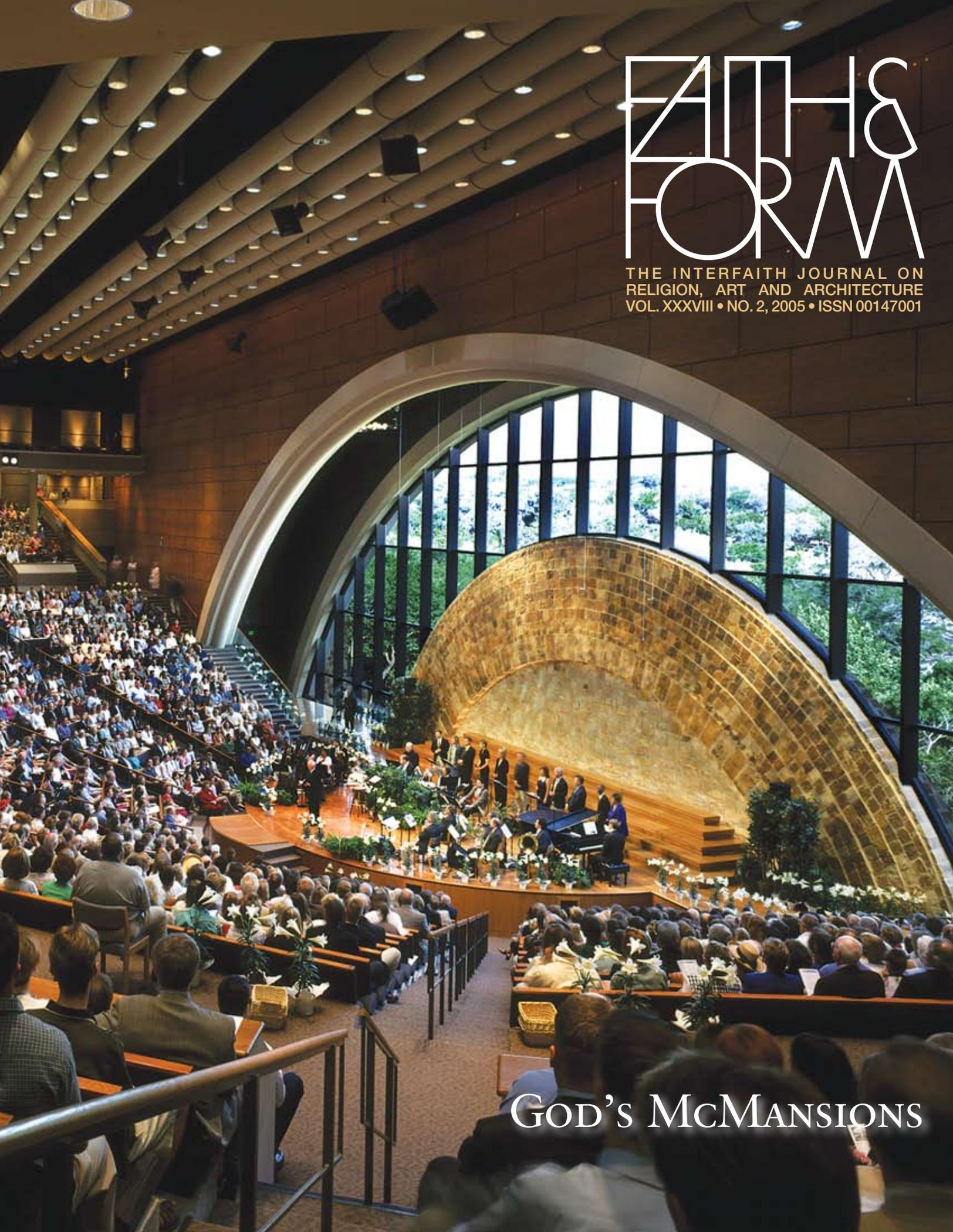


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THE INTERFAITH JOURNAL ON  
RELIGION, ART AND ARCHITECTURE  
VOL. XXXVIII • NO. 2, 2005 • ISSN 00147001



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Manuscript Submission: The editor is pleased to review manuscripts for possible publication. Any subject material relevant to religious art and architecture is welcome. Good visual material is emphasized. Articles may be submitted on disk along with hard copy or emailed to: mcrosbie@faithandform.com. Manuscripts, disks and photos will not be returned unless specifically requested and a return envelope with sufficient postage is included.

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**ON THE COVER:** Overland Partners' Riverbend Church in Austin, Texas (see article on page 13). Photograph by Paul Bardagiy

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## MACHINES FOR WORSHIP



EDITOR'S PAGE \* MICHAEL J. CROSBIE

An issue on megachurches? Who cares? They're big and they're ugly. To most architects and artists—anyone who cares about the lasting quality of worship environments—they're a sin. Cheaply constructed, wasteful, out of scale, hostile to the buildings and neighbors around them, tough on the environment (megachurches and acres of asphalt go hand-in-hand). To those with a sociological bent, megachurches are just more evidence that in this culture quantity trumps quality every time—from McMansions to SUVs, from Big Gulps to Monster Thickburgers.

I'm yours, Lord. Supersize me.

The feeling is mutual. People who build megachurches don't seem to have a high regard for folks passionate about liturgical design. Spend some time poking around in the megachurch world and you will hear that architects are a waste of time and money. Megachurch contractors market their "design/build" services with speed. The value system of Big Box builders prevails whether the box in question is for Wal-Mart, Best Buy, or Calvary Baptist.

Anne Loveland and Otis Wheeler provide a rational, unemotional look at the world of Big Box Religion in their book, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*. The article in this issue adapted from their book is a peek inside the mindset and motivations of today's megachurch Medici. They have a different value system when it comes to architecture. The building as an artifact of architectural or artistic quality, as defined by design professionals whose first loyalty is to art or architecture, just isn't that important to megachurch people. It is more about the relationship of people inside the building, and to the beliefs that they share. This isn't wrong—it's just the kind of thing that drives architects and artists crazy (check out Elizabeth Farrelly's take in this issue on how megachurches are ruining the world). The first loyalty of the architect and the artist is to the religious environment. No one, it seems, in a megachurch will ever care about the building as much as the architect and artist does.

But there is something else wrong with the megachurch picture. There are faith traditions that, in the past, created structures for worship that were simple, unadorned, and "unchurchlike." I am thinking of the New England Congregational meetinghouses of the mid-19th century, whose simple, box-like forms and interiors stripped of all decoration could have just as easily served as a school or a factory. But they were intrinsically beautiful buildings in their proportions, craft, and stark beauty in the landscape. These churches were part of a tradition of building that stretched back many centuries. In other words, they were products of a culture that cared about making things of quality.

This is what most megachurches lack—a sense of refinement and a reflection of quality. These are values that do not have to be sacrificed for size. The round-the-clock media coverage of recent events at the Vatican reminded anyone who was watching that you can make a church big and beautiful at the same time. Overland Partners' Riverbend Church, considered in Judith Dupré's article, proves that even a megachurch can rise to a higher standard.

The message is: don't give up on megachurches. Artists and architects need to show potential megachurch clients that they can build better worship environments by availing themselves of their God-given talents. They must give credence to the view of megachurch folks who see the building as a machine for worship. But a beautifully designed and crafted machine it can be. 

MICHAEL J. CROSBIE IS THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF *FAITH & FORM* AND CAN BE REACHED BY EMAIL AT [MCROSBIE@FAITHANDFORM.COM](mailto:MCROSBIE@FAITHANDFORM.COM)

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# GIMME THAT BIG BOX RELIGION

BY ANNE C. LOVELAND AND OTIS B. WHEELER  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY OTIS B. WHEELER



Photo: R. Laroux

Our sample of 63 megachurches reveals that their architecture varied more than the prototype suggested. Some of the megachurches we visited were plain, utilitarian structures that recalled the 17th century meetinghouses and the 19th century tabernacles. Others exhibit

decor ranged from very austere to highly ornamental. Unlike Willow Creek, many megachurches featured “churchlike” details such as crosses, towers, spires, even stained-glass windows.

Differences among evangelicals regarding their basic conception of the church building also produced architectural variety. Virtually all evangelicals agreed that the church building was not a sacred place. Nor was it an end

or congregations wanted to be considered stingy. Jerry Falwell, for example, disparaged what he called “rinky dinky ‘chicken coop’ churches,” explaining that “a cheap church makes God look cheap.” Lynne Hybels insisted that “‘Good enough’ is just not good enough when it comes to honoring God through the church,” that “our attitude ought to be to pay tribute to Him with the best we can offer.” Believing that “God deserves our very best”



*Calvary Church, Naperville, Illinois*

ed a more elaborate architecture comparable to that of the auditorium and “gathered” churches. Megachurches also differed in the size and number of their buildings, as well as their shape and visual emphasis, and their

in itself. Some regarded it as simply a “tool for ministry.” Such thinking attached little importance to the building’s architecture and provided a rationale for economical, unpretentious, strictly utilitarian facilities. Other evangelicals, however, viewed the church building not just, or only, as a tool for ministry, but as a facility designed and built to honor God. Conceiving the building in that way elevated the importance of its architecture. Few late-20<sup>th</sup> century pastors

led many evangelicals to underwrite costly facilities featuring luxurious appointments such as plush carpeting and upholstered theater seats, gleaming tile restrooms, expensive woodwork, and the like.

The architectural variety also reflected the choices megachurch builders made regarding the design/construction process. Some pastors and congregations employed an architect or architectural firm to develop a design appropriate to the church’s theology,

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ANNE C. LOVELAND AND OTIS B. WHEELER ARE EMERITUS PROFESSORS AT LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY. THIS ARTICLE IS ADAPTED FROM THEIR BOOK, *FROM MEETINGHOUSE TO MEGACHURCH* (UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI PRESS).

worship and other programs, budget, and aesthetics, and to supervise the construction of the building. Assuming a high level of creativity and skill on the part of the designer, an architect-designed building promised a degree of individuality, even distinction. However, pastors and congregations that chose a design-build firm or a package builder were likely to get a more conventional building, less tailored to their needs, since such firms used “standard materials, finishes, and structural systems.”

