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## Traditional Trappings for a Modern Mission



LEFT, MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK; RIGHT, RIVERSIDE CHURCH, TINA FINEBERG /THE NEW YORK TIMES

*GOthic IN INSPIRATION* Left, Riverside Church's tower under construction in a photograph taken in 1929 or '30. Since last year the church has been cloaked in scaffolding, as [Howard L. Zimmerman Architects, P.C.](#) and [Beyer Blinder Belle](#) oversee \$4 million in repairs to the limestone, especially the highest sections that are most exposed to the weather.

By **CHRISTOPHER GRAY**

**RIVERSIDE CHURCH**, completed in 1930 at 122nd Street and Riverside Drive, embodied modern religious thought but was clad in 13th-century French Gothic. Its massive tower is now ringed by construction scaffolding, as restoration crews go piece by piece, inspecting and repairing the limestone.

In 1926, Park Avenue Baptist Church, which occupied a sanctuary at 64th Street that was only four years old, announced plans to build a new church overlooking the Hudson River, close to Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University.

Backed by John D. Rockefeller Jr., the church sent its architects, Henry Pelton and Charles Collins, on a 21-day trip through France and Spain to study cathedral design. The pastor, Harry Emerson Fosdick, had accepted his position in 1925 on the condition that a brand-new church, open to all Christians, be built.

The architects' design for a 22-story tower was adapted after one of the pair at Chartres, soaring above a 200-foot-long sanctuary seating about 2,400 people. The tower was not simply symbolic; it held offices, social rooms, classrooms, a bowling alley, a theater and similar spaces.

In September 1928, as the steelwork on the tower was being raised, the church announced a name change consistent with its ecumenical mission: Riverside Baptist Church would become known simply as Riverside Church.

Three months later, 100,000 people watched as a nighttime fire turned the interior of the half-completed building into a furnace and sent a tower of flames into the sky. The nave had been just a shell; what burned was the network of wooden scaffolding around the interior walls. Chunks of stone popped off the face, and fires spread to adjacent buildings. Sparks even ignited a Christmas tree in a sixth-floor apartment at 99 Claremont Avenue, adjacent to the church. (The apartment house has since been torn down.)

Construction eventually resumed, and when Riverside Church opened in 1930, *The New York Times* said that its tower was the highest of any church in America, 392 feet. In his opening sermon, Fosdick said that if Jesus were to return, he would disapprove of the frequent wrangling over policies and rituals that separated the different Christian denominations.

The huge Gothic-style tower arrived at an unusual time for American architecture, when the purity of European Modernism began to make the historic styles seem like bad habits. Writing in *The New Yorker* in 1930, George Chappell found fault with the "scrambled Gothic" design and described the tower as "impressive in size, yet strangely lacking in majesty." But Mr. Chappell admired the restraint and simple proportions of the great nave.

In a 1934 piece in *The New Yorker*, Lewis Mumford was tougher, calling it one of several particularly leaden "dead colossi," which also included the Federal Courthouse in Lower Manhattan.

A overflow crowd of more than 2,500 people had the opportunity to ponder architectural tastes themselves when they came to the church in 1932 for the wedding of Blanchette Hooker and John D. Rockefeller III, whose brother Nelson was best man.

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*Edward Pon, a project architect for the [Zimmerman Firm](#), said the wind limits the amount of decking and netting that can be in place at any one time — too much wind on too much material could be unsafe. As it is, giant swaths of netting on the lower stories facing Riverside Drive flap in the breeze like galloping black giraffes.*

Usually such enclosures detract from architectural aesthetics, but in this case the spidery steel network and thick wooden decking soften the wind-swept austerity of what has always been a chilly, formal monument.

Riverside Church is open Monday through Saturday from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; on Sundays, after the main service at 10:45 a.m., the church remains open until 4:40 p.m.

Although tours are available (information is on the church's Web site, [theriversidechurchny.org](http://theriversidechurchny.org); click on "About Us"), in the middle of the week the giant nave is often empty, and a visitor can explore undisturbed.

On their 1926 European trip, the architects particularly admired the low, wide nave of the cathedral at Girona, Spain, and so Riverside has a roomier quality than lofty English-style cathedrals. Meandering around the curving stone staircases can seem like stumbling across some magnificent undiscovered French church not listed in any guidebook.

That is especially true of Christ Chapel, hidden unless you look for it. It is a breathtaking private 11th-century-style oblong of cream-colored sandstone with small, high windows, a tiny secret counterpoint to one of New York's biggest churches.