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THYSPACE



rethinking buildings
& facilities

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Church facilities are much like ships in the sea. They're human-designed vessels severely and continually challenged by the natural turbulence of their Creator-designed environment. Of course, the original purpose

of ships or church facilities hasn't changed. But the relationship between them and their seas must change if they are to operate, or even survive, in the waters of their calling.

The craft of shipbuilding has evolved as civilizations learn more about navigation and gain new technologies that improve safety and efficiency.

Do church leaders study the complexity and changes of our cultural environment with the same kind of "nautical seriousness" when it comes to the design and construction of church facilities? Or do we sometimes allow nostalgia, idealism, or other issues to obscure better ways to design and build spaces dedicated to worshipping God?

What We Don't Know Is Expensive

Churches in the United States have indicated they're spending roughly 40 percent of church budgets on facility-related costs. In fact the U.S. Census Bureau reports that the American economy spends more than 8 billion dollars a year on church facilities.

Thom Rainer's research notes that only 17 percent of American churches are growing, and less than one-fourth of those are growing through conversions—the rest are merely "shuffling sheep." Yet 78 percent of unchurched adults would be willing to listen to someone share their spiritual beliefs, according to Ed Stetzer of LifeWay Research. Clearly, we live in a very spiritual nation where most people simply aren't connecting with the church.

Question: Would you continue to invest \$8 billion in a business that had lost much of its "customer base" over the past 17 years? You would if you knew how to reverse that trend.

A Better Way to Build

Author and futurist Rex Miller has considered the folly of building cruise ships when the need is for oil tankers that can operate in the North Atlantic. In *The Millennium Matrix* (Jossey-Bass), he writes, "The church has been building the spiritual equivalent of vacation cruise liners: large slow structures made for calm, balmy seas and friendly ports of call. We may be trying to make these ships a little faster, a little more up-tempo and with a mission statement, but we're expecting calm seas and a sunny horizon. Here's the catch: The church has long since left a stable, homogenous, and predictable culture."

The Rainer Group's studies for Cornerstone Knowledge Network certainly support the application of seriousness and intentionality to the design and construction of ministry space. In the face of negative indices, research has discovered some very positive trends.

For example:

- 78 percent of healthy churches grow after construction—some as much as 50 percent in the first two or three years.
- 54 percent of the unchurched say that church design is important. By that, they mean it would influence their evaluation of the experience.
- 85 percent of church leaders rated their building experience as "excellent" or "very good."

Our research partners and we were surprised at these results. Obviously, properly applied research can help church leaders be as knowledgeable about, and responsive to, their operating environments as ship captains are to theirs. More than that, the research confirms that the purpose of the church has not diminished. Only the environment has changed. Therefore, the real issues are adaptive.

Through our investment in research and collaboration with leading ministries, we've discerned several "underlying movements"—unseen currents below the surface of the sea—that strongly influence the local church's ability to

navigate. Local churches should carefully and prayerfully consider how to adapt to these significant movements.

The digital era has introduced new rules and rhythms into church life: The whole milieu is now more participatory, thrives on networks and connections, values authenticity, and requires pragmatic answers.

The Digital Age

Rex Miller has helped the church world (as well as others) understand history as viewed through the lens of the successive ages of communication. Oral was first; the second age was print; then came the broadcast era; and we are now emerging into a fourth era: digital interactive.

This new digital era proposes sweeping and unprecedented change for all segments of society. Why? Because our oral, print, and broadcast era structures are no longer suitable to the realities of our new environment. The digital era has introduced new rules and ►►





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Soul Cravings

In his book *Soul Cravings* (Thomas Nelson), pastor and author Erwin McManus has identified a very significant underlying movement: He sees a whole generation's soul craving as a deep yearning for "something we can believe in." That yearning is for authenticity, significance, and a sense of belonging.

That's why one of the fastest-growing segments of the service economy is the explosion of coffee shops,

bars, bakeries, and other meeting places. It isn't about the coffee, the beer, or the hot cross buns. Clearly, something deeper is going on. In short, people are lonely and disconnected.

That loneliness is

so acute that today's largest-selling pharmaceuticals are depression medications.

Churches must understand our culture's suffocating pace and, in turn, develop responses—including architectural ones—that will make life simpler and more sustainable.

