

Brother Nivard Streicher
 — *Architect of Mariannahill* —
 1884-1922

Anniversaries tend to gain added significance in a relatively young country such as Natal. They can serve as occasions for reflection upon our ideals, especially those that are beginning to sound hackneyed. In 1985 Natal is celebrating several anniversaries, some well publicised such as those of Durban and the University of Natal; others less well known such as the centenary of the founding of the Sisters of the Precious Blood at Mariannahill. A century ago a young man started work at Mariannahill, whose contribution to the architectural heritage of Natal has yet to be fully appreciated. There is no evidence that he had ever been involved in architectural planning before he arrived in South Africa. However, Georg Streicher, who was a master carpenter, must have experienced the current European architectural trends before he entered a religious community and came to South Africa. For forty years he was to guide the architectural studio at Mariannahill, developing a unique style of mission buildings.

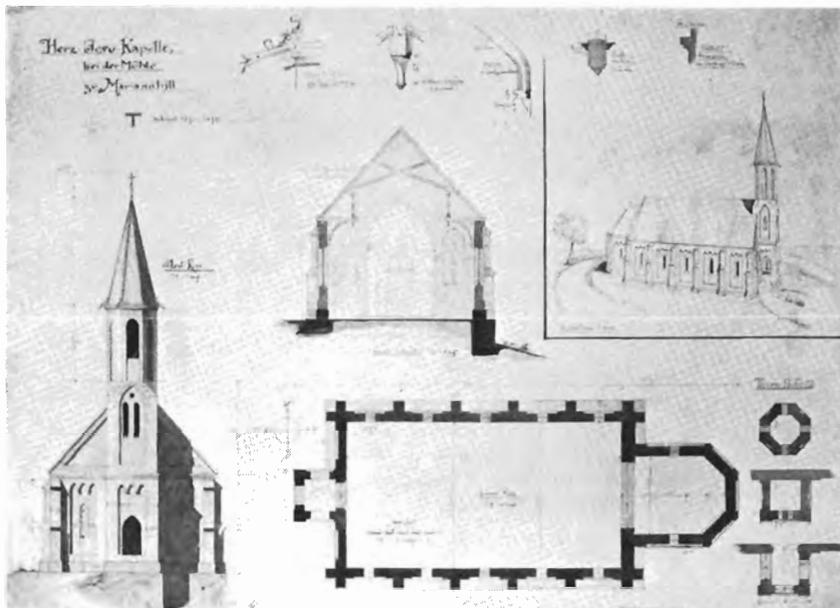
Georg Streicher was born in Erding, Bavaria, in 1854, the second child of a master carpenter. He underwent a thorough training as a carpenter before entering the Trappist monastery of Maria Stern, in Bosnia. He may very well have worked there before joining Prior Franz Pfanner's first band of recruits for the new priory of Mariannahill, South Africa. In July 1883 these men arrived at their new home. Each man joined the specific trade for which he had been selected. Streicher joined the building team, who were erecting a large mill on the banks of the Umhlatuzana River, some distance from the priory. His ability to understand complex building principles must quickly have manifested itself, for soon he was called upon to design a chapel for this mill community. His proposals for this chapel, the Herz-Jesu Kapelle, was a synthesis of current European architectural thinking.

The emerging manufacturing classes of nineteenth century Europe had profoundly influenced architectural styles. Architecture was no longer the prerogative of the aristocratic class. A growing interest in architectural historical research, at first rather sketchy, but progressively more thorough, resulted in many pattern books being published. Builders and developers referred to these books and chose the style they considered most suitable, or most to their liking. It became generally accepted that the classical style of ancient Greece and Rome was most suitable for educational and civic building. The Middle Ages were seen as the ideal period of Christian

civilization, and it became a moral duty to build ecclesiastical buildings in a neo-gothic manner. After the discovery of the original plans for the Cathedral of Cologne, and the recommencement of building operations there in 1842, the neo-gothic style became almost obligatory.

