



# Luminous Portals

Reflections and Imagery on the Windows at St. Joseph Chapel at Regis College, Toronto



This book was created by Sarah Hall, RCA and her class in March 2010.  
It is dedicated to Karel Versteeg - with special thanks to Hajo and Eric Versteeg.

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*The large-scale windows in the Chapel at Regis College, created in dalle-de-verre with rich, jewel-like chunks of faceted glass, project a sense of majesty and awe, as the eye is drawn upwards toward the light of the world.*

*The offbeat irregular shapes add to the splendor of the medium, set in strong outlines of dark concrete that add impact to the negative space.*

*By Helen Bradfield*

## Biography of Karel Laurens Versteeg

Born: November 17, 1916

By *Bill Mohan & Eric Versteeg*

Born in Doordrecht, Netherlands, Karel Versteeg was a lawyer, a prisoner of war during the last two years of World War II, a delegate to a 1946 post-war conference held in Montreal and a member of the Dutch diplomatic service.

In 1951, he and his wife Elmyre Marie (Gans) Versteeg emigrated to Canada with their seven children and settled in Montreal. In 1953, the Versteeg family moved to Almonte, a small Ottawa Valley town. When he first came to Canada, Karel was the sales representative of a large rubber manufacturing concern based in the Netherlands. Subsequently, he sold school furniture but a chance conversation with the Chairman of the Renfrew public school board, who was also a member of the local United church started him on his career in ecclesiastical stained glass.

The Chairman's church needed its stained glass windows to be repaired. One of Versteeg's very good friends at the time was a Dutch artist and stained glass craftsman who had come to Canada via Peru and whose father had done extensive work on the stained glass windows in a Cologne cathedral. Together, they were confident they could carry out the required repairs and did so for the sum of \$2,650. As Versteeg was becoming increasingly concerned that the school furniture business was about to go bankrupt, he decided that this was an opportune time to start a stained glass business on a full time basis. The original stained glass operations were established in Carleton Place under the name Carleton Art Studios, which name was subsequently changed to Charles Versteeg Studios. The gamble paid off.



Over the years, Karel Versteeg perfected his craft in stained glass, leaded glass, dalle-de-verre (glass in concrete and later, glass in epoxy), mosaics, copper enameled tiles, and bas-relief in fired ceramics. His work can be seen in approximately 300 churches and synagogues located all over Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Michigan.

Charles Versteeg Studios moved from Carleton Place to Toronto in the early 60s, settling on the top floor of what was then the George Hees building on Davenport Road. After a major fire in 1963, the business moved to the top floor of a building at the corner of Poplar Plains and Davenport Roads. Over the course of many years, the business employed a great number of artists and craftsmen, highly skilled in the art of designing and making these windows. Versteeg retired and closed his stained glass business in 1968.

## How Dalle-de-Verre Windows are Made

By Elizabeth Steinebach

The glass for Dalle-de-Verre windows (also known as slab glass or faceted glass) is cast at the glass manufacturer. Infinite color and color combinations are possible. The fairly standard size being 12 inches by 8 inches by 1 inch thick. Cut with a conventional glass cutter, it is the breaking technique that separates dalle-de-verre from leaded stained glass.

For larger pieces, when this was done more than 40 years ago (this technique may have changed over the course of the last 40 years) the dalle, held in both hands was brought down with enough force as to cleave the glass into two. This was done on a large specialty chisel, edged with tungsten carbide or on a straight edge of steel, which was firmly wedged into a very large stable block of wood.

To further shape the dalle into the required pattern shape, one continues scoring with a glass cutter, and breaking until the piece is about the right shape and size. Detailing or finessing the pattern piece was done with a specialty hammer that looked very much like a present day bricklayer's hammer. Chipping the one inch edge creates a "bite" that is necessary for the dalle to be captured well by the matrix and helps with ensuring weatherproofing. The hammer too, is edged with tungsten carbide to ease chipping. When the pattern piece is chipped from the one inch edge, the characteristic faceting feature occurs. Similar to the concentric rings of a sea shell, the facets remove glass material allowing the light to be refracted through the varying thicknesses. This is not usually seen as the breakout of spectrums, but as a brightness or hi-light within the pattern piece. Faceting can be done to either side, but is unusually left to the inside face, allowing for a smooth and even presentation from the outside, where it will not collect dust and dirt.