Simplicity and Sustainability

As everyone knows, life in America is intensely and increasingly complicated. People are caught in genuine struggles to make life work within all the competing demands. The intersecting and overlapping circles of relationships, careers, events, economic survival, physical fitness, and other needs have created crushing burdens for too many people.

On top of this, local churches challenge these same people to join small groups that add more relational and time demands. And church leaders wonder why they can't get greater participation from the congregation.

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The Post-Christendom Culture

The United States had long been seen as the center of world Christianity. The great river of Christian missionaries, creative energy, theological training, and financial resources flowed from America to the far corners

of the earth. However, that has all changed. In 1900, 90 percent of the world's Christians lived in the Western world. Today, according to one study, only 30 percent do. We are no longer the center of Christianity for the world, and Christianity is arguably no longer the center of our culture.

Furthermore, the U.S. is rapidly becoming much more pluralistic and multicultural. So the church is not only losing the "home court advantage" for the Christian message, but now must also compete with Islam, Buddhism, and other religions on a level playing field. The church's message must be more focused and compelling to the needs and interests of those who don't come from a cultural Christianity. Indeed, the message must be more biblical and less cultural.

Leonard Sweet calls these changes a "perfect storm" for the North American church. Because of this historic shift, churches will have to find a more serious and intentional alignment between culture, ministry, leadership, and the facilities they build.

How do churches pull all of these issues together into purposeful traction?

An Epic Story

We have learned that the origin of nearly every church is an epic story. Over time, programs and methods are added to facilitate the story. Too often, those facilitating features replace the story as the compelling focus for ministry. **Churches that are serious and intentional about their mission often need to recapture or even rewrite the essential points of their own epic stories.**

A healthy and comprehensive understanding—including frequent retelling—of the story releases churches into a confident, missional, and culture-engaging posture toward their environments. We see four essential anchor points of identity and calling in that story.

1) Code—an internal understanding of the unique DNA imparted by their Creator. It is the consummate grasp of exactly who they are (and it is almost never identical, or even similar, to some national model of doing church). Code encompasses the various gifts, abilities, talents, burdens, and availabilities within the church.

2) Context—an external comprehension of the precise area (geographical, cultural, socio-economic, historical, religious, and so on) to which a church has been called. Just as a pastor exegetes Scripture, a church must exegete its surrounding culture. They need to acquire the same attitude a missionary would display when stepping onto the soil of a new land.

3) Calling—the actual ministry vision, burden, and tools

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that fulfill the unique mission. We often ask church leaders, “What makes you weep and pound the table?” In other words, calling must find passionate expression in specific human lives. This is the nucleus of your epic story.

4) Creating—the physical building design that releases and strengthens the calling. Only after a church understands the first three C’s, can it create the facilities that support ministry. The real issue is: What will help us connect with those around us?

Moving From Prescription to Description

The influence of mass culture too often produces conformity to approved templates. As a result, many people and organizations tend to simply download models of dress, political action, morality, entertainment, and even church. In other words, they just take a culturally sanctioned “prescription” as a guide for personal or corporate life.

However, a deeply inscribed and understood story releases people and organizations to true creativity, originality, and authenticity in describing a new future. When a church can describe its future, it can create facilities that support and strengthen that description.

For example, one of the underlying movements reveals a deep longing within the culture for a sense of belonging. Therefore, any serious engagement of the culture must consider the profound loneliness and alienation at the root of the need to belong. But there is no one-size-fits-all prescription for how to build in a way that imparts a sense of belonging.

For some churches that may mean an incarnational approach of engaging culture in existing public places, which requires no additional facilities. Other churches have the potential of creating relational spaces that will provide neutral community connection points. Still others may need to consider developing facilities off-campus—which may mean giving up their 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status—to reach the people God’s called them to reach.

Which approach or combination thereof is right for your church? No one can prescribe the answer for you. But you can be intentional about navigating all the underlying movements in our society. They all take on different expressions in each locality. A prayerful understanding of your epic story and the community it impacts provides the only sound foundation of a successful building program.

The purpose of the church universal and local churches remains vibrant, compelling, and relevant. But the always-changing environment requires creative and prayerful adaptation.

Building for the Storm

Throughout all of history, the will of God has caused things—such as altars, an ark, tabernacles, temples, homes—to be constructed from wood, stone, minerals, and other forms of matter. Even though the whole earth is “sacred space,” very often “Thy will be done on earth” becomes a construction project.