The variety of megachurch architecture notwithstanding, megachurch builders agreed on one thing—that the church building was an instrument of evangelism and that architecture could and should be used to make an impression on the unchurched and unsaved that would lead them to attend a worship service or become involved in some other church-sponsored program or activity. Of course, this was

ways, and freeways throughout the United States; the preeminence of the automobile as a mode of transportation; and the advent of what Kenneth T. Jackson has called the “drive-in culture.”

Undeveloped or newly developing areas in the suburbs proved especially attractive to megachurch builders. Since the cost per acre was less than in already developed areas (and much less than in metropolitan areas), megachurch builders could “think big”—planning huge campuses of one hundred acres or more and an entire complex of buildings rather than just a large auditorium and Sunday school building.

Besides accessibility and relatively low-cost acreage, suburban locations, especially in undeveloped or newly developing areas, offered the promise of increased worship attendance and church membership once new residential areas opened up near the church.



*Faith Community Church, West Covina, California*

not a new idea among evangelical church builders. But megachurch builders gave it a new twist. In accord with the “marketing orientation” recommended by church growth experts, they regarded the megachurch structure and its architecture as an advertisement for the “product” and “services” offered by the church.

In adopting the merchandising strategies of the business world, megachurch builders seized the opportunities created by recent and ongoing changes in American society: the population shift from the center city to the suburbs and, later, to the “edge cities” mushrooming within or adjacent to major metropolitan areas or along tollways and interstates; the expansion of millions of miles of highways, express-

Suburban megachurches made ample parking space a priority. “You want people to perceive that you have room for them,” explained church growth expert George Hunter. Another reason was that megachurches located on major highways were inaccessible to pedestrians, and public transportation was usually unavailable. Most members and visitors came to church in automobiles.

The church growth experts’ invocation of the shopping mall analogy was not mere rhetoric. Many suburban megachurch builders followed the merchandising path charted by the shopping malls of the mid to late-20<sup>th</sup> century. Megachurch builders imitated the shopping malls in moving away from the center cities to the suburbs in order to capture

a growing retail market—a “mission field” in evangelical terminology. Like mall builders, megachurch builders erected very large buildings and located them on extensive campuses that were easily accessible to highways. Megachurch builders also followed the shopping mall model in eschewing the traditional sidewalk or street orientation and opting instead for a large building or buildings situated in the middle of a vast parking lot.

Two “seeker sensitive” megachurches in our sample even appropriated the shopping mall style of architecture: Faith Community Church in West Covina, California, and A Community of Joy in Glendale, Arizona. Indeed, the origins of Faith Community Church linked it with the shopping mall. The previous church building had been a remodeled Dollar Saver supermarket. In the mid 1990s, the congregation bought a building where Hughes Aircraft had once manufactured

a mall. A place that’s familiar, a real gregarious place.” In talking with another *Times* reporter the following year, he observed, “Malls are a neutral place and people feel comfortable in malls. So when people come into our church, they will say, ‘Here’s a familiar place. I feel safe and secure here like in a mall.’” Architect Gilmore said that his “mission” was “to create an environment free of religious symbols.” Instead of traditional church furnishings, he envisioned “calming pools of cascading water” and “movable kiosks” vending cappuccino, hot dogs, and popcorn. Lack of space ruled out the “full-blown food court” the pastors and some members of the congregation wanted, so they settled on the kiosks instead.

Just as the pastor of Faith Community Church justified the mall ambience by saying that it made people feel comfortable, the Community of Joy church administrator explained that “we asked the architect to



*Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship, Dallas, Texas*

torpedoes and flight simulators for Stealth bombers. Besides the low price, ample space (165,000 square feet), and parking for 1,100 cars, another attractive feature of the building was its location, accessible from not one or two, but four freeways. “Within 20 minutes of the facility there are millions of people,” associate pastor Jim Hayford noted. Architects David Miller and David Gilmore planned the adaptation of the flat-roofed, boxlike industrial facility to its new purpose.

The shopping mall look of Faith Community Church was intentional. A *Los Angeles Times* story published in 1996, when the adaptation was under way, quoted the pastor as saying, “We did not want a traditional church atmosphere. What we were aiming for was the feeling of

design buildings that would meet people’s everyday thinking.” The church had been criticized for looking like a shopping mall, but, he observed, “that’s where people go.”

A Community of Joy provides a good example of what Mark Gottdiener called a “themed environment.” Just as amusement parks and restaurants used architecture and decor to create a “themed space” (think of Disneyland and the Hard Rock Cafe), the Joy church not only looked like a shopping mall but also offered its “customers” the experiences they enjoyed in the mall: consumption, entertainment, and community. Its shopping mall ambience advertised the fact that Joy was a “full service” church. Just as mall-goers could choose

from a wide array of consumption opportunities, visitors to Joy could select from myriad facilities and programs.

The architecture and decor of the shopping mall also advertised the church's emphasis on excitement, energy, enthusiasm—in a word, joy—not only in its recreational and social programs but also in its worship services. Joy was a “seeker-oriented” church, and Pastor Walther P. Kallestad used what he called “entertainment evangelism” to appeal to the unchurched. He based his approach on two assumptions: that many unchurched people found Christianity “boring,” and that entertainment could be used (and redeemed) for the proclamation of the gospel. In 2000, each of church's four worship services targeted a slightly different audience, but all of them accentuated entertainment in the form of contemporary music, drama, and multimedia presentations. And, finally, just as the shopping mall offered visitors a sense of

activities of the church. Whether intentionally or not, these structures advertised the builders' indifference to the church building and its architecture. They reflected many evangelicals' conviction that the people, not the building, constituted the church.

Several megachurches in our sample exemplify the adaptation of late-20<sup>th</sup> century corporate design. They were rather plain, unornamented structures that exhibited little or no evidence of their religious function. Like Willow Creek Community Church, another example of the corporate style, they resembled educational, civic, or corporate office buildings or complexes rather than churches.

Distinctive form and detailing distinguished the corporate-style Saddleback Church, located on a 74-acre Foothill Ranch site in Lake Forest, California. Saddleback was a “seeker church.” Pastor Rick Warren built his 4,000-plus congregation using the



*Saddleback Church, Lake Forest, California*

community, Kallestad envisioned his church as “a strong and caring community” that would “attract people of all ages and walks of life with programs that provide a positive influence in their lives.”

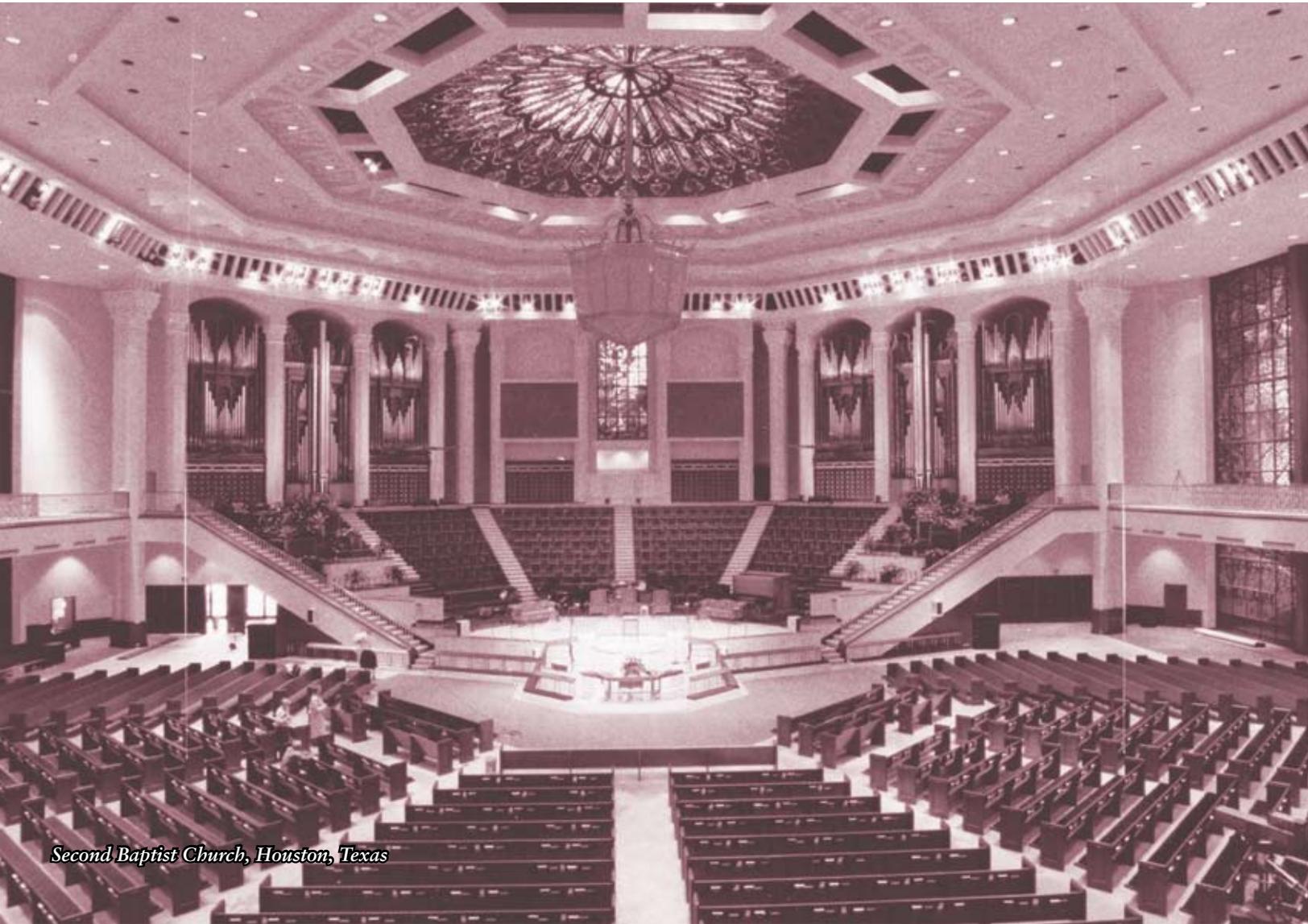
Like the two shopping mall megachurches just described, many other megachurches exhibited the influence of secular building design, especially that used for commercial or corporate buildings. In style and mode of construction, several megachurches resembled the utilitarian buildings used for warehouses or in strip shopping centers. Boxlike, with metal roofing, they exhibited minimal detailing except for the facade or entrance. The builders' main concern was to find the most economical way of enclosing a large space for worship and other

“Saddleback Strategy” he developed in the early 1980s, which targeted unchurched, well-educated, professional Baby Boomers who felt uncomfortable in the “traditional church.” Embarking on a long, multiphase building program in the early 1990s, Warren envisioned a parklike campus. “People always say they feel closer to God in nature,” he told a *Los Angeles Times* reporter. “When God made Adam and Eve, he put them in a garden, not a skyscraper.” Elaborating on his architectural philosophy, he added, “We see our buildings as tools for ministry, not monuments. We're much more into putting money into landscaping, trees and a park atmosphere than making an architectural statement.”

