



Imaginative Use of the Arts: Architectural and Visual

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I. STANDARDS OF IMAGINATIVE USE

The use of architectural and visual arts in the church requires an understanding of how to achieve clarity, quality, and control with respect to the provocative creativity available to the church. Provocative creativity brings design results to the point of notoriety for architectural interpretations, and newness and beauty in the visual mediums. Notoriety is the recognition by qualified persons evaluating spaces and things of visual nature. When a visual piece, circumstance or setting is evaluated, the aesthetic standards are those of the perceiver. For consistency in this matter, we should attempt to develop standards at the level of professional artists, who have special qualifications in religious architecture and/or art. There are highly qualified and creative non-art-professional parishioners who contribute with deep sincerity to the visual environs of the church, and perhaps our chapels and churches should display the work and abilities from within the parish. But this sets the standard at the level of the “lay artist” enthusiast rather than that of the “professional.” The church is usually comprised of people who are politely and democratically organized for voluntary activities and contributions. It requires a gifted, trained and diplomatically strong person to maintain overall visual coordination; consequently, authority, responsibility and control for visual environs must be clearly delegated.

Imaginative use of the arts requires a sense of quality appropriate to the church, to God and God’s people. So often the church is filled with crudely designed and made felt banners, rather than a weaving, a tapestry or art form worthy of its dedication and placement. Yet the burden of cost is not really that significant. Are we fulfilling our dedication and commitment through such trivial displays? Nor does imaginative architecture necessarily require excessive expenditure, since innovative design responds to budgets as well as their “material” solutions. It is an artistic composition of less costly materials and

labor-saving procedures that accomplishes low budget projects. Obvious limitations arise, but creativity need not be sacrificed on the altar of budgetary restraints.

All standards of provocative design are now being broadly interpreted in their theoretical orientation and derivative style. Post-modern classicism is a strong current flowing through the visual arts professions. With new geometrical forms and liberation from the “less is more” of modern architecture, some extremely exciting visual results are being developed throughout the world. The American Institute of Architects national award committee honored three post-modern buildings for religious purposes as award-winning 1984 projects, and the professional periodicals have similarly recognized this new creativity. Smatterings of traditional detail from

historic regional architectural styles are being used as creative applique or interpretations applied to modern architecture. Variations in interpretation and detail expose the traditions of the locale or country, thus enabling a free approach to expressing regionalistic character and associated forms, details and decorations. Although there may be a tendency to “overcook” the design, particularly for church architecture where humility and simplicity are valued, the creative geometry of stretched or compressed proportions, square corners mixed with curves and juxtapositioned elements, perhaps slightly reminiscent of local traditions, offers new impressions to stir the imagination.

It is difficult to say where provocative thinking will be in five to ten years. Is the post-modern trend a temporary flourish that will soon disappear? Many think that overall style elements will readjust to simplification, but these new proportions and freedoms will continue to excite and enrich our visual environment, much more than the modern architecture of the fifties through the seventies does.

II. PROCEDURES

Pastors have asked how architectural and visual ideas are generated. Assuming the special training and experience of the professional, what is the source of ability to visualize and draw (or communicate) an architectural proposal? A response is difficult, but some have suggested that preparation of a sermon is a similar process. The pastor faces the blank paper and studies texts seeking an inspired interpretation for his congregation. One pastor confessed that he could not be creative working within his study. His sources of inspiration could be a peaceful country road, a pleasant distant view, a ghetto street corner, an industrial plant entrance, a golf course parking lot or local sidewalk café. Being in the environs of his parishioners inspired his thoughts on their needs. Innovative thought processes must be based upon sufficient knowledge of the work to enable free communication concerning the issues to be served.

Artists likewise face blank paper or a lump of clay, by means of which they are to communicate creatively. Those working in visual mediums extract from the setting, the people, the mission and the message of the church the necessary information, while also incorporating reflections from their own thoughts, imaginations and experiences. An architect walks the site, observes its neigh-

bors, the landscape’s characteristics, the views and other influences to which he reacts in exploiting the site’s advantages. These factors are combined in a basic idea that is rarely provocative in its initial concept or sketch. If one visits an architect’s office, one sees numerous considerations of alternatives. Evaluating them with committee members ultimately leads to the basic “backbone” concept of the proposed design.

Designing a visual art piece is much the same process, combining experimentation and practice in the craft. It is not rare that an artist will study and execute a number of miniatures of the art object before the final piece is begun. Interpretations and developments are essential to the final product, the story to be told through artistic communication.

