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GIVING PHYSICAL PRESENCE TO FAITH

THE LAST WORD * CHRIS DILORETO, AIA

Why do some places appeal to us spiritually, while others, many dedicated to worship, do not? This difficult question was noted in an article for *Liturgical Arts* magazine in November 1950, when architect Pietro Belluschi wrote, “I do not agree with the premise that if the liturgy is understood and appreciated, all other questions are readily solved, because the examples of many churches built in recent decades, while fulfilling all liturgical requirements, have failed to a great extent to create the emotional impact so necessary in the House of God.” Can auditorium churches, churches in metal buildings, churches in storefronts, churches with pseudo-historic details be awe-inspiring? While creating a space that cultivates a sense of the divine is no easy task, are there necessary qualities that could be quantified?

One must first understand what a spiritual space must accomplish. The noted theologian Rudolf Otto postulated that underlying all spiritual experience is the notion of the “numinous.” He summarized numinous as having three components: it’s different than ordinary experience, there is a sense of overwhelming power, and it is awe inspiring. This presence of the numinous, defined here in the most simplistic terms, is what the best

worship environments, modern or historic, possess. Translating this concept into physical architecture is difficult, yet in successful worship spaces one finds three overarching concepts present.

First, they represent the people and time of the community that worships there. Each time period, house of worship, and congregation is unique within the framework of their particular religion. The best buildings embody in their architecture the culture, worship style, and history of the individual faith community. Who we are and how we relate to one another at a given moment is frozen in our architecture. Being comfortable in worship helps bring about a transcendental experience.

Second, successful worship spaces are honest. Phony arches, materials made to look like something they’re not, and oddly proportioned rooms and spaces dilute anything striving to be awe-inspiring. Truth in architecture means materials used honestly, rooms that have appropriate width and height, buildings sited in response to their environment, and structural components that are easily understood. Spaces can be intimate or soaring, depending on congregation and desire. But if they are truthfully crafted, each can lead to a feeling of something out of the ordinary and prayerful.

Finally, all successful worship spaces are beautiful. They are, from site planning to the smallest detail, carefully considered with solutions that are purposeful, layered with meaning. The Canadian architect Arthur Erickson once noted, “A thing of Beauty is not pretty, nor perfect, nor flashy – but restrained, often odd, tough, indefinable – it touches a higher sense than the emotions alone. Out of the most ordinary circumstance a transcendental experience is distilled. Though lacking in challenge, since it is beyond the limits of the brain, it gives its viewers a sense of highest fulfillment.” That’s numinous.

The gathering of the people is what is most important. The space they use for worship can inhibit or foster a sense of community. All architecture should uplift our spirits through good design; a place of worship must do it consistently. Designs that solve functional requirements, protect us from the elements, and provide us with a thing of beauty are not easy to produce. This mixture of science (structure and technology) and art (which uplifts the soul) is what makes faith-based architecture so challenging, and so rewarding.

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