Varied Textures in a Single Wall System

Grace Chapel was built at the heart of the Lenoir-Rhyne University Campus in Hickory, NC, and immediately became a spiritual focal point for visitors to the University. The 425-seat chapel serves the needs of weekly religious services as well as music concerts and special events. Additional support spaces include a pastor’s office, sacristy and choir rehearsal space. Designed by Architects Clark Patterson Lee, the chapel design establishes a physical presence to the University’s origins in the Evangelical Lutheran Church and a religious center for students, faculty and staff.

The project was designed with a concrete masonry structure with exposed interior walls. Architecturally, the building hearkens to the older campus Neo-Gothic buildings with its exterior Flemish bond brick pattern, arched openings, cast stone, arched wood beams and stone-like concrete masonry walls. The chapel’s tower feature was patterned after the nearby Rhyne building.

The concrete masonry unit walls consist of architectural split-face, polished-face and shot-blast units. All three concrete masonry unit textures were manufactured with the same material mix so that all of the units would have the same base color and exposed aggregates. The different textures of the concrete masonry allowed the designers to create wall accents while adhering to a single concrete masonry wall system. The block is comprised of a brown aggregate that complements the wood trim used throughout the building.

One of the distinctive features of the concrete masonry Grace Chapel is its voluminous space. The interior ceiling is 53 feet (16.2 m) from the floor to the ceiling’s peak. The floor plan is arranged as a cruciform so that when viewed from above the chapel appears to be a cross.

While the concrete blocks are used for the building structure, they also provide an interior finish, which eliminates the need for other interior finishes. The block's durability will greatly reduce the need for maintenance and upkeep. In addition, block's fire-resistant qualities easily met local building code fire ratings requirements for the walls.

Acoustical performance was a high priority for the design team. Concrete masonry was a good choice for managing sound. The space is highly reverberant and perfect for choral and orchestral performances. As a result, only a minimal sound system is required.

Built as part of a $65-million campaign, the new 10,000-ft² (929-m²) chapel blends with its campus surroundings thanks to the selection of concrete masonry for both its structural and aesthetic qualities.
“The use of concrete masonry on the interior with a backup of exterior veneer was an elegant solution. Inside, the concrete masonry details, with their combinations of large and small-scale units, is both inviting and quite handsome.”

—Design Awards Jury