



THE CHURCH BUILDINGS OF HÁTEIGSKIRKJA - ENGLISH VERSION

Háteigskirkja Church was designed by architect Halldór H. Jónsson (born October 3, 1912 – died February 6, 1992). In terms of form, the church is a basilica—a traditional architectural style for churches dating back to the early days of Christianity. A basilica is an elongated, rectangular structure; the nave is divided into three, five, or seven aisles by colonnades, with the central section being the widest, and it features an extension at one end containing a raised platform.

In designing the church, Halldór emphasized three key qualities: it was to be beautiful, welcoming, and solemn. The architecture of Háteigskirkja is quite unique for an Icelandic church; it incorporates Eastern influences—evident, for instance, in the pointed towers, the pointed arches of the windows and doorways, the design of the interior colonnades, the gilding of the columns, and a distinct ornamental garden adjacent to the church. It is said that Halldór was inspired by a visit to Granada, Spain, where he explored the Alhambra—a palace and fortress complex built between 1238 and 1358 by Muslims in an Islamic architectural style, which also reflects Spanish influences.

The name "La Alhambra" can be translated from Arabic as "the red fortress." The name refers to the reddish stone from which the fortress is built—a red hue that is also prominent in the interior of Háteigskirkja. Furthermore, much like in Háteigskirkja, La Alhambra features numerous arched passageways and gilded elements, as well as enclosed pleasure gardens—reminiscent, perhaps, of the ornamental and meditative garden found at Háteigskirkja. Atop the tower of La Alhambra sits a recessed roof crowned by a slender cross reaching toward the heavens—a design echoed in the four towers of Háteigskirkja. Byzantine influences are frequently cited in descriptions of the architecture of Háteigskirkja. Additionally, one might say that Catholic influences have persisted within the walls of Háteigskirkja to a greater degree than is typical in Icelandic churches; this is evidenced by a distinct emphasis on the Virgin Mary, manifested in a Marian altar featuring a mosaic image of Mary by the painter Benedikt Gunnarsson (born July 14, 1929 – died November 22, 2018), located to the right of the church's chancel. This magnificent, large-scale mosaic by Benedikt in the chancel—which immediately catches the eye of visitors — along with the image of the Virgin Mary, further enhances the church's Eastern aesthetic.

Pétur H. Ármannsson, an architect and division director at the Cultural Heritage Agency of Iceland, delivered an informative talk at Háteigskirkja (Háteigur Church). This took place as part of a well-attended "historical walk" held on September 17, 2025, to mark the 60th anniversary of the church's consecration during the Advent season of 1965. In his talk, Pétur highlighted an intriguing connection that may, to some extent, explain the Byzantine influences evident in the architecture of Háteigskirkja. This connection concerns the fact that Dr. Selma Jónsdóttir (full name: Sigprúður Selma Jónsdóttir)—sister of Halldór and the first director of the National Gallery of Iceland—defended her doctoral thesis at the University of Iceland in 1960. The thesis was titled "A Byzantine Last Judgment Depiction at Flatatunga"; in it, she argued that carved wooden panels from Flatatunga had originally formed part of a medieval Last Judgment scene executed in a Byzantine style. Given that Selma was working on her thesis during the same period that the concepts for Háteigskirkja were being developed, it is an interesting hypothesis that the subject of her research—conducted by the sister of Halldór—may have, in some way, influenced his ideas for the church's design. It is worth noting that Selma was the first Icelandic woman to earn a doctoral degree. In 1950, she was the first—and only—employee of the National Gallery of Iceland, and from 1960, she served as its first director. In recognition of her professional and scholarly contributions, Selma was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Icelandic Order of the Falcon in 1979; she also received other Nordic honors.

The parish hall by the church was designed by Halldór's son, Garðar Halldórsson (b. 1942), the former State Architect. The parish hall was built in 1992.