Renewing spaces: Designing distinctive churches

by Michael J. Crosbie in the November 15, 2005 issue

Houses of worship have certain physical characteristics that appeal to the senses. Building materials are often precious and placed with care. They include carvings of symbolic and allegorical meaning. Through their design and decoration, churches tell stories of the faith. Stained-glass windows lift one's spirits from earthly concerns. Vast interiors not only accommodate those who come to worship but are symbolically big enough for God to join us. The shafts of sunlight that spill from upper windows to the cool stone floors below seem like ladders to the heavens.

These elements reflect some of the traditional aspects of sacred space that have been passed down for centuries. But like all works of architecture, sacred buildings reflect not only a faith tradition but the values and concerns of the builders' immediate context. When people build churches, they are embodying their faith in their own particular social world and historical moment.

I've selected eight examples of excellent contemporary church design—eight projects that have succeeded admirably in embodying a particular community's religious identity and mission in its context. The architectural aim is somewhat different in each case, depending on the identity of the community and its goals.

Embroidering on the past: Many communities wish to use the historical style of their building or the traditions it represents as the inspiration for a new design. That was the approach at the restored and improved Old St. Patrick's Church in Chicago, a project designed by Booth Hansen Architects of Chicago.

Old St. Patrick's Church is the oldest surviving institutional building in the city (it was spared in the Great Chicago Fire). The parish was founded in 1846, and the church was constructed in 1854 by Irish immigrants and furnished with generic Catholic icons. Around 1915 a local artist, Thomas O'Shaughnessy, who had studied Celtic decorative arts in Dublin and learned the art of stained glass at the Art Institute of Chicago, transformed the windows and stenciled the walls with images from the

Book of Kells. After numerous repaintings by less skillful artists, however, the church was left with a mix of styles and only traces of the Celtic theme.

As the church community experienced a renaissance, the congregation sought to revive the building as well. Bringing new life to Old St. Patrick's was a collaborative effort between the congregation, artists, craftspeople and the architect. The "new" church they created together respects the Celtic traditions of the church and the congregation, reaches into the community and is able to respond to future needs.

Booth Hansen used modern technology to reinterpret and expand the splendor of the building's heritage. Along with restoring what was already there (and discovering some of O'Shaughnessy's work under paint and plaster), the architects used Celtic designs to embroider new patterns and pieces onto Old St. Patrick's fabric. The new altar blends traditional Celtic symbols in a fresh way. The new reredos, the wall behind the altar, uses Celtic designs in bas-relief, while the floor of the new elevated altar area incorporates Celtic designs in the inlaid marble. The result is architecture and art that strengthens what was there already and extends the fabric of the church and its history.

Celebrating the vernacular: Certain regions of the country have a distinct tradition of church architecture, and congregations often want to tie their new building to that tradition. New England has a powerful tradition of vernacular architecture. The simple, white, wood-framed congregational meetinghouses are for many people the epitome of New England.

Congregationalism has its roots in the Puritan movement. The Puritans' meetinghouses were simple buildings, constructed without frills, which expressed the unambiguous and rigorous nature of their civic and religious life. The sanctuary allowed the congregation to have close contact with the speaker. The spoken word from the Bible and the sermonizing on the word were at the heart of this faith. The meetinghouse interior did not need to accommodate processions or other movements of people. This style of religious architecture had a lasting effect on the architecture of New England and other kinds of buildings—schoolhouses, town halls, libraries, even factories and mills.

Christ Congregational Church in Brockton, Massachusetts, draws from this tradition. Designed by Donham & Sweeney, the new church is the latest building for a congregation that was formed in the 1700s. The current congregation is the result of

the merger of four separate parishes in the 1980s. When the congregation decided it needed room to expand, it wanted a design that would reflect its distinguished past and also create a stronger sense of unity.

