

# On The Threshold

A tiny church vestibule designed by Leo J. Blackman makes a smooth transition from outdoors to indoors, and medieval to modern.

When Leo Blackman designed a small vestibule for St. Paul the Apostle, a 105-year-old church on Manhattan's Upper West Side, he thought of it as a piece of cabinetry lit from within. With a tight space (42.5 square feet) and an equally tight construction budget (\$10,500), Blackman fell back on his experience as a solo practitioner designing apartment renovations and small retail projects. Such work had taught him to make the most of inexpensive elements such as built-in furniture and lighting fixtures. Once designed, the vestibule was built in a Brooklyn cabinetry shop in four sections (three sides and the ceiling), then assembled on-site.

The vestibule was needed as an airlock against cold breezes that blast parishioners during the winter. In the past, the Great East Door, located on axis with the church's altar, was normally shut for the winter, forcing visitors to enter and exit from less ceremonial (and less direct) doors on the north and south ends of the east facade.

The rather plain exterior of the church gives little hint of the grand basilica inside, adorned with a Stanford White altar, a stone floor designed by Bertram Goodhue, and works by Augustus Saint-Gaudens and John La Farge. Blackman's challenge was to insert an 8.5-by-5-foot vestibule in the 30-foot-high narthex where, as the young architect explains, "a rather imposing crew of artistic ghosts lurks about."

Instead of directly imitating the neo-medieval ornamentation found throughout the church, Blackman applied the proportions of the oak paneling surrounding the vestibule for his discreetly Modern design. Built of 1.5-by-5.25-inch oak boards with 3/4-inch-thick oak-plywood panels and glass panes set into a grid, the vestibule respects the older architecture while establishing its own identity.

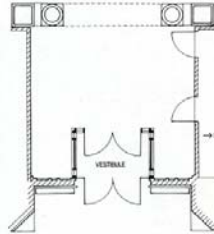
Anchoring the design are four pyramid-topped corner "towers," reminiscent of



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The intimate scale of the vestibule intensifies the impact of the columned narthex and grand basilica (above). New elements follow dimensions set by the surrounding paneling (top).



those on the exterior of the church. Panels facing the altar are mostly translucent glass so priests won't be blinded by strong morning sunlight. Three narrow bands of clear glass wrap around the structure for contrast and pick up horizontal elements in the neo-Gothic paneling on either side of the vestibule. Maintaining a simple palette of materials, Blackman used light-green slate for the floor and baseboards. Changes in materials—from rough pressed glass to smooth bronze handles—add a tactile dimension to the room.

The vestibule serves as a fitting, human-scaled transition from the outdoors to the great space of the church itself. During the day (when sunlight is diffused by the translucent glass) and at night (when incandescent strip lights on the ceiling are turned on), the vestibule glows warmly, setting itself somewhat apart from the darker surfaces around it. Imbued with the spirit (if not the exact style) of its context, this modest room is a popular addition to a venerable church.

CLIFFORD A. PEARSON

*Vestibule*  
Church of St. Paul the Apostle  
New York City  
OWNER: The Paulist Fathers  
ARCHITECT: Leo J. Blackman,  
Architect—Leo J. Blackman, David  
Nowlin, Christine Straw, project team  
FABRICATOR: B.A. Woodworking—John  
Gonzalez

The vestibule glows warmly with natural light (below), and seems one step removed from the heavier esthetic of the surrounding paneling and Great East Door (right). Construction costs for the 42.5-square-foot room (excluding the exterior glass doors) came to less than \$11,000.