Imaginative use of the arts requires a sense of value appropriate to the church, to God and God’s people. Sentimentality has been characteristic of much visual art in our churches; such art rarely challenges or nourishes the human response to beauty. Does it provide a setting

appropriate to our God? Temples in feudal societies were often adorned with jewels as gifts to a much feared God. Our current stress on love for others suggests that we seek moderation, but does not require that we forsake quality. Recently, a visitor told the pastor that there should be a sign over the front door reading "For Sinners Only." This earthy statement of purpose has stuck with me; it should have an impact on church design. Obvious, beautiful simplicity comes from massaging the concept; the humility and authenticity that result are appropriate to the mission and image of the church.

III. THE CHURCH IS ITS PEOPLE

Conceptually, the church or chapel should furnish the "family" a shelter which affords the space in which to be spiritually washed, refreshed and embraced during the liturgy. Acknowledging that we are weak, interaction with each other centered on the teaching "love your neighbor as yourself" requires our gathering together and thus becomes the "backbone" of our assembly. This concept is then developed for communicating to each other the visual elements, including scale relationships, form, color, light and texture contrasts for the overall statement of image.

The narthex provides the first opportunity for interaction. The vestibule/coat-room/narthex easily becomes an overcrowded meeting place. Spaciousness characterizes the new visual ambiance of an entrance into a church commons, sometimes called the "living room of the church," a place to greet and meet in a setting with some lounge furniture and a fireplace. (One pastor suggested proportions in the commons adequate to accommodate driving his Volkswagen through to the center aisle of the church, if it could provide the right illustration for his text for the day.) The commons offers an opportunity for an art gallery. Themes related to current social concerns can be displayed in photography. Art and artifacts afford new opportunities for communication and vastly improve the visual entrance to the church. Recently, a new church interpreted in the "Puritan" character displayed quilts made by the Amish. The colors, textures and handcrafted quality of the quilts informed and inspired

appreciation for their visual artistry. Contrast this with the narthex that has become the church bulletin board, filled with notices and banners. Abuse of wall surfaces, even wood paneling, is particularly disturbing and shows disrespect for a quality room. Suggested solutions have included a specially designed kiosk or a "bulletin board room" for banners and notices. If members referred to the room or niche for notices, the church could retain control of the visual amenities or exhibits in a gracious commons, which offers the ordered and respectful appearance appropriate for a church entrance.

IV. A FAMILY GATHERING

The family concept gives further support to gathering closely around the chancel and looking into the faces of fellow members. Banks of seating placed in juxtaposition about three sides of the chancel (in preference to the semi-circular Roman theater seating plan) encourages greetings and expressions of personal support. With this plan, the footprint of the church approximates variations of the square rather than a fan or narrow rectilinear footprint.

Near Louisville, Kentucky, a hexagonal church with five walls of glass has been placed in

a wooded park-like setting. The contemplative site was successfully integrated with the pleasantly open and luminous interior. However, moveable seating placed around the moveable platform chancel gave the sensual feeling of a temporary installation, detracting from the other amenities. Additional concern and investment in the solution could have solved the problem of a totally flexible space. More problematic is the lack of control in the placement of the chancel and seating, which has the potential of creating visual chaos. Opportunities for religious drama, large musical groups and use as an art gallery can be achieved in totally flexible churches. Plans for furniture, storage space and seating are essential to total flexibility. "Imaginative abuses" have provoked a trend towards more fixed elements and furnishings.

Churches seating more than three or four hundred people are more adequately served with fixed seating on sloped floors for improved sight lines. Moveable seating in the front rows adjacent to the chancel offers the necessary flexibility for musical groups, instrumentalists, drama, and other liturgical needs. Several seating plans prepared by an architect could provide the needed control of the variations and prevent the appearance of an abandoned bandstand.

V. THE CHANCEL

Emphases placed by the congregation on Word and Sacrament should be well understood. If the altar and pulpit are moveable, their placement for the liturgy should be in accord with such understanding. The chancel design is usually the point of departure from which the architect develops the seating plan and ultimately forms the interior shape of the church. There is little to prescribe for success, other than one's own artistry and a concern for overall simplicity, logic, and adequate volume for acoustical quality. It is true that all too frequently the shapes and inventions of the architects have been awkward and ugly. Too

rigorous an application of theory or an overly ambitious concept are often to blame. Currently, there is greater respect for simpler, more restrained forms. As architecture is visually shaped, peripheral neighboring building or site influences assist in bringing the solution into focus. Scale and proportions in the new architectural geometry are stretched to new relationships and are integral to current statements of provocative success.

VI. THE PALETTE

Daylight in some controlled form is an essential ingredient for a pleasant and uplifting atmosphere. This medium should be given as much artistic concern as the front entrance or the chancel. Dr. Schuller's crystal cathedral in California may be considered arrogant and extravagant by some, but one cannot dispute its provocative notoriety, which is due to the building form, the glass roof and overall open luminosity. Daylight creates depth in texture, shades and shadows, openness to the interior and the exterior. Colors come alive. Moderation and artistry can be achieved simultaneously with new imaginative uses of daylight.