The exterior is of the same materials seen in countless New England buildings since the 18th century: clapboard (horizontal) and board and batten (vertical) wood siding. The church is straightforward, filled with light and (like the congregation it serves) “worship centered.”

Worship is a collective activity, so the design focuses on the 450-seat sanctuary. This square room, symmetrical on all sides, offers a strong sense of “oneness.” In the sanctuary the unobstructed clear span creates an expressive structural form that soars to the light of the cupola. The church’s narthex (the space where visitors first enter, before proceeding to the sanctuary) was designed in response to the congregation’s tradition of greeting one another in fellowship before the service.

Giving old traditions a new interpretation: In any design, the architect seeks a source of inspiration. In some cases, the architect may examine the tenets of faith itself and use these philosophies and beliefs as a starting point in the design. This is a difficult task, since it requires the architect to transform abstract concepts of belief into a physical object—a church.

For many years the sisters of the Abbey of St. Walburga, a Benedictine monastery, occupied a compound in downtown Denver. With the growth of the city, however, the increase in traffic and urban noise threatened the solitude of the abbey. The 30 sisters set out to relocate their abbey to a remote site in northern Colorado, not far from the Wyoming border.

The design of the abbey, which is the work of Barrett Studio Architects of Denver, puts at the center a chapel where the nuns gather to pray several times a day. This project was phased over several years, and the chapel was built first.

From the earliest discussions with the sisters, the architects realized that their faith was a living tradition, not an exercise in nostalgia. This faith informs the way the sisters view the world and how they direct their lives, which they dedicate to prayer. The community is guided in its earthly and spiritual life by the principles of St. Benedict’s Rule. The Benedictine tradition emphasizes beauty, stability, symmetry, harmony with nature, frugality, simplicity and truthfulness.

The architects used these principles in the design of the new chapel. The setting in the hills allows the abbey to live in harmony with its natural surroundings through the use of concrete, wood and metal, which contribute to a color palette that is very much at home in this setting amid rocks and trees. The interior of the chapel, the heart of the community, is contained within an octagonal shape. Symmetrical on all eight of its axes, it is close in symmetry to the circle, which is a geometric symbol of Christ, with no beginning and no end.

The upper portions of the chapel are filled with windows amid the wood roof structure. The natural light represents truth—the light of the Word. The materials used inside the chapel are expressed in their natural beauty—the wood structure, ceramic tile floor and concrete walls all express their nature without being hidden behind paint or other finishes. The exposed-wood roof structure is an expression of the building's stability. The sparseness of the interior communicates a sense of beauty and also of frugality—allowing the natural materials and abundant sunshine to articulate simplicity within the chapel. The design grows from the faith tradition of the Benedictines and expresses a new interpretation of that ancient tradition.

Blending cultures: Faith traditions are becoming more diverse in the U.S. as people of different denominations, cultural backgrounds and ethnic heritages adopt new beliefs or reinterpret traditional ones. The mixing of traditions is reflected in worship spaces that incorporate elements of the particular ethnic groups.

Holy Rosary Catholic Church in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, designed by Bahr Vermeer Haecker Architects of Omaha, Nebraska, mixes traditional Roman Catholic design and Native American artistic sensibilities. In bestowing on this church a design award, critics noted that the "blending of Native American and Catholic tradition enhances and enriches the liturgical environment. The building exhibits the wonderful influence of two traditions expressed in elegant form, sitting beautifully in its prairie setting."

The new church was born out of tragedy: a fire destroyed a 98-year-old church that was the heart and soul of the Catholic Native American community of the Red Cloud Indian School in Pine Ridge. The old church had been a Gothic-inspired building in the European tradition.

According to the architects, as an act of respect to Lakota spirituality the new church is aligned with the Four Directions, symbolizing the sacredness of the church and its

being situated at the physical center of the Red Cloud campus. The Lakota medicine wheel and its symbolic expression of nature’s four directions coincide with the form of the Celtic cross, an element of the Catholic tradition. Both are used in the design of the new church as symbols of unity.

