

# Bethlehem Baptist Church

R.M. Schindler, Architect

**Open House - April 12, 2014**

**New Home of Faith Build International**

**4901 Compton Avenue, Los Angeles**



## Schindler

Rudolph Michael Schindler was born in Vienna, Austria in 1887. He came to the United States in 1914. He worked with Frank Lloyd Wright from 1917 to 1923. In 1920, he went to Los Angeles to work on Wright's Barnsdall House. He started his own practice in 1921 and designed hundreds of buildings. He died in 1953.

Schindler created a body of work that is known for:

- unique building forms, colors and site design that reflect Southern California land forms, plants and lifestyle
- strongly abstract, geometric buildings that seem to be in constant motion
- dynamic, light-filled spaces
- experimentation with new materials and construction methods

Schindler's work was mostly residential – houses, some apartments, and a few retail buildings. This is his only church. It illustrates how he designed a non-residential civic building, located on an urban site on a busy street, with its different uses and larger spaces. It is a unique historical building because it has retained most of the original construction, with no remodeling or additions, and few repairs. Visiting the Bethlehem Baptist Church is a wonderful opportunity to experience one of Schindler's landmark designs.

## Church

The Bethlehem Baptist Church was founded in 1933. They purchased the church property on Compton Avenue in 1936 from a Methodist congregation. The Bethlehem Baptist Church hired Schindler to design and build their church in 1944, the previous church had burned down (a house and social hall remained).<sup>1</sup> This decision was notable since few African-American organizations could afford new buildings designed by an architect. Selecting Schindler, a highly original modern architect, also demonstrated their willingness to look at church design in a new way.<sup>2</sup>

Key elements of Schindler's design for the church include the:

- **Courtyard:** The church turns away from busy Compton Avenue through the use of large blank walls, and it turns towards a courtyard that faces the quieter 49<sup>th</sup> Street. The existing house was moved and the new sanctuary was designed as an "L" to create a complex that wraps around the court.
- **Sanctuary:** The sanctuary is a simple and calm space. It is filled with soft light focused on the pulpit, and dramatic beams of light streaming from the base of the monumental cross.
- **Colors:** The original colors of the church, now painted over, were striking. Architectural historian and Schindler draftsman, Ester McCoy, described them as "a mulberry grey that deepened into rosy violets and deep plums for the interiors. According to Schindler, the scheme was based upon the skin tones of the worshippers."
- **Unbuilt element:** The original design included a large second-story roof terrace that covered the first-story portion of the sanctuary, an unbuilt classroom, the relocated house, and the social hall along the alley. This roof terrace included an outdoor stage, and was meant to provide extra room for people to watch services through the second story windows, as well as provide a space for social gatherings.

The parish sold the building in 1975 when they moved to a larger building.

<sup>1</sup> Church burning clarified, revised 6-17-2014

<sup>2</sup> Church history from Alison Rose Jefferson: "Bethlehem Baptist Church: Revolutionary Architecture in a South Los Angeles Neighborhood" in *Intersections of South Central Los Angeles: People and Places in Historic and Contemporary Photographs* by Christopher D. Jimenez y West, Matthew W. Roth, Alison Rose Jefferson and Morgan P. Yates (2006).