

SACRED SPACES: BUILDING SPIRITUALITY

BY: MARY GREENE



Keystone Community Church is in its sixth sacred space. In less than 10 years, it has moved from private home to former nightclub to strip mall to industrial warehouse to corporate headquarters to where it is now – a structure that was designed and built to be a church.

In each location, the congregation experienced something different – and something consistent.

“Every one of them was a sacred space for us,” says Gene DeJong, the senior pastor at this Grand Rapids, Mich., church.

Especially after worshipping in a nightclub and a strip mall, few preconceived notions about church remained.

“When we got to this space, we were able to look for more than just an auditorium and pews. We were able to ask, ‘Where did our people best connect and what kind of setting allowed us to most be what we want to be?’”

BREAKING THE STAINED GLASS BARRIER

For hundreds of years, little changed in the design of sacred spaces. In cathedrals and temples and mosques, traditional formulas and forms established a kind of holy hierarchy, separating laity from clergy, follower from leader. Traditional sacred spaces usher in worshippers with a hush that beckons you to venture in, to draw closer, to approach the divine.

In contrast, at Keystone Church a decidedly non-traditional space welcomes worshippers with informality and accessibility.

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“Our spiritual journey is rooted in our forefathers, but the form of that journey is always changing,” DeJong says. “Our target is very much the crowd that used to go to church. Our space shouldn’t refer to where they came from... maybe it even needs to surprise them a bit.”

And surprise it does. Traditional steeple? Not here. Stained glass? No way. Walk in the front door, and you might be tempted to step back outside and double-check the sign: is this a church?

With clusters of round tables circling two curved, corrugated metal coffee bars under a 28-foot ceiling, this sacred space could easily be mistaken for a university commons, a conference center or a very large coffee shop. To help achieve comfortable informality, Steelcase Cachet® chairs were selected for the main worship area instead of traditional wooden pews. On the perimeter, lounge chairs provide yet another seating alternative. In addition to the ergonomic benefit, seating from Steelcase is GreenGuard–certified, which helped Keystone achieve another goal: certification through the U.S. Green Building Council’s LEED Program -- Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design -- as an environmentally healthy building for people. Outside, a natural open meadow is teeming with native plants, insects and critters.

All very intentional.

“Worship spaces in particular work best when they are designed well,” says Jenn Sanborn, interior designer and owner of Sacris Design, a Massachusetts firm specializing in the design of sacred space. “Its function is to transcend itself. It’s a place you go to experience some otherness... the space needs to function really well for that to happen.”

Sanborn says three key elements define the experiential quality of a worship space. First, the actual space planning. Does it serve the needs of the people using it? Do the forms support current beliefs and behaviors? Second, lighting and acoustics. Does the space function so that people can see and hear? Third, honesty of materials. Do the materials have the integrity that gives the space authenticity?

