

Spirituality in architecture gets boost from revival of arts

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By Greg Warner

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FALLS CHURCH, Va. (ABP)—Architect Larry Cook believes “any building completely devoid of art is devoid of spirituality.”

The Virginian is one of a growing number of architects who welcome the return of symbolism and spirituality to church buildings. After decades of sparse modernist buildings and symbol-less megachurches, many Christians and congregations are craving a return to more overt spirituality and symbolism in their houses of worship, according to some theologians and artists.

The search for authentic spirituality and uniqueness in church architecture is aided by another trend—a rediscovery of the arts by Christians.

Stained
glass
window
at
Broadway
Baptist
Church
in Fort
Worth.

In today's image-driven culture, the Reformers' fear of idol worship has given way to new visual and artistic expressions of the gospel, whether video, drama, painting, installation art—even tattoos and graffiti.

"The spoken word does not have quite the same content for generations growing up on television," said architect Douglas Hoffman of Cleveland, Ohio.

There is a new collaboration between artists and architects, Hoffman said, that eventually will improve the spiritual aesthetic of America's churches. "There are always religious artists at architectural meetings, and they're raising the bar for the interplay between artists and architects," he said.

One group leading the way, Hoffman said, is the Christians in the Visual Arts organization, which encourages Christian artists to make a difference in the church and ultimately the secular world.

Some congregations, in addition to making their worship spaces more artful, are advocating a more indigenous faith, one that reflects their geographic setting and culture. So they are turning to local artists to decorate their buildings.

Whereas a worship banner and a framed print of Sallman's Head of Christ

might have passed for art a couple decades ago, churches now want homegrown artists—whether professional or amateur, Christian or not—who will paint or sculpt something unique for their buildings.

Large-scale original murals, custom furnishings, even art galleries are part of the fabric of some congregations, particularly those reaching younger adults and those with ties to local arts communities.

“Churches realize they don’t have to choose their art and furnishings from a catalog anymore,” said Judith Dupré, a writer and design consultant for churches. “They can fill their worship space ... by looking locally, realizing that, for the same price as picking out a lectern from a catalog, they can get something marvelous and unique, a one-of-a-kind furnishing.”

Ironically, despite their new openness, Christian churches trail the secular world in promoting spirituality in art, several observers said. There is a movement, evident worldwide but especially in Europe, to seek spiritual meaning in nonreligious art, said Cook, the architect from Falls Church, Va., near Washington.



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That reality was brought home dramatically on a recent visit to Washington's National Gallery of Art, Cook said. The rooms containing pre-Reformation paintings were packed with people "seeking spirituality in secular art," he said.

In contrast, 30 years ago, when Cook was studying art and going to the National Gallery, he said, those same rooms nearly were empty.

Inevitably, any effort to make a church building spiritually expressive, architectural unique, or artistically plentiful will run into a common roadblock—cost.

"Churches are very conscious about cost," said Michael Crosbie of Essex, Conn., who is chair of architecture at the University of Hartford. "Art tends to add costs, and sometimes it's a likely thing to be cut."

"If a church building project is being driven by economics, then all of those (artistic) ideas can fall on deaf ears," echoed Hoffman. Likewise, a well-entrenched sense of tradition can "act like cement on their feet" when church leaders are considering radical changes to the worship space, said

Hoffman, a former architect for the United Methodist Church.

Hoffman and Cook see a stark contrast with the Gothic cathedrals of the Middle Ages, which took decades and untold fortunes to build.

The Gothic churches of Europe represent “the epitome of artistic achievement” for church buildings, Hoffman said, and citizens who donated to the construction “paid for a full-life experience,” from birth to death.

Of course, civic envy played a large role. The objective was “to outdo the neighboring town” by building higher, said Cook, who has designed more than 200 churches.

But the cathedral “used to be the finest work of architecture in a community,” added Tim Blonkvist, an Episcopal architect from San Antonio.

While the Medieval faithful often “gave their last penny” to the cathedral construction, he said, Christians today “would rather spend money on themselves than give it away.”

“When everybody’s individual house is built with a higher quality than the house of God, I think we’ve got things backward,” said Blonkvist, who designed the award-winning, \$12 million Riverbend Church in Austin, a Texas Baptist congregation.

However, the architects say, a growing number of churches—like Riverbend—are willing to spend money on artistically unique and spiritually inspiring sanctuaries.

“Some congregations are willing to spend money on buildings that are more permanent and expressive,” said Crosbie. Custom stained glass, sculpture and other art forms are now on the shopping lists of a few congregations.

The Riverbend facility won an annual award competition sponsored by

Faith & Form, a magazine about religious architecture, which Crosbie edits.

“The point of the awards program is to show others what a high-quality worship environment can be like,” he said.

Blonkvist cites the biblical story, told in Matthew 27, of a woman who poured a flask of expensive perfume on the hair of Jesus. While some of the disciples complained the woman was wasting money that could help the poor, Jesus called the woman’s act “beautiful.”

“Jesus said, ‘I am worthy of you spending money to adorn me,’” Blonkvist said.

He admits “there are good arguments both ways” about spending money on church buildings or ministries. “There is a place for both,” he said. “I am most comfortable in the middle.”

When building a place for the worship of God, he advised, Christians should ask themselves: “Do you want to invite God here? Do you want it to be the finest or the cheapest we can build?”

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