The main entry with its bronze doors and zinc-shingled bell tower evokes the memory of the old church. Once one passes through those doors, one encounters a rich cultural mélange. The arches in the sanctuary interior symbolize a sense of welcome. The circle forms in the floor of the narthex symbolize the never-ending connectedness of the Oglala Lakota with God (Wankan-Tanka), nature and one another. The church’s floor plan relates to a symbolic form of the Holy Spirit from Catholic tradition and an eagle in Lakota spirituality. The pews are arranged in a semicircular fashion, which is a traditional form of gathering among the Lakota. The stained-glass windows were designed by Francis He Crow, a Lakota elder. They feature graphic novelettes of traditional Lakota stories, which echo biblical themes.

The tabernacle is set into a brick reredos on the east wall, which contains bricks and the cornerstone of the destroyed church. This completes the spiritual connection between the old church and the new one. The face bricks of the reredos fan out at the top, suggesting a Native American feather headdress.

Building on a mega scale: The rise of megachurches is most pronounced among evangelical congregations in the Southeast and Southwest, but they can be found anywhere in the country. Some commentators on the trend see it as a manifestation of suburban sprawl and the rise of the exurbs—those communities that sprout up in the middle of nowhere, apart from large cities. Others see megachurches as efforts to turn worship into entertainment, with the emphasis on theatrical spectacle.

The architecture of churches that build on a mega scale is usually nontraditional. The art and decoration is usually minimal, often avoiding Christian symbols. Symbolic arches, stained glass, crosses, statues and candles are nowhere to be found. The reason for this absence, megachurch designers say, is that the church does not want to confront potential congregants with off-putting reminders of traditional Christianity. Megachurches want to offer a friendly, familiar, nonchurchlike atmosphere.

Hope United Methodist Church in Voorhees, New Jersey, was designed by Richard Conway Meyer to be nonthreatening, welcoming and literally transparent. The idea

is to let participants see what they are getting into before they walk through the door.

The neighborhood around the new church is industrial, with factories, branch banks, microwave towers and a municipal water tank. In a certain way, Hope Church expresses some of the architectural elements of its neighbors—you might mistake it for a manufacturing facility or a warehouse.

According to the architect, the church members viewed the architecture as a potentially powerful tool in reaching out to a transient and secular community. This population might be turned away by traditional ecclesiastical imagery that implied a closed community. So the church offers a visual version of the familiar and comfortable: highly visible parking spaces, a clearly marked entrance and a clear view of the vibrant activity of the congregants. The transparent church front is echoed in the glassy walls of the worship space itself. One can see into the sanctuary before one has even entered the narthex.

To reinforce the impression of dynamic, constant growth, Hope Church presents itself as perennially incomplete—always in the process of becoming. The large girder in the worship space and the fragile zigzag wall behind the stage allow for easy expansion as the church grows. Even the entrance canopy can be extended to twice its current size if needed. The large worship space, dominated by a stage for bands and electronic equipment, allows this faith community to demonstrate its beliefs out in the open, for anyone in the parking lot to see.

Affirming an urban presence: As populations have shifted away from urban areas, many city churches have closed and the buildings have been turned into restaurants, houses, nightclubs or offices. (In Pittsburgh, one church has been transformed into a beer hall.) Meanwhile, some congregations have recommitted themselves to the urban scene and seek to be part of urban revitalization.

In the 1960s the First Lutheran Church in San Diego built a small sanctuary on a downtown site. This small church was gradually surrounded by high-rise office towers, and it lost its place in the skyline. The expanding congregation decided to renew the church’s urban presence and to make a statement that the church was “in the city for good.”

Dominy + Associates, Architects, created a new urban enclave for the church, providing space for worship, education and fellowship, plus a protected space for

outdoor gatherings. A new tower was added that rises 67 feet above the chancel. The tower is in proportion to the adjacent high-rise buildings. Both the tower and the new chapel have skylights that are illuminated at night, transforming these structures into glowing beacons on the skyline.