The first permanent structure erected on the Saddleback campus was a multipurpose building used as a temporary worship center, which opened in September 1995. The plain rectangular building had a modified barrel vault roof instead of the more conventional gable or circular roofs seen on most megachurches. Some members fondly referred to the building as “our airplane hangar.” Others thought it looked like a gymnasium. In keeping with Warren’s naturalistic emphasis, both the exterior and interior of the glass and steel building incorporated earth-tone slate tiles, adobe, and wood. Large, floor-to-ceiling windows allowed natural light to flood the worship space. Warren wanted the landscape to be visible from inside the church, but he also wanted the worship space to be visible from the outside. That way, in southern California’s balmy climate, Saddleback

All of the megachurches considered thus far were emphatically modern in design. There were good practical reasons for building in the modern idiom: it was cheaper than building in the traditional style, and it worked just as well in the design of economical, strictly utilitarian church buildings as in the construction of more expensive, distinguished edifices. In addition, the modern idiom may have appealed to recently organized megachurch congregations made up primarily of the unchurched or converts from other denominations and who lacked a consensus on what a church should look like; or to congregations that had no denominational affiliation and therefore no architectural tradition to draw upon.

Megachurch builders used the modern idiom to advertise their break with the “traditional church.” Megachurch builders used the



*Second Baptist Church, Houston, Texas*

worshippers could sit outside the auditorium where they could watch the worship service through the windows and hear the preaching and music over loudspeakers.

All of the megachurches considered thus far were basically boxlike buildings, whether square or rectangular. Other megachurches were circular, hexagonal, octagonal, or 12-sided. The use of the circular or polygon form was significant for two reasons. First, it recalled the tents evangelicals have used throughout much of their history. Second, unlike square or rectangular buildings, it prefigured the shape of the worship space inside.

modern idiom to advertise all of the “virtues” and “intentions” that distinguished their church facilities and programs from those of the “traditional church,” such as accessibility, convenience, comfort, innovation, excellence, and relevance (contemporaneity).

While the use or evocation of a historic style implied disapproval of the modern idiom favored by most megachurch builders, the builders of neo-Federal or Gothic megachurches agreed that architecture could and should be used as a marketing device. Like their modernist counterparts, they, too, sought to attract the unchurched and the unsaved, especially those who thought a church should “look like a church”

and were put off by neutral, secular-looking church architecture, or who appreciated the “visual linkages” to their historical and theological heritage. In effect, these megachurch builders employed the very strategy the church growth experts recommended—“packaging” their “product” in such a way as to stand out in the religious marketplace and attract individuals shopping for “something different.”

When late-20<sup>th</sup> century evangelicals began building megachurches they confronted a wide range of design choices. The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century produced no distinctive, dominant style of church architecture; because none of the evangelical denominations mandated a specific building design or style, affiliated pastors and congregations were as free as their independent, nondenominational counterparts to select whatever suited their taste and budget. In effect, each mega-

commentators missed in the megachurches (and which they associated with the iconic Federal-or Gothic-style church)—crosses, spires, hymnals, pipe organs, stained-glass windows, pews. Critics complained that megachurches lacked “architectural distinction.” They disparaged the elevation of “function over worship—designing buildings to accommodate musicals, theater productions, potlucks, sporting events, and education rather than constructing beautiful, symbol-filled, worship-orientated sanctuaries.” Above all, they disapproved of their resemblance to secular, commercial buildings. Megachurch buildings, they said, looked more like warehouses, malls, theaters, convention centers or corporate headquarters than churches.

Whatever its focus, much of the criticism of megachurches reflected an underlying, perhaps unconscious, assumption about the relation



*First Baptist Church, Houston, Texas*

church devised its own architectural philosophy. The reigning idea seemed to be “every man (or pastor or church building committee) his own architect”—a kind of architectural antinomianism.

Megachurch architecture provoked scathing criticism. Commentators objected that it failed to inspire awe or to “celebrate the transcendent nature of God,” that its horizontal orientation de-emphasized “sacral associations.” One critic declared that it seemed “determined to banish the sense of mystery and otherworldliness that has long been at the very heart of the architecture of Christianity.” As his remark suggests, much of the criticism focused on the details and furnishings

between “the sacred” and “the profane,” that the two were absolutely separate from, and the opposite of, each other. The sacred constituted “an ideal and transcendental world . . . set apart from ordinary life,” whereas the profane consisted of “the everyday and the utilitarian,” the “commonplace” and the “familiar.” According to this way of thinking, a church should embody the sacred and eschew the profane.

Recently, a number of scholars in various fields have begun to question the rigid distinction drawn between the sacred and the profane, insisting that in some cultures they have often overlapped or mingled. In a seminal study of material Christianity in the United States, for

example, Colleen McDannell found “little evidence that American Christians experience a radical separation of the sacred from the profane.” Indeed, her research showed “the continual scrambling of the sacred and the profane” by Protestants as well as Catholics.

Evangelical megachurches provide a particularly rich illustration of such scrambling. There was a great deal of the profane in the megachurches. Think of the sermons and ministries addressing individuals’ personal and family needs and problems; the pervasive influence of popular culture, especially in music; the Fourth of July pageants, the sports leagues, the fitness centers, the economic development projects. In many cases, too, the architecture was frankly imitative of commercial designs, forms, and technology.

The megachurches were everyday churches built for and serving everyday people. And intentionally so. Megachurch pastors liked to say, “We meet people where they are.” Rick Warren told a newspaper reporter, “Rather than dealing with the hereafter, we deal with what it means to be here right here and now.”

Whereas the critics disdained the megachurches for their emphasis on the profane and the mundane, megachurch people embraced them because of it—because it made the church relevant to their everyday lives. At the same time, however, and unlike the critics, megachurch people experienced a profound sense of the sacred in the megachurches. This was especially true during the worship service, when many individuals said they felt “the presence of God,” meaning that they encountered a deity who was approachable, familiar, and palpable.

Obviously this kind of God, with whom an individual could enjoy a direct, intimate relationship, was very different from the distant, majestic, awe-inspiring deity invoked in the liturgical churches. Among megachurch people, the notion of an immanent God combined with traditional doctrines of the Creation and the Incarnation to dissolve any rigid distinction between the sacred and the profane. Megachurch pastors and congregants believed that God was “present and active in the world,” constantly intervening in the everyday lives of human beings. And he could be encountered anywhere, not just in church.

That was the kind of deity megachurch pastors such as Bill Hybels described in their sermons. A reporter paraphrased one of his messages as follows: “The distant God isn’t all that far away. He’s not the presiding official in a court of law tallying wrongdoings and weighing them against works of wonder. He’s waiting for you in the stands of the soccer field, between the rack of clothes at Field Days, or in the boardroom. He wants to be your friend, and if you let him, it will change your life.”

That a church building should communicate the faith of its congregation was the rule evangelical church builders inherited from the Puritans and maintained into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Late-20<sup>th</sup> century megachurch builders were no less dedicated to the functionalist aesthetic. The forms they appropriated from earlier periods of evangelical church architecture proved remarkably well adapted to their new mode of worship and their new ideas about God, as well as their commitment to evangelism. Curved seating and the large platform, originally instituted in the 19th-century auditorium churches to improve the hearing of the Word, facilitated the megachurches’ new emphasis on music and other performing arts. Invitation stairways aided the commitment to evangelism. So did the horizontal orientation of the mega-churches, which recalled the tents, tabernacles, temples, and churches of the revivalists and 19th and early-20<sup>th</sup> century dissenting evangelicals. Extending outward rather than upward, the megachurches signaled that “the church’s mission is to the world—not to itself.”

The horizontality also reflected megachurch people’s discovery of an immanent deity. Under the comparatively flat ceilings of their worship centers, megachurch people encountered an immanent God, not the transcendent God of the heaven-pointing, liturgical churches. Like the revivalists and dissenting evangelicals, megachurch builders used modern, secular styles of architecture, which communicated megachurch people’s conviction that “religion is not a thing apart from every-day life” and that the church was not a refuge from the world — it was not only in the world but of the world.” 



