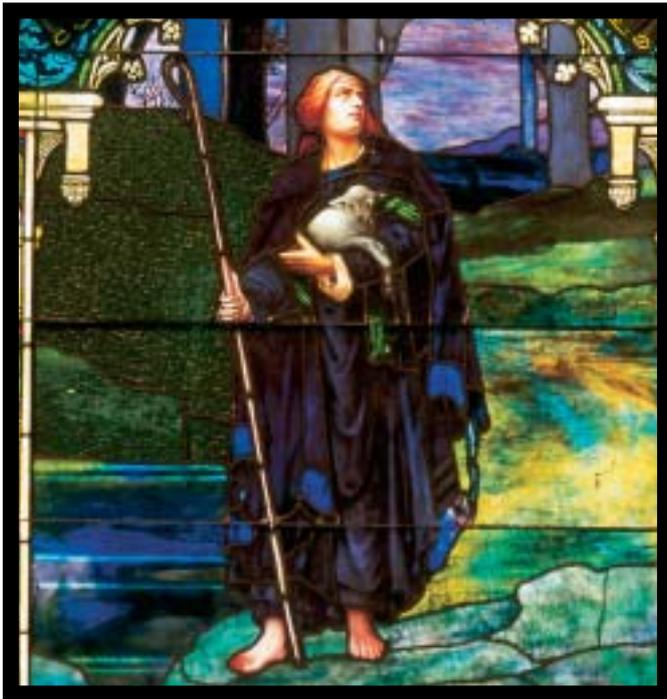




Window to the Future

BY ELIZABETH A. EVITTS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID COLWELL

✦ The recent restoration of Brown Memorial Church reinforces a congregation's commitment to the city.



December 4, 1870 was a glorious winter day in Baltimore. Clear skies and crystalline sunshine buoyed a crowd assembled at the corner of Park Avenue and Lafayette in Bolton Hill. A blizzard probably would not have kept them away. They were gathered to watch history in the making. That morning, Isabella Brown officially dedicated Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church in honor of her late husband, George Brown, son of financier Alex Brown. In bankrolling its construction—at a then staggering cost of \$150,000—Brown became a pioneer, one of the few women ever to fully fund a house of worship. After the outdoor dedication, the crowd moved inside for the worship service and found 150 gas jets lighting a spectacular vaulted ceiling. It was standing room only, and hundreds of people had to be turned away. The newspapers had been covering the story for months, and *The Baltimore American* reported that Brown Memorial Church “was opened for divine service on one of the most auspicious days of all the year.” ✨

Above (clockwise from top left): “The Lord is My Shepherd” was created by Pittsburgh Stained Glass Co/William Willet (who is a partner now with Hauser Art Glass who did the restoration of the large Tiffany windows); the steeple at Brown Memorial Church; “Jesus and the Children”; the front entrance to the church. Right: The Tiffany Babcock Memorial Window after restoration.



Auspicious indeed. More than 130 years later, the church that Isabella built still thrives. With the addition of 11 Tiffany stained glass windows in the early 1900s, Brown Memorial became more than just a philanthropic phenomenon; it became one of the most significant buildings in this city, a treasure of art and architecture.

Brown Memorial has recently benefited from a \$1.8-million restoration, thanks to a new generation of urban visionaries. Brown's congregation not only salvaged an extraordinary structure, their efforts also preserved what is arguably one of the world's finest collections of Tiffany stained glass windows in their original setting. Experts say that without the renovations, those windows could have deteriorated beyond repair.

Like the windows, the church itself has, over the years, been endangered. In the 1950s, there was talk of abandoning the Bolton Hill location and relocating to the suburbs, but a parishioner named James Rouse helped persuade the congregation to stay. The decision to dig in and to eventually renovate solidified the civic commitment set forth by Isabella Brown.

KEN MILLS, DIRECTOR OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT WITH STRUEVER Bros., Eccles & Rouse, has been attending church at Brown for eleven years, and like many congregates here, remembers the first time he entered the building. "It was overwhelming," Mills recalls. "From the street, you just don't get a sense of the volume inside. They don't build churches like this anymore."