Streicher's design for the Herz-Jesu Kapelle is very traditional. The plan consists of a simple rectangular nave, a sanctuary at the Eastern end and a tower over the entrance door on the western end. The building is typically neo-gothic — a steep roof and flèche, narrow, vertical windows, small, engaged buttresses, and internal hammer-beam trusses. What makes this building particularly interesting is the designer's handling of locally available materials. There was a good brickyard at Mariannahill from which the walling material came. He must have been relatively familiar with the aesthetic possibilities of brickwork, but corrugated iron roofing was a new material to him. The external roof planes are, therefore, quite simple. He was, however, able to add great architectural charm to the interior by articulating the structural roof timbers. The gargoyles on the tower are unique — galvanised metal pipes worked at the spout end to form fabulous beasts! This charming building became redundant in the 1940s when the industries formerly housed in the mill building were moved to the monastery grounds. It has suffered greatly as a result of moisture penetration and vandalism, and much of the highly decorated internal wall surface has been irreparably damaged.

In 1886 Georg Streicher was professed at Mariannahill, taking the religious name of Brother Nivard. The religious community at Mariannahill grew rapidly in these early years of its existence. All too soon the original priory church proved too small and it was decided to build a larger church. Brother Nivard was instructed to prepare designs. The problem called for a much larger church — to seat more than 300 monks — on a sloping site, adjacent to the proposed Refectory and Chapter House. The nave had to be considerably wider than anything he had built before. He chose a traditional basilican format consisting of a sanctuary, a nave with two side aisles, and a narthex. The sloping site permitted him to step the floor down in stages towards the sanctuary. The choice of a basilican plan necessitated the provision of columns between the aisle and the nave to carry the clerestory windows. This allowed him to reduce the span of the roof structure, yet he took full advantage of the possibilities presented by the timber structure to create an elegant, dignified interior. There is a wonderful logic in his choice of materials: brickwork for the low aisle walls, long slender timber for the columns supporting the clerestory. The infill panels between the clerestory windows are timber panelled on the inside and clad with light-weight corrugated iron on the outside. The external brickwork is similar to that at the Herz-Jesu Kapelle: piers with infill panels punctured by relatively small windows. It is interesting to note, however, that the 'gothic' arches in the brickwork had already been replaced by rounded arches, possibly because these were easier to construct. The building was renovated in 1981 in preparation for the centenary celebrations. Internally the building has been redecorated several times. It has now been stripped down to its architectural elements, and its natural materials, and has become a celebration of dignified, rational, harmonious design. Externally the corrugated iron roof was replaced with corrugated asbestos, which was unfortunate, as the scale of the corrugations is too large.



Herz-Jezu Kapelle, Mariannahill, 1893.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)



Monastery Church, Mariannahill, 1887.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

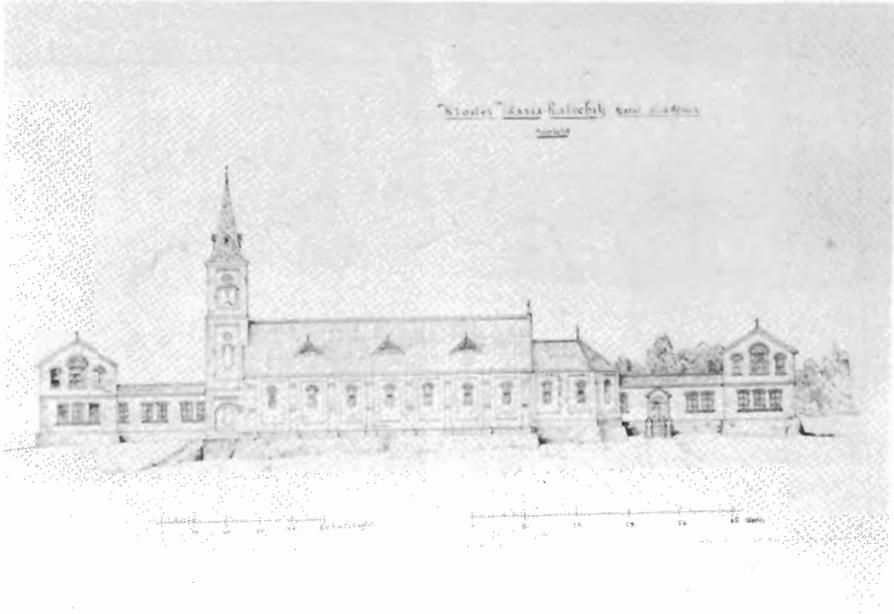


Lourdes Mission Church, 1895.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