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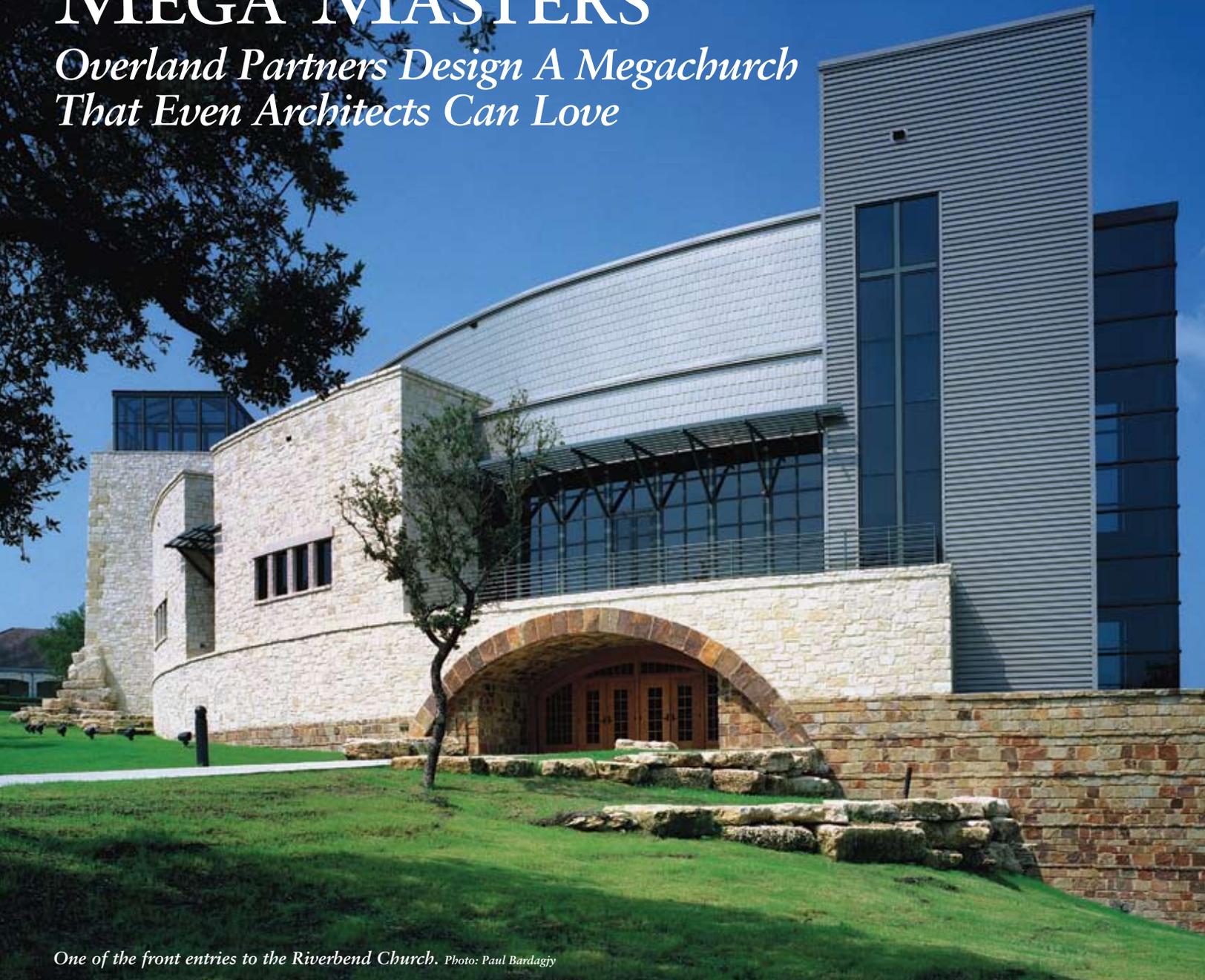
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# MEGA MASTERS

*Overland Partners Design A Megachurch That Even Architects Can Love*



*One of the front entries to the Riverbend Church. Photo: Paul Bardagjy*



*Photo: Robin Holland*

BY JUDITH DUPRÉ

Overland Partners Architects has provided comprehensive design and master planning services for a wide variety of projects in 17 states, Latin America, Europe, and Africa. Founded in 1985 in San Antonio, Texas, by Madison Smith, Robert Schmidt, Tim Blonkvist, and Rick Archer, the firm has grown to include two additional principals, Bob Shemwell and Becky Rathburn, and currently employs a staff of 50. The firm has designed more than 30 churches, and numerous other award-winning buildings for corporate, institutional, and private clients. Their work is notable for its masterful use of native materials, elegant structures in energetic

dialogue with each other and the landscape, and commitment to building in harmony with the environment; all partners are LEED accredited. Overland's Riverbend Church in Austin, which won a Faith & Form Design Award in 2000, includes state-of-the-art television broadcast and production facilities and is home to an evangelical Christian congregation of 8,000. I interviewed Overland's partners about the role of the architect in the design of megachurches, and working with evangelical congregations.

**Judith Dupré:** Do evangelical Christians regard churches in the same way New England settlers once thought about their meeting houses—that the Word of God, not the structure, was of prime importance? Does this attitude color the typical lack of emphasis by most evangelicals on architectural quality?

JUDITH DUPRÉ IS THE AUTHOR OF THE FORTHCOMING *AMERICAN MONUMENTS* (HARPERCOLLINS, 2006) AND A MEMBER OF *FAITH & FORM*'S EDITORIAL BOARD.

**Overland Partners:** The issue isn't one of lesser or inferior quality. Evangelicals are stripping down the environment to the essence of what is, in their mind, the church: the people who gather, and the focus of that gathering, which is the Word of God. They do not want the clutter of religious symbols interfering with or distracting from the simplicity of the Word of God or the communication among them. Many churches today have become so beautiful in and of themselves that our attention is drawn to these features—the stained-glass windows, cross, furnishings—and that can distract from the Word.

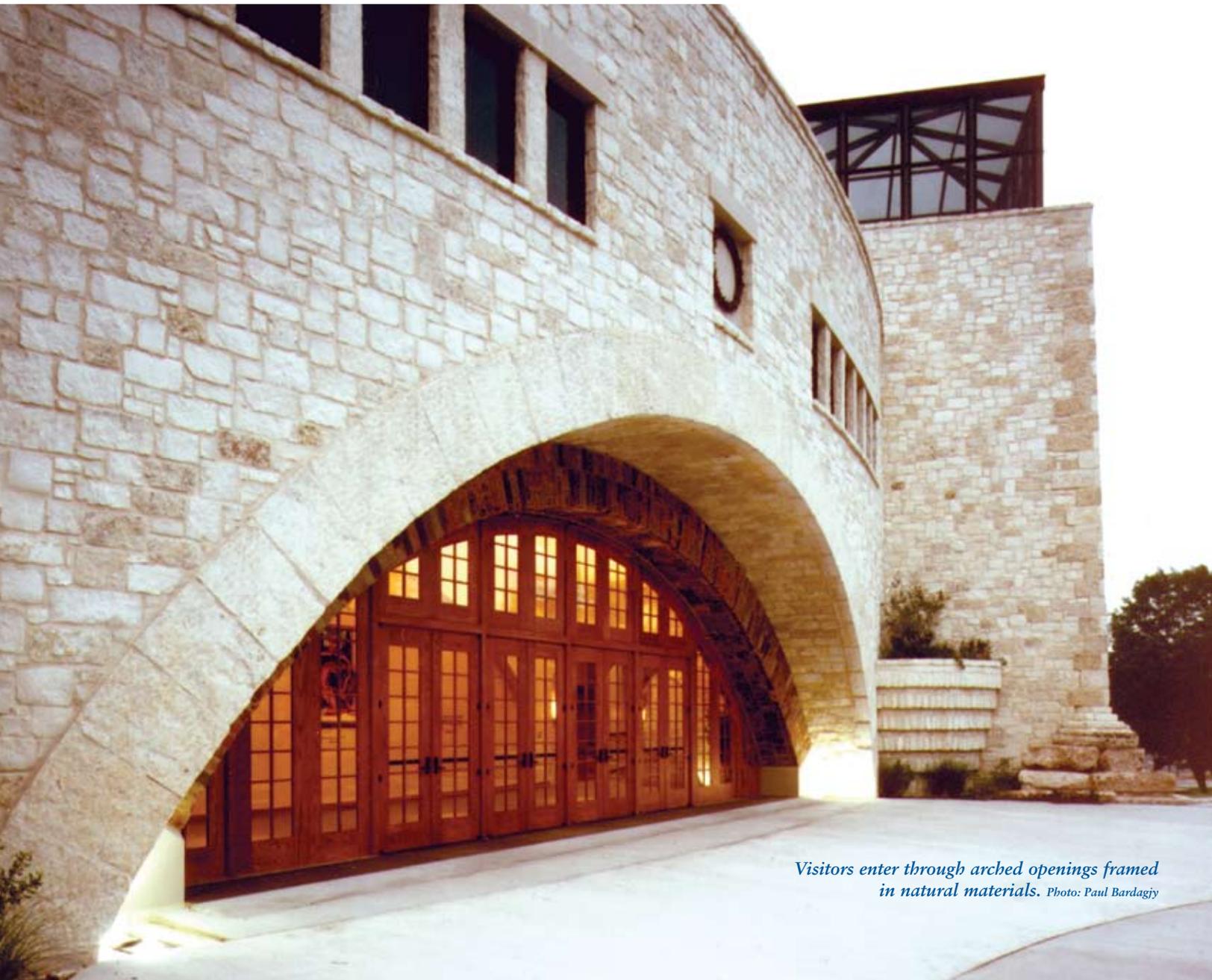
When you design an evangelical space, you have to think about all of the potential opportunities to bring people together, because the space is a multi-purpose facility rather than a single-purpose sanctuary, a seven-day-a-week facility, not a one-day-a-week facility. The space is primarily about fellowship, about being bound and united as a group.

**JD:** Will evangelical buildings change as their congregations become increasingly mainstream and more politically influential?