By that time, two major renovations had dramatically altered the original interior of the church. Transepts were added in 1905,

around the time the Tiffany windows were installed. Then in 1930, Ralph Adams Cram, the celebrated architect from Boston, redesigned the altar and built the current chancel where Ernest M. Skinner Company, also of Boston, installed one of its signature organs. With nearly 3,000 pipes, it is now one of the few remaining, tonally intact Skinner organs anywhere.

By the 1990s, the church leadership knew the building needed a major overhaul. A generous gift from the estate of Mrs. E. Cowles Andrus in 2001 made the renovation a reality. The 300 members of the congregation helped match the gift, contributing to the total of \$1.8 million for the building project.

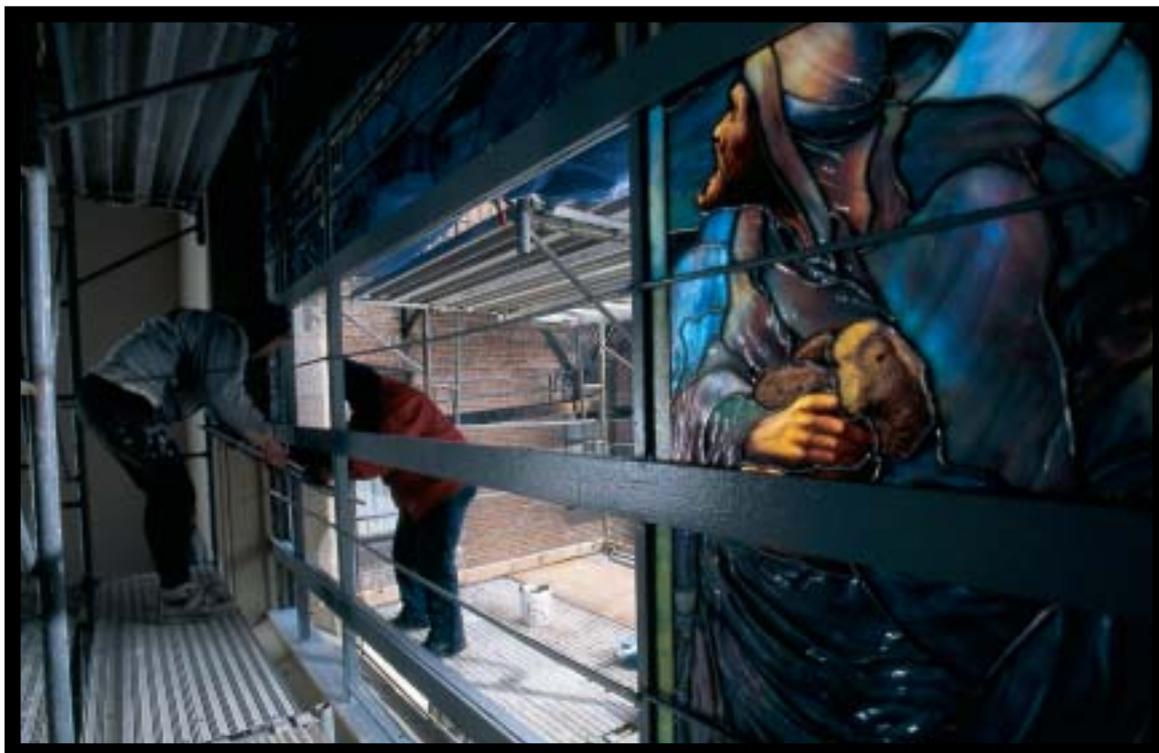
Ken Mills and longtime church member Charles Obrecht, of developer P. Fred'k Obrecht & Son, spearheaded an executive committee charged with restoring the building.

There was much to be done. The lighting was subpar, plaster was cracked, the domed roof needed a new coat of paint, and the exterior façade needed to be repointed. There was also concern that the two largest Tiffany windows in the transepts were in danger; the glass seemed dull and some sections appeared to be bulging.