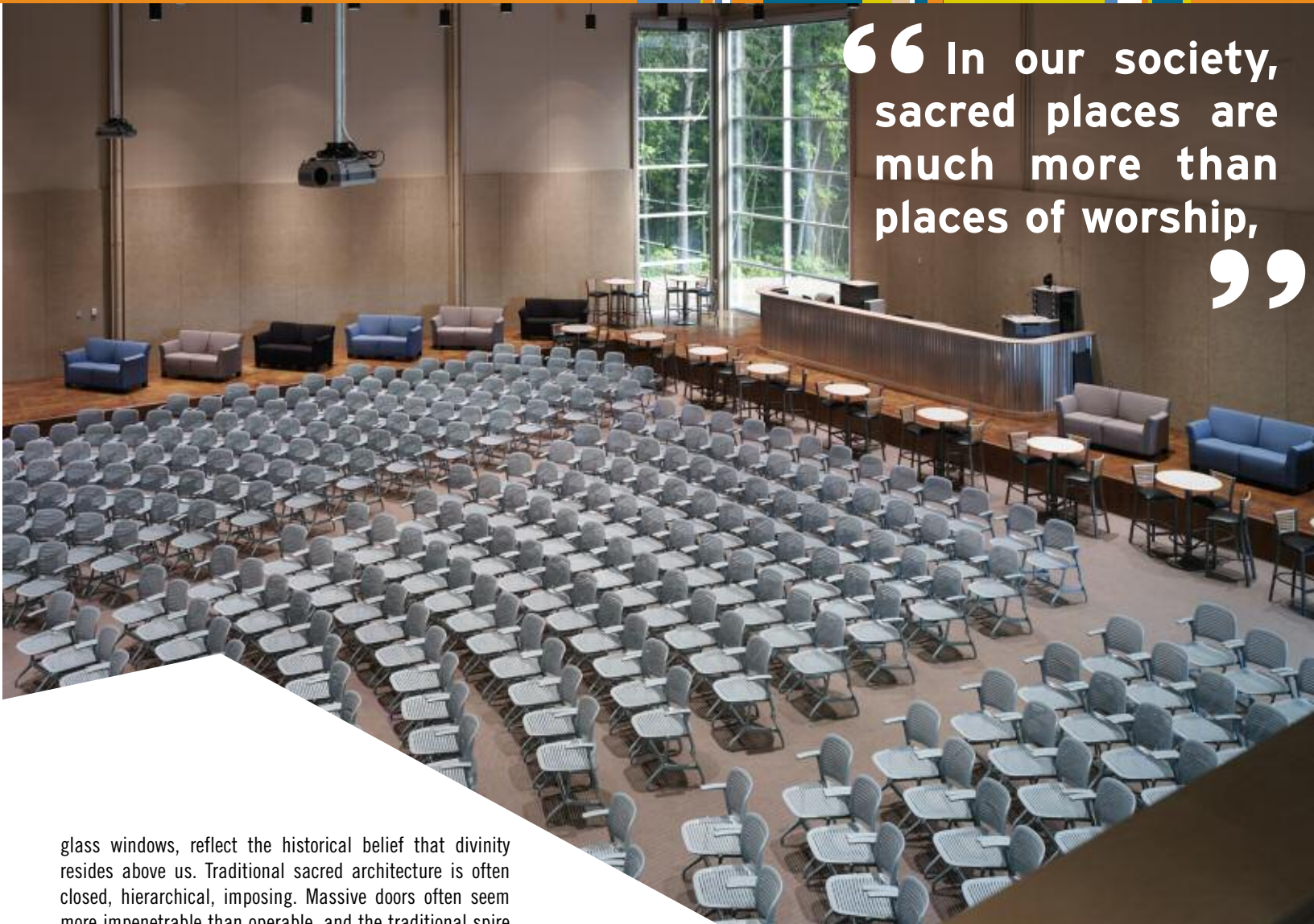
For many congregations, a fourth question comes into play: What kind of flexibility and furnishings does the space need? Sanborn says new sacred spaces may feature multi-function spaces with stacking chairs, sliding walls and rolling tables -- or fixed, tiered seating with high-tech stage and sound systems. The first approach is favored by congregations with a participatory worship style. The later works for media-driven, performance-oriented services. And for some faiths, Sanborn notes, the only required furnishing is a prayer mat.

CHANGING BELIEFS, CHANGING BUILDINGS

Sanborn says that, historically, churches reflect the beliefs and theology of the people at the time they are built. Great cathedrals, with their soaring gothic arches and opaque stained

A photograph of a modern church interior. The space is characterized by a curved, corrugated metal bar with a counter and stools. The ceiling is high with exposed ductwork and several pendant lights. A neon 'OPEN' sign is visible on the curved wall. The floor is polished wood. The overall atmosphere is industrial and contemporary.

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glass windows, reflect the historical belief that divinity resides above us. Traditional sacred architecture is often closed, hierarchical, imposing. Massive doors often seem more impenetrable than operable, and the traditional spire reaches upward to the heavens.