Once all the dalles are cut to the desired pattern, there are two methods to assemble. The original and more traditional method is the creation of a concrete matrix, often mixed with latex to improve adherence to the glass. Concrete, a discipline unto itself can be engineered to specific requirements, for specific sites, colors and environments. A temporary framing system holds the concrete and glass in place, as the concrete cures. Once hardened, the glass is cleaned and readied for installation, usually by securing into a metal armature.

A more recent advancement in matrix materials is the use of epoxy resin. To prevent air pockets, sand is used as a material that is easily lost, first filling and surrounding the glass within the frame, about half the height of the one inch dalle. The two part epoxy resin is readied and poured to level height of the dalles and left to harden over night. The next day the frame is loosened to allow the panel to be turned over. All excess sand is brushed away, the frames secure in place and the epoxy resin again poured to the level of the dalle. When hardened, the panel can also be cleaned and place into an armature, ready for installation.

Both matrices can be colored or decorated with various aggregates, both inside or out. This allows for optimum architectural integration. Maintenance is minimal, care is simply the occasional brushing with a soft dry brush, or a sudsy water wash and rinse, if particularly dirty. Yearly inspection of the matrix is not required, but suggested, especially in our northern climates.



## A Reflection on the Windows, St. Joseph Chapel, Regis College

### Two Spaces, Two Lights

By *Brigid Elson*, SMC 1961

The solarium at 29 Queens Park Crescent was filled with the light of common day streaming through large, square paned, clear glass windows and, less clearly, through an opaque skylight. It was here that the women students of St. Joseph's College residence were required to attend Mass two or three times a week at an hour so early that many arrived in pajamas barely concealed under their long black academic gowns. In this unusual space we sang Gregorian Masses, using the heavy *Liber Usualis* where the notes, tiny diamonds and squares, were scattered over the pages like little black gems.

A new chapel was added to Mary Hall during my third year at the College. It was a conventional religious space, a long rectangle dimly lit and conducive to prayerful states. There were only four windows, tall slim rectangles which echoed the shape of the chapel, and blocked any view of the street outside. Within a year or so the ordinary panes were replaced by chunks of multicoloured glass in patterns that suggested, rather than made explicit, religious images.

These windows shaped common light into bright jewels which added another dimension to this sacred space. Having moved from one space to another, from the light of common day to filtered light, we learned, if only implicitly, that approaching God could be a question of style.





## A Reflection on the Windows, St. Joseph Chapel, Regis College

### The Light is Magic

By *Dorothy Janes*

Riding past Regis College in a bus on Wellesley Street in Toronto on a grey February afternoon I watched for the stained glass windows in the chapel. At first I didn't see them. Then I realized that the dull wall with the strange swirls was the windows.

That was when I knew that light is a reason for stained glass windows.

Another day alone I went into the chapel during the course *Radiance, Reflection, Revelation* for a second, more focused look at the windows.

I am pleased that the design is abstract so I can reflect on and absorb my own inspiration from their rainbow beauty. Their radiance is enhanced by the mirror reflection in the curve of the grand piano which stretches a window as if it were reaching to the floor.

I was humble in the reminder that I'm 'held in the light' (a revered concept for Quakers) of this glory.

## Reflection on the Windows, St. Joseph Chapel, Regis College

By Rev. Bob LePage

The four windows of the St. Joseph's Chapel at Regis College speak to me of the activity of God in creating the heavens and the earth.

The dalle-de-verre (faceted glass) creates an intensity of colour and action that is immediately captivating when one enters the chapel. The variety of colours and the use of swirling lines in the abstract patterns create a sense of dynamic activity, - particularly within the three windows in the chapel proper. The windows appear to be a series that tell a story in four stages, beginning with the most eastern window, the one in the narthex, at the main entrance to the chapel. It has predominantly vertical lines in the patterns, with only a few curves. This suggests to me that I am seeing the beginning of the intense activity that is so evident in the other windows. Is this the moment at the beginning of time when the Spirit of God begins to move over the void?

In the next window, the one at the back of the chapel, there is an increase in movement, with the beginning of large curving patterns that will increase in number and become more focused toward a central point in the following two windows. There are what appear to be two angels flying from the east and west edge of the window toward the center. There is a form of a cross in red, centered and occupying the center of the window. Is this a representation of the creation of heavenly realms with a symbolic representation of the Christ who was, according to the Gospel of John, with God at the beginning? Or is the cross a foreshadowing of the Christ who is to come in the fullness of time?

