

Students preserve church history in drawings

By LOUISE OKRUTSKY

To Betty Lee Francis, the measured drawings done by her Lawrence Institute of Technology architectural preservation class are anything but dry renderings of obscure architectural details.

For Ms. Francis, an architect, instructor at the Southfield-based college and chairwoman of the Franklin Village Planning Commission, such drawings are one way of insuring that older and historic buildings will remain available to the public through records as well as in actuality.

"It is important to document our historic buildings to pass along to future generations," she said.

This spring, her class concentrated on the Unitarian Universalist Church on Halsted in Farmington Hills. Drawings of the 19th century building believed to house Michigan's oldest continuing congregation, will be turned over to the church's board of trustees.

During the course of the project, students clambered through the church's attic to discover details of its original mortice and tenon construction.

The church's builders cut projecting parts on the end of each piece of wood in the two main roof supports. Those projecting portions were then inserted into mortice to form a joint.

USUALLY the base of the building reveals original portions of the structure because it isn't usually altered. The base of the Unitarian Universalist Church didn't yield such information because it was moved in 1957 from its original location on Warner and Thomas in Farmington.

For the most part, the church's Greek Revival building with a plain front isn't unusual, according to Ms. Francis.

Buildings are of interest not only for their architectural details but for knowledge about the people who used

them and built them, she added.

"As soon as a building is closed, it dies," she said.

Part of documenting old buildings involves recording the structure's relation to its surroundings.

Historically, the Unitarian Universalist Church was located in a rural area. Originally, the church shared a hillside with Farmington's Methodist Church. On the other hill stood the Baptist church.

The Methodist and Unitarian Universalist congregations shared the cost of the bell in the Methodist church tower. The Universalists built their church tower

without thought of someday adding a bell and in the 1870s the Methodist bell tolled for both congregations.

IN 1909 and in 1919 the Methodists were allowed to use the Universalist church in return for helping pay for the upkeep of the building.

In 1901, the church was restored by the Union Society and the Farmington Universalist Church. The project helped to cement the two organizations into one congregation which became known as the Unitarian Universalist Church.

Even the church's transfer to a new

location denotes something about the progress of the Farmington/Farmington Hills area, Ms. Francis said. The move represents part of the area's growth.

Additions to the building such as the transfer of the church represent changing times which affect buildings and persons.

"The unifying element of how the buildings are placed and the street, how people are part of it and how people feel about the building" are part of the structure's history and importance according to Ms. Francis.

"As soon as an older structure is torn down, a part of the environment is demolished," she said.



Betty Lee Francis examines the renderings of the Unitarian-Universalist Church in Farmington Hills done by her architectural class at Lawrence Institute of Technology. (Staff photo by Randy Borst)

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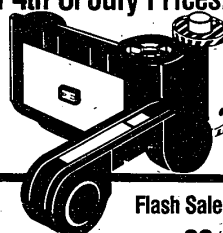
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