This church set the pattern for Brother Nivard's next major work: a church for the new mission station of Lourdes, in East Griqualand. This mission was intended to be as big as Mariannahill, so large-scale plans were drawn up for a church, flanked by a convent and monastery. These were never built in this position, though the site was prepared. The church was planned with a nave, two aisles, a Brothers' and a Sisters' Chapel in the transepts, and a sanctuary. The entrance porch is flanked by two towers which give the building greater dignity. There is a curious mixture of architectural styles: neo-romanesque arches in the brickwork, yet neo-gothic flèches on the towers. Internally, large plastered piers separate the aisles from the clerestory-lit nave. The proportions of these elements are unsatisfactory; it is a curious statement by a man who is not yet fully conversant with architecture, but is discovering the potential of his building materials.

In 1896 he started designing the permanent buildings for a new mission station at Maria Ratschitz. There are certain similarities in the general plans of Lourdes and Maria Ratschitz. His presentation drawings show a scheme linking the monastery to the church, and the convent. The architectural features are also similar. There were many delays in the finalising of these plans, and they were set aside until 1904.



Maria Ratschitz Mission, first proposal, 1896.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)



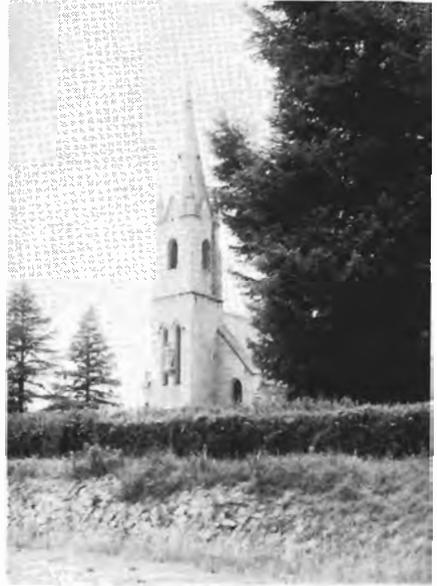
Maria Ratschitz Mission Church, second proposal, August 1904.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)



Maria Ratschitz Mission Church,
September 1904.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)



Reichenau Mission Church, 1898.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

Meanwhile, plans were being prepared for the new buildings at Reichenau near Underberg. Again, the proposals showed a central church flanked by a monastery and a convent. The site was prepared but only the church built. The site conditions here were quite different from those at any other mission site, in that the buildings were planned next to a natural waterfall, there was no suitable clay for bricks, but plenty of fine-grained, good quality sandstone. The sandstone has been used to maximum effect, and even the steeple is made of it. The building is Brother Nivard's most perfect neo-gothic structure and there is beautiful integration of various crafts. The interior consists of a single volume nave — without aisles — but with a Brothers' and a Sisters' Chapel in the two transepts. Relatively little light enters tall narrow windows and so the interior is quite mysterious. It is a little jewel, which has been lovingly repainted by the sisters, and in which the furnishings are stylistically intact. Externally, the craftsmanship is a joy to behold, yet the building stands a little unhappily on its vast barren field.

In 1902 Abbot Gerard Wolpert, the second abbot of Mariannahill, took Brother Nivard to Europe. There he travelled extensively through northern Italy, before returning to Natal, via German East Africa. He must have been profoundly influenced by the romanesque architecture of northern Italy. We may assume that he recognised the textural possibilities of the brickwork, as well as the similarities in the climate, with the sculptural modulation of architectural elements heightened by the sunlight and shade in the two regions. On his return to Natal, he set about the designing of the Campanile for the monastery church at Mariannahill. It was to be his first

stylistically pure neo-romanesque building, divided into five cubic masses, each articulated in a different, yet harmonious manner, and each volume fulfilling a specific function. It was to be the first of a series of such towers: Mariathal, Centacow, and St Dominic's, Newcastle.