The third window reveals an intensifying of action with an arrow shape penetrating upward through an oval and touching a sun at the upper edge of the window, suggestive of a phallus, womb and ovum. The predominant colour is green, suggesting to me the natural world, fertility, creation. The presence of the sun suggests that this window may be depicting the creation of this natural realm that includes the sun and the earth, and all things living.

The fourth window is composed predominantly of curving lines that draw one's focus to an enclosed oval in the upper central portion of the window. As I meditate upon this window I sense that the position and tilt of the oval and the accompanying curved lines are forming the shape of the Madonna, (mother and child). Does this window remind us of the creation of humanity, and of the birth of the one child for whom all of creation has been waiting?



## A Reflection on the Windows, St. Joseph Chapel, Regis College

By *Melissa Seiling*

These windows speak metaphorically to me. With this technique the rocks of glass must be broken, both to adhere to the concrete, but also because in their broken edges is where light pierces in. If the glass was left unaltered, “perfect”, the light would be trapped within each piece and the chapel would not glow as it does.

These windows transport me to my own brokenness and vulnerability. Reminding me that it is not in a false perfection that light is illuminated. Rather it is these rough and fractured edges that connect me to other rough and broken pieces, and here in the painful places, light can enter.

Stand back, look at this mosaic.  
The beauty in the singularity of each piece of glass.  
The beauty of the whole.

This is my body broken for you.

(the above Reflection was also inspired by Leonard Cohen’s “Anthem”)





## A Reflection on the Windows, St. Joseph Chapel, Regis College

By *Lynn Smart*

I am inside Regis Chapel facing three floor-to-ceiling dalle-de-verre windows on the south side. What do these windows convey to me? What is their mood?

I am going to start my reflection with the middle window. In this window I notice the green light drawing my eye to the yellow and orange and red seen at the top. This window speaks to me of the arts, of creativity. I can see in it an easel and a musical instrument, a lute, perhaps, or a couple of harps. The blue and the orange light bring forth the spirituality of the work for me while the green and orange give it energy. I think this window is an inspiration, under the protection of the Almighty, to be creative, an invitation.

The front window nearest the altar appears to me to be more feminine in nature. It is graceful, sensitive, and strong in its faith and trust. The yellow and green light speak to me of trust, and the red of movement and warmth. This window speaks to me of dance, the dance of love. The rear full length window seems to me to talk of growth. If one follows the red light it passes by clumps of chaos, enlightened by the green and blue and red elements. The top red oval looks like the suffering face of Christ and yet it is a strong, warm, and welcoming face.

These windows are framed by red brick and have a texture of glass brick. The light passes through the chunks of glass and falls on the shiny terrazzo floor, especially from the middle window, like trees in a forest on which the sun shines brightly. Yet the walls of the chapel are a bland brown and cream.

In conclusion, I see the brightness of these windows as not only an invitation to act but also as a psalm of praise for the life from God that we are receiving.

## A Reflection on the Windows, St. Joseph Chapel, Regis College

By *Elizabeth Steinebach*

In my mind, stained glass was invented to embody the mysteries of God. The union of color and light, illuminating the darkest recesses of the human soul - or chapel wall, metaphorically transparent, fleeting and seemingly touchable, is more often elusive than we may wish. Whether stained glass is in a small parish church, where colors serenely splash a joyful yet reverent mood, or to the great English cathedrals whose light lifts the heart and soul, colored glass evokes an emotional response.

This is in stark contrast to say, the French cathedral at Chartres, whose hulking great mass can be seen across the golden sunlit fields and in whose experience is like that of stepping into the belly of God, dark, save for the ribbons of stained glass windows. It is not until you step back outside into the light, do you realize what a great gift life is. Emotion or a felt sense experience, each site, each structure, each sacred space is assembled with deep knowing to create an event intended as a unique expression of Divinity here on earth. And stained glass is very much part of that.

There is the slender arm of the stained glass family tree, called dalle-de-verre. Nothing can prepare you for your first encounter. Deep silence, brooding power, an inescapable sense of raw majesty. Gone are the dainty ribbons of lead, the expressive treatments that offer fine detail, creating the sweet angelic faces, instead the thick surround of concrete, nearly engulfing every individual piece of glass in a protective mantle. The contrast of light and dark is wholly accentuated. The fundamental element of what earth is - the very sand and water that is essential to concrete, cleaving to that which is heavenly - light.