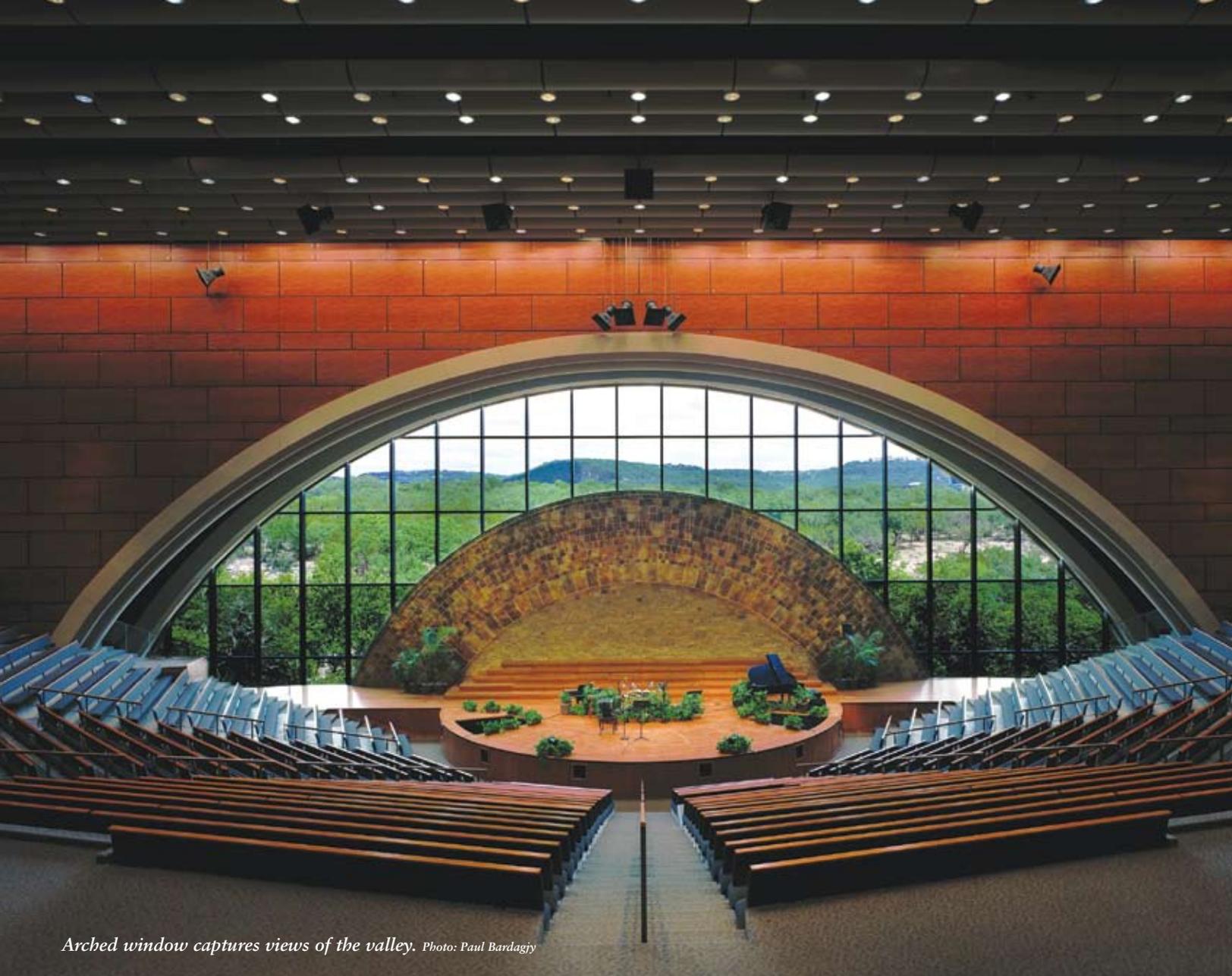
**OP:** We're seeing less of a commitment to architecture and the

creation of inspirational spaces, and a shift to larger gathering spaces more akin to exhibit halls or performing halls fitted with electronic sound and projected images. The required scale eradicates the potential feeling inherent in a sacred space, and makes it very difficult to feel like you are in God's home or in His presence. These spaces are covered stadiums designed more for performance than worship. They have become large and impersonal, but so has Wal-Mart, and reflect the big, cheap-box society we are becoming. Unfortunately, the evangelical philosophy is about big numbers and has become a big business that drives up size, while cost and quality goes down. People have begun to expect less of the building and more from the performer and technology to reach a younger, faster, more high-tech generation. The days of building a cathedral over several generations are gone. Now, if you say it will take longer than one or two years to build, they think you have designed something too expensive and complicated.

**JD:** Overland apparently has found people who care about design. Why are your clients willing to commit their resources to quality architecture?



*Visitors enter through arched openings framed in natural materials. Photo: Paul Bardagjy*



*Arched window captures views of the valley. Photo: Paul Bardagjy*

**OP:** We draw our clients into the design process and help them understand the wide range of possible solutions. We remind them of the honor and privilege it is to leave a mark, something lasting, beyond their own individual lives, and participate in a higher purpose. They begin to understand the project as a heightened opportunity to create a work of architecture commensurate with the task at hand, as opposed to just creating shelter. As we encourage our clients, involve them, dialogue with them, and dream with them, usually the project begins to grow and improve in quality. One of our goals is to push the project, our clients, and ourselves toward the best building possible.

**JD:** What was the genesis of the design of Riverbend Church?

**OP:** Riverbend could easily have been a large box. That's what we started with—a simple rectangular box that contained more chairs shoved up against the existing building. As we engaged them in a discussion about the name of the church, Riverbend, and relocating the building on the bend of the river, the place where things slow down, collect, and gather, they began to think of the facility itself as a special place. The original inspiration was the bend in the river, yet their 1,000-seat sanctuary and

other existing buildings had no relationship to the river. The bend gave rise to two questions: one, should the sanctuary be closer to and acknowledge the bend; secondly, should we derive our form from that bend?

What happened here was miraculous. They were trying to raise money for the new church. The fundraisers said, given the number of donors—their age, wealth, annual giving budget, all the statistics—the most you'll be able to raise is \$5 million. The design was something more in the neighborhood of \$10 to \$12 million in terms of its size, shape, and complexity. How do you phase something like this? They had us make drawings, renderings, models, which we brought to the site. They erected a tent and gathered their 2,500 members together, too large a crowd for their existing church, and had one service instead of the usual three Sunday services. It was the first time that they gathered as one.

Dr. Gerald Mann, the pastor, said, "We have an opportunity here to provide a place for all 2,500 of us so that we can worship together in one service, and with the ability to double in size." They brought out a box and put it on the altar and said, "What we're looking for is a miracle—to raise twice the amount of money that our fundraisers say is possible. We are going to

turn it over to the Lord. If He wants it done, well, He's in the business of miracles. If He doesn't want it done, we'll stay where we are." Then it began to pour down rain. It rained for about 15 minutes. You couldn't even hear anyone, and you couldn't leave either. Then the rain stopped and an incredible rainbow came out, right over to the new site. Pastor Mann said, "Do you all see the rainbow? What we are going to build is a home for hope. We are going to integrate the arc of the rainbow somehow into the design of this new building."

At that time, we did not have the concept of the big window that looks out over the hill country and river. The amazing thing was the big arch. We had the idea to put the big arch in the back, open the view with a big window, 130 feet wide, so that what God created would be visible. They raised almost \$13 million in pledges that day. It was truly a miracle to see that happen.

**JD:** Riverbend is masterfully integrated into its site. How did the landscape shape your design?

**OP:** We wanted to take advantage of what God had created, not what man had created. We spoke with the client about native materials, the landscape, the two different colors of stone, and integrated those materials into the building's exterior and interior, along with natural woods to make a connection to the natural beauty of the land when looking out the window. As we began to explain the space as a dialogue between inside and outside, between man and nature, they began to appreciate it and get excited about it. Instead of something man had created—a piece of art or a symbol—the large focal window provides access to what God has created. It presents a simultaneous appreciation

of God's creative existence while the Word of God is shared in the foreground.

**JD:** How does Riverbend respond to the particular demands of the evangelical worship service?

**OP:** We looked at the congregation's history, its roots, and also to antiquity and Roman and Greek amphitheatres. We wanted to have the most people in the closest proximity to the performer or speaker. In Athens and Ephesus we saw churches where, over centuries, the rear structure fell away, so that what remained was an outdoor amphitheater with remains of the actual structure, and a beautiful distant view out to the hills. The Romans built amphitheatres because they didn't have amplified sound, and wanted to get people as close as possible so they could hear the natural, spoken word. At the original Riverbend Church everyone was within 95 feet of the stage. They asked if it were possible to design a church for 4,000 to 5,000 and have everyone seated within that same distance. The only shape that would make that possible is a half circle.

Regarding physical growth opportunities, we built a balcony without truly finishing it out so that the lower floors provide 2,500 seats and the upper level holds approximately 1,500 seats. That allowed Riverbend to expand to the balcony without having to close the church for construction. One of the biggest deterrents to church growth is closing for a year for expansion construction, because people leave to find alternative locations for worship and it is difficult to draw them back. At Riverbend, the shell of the second floor balcony was incorporated in the basic structure.

*continued on page 18*

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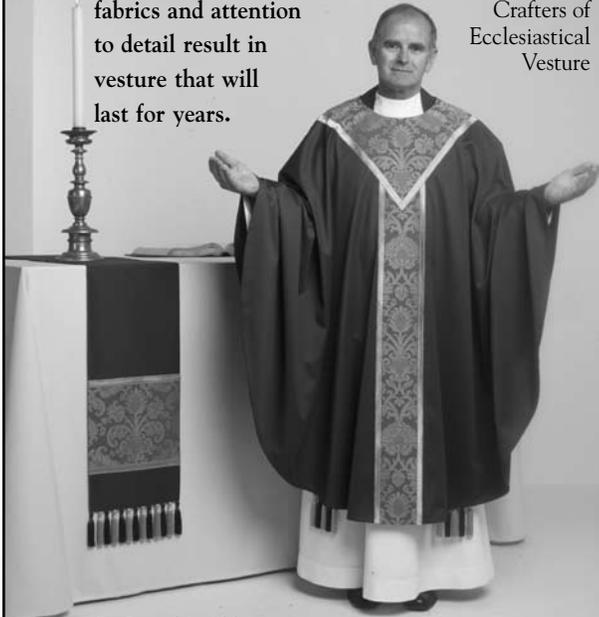
*Religious symbolism is subtle throughout the building. Photo: Paul Bardagjy*



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**JD:** What provisions have you made for the places where the worshipper “touches” the architecture?

**OP:** The building can help people prepare themselves for the message they receive in worship by creating a space that taps into their emotions and psyche—in either expected or unexpected ways. For us, a major focus is the materials of the building. We emphasize quality materials that are durable and built to last. Starting with materials and following with details, we try to design buildings that will take on a patina, so that it looks better (instead of worse) over time. We are often involved in the design of specialty pieces such as baptismal fonts where detail can help reinforce a spiritual concept.

It is important to mention the word liturgy—defined as the work of the people. Although we work on many churches that are not liturgically based, they still need to support the liturgical definition in its truest sense: the work to be done by the congregation, whether singing, standing, sitting, or praying. The building details need to support the congregation’s part in the worship experience.