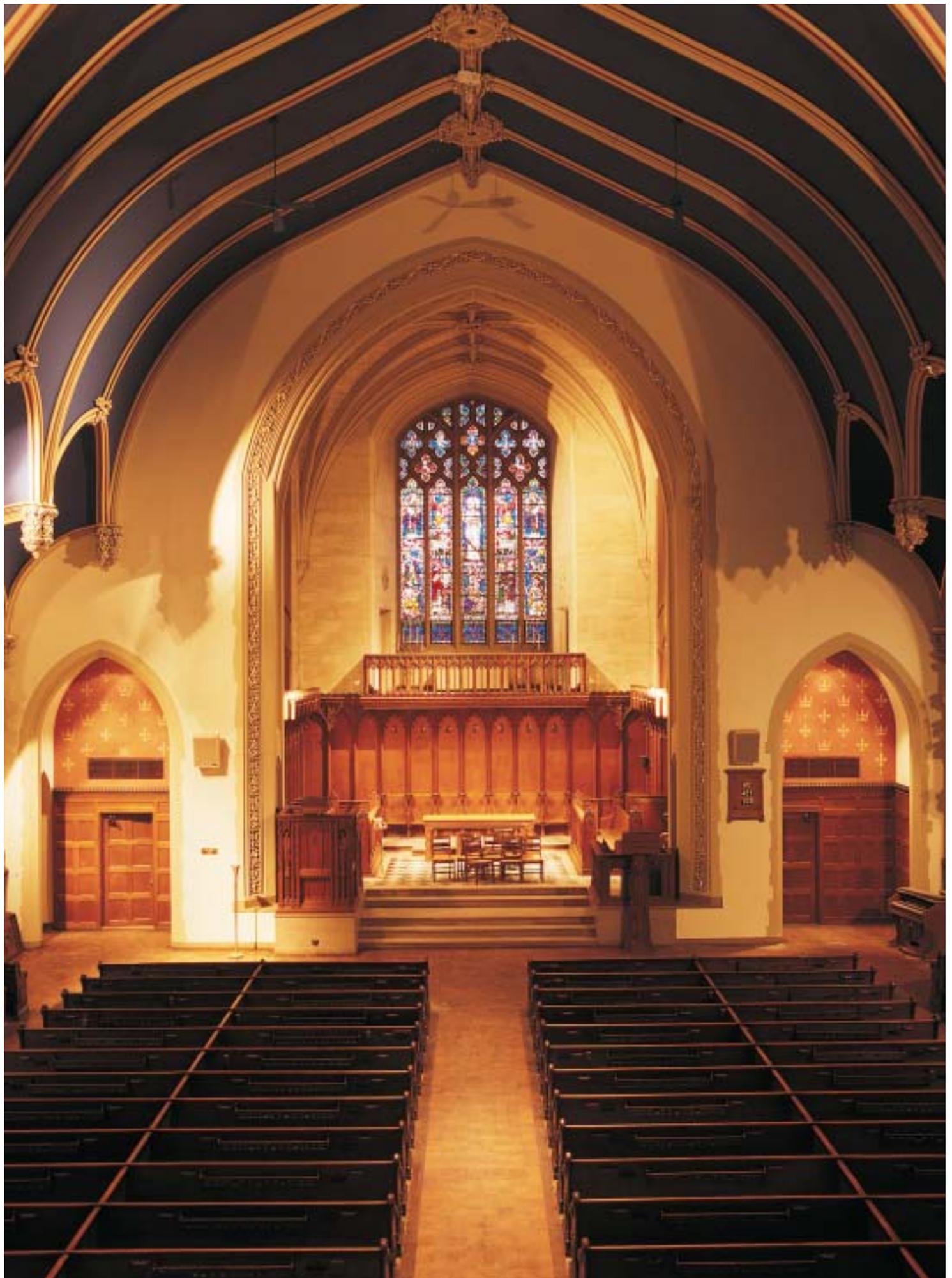
Committee member Tom Liebel was asked to assess the deterioration around the windows. An associate with Baltimore-based Design Collective, where he specializes in historic preservation and the re-use of existing buildings, Liebel didn't like what he saw. Tiffany windows are famed for their intricate layers of glass, and the cement that secured the glass in the lead had powdered, sending dust between the layers, and the dust had dulled the once lustrous glass. Liebel also noted rusting in the framework, as well

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Below: Hauser Art Glass Company reinstalls one of the large Tiffany windows in the transept. Right: View of altar in the newly renovated church.



as fatigued leading in the windows. The degradation to the structure was forcing the glass to move, causing cracking. “It was apparent the windows needed a full reconstruction or they would fail,” Liebel says.