By contrast, modern worship centers are often designed to reach outward to the people. “Today, the old architectural types don’t necessarily transfer to our ways of thinking about God,” Sanborn says. “The old ‘God up in heaven’ is now ‘God in our midst.’”

“Really, we should operate more like a nightclub,” DeJong says of Keystone Church. “People want to experience faith and worship on different layers, at different levels. When you walk through the door here, there’s immediate acceptance. You don’t have to go farther than you want to.”

The decision to pursue environmental LEED certification for the new building, which includes office and meeting space as well as worship and gathering space, was about shaping the church to the needs of the people and the culture it seeks to serve.

“It felt like the right thing for us to do,” DeJong says.

MORE THAN PLACES OF WORSHIP

Interest in religious architecture is strong in today’s world. The American Institute of Architects sponsors the Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art and Architecture (IFRAA) Knowledge Community, an association of professionals whose primary interest is religious facilities in a broad array of traditions. This year the group held a two-day conference focused on a deeper understanding of what’s required to create sacred spaces.

“While we acknowledge that places of worship still provide an arena of spiritual nourishment for many, nondenominational ‘sanctuaries’ are becoming increasingly popular in various public buildings, ranging from airports to schools and prisons,” states an IFRAA brochure.

Another organization focused on sacred spaces is The Center for Religious Architecture in Chicago. Established in 2002, it’s working to identify and research significant religious structures around the world.

The changing profile of sacred spaces like Keystone Church is altering the aesthetic character of their communities, but that doesn’t mean old religious buildings are obsolete. While the conversion of stately old churches to funky new condos is a hot trend in the United States and Canada, the nonprofit Partners for Sacred Places is helping congregations preserve and update old churches, temples and mosques.

"In our society, sacred places are much more than places of worship," says Bob Jaeger, executive director of the national, non-sectarian organization. "They are community centers, neighborhood anchors and wellsprings of volunteerism."

One prominent example: St. Paul's Chapel, built in Colonial times and located directly across from the World Trade Center site in New York City. It was home to an extraordinary eight-month volunteer relief effort after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

When a sacred place is demolished, shuttered or converted, the community often loses much more than a worship building. It loses a symbol of spirituality that exists over time. The age of a structure can be an important element of its overall impact as a sacred space – worth preserving and renewing.

Take St. Burchardi church in Halberstadt, Germany. Built around 1050, this church functioned as convent for more than 600 years. It was turned into a barn around Napoleon's time. During the Cold War, it housed pigs.

Several years ago, the 950-year-old church was fortified with new windows, a new roof and structural reinforcements in anticipation of a special event that would retransform the structure as a sacred space. Within its walls, a contemporary concert designed to continue for 639 years began on May 9, 2001. It was the start of a performance of "Organ 2/As Slow as Possible," by American avant garde composer John Cage, on what would have been his 88th birthday.

After a one-and-a-half-year silent prelude, the first triad was played May 2, 2003. The second notes were played May 7, 2004. The next two notes will be played on July 5, 2005. Lead weights on the keys keep the sound of each combination of notes constant until the next ones are played.

The timing of the concert is based on the 1361 inauguration of the first organ with a 12-note claviature in Halberstadt, 639 years before 2000. This was the beginning of keyboard music as we know it today. The last note of the composition will be played 639 years after the fulcrum point of the year 2000. "In view of our fast moving age, this plan is a way of trying to slowdown. The 'discovery of slowness' and the planting of a 'musical apple tree' can be understood as a symbol of confidence in the future," states the project website.

Like the building that hold its notes, the John Cage project dramatizes that spirituality spans generations, while each generation redefines it in its own way. Architecture is an important part – but not all – of the equation and the experience.



Photos(above clockwise): St. Burchardi. The organ in St. Burchardi. St. Paul's Chapel. (Left) The nursery at Keystone Community Church with windows at eye level for toddlers.