**JD:** Why are there no religious symbols in the sanctuary?

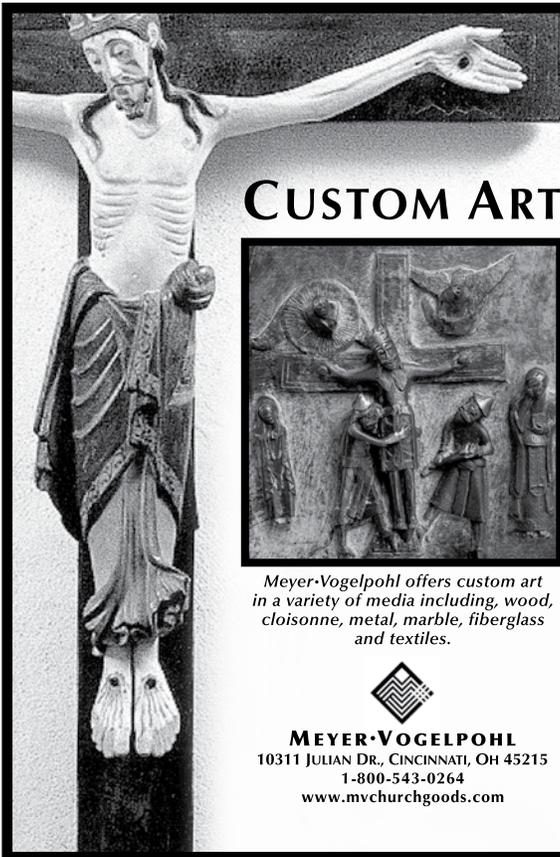
**OP:** Riverbend did not want a single religious symbol or ornament inside the facility so as not to turn off the person who comes to, say, a Wednesday night concert. Art and artifacts, all those traditional symbols that had been historically employed by the church, could get in the way of some people coming back to church. We are trying to attract people not to the church but to the Word of God. We come to that space to hear something that is going to move our souls. What is powerful is the Word, not the symbol.

We inserted concrete crosses into the tower windows. The crosses were a big issue. Some said, “We’ve got to have a cross in here somewhere—everything is too subtle. We need something that marks it as a church.” This caused a transition in the design. Over the arched entry is a crown of thorns, flanked on either side by six windows that represent the 12 disciples. Taken together, the windows represent the Last Supper. When you enter, you immediately see a painting of the Prodigal Son, which welcomes those who have left the church.

**JD:** Is Riverbend’s Sunday message diluted by the space being used as a performing arts center during the week?

**OP:** We don’t think it’s diluted, we think it’s enhanced. This particular church had a very clear mission: to reach out to the four “B’s”: the bruised, the battered, the bored, and the beaten. There was a group in society that had been turned off, for whatever reason, by the traditional church, its traditional shape and liturgy, by stained glass, smoke and incense, and everything that went with it, who had turned away from their faith. They wanted to reach out to those people, and draw them back in through the performing arts—singing, dance, music, lectures. When they came in, they’d say, “What a great space, what a beautiful landscape, this must be an interesting church— tell me more about it.” Through their curiosity, they’d decide to come back and check the place out on, say, a Wednesday night, even before considering a Sunday service. 

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*Worship space is also used  
for secular gatherings.*

*Photo: Paul Bardagjy*

# HOW GREAT THOU AREN'T

BY ELIZABETH M. FARRELLY

Photo: Martin van der Wal



I'm thinking of starting a movement called Pagans for Proper Churches. PPC. Dark and lonely work, sure, but necessary, because everywhere, under every log and rock,

mon-or-corporate look so down pat it's hard to pick 'em from the general high-street lineup.

Hard to pick, but they're everywhere, and multiplying. The Real Life Christian Church in Melbourne on the road in from Tullamarine airport sits in a dry paddock, leaning-to against a discount Tupperware outlet: without the sign you wouldn't know it from a

merchandising. The Newcastle City Church, next-but-one to Fanny's Night Club, has the same, low-rent crem look—aluminum doors, air con, receptionists, flowers, muzak—while the same franchise in Maroubra blends right in between the greasy spoon and Noodle Boy. Paradise Church, SA, was deliberately de-symbolized so as not to signify “church,”



Photo: Otis Wheeler

nice old churches are being melted-down into nightclubs or ad agencies while the new, bursting-at-the-seams version have the com-

ELIZABETH M. FARRELLY IS AN ARCHITECT, ARCHITECTURE CRITIC, AND A COLUMNIST FOR THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD, WHERE THIS ARTICLE FIRST APPEARED.

fibro shed. The Anglican Crossroads Church in Redfern does a convincing imitation of a launderette, while the Church of God of Prophecy in Darlington apes a 1950s haberdashery. Alexandria's Hillsong Church looks about as spiritual as your average dentist's waiting room, distinguished from its office-park ambience only by the vigorous up-front

and Chinatown's Central Baptist Church tags itself “the original Star Trek.”

Nor is it just the out-there evangelicals. With one or two exceptions, the dumbing-down is across the board. St Andrews Anglican Cathedral now wheels its altar in and-if needed. The Church of St Peter Julien of the Blessed Sacrament in George Street

dresses as a '60s city bank. St Mark's Anglican, Malabar, could easily pass for pensioner housing. And the new St Patrick's Parramatta uses a dog-leg axis, central altar, flattish ceiling and horizontal aspect to give the mystery-levels of a standard school gym.

Why would it matter? Especially to a pagan? Well, symbolism, mystery, cultural depth. Spirituality, even. Beauty. And the nagging intuition that they're all somehow connected.

The church of myth and memory is, as Rilke said of the tree, center of all that surrounds it, focusing our aesthetic as well as spiritual hungers. And the tree, universal religious symbol, is an apt simile. From Buddhism to shamanism to the esoteric Kabbalah, the tree has signified center, source and *axis mundi* (linking underworld, earth, and heaven) over millennia, as well as knowledge, fertility and life itself.

In the church, the tree traditionally abstracts as both steeple and cross. These days though, you're lucky to get either. Today we turn trees into toilet-paper and churches into lowest-common demagoguery, pulping both through the relentless numbers game. The times when sacred music, liturgy and architecture were troves of transcendent beauty are long gone, good riddanced by the ever-more-populist church herself.

It's not that Church doesn't do church any more – far from it. Hillsong, for example, promises its yuletide customers “awesome church” in the same cheesy tones with which Viagra retailers promise “awesome sex.” It's more that Church-as-activity has come to preclude church-as-artifact. So that now, although the corporate Church is more publicly and politically apparent than for decades, the buildings themselves camouflage into the commonplace with an aesthetic language that is deliberately mundane. Not a steeple or stained glass window in sight.

But, you counter, isn't this what Christianity is about? Isn't it good that the church shrugs off its materialist trappings and focuses for once on content? Isn't this what that nice Mr. Cromwell fought for?

Well yes, and no. It may look like Reformation II, but the underlying theology is no new-Puritanism. A 10-minute sampler of Hillsong's heady “I believe!” group endorphins, complete with big-band, stage-lighting, and dry-ice, shows that. Or a glance at its shop, with Bobbie Houston's latest book, *I'll Have What She's Having*, titled for Nora Ephron's famous orgasm joke. No, the new church doesn't deny the senses. What it denies is the traditional role of abstraction and metaphor – beauty, in a word – in engaging those senses. Just as the bible is increasingly literalized, so the physical Church is being systematically stripped of all penumbral and symbolic meaning. Why?

Populism, in a word. Without recourse to the stakes and thumb-screws of its bloodiest historic moments, the Church is forced to pursue popularity. And popularity, it is assumed, demands ordinariness. As Brian Houston, Hillsong Sydney's head personality-icon, says, “We're not anti-Christian symbolism. But most people see church as cold and austere. We want it warm and embracing.” It's Mohammed's problem with the mountain: a problem to which the Church's traditional answer has always been inclusion. Catholic means catholic, after all, because of the Church's apparently limitless absorption coefficient, allowing it to envelop, over the centuries, a range of pagan ritual from pre-Christian sun worship to Haitian voodoo.

But this time is different. This time the core artifacts themselves are distorting under populism's gravitational pull.

As South Sydney's Anglican Bishop Robert Forsythe puts it, “function is creating form, and function is changing.” The church's center, he says, is “no longer the altar but the audiovisual suite.” Or, as U.S. commentator Leonard Sweet puts it, “church architecture must

[accommodate] screens....The screen is the stained-glass window of the postmodern age.” Hence the easy alliance between the New Church and the McMansion: both revolve around home entertainment technology.

Such trends, needless to say, are American led. As Ray Robinson, of American Church Builders notes: “Following typically American trends of one-stop shopping centers, the contemporary church often incorporates cafes, gymnasiums, computer centers, and even rock-climbing walls and bowling alleys. These facilities are designed to increase religion's prominence in the activities of everyday life and develop a sense of community among congregations that can number well over 20,000.”

So it's all about increasing religion's prominence in the activities of everyday life? Or maybe the other way around? Increasing everyday life's prominence in religion?

Sounds harmless, if a little dull. Underpinning it though is a profound paradigm shift. Abandoning the mystery, axuality, and otherness of the traditional Eucharistic church, the new church models itself on relationships. Human relationships. This changes everything.

The traditional, cruciform church plan can be read as a symbolic Corpus Christi, making the altar rail, at the crossing or shoulders, a threshold not only between body and head but also between this world and the next; between humanity, if you like, and God. But the implied distancing and subordination (of humans to God) is no popularity cinch. So the new church exchanges vertical for horizontal, gloaming for daylight, otherworld to world; relationship with God, perhaps, for a “community of relationships, where people feel at home and welcomed.”

Church, it seems, may these days be awesome, but not awe-full. What you see is what you get. And what you get is easy, friendly, accessible, no frills, nothing difficult or intimidating. Nothing secret or scary or threatening. Everything, above all, familiar.

Monsignor Francis Mannion, president of the U.S. Society for Catholic Liturgy, calls this phenomenon “the cultural canonization of the intimate relationship.” Just as the workplace has been domesticated by the tyranny of intimacy (flatter structures, domestic feel, etc.), so the church. Which explains why St Andrews' Cathedral has no communion table, but an in-nave tea-and-coffee table instead.