The dalle-de-verre in the Regis Chapel is equally expressive. Unassuming from the busy streetscape of Welles-

ley, in the core of downtown Toronto, the façade creates a tantalizingly elusive quality of curiosity in such a humble way, where only the most determined would satisfy that call to venture in. Yet inside the embrace of color and the glow of light, even on an overcast day, works its subtle magic. The volume is made to seem bigger as the windows recess into the void created by the drop ceiling. I wait for the wow factor. This sensation that lets me know that God is in the house - regardless of religion or ceremony. Like a tiny shudder, similar to what I imagine the ecstatic state of mystics must have been like, I know that this glass has done what it was intended to do. All the elements have come together to produce a portal to the Divine within. The flavor of this chapel is one of sweetness, an alluring confectionery, a treat to be savored and enjoyed, an invitation to celebrate goodness.

The designs employ the movement of line and a deep understanding of the meaning of color, leading a busy mind away from conventional labels. Like a toddler with a coloring book, crayoning outside the lines, the usual reference points are meaningless, we are opened into a relationship, exploring beyond rational thought and filled with wonder and awe. Delighting our psyche and feeding our spirit, dalle-de-verre is too primitive in its methodology to bear the desires of the human ego, the strength of color and line is pure, beckoning us back to relate to God in a felt sense, visceral, rather than an intellectual way.

Dalle-de-verre may have lost favor, for the moment. Its heyday was post Second World War, when the reality of good and evil was evidently clear. The right medium is always made available at the right time, for the right purpose. Its steadfastness and longevity is its ability to outlast pop culture and the ever changing trends in all things, including our personal quest, for understanding our relationship to God. Its beauty and appeal is its unwavering ability to remind us of what matters most.





## Reflection on the Windows, St. Joseph Chapel, Regis College

### Seeing, We Hear God's Call

By *Donald Sutherland*

The chapel welcomes, beyond the door.  
Its somber bricks stand bathed in light,  
The gift of luminous portals, four  
These clefts proclaim God's power.

Each window, mosaic-like, emits  
A burst of color to bless the space,  
Each stanza-like, repeats a message  
To attentive souls who enter here.

The first, its splendor partly hidden  
Peeks shyly above the empty choir  
To prefigure glories further right.  
The rest stand firm and fully seen.

Next Eden's garden fills our view  
Revealing there an unspoiled world  
It bursts with colors overwhelming  
A joyous anthem to God's might.

The third depicts man's cries to God  
A chartreuse anchor, deeply rooted,  
Extending shank towards an orb,  
The glowing symbol of our Lord.

Finally in the last rendition  
A verdant bordered road of gold  
Rises from earth's wild beauty  
To reach the verge of heaven

At its apogee, the Trinity  
Appears in form symbolic  
God the Father writ in gild  
His Son in sapphire blue

While slight to their left  
The Holy Spirit rests within  
An abstract shape, a golden hue;  
A form beyond our mortal ken.

Thus reside these three in one  
Beside the chapel's modest altar  
Welcoming all who enter here  
That they might, in caritas, be one.

Therefore let us adore the Lord  
So even in our mortal weakness,  
Beauty and perfection might prevail  
As in these shards of shattered glass.