Appropriate controls are as important as the daylight. Shading materials such as the semi-transparent stretched cloth developed for the all glass office buildings, or the more frequent exterior shading overhangs, should become an ingredient of the visual design palette. Translucent roof and wall panels effectively insulate and reduce glare from large area skylights used to fill the church or room with soft light. These new materials have, on occasion, replaced the diffusing

stained glass used for centuries, for reasons of cost, protection and maintenance.

Artificial light affects the colors and materials of the interior. Fluorescent light should be avoided because the light flattens shadows and textures, while deadening the intensity of color in the interior and skin color of the audience. Some natural materials, primarily woods of light colors, will glow in a luminous room. Warm colored light, such as incandescent, provides reflections which elevate the human reaction to the visual ambiance. A red turns to purple in fluorescent light, while remaining bright and clear in incandescent. New types of bulbs have been developed for long-life efficiency, ease of relamping and light colorations that closely match the less efficient incandescent bulb. Artistry in illuminating walls brings luminosity and overall lightness. Systems and design should match functional requirements and the visual impact of fixtures and controls be appropriately minimized.

VII. DECORATION

If art pieces are rented or borrowed for exhibiting in the commons, the theme can be changed for educational or devotional purposes. Integration of permanent art in the commons (other than architectural decoration) should be placed where the theme is fixed and requires continuity. Permanent art can be incorporated where it can provide background for, and be combined with themes for the day or season. Architectural decoration must support the architectural “backbone concept” and reflect the “style.” It is not uncommon now to see the

use of traditional classic forms interlaced with horizontal stripes on the walls, moulding at wall openings, ceiling patterns and floor geometry. If artistically executed with restraint and subtle contrasts, these elements can add new dimensions and enliven reflections from the old.

One can continue to see great beauty in the rectilinear geometry and color balances in the paintings of Josef Albers. Ugly imitations of cubistic paintings have been so abused that the art has, thankfully, been virtually abandoned. Church supply firms have carried some of this modern influence in their designs and deserve little credit for adding to visual quality.

A chapel near San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, designed by George Nakashima, an architect and sculptor particularly famous for his very basic wood furniture, has become notorious for its design. Situated on a dry Mexican hill, this white stucco, box-like structure with three small turrets has become an attraction for visitors to this art colony town. Upon entering through the natural wood doors, one’s first glimpse is the 12 x 12 blue tapestry with an interwoven red Greek cross pattern, illuminated from reflected light bouncing off the white wall struck by a stream of sunlight slashing across the room. The altar is of slabs of burl walnut, the floor of Mexican tile, and the roof is vaulted, unpainted brick. Since this was designed for a monk and his assistants, it was possible to customize vestments, paraments and visuals with artistic excellence. Decoration in the worship space adds the texture, color contrast, sense of detail, curve and contrasting shape required for rendering a message with beauty. Decoration and furnishings of the appropriate quality and design can heighten the joy and the emotions of the congregation.

One cannot minimize the importance of choir seating and pipe organ placement, which as decoration become very important. American tendencies currently appear to require larger pipe organs than do many churches in Europe. Particularly the tracker action organ, when placed for

directing the choir from the console location, is difficult to plan and integrate into the worship space. The position and emphasis to be placed on these elements must be carefully studied and evaluated for scale relationships. Placement and size tend to dominate when considered in composition with the chancel.

The pulpit and altar must have fitting proportions, detail and materials that relate appropriately to the church interior. Enrichment to the point of endearment should be avoided unless theologically appropriate and in the hands of an expert liturgical designer. A table and an appropriately positioned and scaled lectern are the essentials. Simple beauty and craftsmanship in appropriate quality materials should prevail.

Woven decorations add fiber and softness to the surfaces of worship space or commons. Contrasts with plaster, brick, stone or block give us all texture, relief, and color. Care in placement of sound absorbent tapestries is recommended for good (live) acoustical results. Large tapestries on the wall can assist in preventing sound from reflecting across the room.

Places of devotion or worship must respond to the human spirit and create the scene for spirituality. Beyond that, the church becomes a home with which its parishioners become identified and attached. Creating the sense of belonging to an art-filled environment, changed frequently to add new stimulation

through variations of daylight and visiting artist exhibits, will add to overall respect and happiness within the “family.”

VIII. CONCLUSION

Integration of the art forms of building and visual arts into a controlled result is a challenge for which the church leaders and congregation should have greater concern. The reward of success in creativity and visual quality is recognition that the congregation has concern for its image in the community. Perhaps the road to this end will be rough, but emotional refreshment, instead of complaints and disillusionment, should be the long term result. It pays to enrich life in the church with quality art and to exhibit concern through provocative thinking about things visual.