Where to from here? The two extremes of religious building-type are usually seen as temple (house of God) and meeting house. Generally, the church locates itself somewhere between the two – making it, and its artifacts, themselves sacramental objects. This cuts across Cromwell's view of idolatry but supports St Augustine's (and Plato's) idea that the physical beauty of such objects, far from being diversionary, actually conducts both eye and soul to God. Augustine's idea that beauty can be the connective tissue between humans and God, rather than a barrier, seems to me a strong one. Beauty as icon, rather than idol. It's what sociologist Richard Sennett calls the “conscience of the eye” and it implies an important role for both beauty and distance in church design.

This is clearly not the mood of the moment. As Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar says: “We no longer dare to believe in beauty and we make of it a mere appearance in order the more easily to dispose of it.” And it's not like the church will – or even should – change for romanticising heathens like the PPC. But if postmodernism has any value, it should redefine “function” to include the therapeutic and spiritual role of beauty, and to recognise that proper job descriptions for both tree and church should surely exclude toilet paper but, just as surely, include axis to heaven. 

# NOTES & COMMENTS

## FR. RICHARD VOSKO NAMED HONORARY AIA

A member of *Faith & Form's* Editorial Advisory Board, Fr. Richard Vosko, has been named an honorary member of the American Institute of Architects. According to his citation, Vosko "has rendered distinguished service to the profession of architecture as a nationally known consultant for worship spaces. As an influential advocate for design excellence in religious architecture, he inspires architects, as well as their clients, to achieve the very best." The award was bestowed on Vosko at AIA's annual convention in May. Vosko was also interviewed for the CBS special program, "Sacred Spaces," which is scheduled to air on June 19. Congratulations, Dick!

## ILLUMINATING THE WORD: EXHIBITION OF SAINT JOHN'S BIBLE

In an event that has not occurred for 550 years, the monks from Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota are resuming a strong Benedictine tradition. Making an illuminated Bible the "old fashioned way" takes time, thoughtful reflection, and specialized skills – all rarities today. Donald Jackson, artistic director for the project, expertly guides the pages currently on exhibition at the Minneapolis Institute of the Arts. He speaks of a symphony of artists working together in ink, egg tempera, gold leaf, and watercolor (below). The artists are soloists in their own art yet each contributes to this work in a way that achieves a high degree of unity. The goal of all is to ignite spiritual imagination.

The exhibition reveals an effort born of tradition yet clearly reflecting the contemporary world. The text is familiar; the translation is new (NRVS). Calligraphied on vellum there is no Latin or Hebrew - the words are in English. Illumined in a traditional manner, the images are drawn primarily from Christian precedents but with frequent references to

other faith traditions. Computers have plotted the layout and set the schedules, but everything you see is the work of an artist's hand.

Theological reflections debated by monks inform but do not dictate the visual presentations of the artists. Images – often of the poor or marginalized - are multilayered and evocative. Images from the Hubbell telescope, DNA molecules, and the insect life of Minnesota collide with iconographic figures, traditional knotted patterns, and prehistoric images from the caves of Lascaux. Like medieval miniatures setting the life of Jesus in the artist's town, these vignettes tell a story at once ancient and part our own times. The Word is not just illuminated; it is made real-truly a tribute to "Word-made-flesh."

The first volume of the Saint John's Bible, Gospels and Acts (from which these illustrations are taken) is now available from the Liturgical Press in Collegeville ([www.saintjohnsbible.org](http://www.saintjohnsbible.org)).

—CAROL FRENNING

THE AUTHOR IS A LITURGICAL DESIGN CONSULTANT AND CHAIR OF THE ADVISORY GROUP FOR IFRAA AND ON THE BOARD OF FAITH & FORM.

## PHILIP JOHNSON AS HENNY YOUNGMAN

Thanks for your Editor's Page column in the last issue of *Faith & Form* (Vol. 38, No. 1, 2005). I have been struggling with Philip Johnson for my entire professional life. I had always felt he was the Henny Youngman of architects and his projects were a series of one-idea one-liners. Even the much-loved Glass House had a sort of "take my walls-please!" kind of feel to it. Yet, he was the enduring model of what an architect was supposed to be.

I believe that the best architects were those who could balance the most constraints at once, functional and visual, sort of like master jug-



glers. Juggling one ball does not impress. As a student in Cambridge, more than once I saw workmen shoveling snow off the flat roof of his home/thesis project from his Harvard GSD days. It was clear that the context he cared about was not local or even regional, but had more to do with his "peers."

The towers he designed with John Burgee across from Rowes Wharf in Boston are still one of my least favorite projects in the city. As the architecture critic Robert Campbell pointed out, "more Palladian windows than in all of northern Italy." Again, a single idea pushed to the limit. And it's all wallpaper—the half-round window at the top of each window opens into the space above the suspended ceilings. The citizens rose up and forced the office to redesign the second tower after they saw the first. I remember architects at the time commiserating with Johnson, but my sympathies were definitely with the mob. Though he is more talented, I feel that Frank Gehry had his way paved for him by the likes of Johnson. But that is for another discussion.

The Father Coughlin era and the Nazi sympathies were of course well outside the bounds of youthful transgressions. It didn't help that I saw a televised interview with Johnson in which he defended himself with the throw away line that "everybody admired Hitler back then," presumably before they or he knew better. It certainly would have been a rude awakening indeed had Johnson been a citizen of Germany in the 1930s. I don't know if his choices were more sad or ironic.

I hope you do not receive undue criticism for the timing of your comments. I thought it perfectly appropriate to sum up the man with a clear eye. Well done.

--ERIC PALSON

THE AUTHOR IS AN ARCHITECT AND PRESIDENT OF SHEERR McCRYSTAL PALSON ARCHITECTURE IN NEW LONDON, NEW HAMPSHIRE.

#### BRUGGINK IN ROME

*Faith & Form's* feature on Richard Meier's Jubilee Church (Vol. 37, No. 2, 2004) has stimulated a September 2005 seminar in Rome by Prof. Donald Bruggink, leader of 11 prior art and architecture tours. Rome offers the opportunity to view art and architecture as a reflection of Christian faith over two millennia, culminating with what was originally billed as the Church of the New Millennium. For more information: donb@westernsem.edu.

#### ELDON F. WOOD, 1925-2005

Eldon F. Wood, FAIA Emeritus, lived and practiced church architecture in Alexandria and Charlottesville, Virginia. He had a life-long interest in religious art and architecture. His churches included numerous Colonial Anglican/Episcopal Churches throughout the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida, and the Virginias. Eldon was an active member of the Guild for Religions Architecture and a founding member of the Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art and Architecture in the 1970s. He served as IFRAA's first president through the '70s. His devotion to his faith was expressed in Bible study and teaching, singing in the church choir, and using his considerable talents as a visionary artist to glorify his Lord. Eldon's other interests included civil rights, art, gardening, photography, and successfully completing crossword puzzles...with a ballpoint pen.

#### WORSHIP SPACE: TOO NARROW A FOCUS?

Revisiting the architectural quality of worship spaces is a worthy, indeed necessary, effort to recapture the essence of worship rather than merely generating space for routine traditions and rituals. Congregations and building committees love the attention given to seek their likes and dislikes, with or without developing the essence of

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relationships between the meaning of their worship and their worship space. Initially, Steven J. Orfield's article (Vol. 37, No. 4, 2004) seems to be an important step in the design of worship space. Then the clarity of the article fades in the attempt to distinguish the esthetic of the space per se versus the esthetic related to the worship for which the space is created. In my opinion, the unilateral comparison of frontal focused spaces comprises a very small portion of significant criteria in the design of worship space.

Most of the images in Figures 1 and 2 have a traditional axial plan where people gather in a formal relationship to the altar. Although the focus is on the altar, the aesthetic is narrowly depicted as variations of light, plane, and form as manifested on the frontal oriented plane. These examples could be any neutral container using the semantics of the descriptors inherent in the evaluations tested. People who have experienced traditional spaces throughout their lives will naturally respond to the diagrams presented but never establish a sense of the

meaning of centrality in worship. Certainly, the importance of light, and all the qualities associated with it, cannot be ignored and the author is applauded for attempting to capture congregational priorities.

Some worship gatherings are more centrally focused and include relationships not only with God but also with the people gathered and with the context of the environment for assembly. I believe that Orfield's study was interesting but limited. Does the author intend to carry the study much, much further? I hope so. If he doesn't then we fall into the same trap—the premise he wants to avoid in the design of spaces and working with church committees. Someone once said that “ritual is habit made holy.” Even the roots of tradition require a powerful continuing revelation of meaning for growth and inspiration rather than mere rote behavior. If we are building temples, we must have a strong vision of the wholeness of God, people, and relationships within the spatial context.

Orfield is to be encouraged with his extensive efforts and sensitivity to the need and search for quality in designing religious architecture.

—MARTIN D. GEHNER

THE AUTHOR IS AN ARCHITECT AND ENGINEER WHO TAUGHT AT YALE UNIVERSITY, AND IS NOW WORKING WITH HIS OWN LUTHERAN CONGREGATION ON THE REDESIGN OF ITS SACRED SPACE.



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#### EAST END TEMPLE WINS AIA HONOR

*The East End Temple in New York City has won a 2005 AIA Honor Award for Interiors. Designed by BSKS Architects LLP, the new home of this temple formerly served as a residence built in 1883 by Richard Morris Hunt. Its façade and the front library room, all that remained reasonably intact, have been restored to their former elegance and adapted to the temple's needs. The sanctuary was designed to embody many of the symbols of Jewish faith. Natural light as a traditional symbol of divine presence is brought into the space high over the ark. “The project is created in a 25-foot width, but with strategic planning it feels much more spatial . . . It's like a piece of jewelry in its attention to detail and custom-designed elements,” said the jury. “The elements of faith are woven into the fabric of the interior.”*

### Quote of Note

*“The wood for a temple does not come from a single tree.”*

*—Chinese proverb*

#### SEEKING ALTERNATIVES TO HISTORIC CHURCH DEMOLITION

The National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation, Historic Seattle, and Friends of First United Methodist Church have appealed the City of Seattle's approval of the plan for a new 33-story office development on the block currently occupied by the First United Methodist Church and the Rainier Club in downtown Seattle. The proposed development calls for demolishing the historic 1907 church—the last historic religious building in downtown Seattle.