## Reflection on the Windows, St. Joseph Chapel, Regis College

By *Lee Thirlwall*

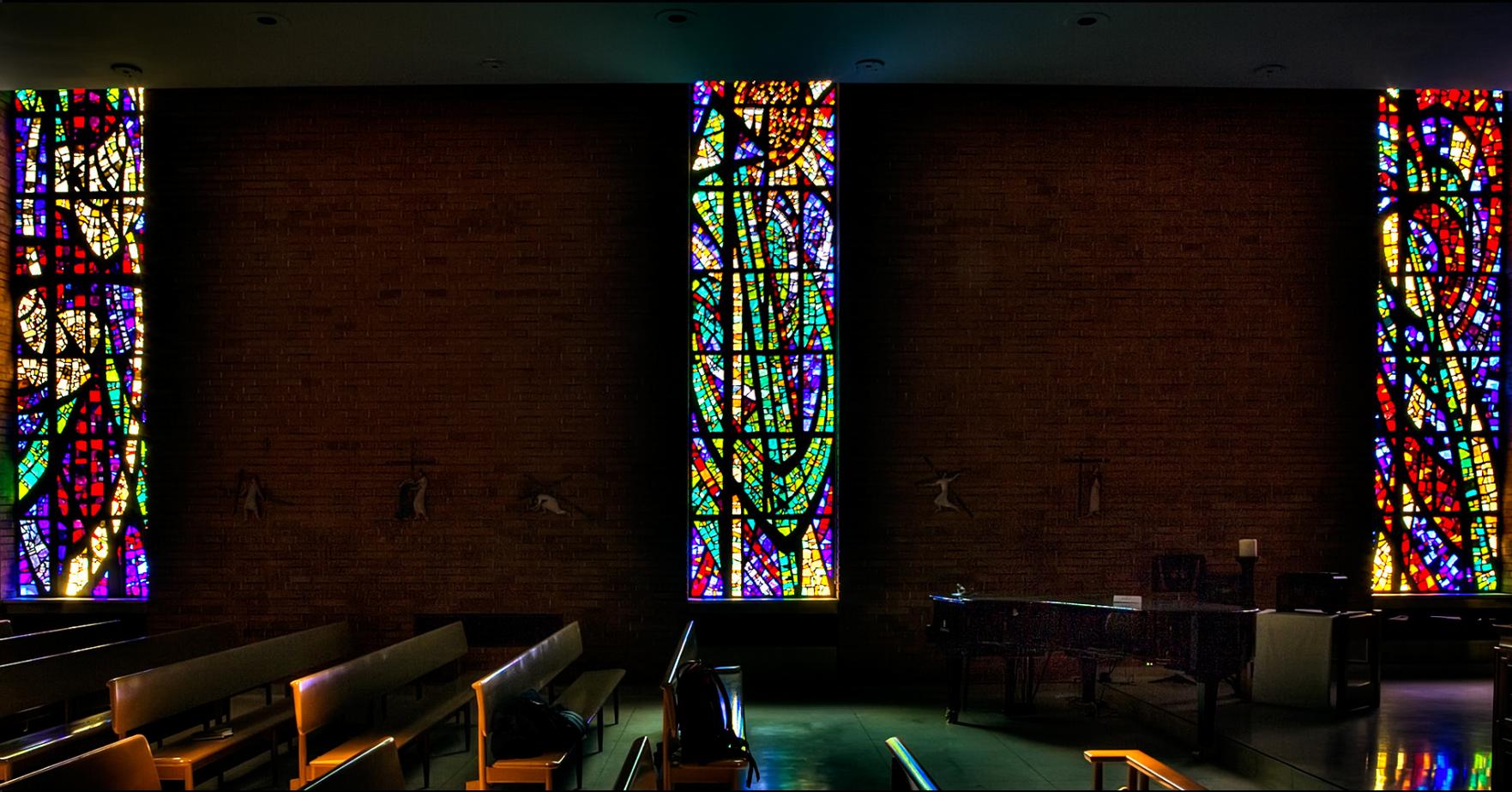
I have visited the chapel many times, worshiped there on a few occasions and viewed the interior and exterior in different light conditions. I love the windows! Artistically, I enjoy, non-figurative and expressionist painting, vertical rectangular formats and bright, strong colours. So I am probably prejudiced to like the windows. I am, however, never comfortable with the architecture of the chapel. Parts of the interior, like that awful ceiling and the foyer/choir loft, do violence to the windows.

The rest of the chapel interior always seems to me as overly plain, not chaste or meditative but bland. This may be because I have spent too much of my life in schools built in this style. I call the style Institutional, Mid-century, Mediocre, Modern. International style on a budget, not “less is more” but “easy-to-clean”. The style uses only rectangles, Toronto’s least interesting brick, clear glass, and cement.

Despite this, the exterior street wall works. It is not very exciting but complete, {unlike the interior side} unified and some what elegant. The four concrete bands are the geometric frames that contrast, gently, with the swirling, sensuous, tracery. They give a cloisonné effect, as if carved out to make space for the glass. The tracery looks like a large drawing in white with dark background. At night there is a reverse, strong, black drawing with bright, inset, jewels.

The windows of the college chapel are its glory. They are magnificent every time I see them. The chapel is no match for the windows. I would like a white or extremely muted interior to receive the gorgeous, coloured light. The colour is utterly dominant. The imagery never seems important to me. I see light and image as one, sun, fire, water and vegetation. The colour is the message, light and life. And those colours burn, brilliant in daylight, smoldering embers at night. Unlike the exterior, the interior tracery is background, necessary, black and opaque, that supports and heightens the drama of the colour. The glass, erratic in thickness and pigmentation, interacts with the changing light to offer infinite variations. To be able to get those colours in painting would be ecstasy. I am sure this is the reason artists turn to glass.