That he was continually learning, and struggling, is clear from a look at other buildings that were proceeding at the same time, particularly his new proposals for Maria Ratschitz. The original neo-gothic tower was redesigned in August, and again in September 1904. His first, rather ham-handed attempt to break away from the gothic steeple was patently unsatisfactory; his subsequent solution was most interesting.

His churches are now nearly always of a similar size and plan. Local conditions determined the detail and building material. His developing architectural understanding improved with every successive design.

Between 1907 and 1909 the new parish church of St Joseph's was planned for Mariannahill. This was to be his largest and boldest work. The integration of the various elements is beautifully handled. It has an almost Byzantine clarity of form — a semicircular apse, a clear crossing between the transepts and the nave. Branching out from these elements are secondary apses in which the subsidiary altars and confessionals are located. Two grand towers flank a generous narthex. All the elements are generously proportioned and one wonders whether Brother Nivard expected this church to become the cathedral of a new diocese at some later date. It subsequently did become the cathedral of the Diocese of Mariannahill.



Campanile, Mariannahill, 1903.
(Photograph: Author's Collection)



St Joseph's Cathedral,
Mariannahill 1909.
(Photograph: Author's Collection)

Whereas St Joseph's cathedral is certainly his boldest articulation of architectural forms, his new church for Centacow mission must be considered his most cerebral exercise. It is beautifully detailed, all its elements are carefully interrelated, and there is an almost classical completeness about this building. The slope of the site was cleverly exploited to make room for a pilgrimage shrine under the porch. Internally the spaces are similar to most of the later churches: a nave, two transepts



Centacow Mission Church, 1911.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

and a spatially separated sanctuary. The windows of these later churches are much longer, thereby giving the interiors much more light. This church has a marvellous rose window over the sanctuary, depicting Our Lady surrounded by the Pope, Bishop Jolivet of Natal, Abbot Pfanner, the Mother Superior of the CPS and several other recognisable personalities of the day. Many of these later churches were embellished with biblical scenes, and symbolic decorative elements. Often the same themes were used, but always originally executed.

His final major church building was started in 1916. This was the church at Mariazell, East Griqualand. There was a need for a large mission church, in an area devoid of suitable clay, but with a rich local stone dressing tradition. Brother Nivard's design breaks away from his neo-romanesque brickwork detailing. In many ways he emulated the bold, rusticated stonework of the American architect, Henry Hobson Richardson; possibly his response to the nature of this building material, and his growing confidence as an architect, brought about this renaissance.



Centacow Mission Church.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)



Marizell Mission Church, 1916.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

There are two asymmetrical towers — one the bell tower, the other the access stair to the choir loft. The east front's most remarkable feature is the huge, semicircular east window. This bold element dominates and unifies the whole of this elevation. It also causes some magical light effects within the church. It is a wonderful experience to attend an early Mass within this building. To start with it is dark and mysterious, bathed in soft candle light. Then, as the service proceeds, the building begins to light up till the first rays of the rising sun shoot through the nave to light up the apsidal dome over the sanctuary. Rapidly the building is bathed in beautiful warm sunshine, and another joyous day has begun.

Nivard was an extraordinary man. He came to Mariannahill at the age of 29 to join his fellow religious as a Trappist monk. Yet his nature and intellect made him an obvious leader. He was in charge of the architectural studio, where he supervised the work of Brothers Otto Mäder and Theobald Ebers. He was constantly having to travel to building sites, and land sales, at which he bought new mission farms. His fluency in English ensured that he often had to act as public relations man for Mariannahill, entertaining many dignitaries. His architectural facilities were used by others beyond the monastery community. He worked for other religious communities as well as for the Natal Government. In 1909 he was granted a free rail pass, '... in recognition of [his] valuable services to the Colony in various directions, and as a slight token of their [the Ministers'] appreciation of the energy displayed by [him] during so many years.' During the 1920 Visitation of the Monastery he was forbidden to undertake further work outside his community. His health must already have been failing. Two years later he was sent to Holland to recuperate. It gave him an opportunity to exercise his religious calling in peace till he died, in his sleep, on 26th February 1927. He died a quiet, withdrawn Trappist monk, typical of the community to which he had dedicated his life. There was no publicity at his going. It is only now that we are beginning to recognise the contribution he made to the architectural heritage of Natal.

ROBERT BRUSSE