The design of a new open courtyard, surrounded by concrete bench seating, offers a secure space in which members of the congregation can socialize. Colored concrete walkways create a crucifix form that extends invitingly beyond the courtyard and onto the city sidewalk.

Another example of the trend of congregations establishing an urban presence is the Metropolitan Community Church in downtown Washington, D.C. This is one of the first churches to be built by a predominantly gay congregation. The community wanted the design to relate to the midcity context of rowhouses and apartment buildings.

Designed by architect Suzane Reatig, the church is composed of two elements: an L-shaped, solid masonry wing for offices, administrative services, a kitchen, a library and a chapel, and a rectangular glass and steel box with a barrel-vaulted roof for the main sanctuary, wrapped by the masonry L-shaped building on two sides.

The genius of this design lies in how the building provides openness and privacy at the same time. The glass and steel sanctuary radiates a sense of welcome to the world outside. The white steel frame of the building is infilled with glass that is mirrored on the outside. During the day the glass reflects the urban neighborhood around it, while in the evenings it glows with a calm inner light. Those inside the sanctuary look outdoors at the trees, the sky, and the birds soaring by. The glass's mirrored coating allows the interior to appear to be multiplied, and there is a blending of interior and exterior. While some urban churches choose to be fortresses within the city, this glassy church refuses to shut out its urban neighborhood, or to be shut out from it.

Being stewards of the earth: The idea of conserving and preserving natural resources has biblical underpinnings. The earth does not belong to any one generation; we are merely its stewards and our mission should be to preserve it for future generations.

Many congregations are trying to build in ways that do as little harm as possible to the natural environment. In the routine running of their churches, they are looking

for ways to recycle paper, conserve energy and avoid polluting the air and water. More and more congregations are building churches that express the principles of sustainability and conservation—a movement best known as “green architecture.”

One example is the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Northern Nevada in Reno. This congregation’s new fellowship hall, designed by Pfau Architecture, combines the creation of spiritual space with sensitivity to the environment. Despite the advanced technology of the building’s energy systems, the architectural character of the building is subtle in appearance, employing simple, natural materials in harmony with the site.

The congregation expressed interest in a sustainable, enduring, low-maintenance building closely connected with the surrounding natural environment. The site is buffered to the south by land slated for wetlands park development, with spectacular views of the Sierra Nevada mountain range to the south and west. The architects wanted to express the spirit of the natural materials used. Many of these are left in a natural state, such as the debarked and clean-peeled tree trunks that serve as structural columns in the hall’s great room. The walls are of concrete block with a high content of fly ash, a waste product of coal-fired electric power generation that can be recycled as a replacement for portland cement.

The 24-foot-high great room is a pavilion of large windows that is visually connected to the surrounding landscape. Louvered shading devices on the windows allow the sun into the space during cool days to heat the concrete floor, which stores the sun’s warmth and radiates it back at night. During the summer the louvers block the heat of the sun. The large windows also permit ample natural illumination so that electric lights do not have to be turned on, which not only conserves energy but also cuts down on the church’s light bill. There is an advanced heating system that circulates water heated during the day through tubes in the concrete floor (the heated water is stored in a 10,000-gallon reservoir on the side of the building). Heated and cooled water is also piped through coils of metal tubing, over which a fan blows to condition the air. This holds the temperature inside the fellowship hall at a fairly steady 59 degrees during the winter and 69 degrees during the summer.

Each of these projects contains some element of the timeless nature of religious architecture—ethereal light, transcendent acoustics, substantive materials crafted by artisans, symbols that speak across ages and cultures. But these buildings also tell us about the particular people who commissioned, designed and built them, and how a particular community aims to live out its faith. These buildings offer us a

glimpse of how our culture makes its imprint upon the worship places that we create.