## A Reflection on the Windows, St. Joseph Chapel, Regis College

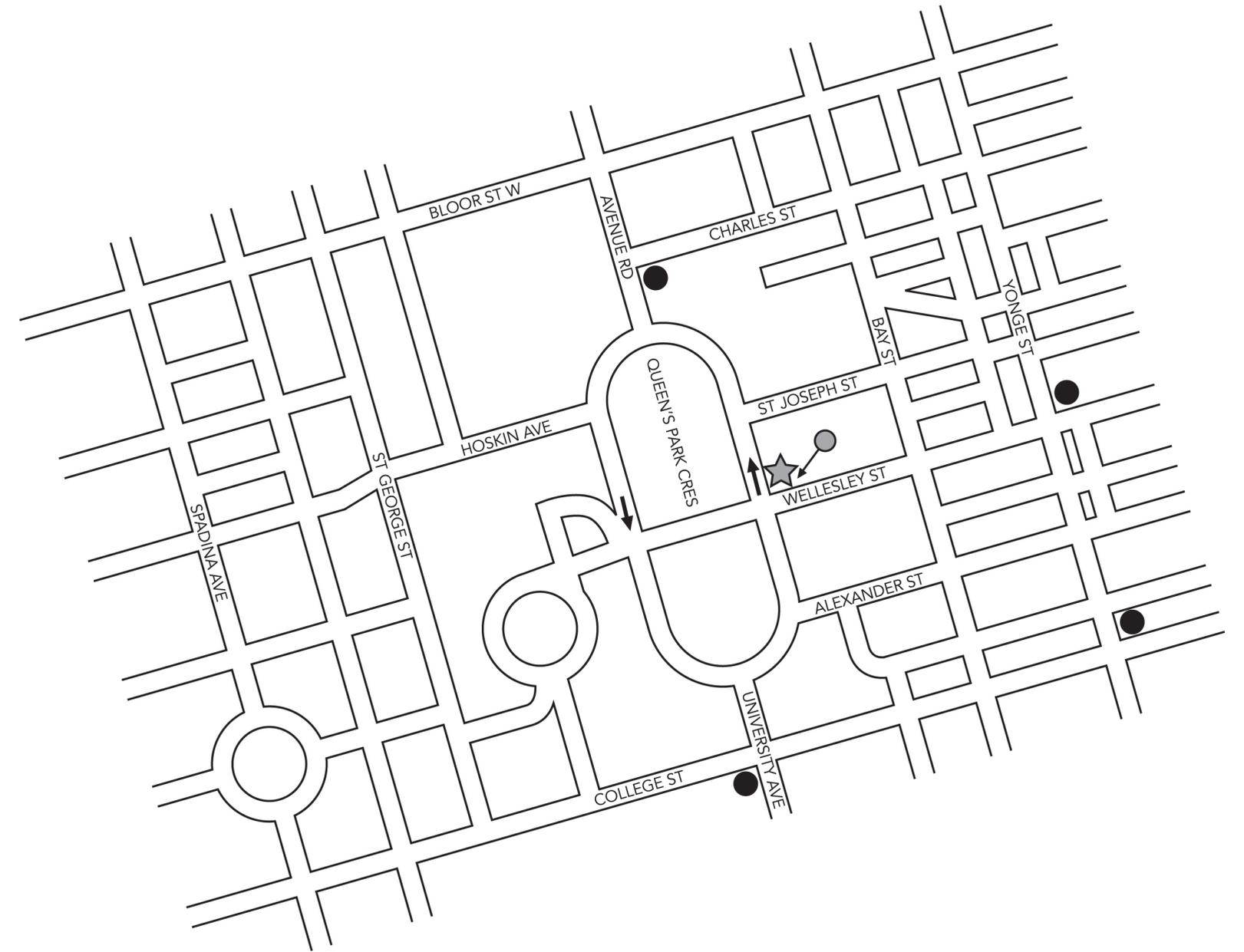
By *Melina Young*

I love these windows. There is an organic harmony present in the way the pieces are placed together, the space between each colour and chunk and how they occupy space in relation to each other. I relate to it viscerally, physically, for it is solid like the ground. The solidity of the glass holds the light of the sun and in places magnifies it to piercing brilliance. And it is of such a scale that I am totally immersed. I stand before the giant sunflower dwarfed, embraced, lifted.



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