

SAINT SEBASTIAN CHURCH
476 Mull Avenue
Akron
Summit County
Ohio

HABS OH-52
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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SAINT SEBASTIAN CHURCH

HABS No. OH-52

Location: 476 Mull Avenue, Akron, Summit County, Ohio 44320.

History: Saint Sebastian Church was built from 1958-1960 as a Roman Catholic worship space to assume the purpose of the original facility. It is owned by the Bishop of the Diocese of Cleveland as are all churches in the diocese. Saint Sebastian Parish opened to the community in 1929 due to the overcrowding of Saint Vincent church in west Akron, Ohio. Father Hilary Zwisler was chosen to lead the new parish and school. He successfully established a parish community which began to outgrow its original worship space. The current day Saint Sebastian church is the response to the need for a larger space and was dedicated in May 1960. It was designed by the architect Robert Kraus Senior.

Significance: The building houses a large collection of modern, handcrafted religious art which was commissioned specifically for the space and is incorporated into the design of the structure. Artwork is used throughout the space to depict religious figures and share their stories and includes hand-carved wood statuary, locally designed and crafted stained glass scenes, and Venetian crafted glass mosaics. The church's unique fixed art collection coupled with its atypical, but impressively executed architectural styling set its architecture apart from every other structure in existence. In addition to bearing historic architectural significance, it also bears great cultural significance. The parish spreads out into the surrounding community which congregates at the church. Here the community gathers in groups of friends, family and peers for education, socialization, tradition, celebration, worship, and comfort. The mere existence of the church has created a cherished subculture and affects the everyday lives of the members in the community. Neither the campus, nor church is currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places, but is believed to be eligible. It appears to satisfy the requirements for Criterion A due to its contribution to the shaping of the community. It also appears to satisfy Criterion C due to the church's unique architectural style and the high quality of art that is part of its original design and execution.

Description: Saint Sebastian Church is a modern interpretation of a classic Roman Catholic basilica. Though modern in style and relatively new in age, the structure is built as an homage to traditional cathedrals and churches - designed to contain many elements and ideas from such historic structures that harmonize with the modern styling. The importance of art as well as the inclusion of natural light in a worship setting are strongly emphasized in the space. It is a brick and stone masonry building designed to have large ceiling span without columns spaced out between the four exterior walls that would potentially obstruct various sight lines. Based on a basilica plan, the church floor is composed of three bays - the center nave and two side aisles. The chancel is at the southern end of the floor and there is an organ loft

attached to the northern wall. The interior walls are finished in plaster or clad in Venetian glass mosaic, eight types of marble, and travertine. The north facade features a grand entrance with monumental limestone columns and sculpture embedded in the yellow brick masonry that compliments the limestone bands that wrap the circumference of the building. Set back in the facade is a curtain wall entry which features green ceramic tiles that are placed in a decorative cross pattern. Above the entrance is a symbol of the parish patron, Saint Sebastian, manifesting itself as a decorated metal sculptural shield. To the left of the West facade is the colossal carillon bell tower, a signature feature of the church exterior and area atmosphere. The gable roof over the nave is shingled in a flat clay tile red terra cotta while the low sloped roofs are covered in a synthetic membrane that is hidden behind a parapet with limestone coping. The foundation walls are constructed of concrete masonry units and there is a partial basement. The structure is still used for its original purpose, has not seen any alterations or significant alterations, and is overall in good repair. Unfortunately, there is threat to one of the signature elements of the church. The colossal Venetian tile mosaic is showing signs of possible water infiltration and has begun to lose some of its splendid tiles. There is currently no plan in place to resolve this issue.

The outbuildings play a significant role in the church community. There are a total of six buildings on the parish property - the current church being one. There is also a rectory connected to the church which houses the current priest as well as administration offices and meeting space. The remaining four buildings are all currently dedicated to the mission of the Saint Sebastian School - two of which have been repurposed to do so. The former convent is now home to the Early Childhood Education Center and the former church is now a multipurpose room known as Zwisler Hall. The remaining two buildings are the original Saint Sebastian School and Byrider Hall, the school's sports and recreation facility. Buildings on the campus are often shared by different groups for various events and activities and there is much interaction within the community.

Sources:

"Church History." saintsebastianparish.org. N.p., 4 May 2012. Web. 27 June 2012.
<<http://www.stsebastian.org/about/history.html>>.

Interview with Diocesan Priest: Fr. John Valencheck, Pastor, Saint Sebastian Parish, 2011.