Tiffany experts from around the country were called in, and those involved in the renovations report that each specialist had a similar reaction to and appreciation of the windows. The reaction of Kirk D. Weaver, of Stained Glass Resources in Pittsburgh, was typical. In an extensive report on the condition of the windows, he wrote that Brown Memorial houses “a remarkable collection of fine art in stained glass.” He went on to write that the two major windows in the transepts “are among the largest known windows created by [Tiffany], and well represent an almost 40-year-long revolution in the art and craft of stained glass.”

A WOMAN COMMISSIONING THE BUILDING OF A CHURCH MAY have been exceptional in 1870, but construction of a new church at that time was quite common. Post-Civil War commissions of churches swept the United States in the late 1800s,

and with the construction boom came a demand for stained glass windows. A New Yorker named Louis Comfort Tiffany revolutionized the industry.

Early in his career, Tiffany (1848-1933) was a painter known for his use of vibrant and vivid colors. He later turned his attention to pouring glass and—along with his contemporary, John LaFarge—spurred the development of American stained glass art. England and Europe were controlling the trade of stained glass in the 1800s, but the inferior quality of the glass and the lackluster artwork spurred Tiffany and LaFarge to challenge the accepted norms. Both experimented with new techniques, ultimately developing “opalescent” glass, a semi-translucent material that remains unique to American glass art.

Tiffany used kilns and chemistry to develop complex color combinations. While the Europeans fired paint directly on the glass, effectively dulling its natural transparency, Tiffany managed to create vivid color in the glass itself. He layered multiple panels to create unparalleled clarity, and the windows shimmered on both sides.

Tiffany also redefined the use of leading. Traditionally, it was purely functional and thought of as little more than support for the glass. As a result, the lead tended to distract from, rather than enhance, the artistic vision. That is until Tiffany developed new

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Church ceiling under renovation.

techniques that allowed the metal to become an integral part of the design, and the once clunky lead lines were transformed into elaborate outlines for things like tree branches and butterfly wings. Perhaps because of such innovations, Tiffany prized his windows above all his other work.

Arlie Sulka has studied and appraised Tiffany glass for close to 25 years and is the managing director of New York's Lillian Nassau gallery. She is also the resident Tiffany expert on PBS's *Antiques Roadshow*. "He started making windows first, before the blown glass vases and his signature lamps," Sulka says. "Tiffany saw his lamps as strictly commercial."

Almost every window was commissioned. "Tiffany would start with a watercolor sketch made for the client and let them choose," Sulka says. "He would then blow them up to full-sized cartoons and separate the design to show the leading."

His client list included a number of wealthy Baltimoreans, as well as several local churches. One of Tiffany's most valued commissions was a series of windows created for the private home of Mary Elizabeth Garrett in the 1880s, five of which now hang in the Baltimore Museum of Art. Some 20 churches, including St. Paul's Episcopal Church on Charles Street and Emmanuel Episcopal on Madison, procured his services.

The commissions for Brown Memorial windows came at the apex of his career and exemplify some of his best work. In addition to the luminous color of the opalescent glass, the windows include special effects like the drapery technique, where molten glass was

manipulated with paddles to form the flowing gowns of biblical figures. The windows also contained an extraordinary (and possibly unprecedented) number of glass layers.

Jim Hauser—whose Minnesota-based company Hauser Art Glass Company, Inc. did the window restoration—was shocked by what he found. "We had allowed for multiple layers of glass," Hauser says. "On site, we estimated four. We were in for a surprise. There were seven layers at the thickest sections."

Other experts were equally surprised. "I've seen glass that's three to four layers thick," says Arlie Sulka. "Seven layers is substantial. It's the first time I've heard of it."

The two largest windows in the transepts, known as the Smith and Babcock Memorial windows, measure 16 feet wide by 32 feet tall and are the largest Hauser has encountered in his 39 years as a restorer of Tiffany glass. "This is the finest collection of Tiffany windows in the country and quite possibly the world," Hauser claims.