That’s why building space for ministry is a grand and noble venture. These are, in fact, great enterprises. To the degree that church leaders and members under-

Connecting to the Community Through Buildings

Rock Bridge Community Church is committed to their community in downtown Dalton, Georgia. When faced with the need for additional space, they chose to focus on revitalizing the center of the city instead of seeking land in the suburbs.

Rock Bridge partnered with Cogun to determine how to keep their downtown ministry by focusing on expanding and enhancing their main facility. The first phase, Stage 123, adds a 500-seat video venue in a renovated Ford dealership built in the 1920s. This worship space

augments the 1,200-seat worship space already on the same campus. The Stage 123 also includes a Wi-Fi equipped coffee shop to serve as a relational space for church and unchurched alike. Phase 2 includes a 17,000-square-foot addition for children’s and other ministries for the community.

But Rock Bridge went beyond what most would consider collaborating with their community when they chose to help fund a city initiative.

In an effort to demonstrate their desire to partner with the city, they approached and built relationships with city officials in the city of Dalton. As part of the project described above, Rock Bridge will provide the materials for a city streetscape project that ran out of tax funds—continuing the revitalization the city was hoping for.





stand this, all phases and components of the building process can be done in joyous and confident faith

But real faith brings people and institutions to the end of illusions. Let's face it: "Cruise liner" churches are a recent invention.

Today's serious church leaders know they can no longer build for calm seas, sunny horizons, and pampered passengers. The church was born in turbulent times and, true to its calling, has always functioned best on the high seas. 🌊



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An Epic Story Materializes

"The journey begins at the crossing." Thousands of people walk under those words every week. It has become the metaphor for people who are taking that first step in a relationship with God. After seeing some of Visioneering's early projects, we began to dream of building a campus that would become a destination place not only for followers of Jesus but also for those who were far from God—a place where people would walk onto our campus and be able to tell what kind of church we were just by the architecture, the images, and the experience. The outcome has far exceeded our hopes and dreams of what a campus design could accomplish.

—**Shane Philip**, senior pastor, *The Crossing*, Las Vegas, Nevada

The Crossing was comfortable with homelessness. Like many church plants, it moved to new venues with each phase of growth and viewed each gathering as the next step. Its leaders believed this experience of journeying together was key to the church DNA—and they feared that "arriving" could significantly shift their culture.

When Visioneering Studios began designing The Crossing's first permanent home, rather than trying to incorporate current trends, the team sought to rediscover timeless truths such as authentic community, appropriate context, and

organic flexibility.

The result was a design that avoided both the traditional "high church" design approach (steeples, stained glass, and so on), as well as the modern stripped-down big-box approach. Instead the site was envisioned as a Christ-centered community that fits in context with its desert setting. Various ministry components (students, children, worship, cafe) were broken up into smaller buildings framing "outdoor rooms," which reduced costs by avoiding 20 to 30 percent of the typical square footage required for interior hallways and circulation. We strategically designed one of the first-phase buildings to be adaptively reused in the future as a community-serving retail/office space, with the potential to bring unchurched people onto the property without requiring an explicit invitation.

The Israelites' journey through the wilderness became a theme for the congregation's first buildings. An "architecture of impermanence" was created, using fabric, pre-engineered metal "sheds," and adobe-like exteriors. A portal with the words *The Journey Begins at The Crossing* harkens back to the city gates of biblical times. The theme allowed the buildings to be constructed of the most cost-effective structural systems possible, including pre-engineered steel buildings, tilt-up concrete, and block where appropriate. The cost savings allowed the church to create a true community destination, an outdoor "living room" called The Camp, which



serves as an example of architectural evangelism.

Other parts of the campus incorporate additional Old Testament

Scripture. Verses from Isaiah 35 describing God's promise to bring life in the desert led to a fabric focal tower, as well as the I:35 Café.

Future development focuses on a Court of Pillars inspired by God's visible presence with his people. During the day eaves extending from the worship center will emit a cloudlike mist, and at night structural pillars will double as torches, creating encircling columns of fire to light the desert "encampment."

On opening day the congregation marched across a dry desert wash and piled stones on the project's border, their pilgrimage to a new home echoing the crossing of God's people so many years ago.