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THE DAILY JOURNAL
OF COMMERCE

Changing churches challenging designers

By: [Inka Bajandas](#) in [Architecture and Engineering](#) January 9, 2014 1:15 pm



Wooden arches visible through a skylight at St. Edward Catholic Church in Keizer pay homage to traditional church architecture in an otherwise contemporary design. (DiLoreto Architecture)

DiLoreto Architecture principal Chris DiLoreto equates designing a church to creating a single, complicated room.

“You’re really just building a special room, but you’re gathering a bunch of people together to be a community,” he said.

For recent church projects, DiLoreto Architecture and other Portland design firms are finding that churchgoers’ desires are shifting. Contemporary touches are being applied to structures steeped in tradition.

Many churches now incorporate more technology, such as projectors for song lyrics or a video feed. They often have less rigid seating arrangements or more prominent lobbies and gathering spaces to encourage interaction among attendees.

Flexibility to accommodate various speakers, musicians and other events is often a high priority for church spaces, said Henry Fitzgibbon, a principal with Portland-based **Soderstrom Architects**. The firm recently designed St. Alexander Catholic

Church in Cornelius; construction is slated to start in early summer.

“We are trying to design (churches) to be as multipurpose as possible without disrupting the nature of that sacred space,” Fitzgibbon said.

Budget constraints are influencing designs, but so are needs related to acoustics, natural light and large crowds.

“We make the hallways extra wide so you can add chairs,” DiLoreto said.

Then there’s an overarching theme that can’t be ignored.

“Churches have that added component that they have to make you feel spiritual,” DiLoreto said.

There’s an art to achieving this feeling, even with a more contemporary design scheme, said Nancy Merryman, a partner with **Merryman Barnes Architects**. One of its recent church designs is St. Juan Diego Catholic Church in Northwest Portland.

“It’s the way you handle the lighting, creating volume,” Merryman said. “It’s just paying really close attention to the light and kind of varying it.”

A big challenge is designing for a space that has an ebb and flow of use depending on the occasion, said Stephanie Fitzhugh, a DiLoreto Architecture project manager.

“It’s a delicate balance to keep people comfortable in a room full of people and not full of people,” she said.

Finding this balance was important to the congregation of St. Edward Catholic Church in Keizer, DiLoreto Architecture business manager Bonnie Henny said. Construction of a \$5 million, 11,000-square-foot church is nearly done; it’s expected to open in February.

“It was kind of important that the space not be so large so you don’t feel lost,” she said. “We don’t need a stadium.”

Henny said she likes that the building’s contemporary exterior contrasts with an interior immediately recognizable as a Catholic sanctuary.

“It has some traditional feel and some modern feel,” she said. “It was important to the parishioners that it very much be a traditional Catholic interior.”

St. Edward Catholic Church patrons also wanted a building that paid homage to Pacific Northwest scenery. This is one reason why the building features so much wood, including in arches and siding, DiLoreto said. The wooden arches, a nod to traditional church architecture, are visible through a large skylight that wraps around

the top of the building, he said.

“It is a contemporary interpretation of Catholic church architecture,” he said. “We didn’t want the building to look like it’s a commercial building.”

Although Catholics generally are particular about the appearance of a church sanctuary, preferences are changing, DiLoreto said. Instead of traditional pews in straight rows, seating angled toward the lectern often is requested, he said, so that people can see others’ faces. Also, DiLoreto Architecture almost always includes in its designs side aisles for people who prefer to sit on the edges.

A central lobby will be as key as the sanctuary for the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Oregon’s new \$8 million church designed by Portland-based **THA Architecture**, said Jonah Cohen, one of the firm’s principals.

“The heart of this community is not the sanctuary,” he said. “The heart of this community is the central gathering space.”

That space and classrooms for child and adult education were important to the congregation, said Leslie Koc, chairwoman of the church’s steering committee for the project.

“We wanted it to be a warm and welcoming space not only to our congregation, but to the community,” she said. “We were looking for a space we would share.”

St. Luke Lutheran Church in Southwest Portland is in the early stages of planning an expansion, but a master plan the congregation is developing will likely include a multipurpose building, said Gerry Reese, co-chairman of the church’s master plan implementation team. This could include meeting rooms, classrooms and additional space for social services the church offers, he said.

“With this new structure, eventually dinners and special events, speakers ... we could certainly handle that on site,” he said.

The need for additional room for social services is one reason why DiLoreto Architecture was hired to expand the basement for St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Parish in downtown Portland, DiLoreto said. The firm is also designing an expansion to St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Parish in Southeast Portland.

Fitzhugh said she always enjoys seeing how the desires and needs of the people who attend each church shape a project.

“It’s a very personal space for people,” she said. “It’s always interesting to see where you started and where you landed with the building.”