Starting in early 2002, Hauser and his staff removed the Smith and Babcock windows in sections after carefully documenting the layout with photographs and on-site measurements. They shipped each section to their studio in Minnesota where the glass was photographed again and rubbings were made to ensure the many pieces would be re-assembled properly. Layers of glass were removed and cleaned, some broken shards were replaced, and 95 percent of the window was re-leaded. Each window took six months to restore.

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Renovated gothic revival interior with the repainted Twilight Blue dome.

Hauser says great care was taken to retain the integrity of Tiffany's glass. "The artwork is in the glass," he notes. "If you've got the original glass, you've got the original artwork."

THE BURST OF CHURCH BUILDING ACTIVITY AND TIFFANY'S prolific output at the turn of the century means many buildings have Tiffany stained glass, but finding a church replete with its full spectrum of windows in their original architectural setting is unusual. That's because, over the years, many Tiffany windows have become victims of urban flight.

By the 1950s, the middle class was fleeing cities and establishing new churches in the suburbs. By the 1970s, urban centers like New York were losing an average of 20 churches a year to developers. Over the span of 50 years, Chicago's South Side lost all but one of its 12 Tiffany churches to the wrecking ball.

Many of the buildings that did survive suffered from neglect caused by economic hardship. Their Tiffany windows either crumbled from decay or were de-installed and put on the auction block. Today, surviving Tiffany windows are often displayed in museum collections.

Brown Memorial faced this very real dilemma mid-century. Crime and grime had begun to plague the surrounding neighborhood and many church members relocated outside the city limits. On May 19, 1955, a special committee of the congregation met to discuss the church's future. According to minutes from that meeting, it was noted with concern that "the trend of inner city blight would appear to be enveloping this island from all directions."

At that moment, the committee seemed to have two choices: struggle to remain in the city or abandon their building and move to the suburbs. But one church member stood up and proffered a different solution. What about one church with two locations, he asked? They could establish a branch in North Baltimore for suburban congregates, without having to quit the city.

The suggestion was made by James Rouse, the visionary developer who became well known for his devotion to the city. Following his advice, Brown Memorial built a second church at Charles Street and Woodbrook Lane, just south of Bellona Avenue in Baltimore County. The two churches coexisted for 20 years, until 1980, when the Woodbrook church became autonomous. "What James Rouse did was allow things to stabilize," says Obrecht, who's been coming to Brown Memorial since 1958. "Many members here are very proud of that [decision to stay in the city]."

Members like Ken Mills, who now works for The Rouse Company. Mills, who notes that "it's an extraordinary coincidence that I'm working [at Rouse]," focused on other details of the restoration while Obrecht coordinated the work on the windows. The decision to restore the windows was a given, but the rest of the renovation involved a lot of soul searching, as the membership struggled with the prospect of change and relat-

ed issues such as historical context.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks was color. The church committee overseeing the restorations could not agree on how to repaint the large dome, which had remained a muted crème color since its inception.

Eventually, committee member Sally Robinson called on her sons for assistance. Her son, Alex, recrafted the decorative plaster, while her eldest son, Sam, owner of Valley Craftsman, helped with the color choice. After walking the committee through an arduous decision process, he finally made a radical suggestion: paint the dome blue. In the end, the members chose Benjamin Moore Twilight Blue, which Mills says "has a definite 'Wow' factor."

According to Tom Liebel, one of the mottoes of the Presbyterian Church is "reformed, always reforming," and those words were kept in mind during the renovation process. In fact, they seem to have been a comfort and an inspiration to some of those involved. "A great deal of respect was paid to the history, but it was also a forward-looking process," says Liebel.

After more than a year, the scaffolding is finally coming down. Soon a crowd will again gather at the corner of Park and Lafayette, this time to celebrate the rededication of the renovated Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church. When they walk in, they will see more than a place of worship. They will see the culmination of 132 years of dedication. They will see the nexus of art, architecture, civic commitment, and vision. "This [restoration] wasn't just a question of preserving the church's history and looking forward to our future," says Liebel. "This is a piece of Baltimore history and it's of national significance." ■