While eligible for national, state, and local landmark status, the church has successfully fought such designation at the local level. The Rainier Club, housed in a City of Seattle landmark, is a partner in the 33-story development and is transferring development rights to the church site. First United Methodist Church and the Rainier Club presented initial designs for their proposed expansion and development in 2002. Without the Rainier Club's participation, the proposed office tower would stand 25 stories.

“Last year, the National Trust included Urban Houses of Worship on its annual list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places as a means of illustrating that thousands of older religious properties are threatened by factors such as deferred maintenance, shrinking congregations, and high real-estate values. The First United Methodist Church exemplifies the best of these sacred sites,” said Richard Moe, president of the National Trust. “We remain eager to help find alternatives to demolition for this national treasure. Losing the First United Methodist Church to an office building would be a travesty.”

Lisbeth Cort, executive director of the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation, added, “As the last remaining historic religious building in downtown Seattle, it is an architectural and historical

landmark of supreme significance to a community well beyond the congregation housed there.”

Under the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA), the City of Seattle was required to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) assessing the impacts of the proposed development on the natural and cultural environment, and to explore alternatives that would reduce those impacts. Preservationists assert that the EIS does not include any alternatives that preserve the historic sanctuary building while meeting the congregation’s needs. The groups are appealing the city’s decision to approve the master use permit for the new development.

America’s urban religious structures give eloquent testimony to the American experience and the quest for religious freedom that helped shape our nation. Unfortunately, many of these vital community anchors and architectural landmarks are falling victim to changing demographics, limited capital budgets, and soaring real-estate values. Although there’s no simple solution, the appellants hope to demonstrate that with technical assistance, staff and board training, and the development of new funding sources, these landmarks of spirituality, cultural tradition, and community service can be saved.

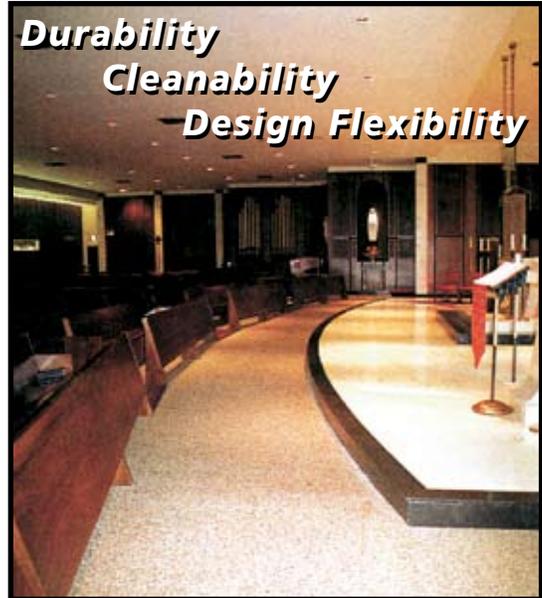
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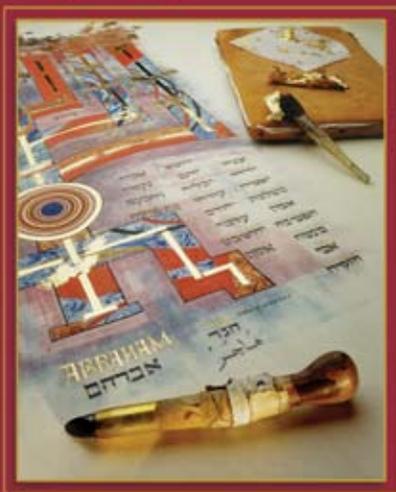
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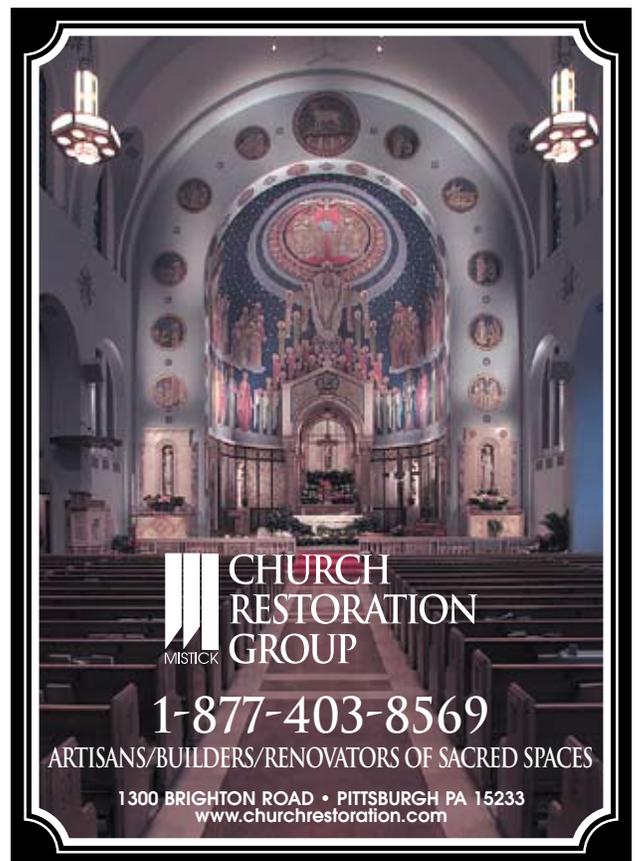
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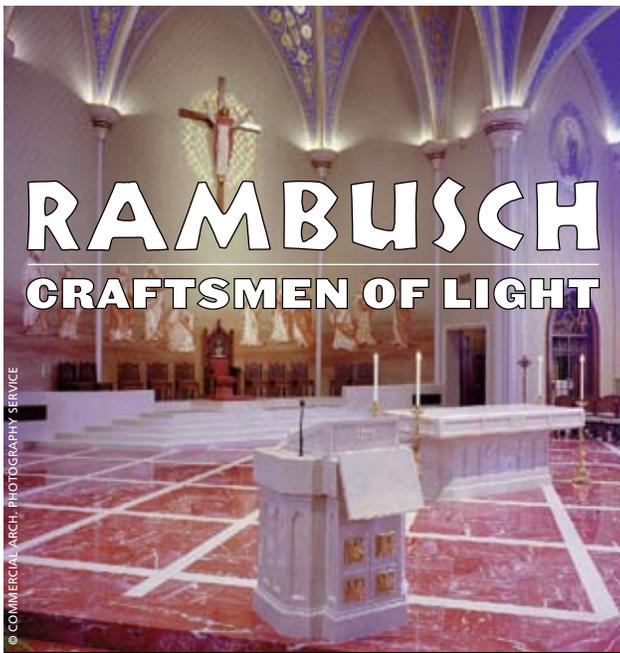
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# EVERYONE A STORYTELLER



JUST ONE MORE THING... \* BETTY H. MEYER

I am hoping you might remember that I emphasized the importance of intuition in one of my last columns (Vol. 37, No. 1, 2004), and even suggested that it is sometimes our first transcendental experience. I have to tell you that I have been haunted ever since with a recurring question: So now what? Are there implications

for the future after the intuitive experience? Does the special awareness we now have suggest a responsibility?

John Huth, chair of the Physics Department at Harvard, spoke at my church recently on the subject: "Who Has Put the Wisdom in the Inward Parts?" He told us of a new field of research called "neurotheology" (Newburg and d'Aquili, researchers) calculating to prove that the religious impulse is rooted in the biology of the human brain, a predisposition toward faith. This made me feel vindicated in my support of intuition, but my question of applying the knowledge gained still persisted.

I know that the word theology comes from the Greek words "theo" and "logos," meaning the study of the human relationship to God. I realize that it is difficult to define one's own theology but perhaps trying to will lead to a better understanding of what constitutes a spiritual life.

I was interested that Dr. Huth remarked that Americans are not usually reflective but that perhaps no group is better equipped to respond to questions facing America today than architects. "They have an opportunity," he said, "to learn from other groups and to know their particular theologies." He questioned whether there should be architecture for its own sake but emphasized that it is the responsibility of the architect to address the differing beliefs of clients. He hoped further that the broader implications of the environment, both social and ecological, would be considered. I couldn't help but think as he spoke that it is an honor to be an architect and to have so many opportunities to compare and contrast varying theologies and then arrive at one's own set of beliefs.

But how can the rest of us also grow in our understanding of human relationships and how our decisions will affect the lives of others? Those of us who still attend religious services (Judaic, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist) do so because we treasure a particular narrative and ritual. Harvey Cox, in his new book *When Jesus Came to Harvard*, emphasizes the importance of narrative or story. He wonders, "Why do we say it's only a story? Our classics that nourish the spirit include poetry, myths, and sagas! It is hard to imagine life without a religious narrative and a ritual."

What is our responsibility after our intuitive experiences? I think we must continue to support religious institutions even though we might want some changes.

Secondly, we should take the time to reflect on our own lives and what has happened in them. With imagination we can sort and select, decide what seems true and what is not, make corrections and decisions and experience a new perspective on the spiritual. As we all know, our imaginations can be strengthened by enjoying music, paintings, sculpture, and craft. I think we will soon see that all our imaginations have disclosed have implications for our personal theologies and perhaps through our subsequent actions for the professional theologians as well.

Theologian John Dillenberger tells us in his recent memoir, *From Fallow Fields to Hallowed Halls*, that contemporary theology is moving away from modern rationalistic understanding to one closer to the arts. Perhaps our third contribution can be to encourage the more conservative theologians of all faiths to open themselves to change and to an appreciation that the aesthetic can contribute greatly to an ever-enlarging faith.

Perhaps I have answered my own question. Intuitive experiences are not ends in themselves. They beckon us to continued growth and new action in our understanding of the spiritual. In this way all of us can become part of the narrative, part of the universal story. 

BETTY H. MEYER IS EDITOR EMERITUS OF *FAITH & FORM* AND CAN BE REACHED BY EMAIL AT [BMEYER@FAITHANDFORM.COM](mailto:BMEYER@FAITHANDFORM.COM)

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