Contemporary church architecture: a look at Bridgeway Church

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Contemporary church architecture: A look at Bridgeway Church
by
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Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to design a church structure that meets the needs of a contemporary church and complements and reflects the nature of contemporary worship. By investigating the characteristics of contemporary worship, I intend to show how the needs of a contemporary church will be met through my design of Bridgeway Church in Ames, Iowa.

Bridgeway is a young, growing church that has adopted a contemporary style of worship. Having only been worshiping a little over a year, Bridgeway is yet without its own structure. As a new church, it is financially unable to build every component of the program desired. Aware of this reality, I will offer a phased building approach. As a phased project the building should include many multi-use spaces and remain flexible for future growth.
RESEARCH

General Dynamics of the New Christian Movement

Relationships, like people themselves, come in as many forms and dimensions as one can imagine. Relationships, more than any other characteristic, define who and what we are and how we fill our role in society. Despite the obvious importance of relational interaction to people’s well-being, the relational aspect of modern church communities has suffered from an increasing lack of emphasis in recent years. The result of this shifting focus away from relationships in the church community has been declining attendance and dying congregations.

Denominations across the country have been experiencing a decline in membership since the early 1970s. The traditional theories behind church formation, which held true for centuries, were no longer relevant to a culture that was placing an increased emphasis on the value of the individual and individual accomplishments.
The personal relationship each individual had with God was downplayed in favor of the structures of church tradition and hierarchy. Traditional worship was not about the individual's relationship with God, but about adhering to tradition and fulfilling roles. Church attendance provided a social and political status. Therefore obedience to tradition and hierarchy, while empty for most, was necessary in order to maintain a certain social status. As members of society began obtaining their social status outside the walls of the church, the church lost its pull. It became increasingly clear that traditional models of worship were not adequate for the changing demographics.

Members of the church began to realize that the importance of their faith did not rest in the rituals and traditions of the church but in the saving grace of their Lord. As this relationship was explored it made way for a worship experience that opened the channels of communication between each person and God and allowed for an intimate, interactive experience. Charles Trueheart in “Welcome to the Next Church” writes, “We form local
congregations as if they were clubs. And then we behave as if they were clubs. But clubs are anti-growth" (17).

People need more from their church than empty rituals and forced participation. Humans were created to worship and to be in relationship with their Creator. People needed a worship experience and a place to worship that satisfies their need to re-establish the relationships with God and with each other that had been lost.

Peter Drucker, a management theorist and author noted, “Americans today go to churches for reasons very different from those of two generations ago. Then attendance was steered by heritage, habit, and social status. Now it is an act of commitment, and therefore meaningful. It is no longer an act of conformity, and therefore meaningless” (Trueheart 20).

In order to understand why people have left mainline churches, it is important to understand how people regard the church and what makes it appealing or unappealing. Today the church is comprised of three generations - boosters, boomers, and busters. Each has grown up under Denominations across the country are experiencing a time of decline.

“The mainline denominations are bleeding. Their churches have more pew than flock, and unless they change, they have more history than future. Little congregations of fewer than a hundred at worship, in rural communities and inner cities, are shutting their doors at the rate of fifty a week, by one estimate” (Trueheart 3).
different conditions and each has different perceptions of the church. Carol Childress, a scholar of generational preferences, has several theories on why contemporary worship is attracting more people to the church.

The “boosters,” those who came of age during the World War II, rely heavily on group settings for their societal identities and value. Having experienced two major world upheavals in their younger years through the Great Depression and World War II, this generation places great value on the safety, security, and stability offered by the established denominational structure, the local church community and the physical church structure itself. The church hierarchy and a clear delineation of responsibilities and power within the church made boosters very comfortable with their position in the church body. The uniform rituals of worship add another layer to this desire for stability. “Service in the church” to this group applied to the routine tasks each did during the Sunday service – collecting the offering, serving communion, ushering worshippers to their seats – but was not given much thought during the rest of the week.
This group finds comfort in the predictability of the formal sanctuary layout of pulpit, altar, and organ. Finding these common elements in each house of worship allows this group to feel secure in the fact that no matter what church they enter, they can be assured of encountering their Creator in the same way.

The "boomers," the children of the booster generation born in the late 1940s and 1950s, moved away from their parents' need for structure and stability to placing an increasing emphasis on the importance of community. This generation experienced the upheaval of the civil rights movement, men on the moon, and the women's liberation—all events that had their foundations in the power of individual action rather than group cohesion and stability.

This focus on self carried over into the demands the boomers placed on the church building. Boomers wanted a church space that would provide ample opportunities for each individual to learn, to talk with their friends and
neighbors after the service, and to have their children learn in the church nursery and worship.

The boomers’ worship experience, as this group began bringing families of their own to church, followed a much less formal routine that used drama and technology to reach worshippers, rather than relying on rituals. This generation started to tap into the power of using contemporary terminology and methods to tell a centuries-old story in a way that related to the issues they faced in an ever-changing world. A gradual shift began away from the vertical church hierarchy to the idea of “shepherding,” with the church leader providing ways for church members to grow and experience life together.

The “busters,” also known as the members of “Generation X,” are seeking a much more genuine experience than the self-focused worship their parents favored. Many of this group are children of divorce and place a high value on friends and associates who replace members of the typical family structure. Busters come to churches hoping to find genuine relationships and
place little to no value on the traditional structures of denominations and church hierarchies.

Busters desire a very informal worship space that provides ample opportunity for spontaneous meetings of different sizes. The “coffeehouse” feel of a worship center is very important to busters looking for a chance to build relationships and replace the stability lost by the breakdown of the nuclear family.

Churches at the end of the 20th Century were faced with a challenge like none they had ever seen. The boosters, boomers, busters and everyone in between were placing different demands and expecting different experiences out of the church.

We never had five distinct generations present in a population before. And actually the demographers tell us beginning this year we've probably started on a sixth generation. So we need to understand the influences that generational attitudes and perceptions had in terms of the way we live our lives and certainly the way we participate in local congregations and make decisions regarding facilities. (Childress)
In order to balance the needs of these different generations, churches began developing the contemporary worship service to speak to each member at their particular point in their spiritual development. Charles Trueheart writes,

A leading pastor in this movement, Leith Anderson, of Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota classifies this as ‘reading the culture’ and ‘translating the culture.’ The current culture is suspicious of old-church ‘European’ atmospherics, ritual, and language--suspicious of old institutions in general (8).

In some cases that's because the church belongs to none. The Next Church is sui generis, a house built of local materials and independent pluck and zeal. In other cases the church would just as soon not mention that it owes allegiance to any remote earthly institution. In a few cases the church doesn’t even call itself a church (21).

In response to these growing needs, many churches are incorporating a contemporary approach to worship, one that is more applicable to today’s trends and popular culture. The goal is to eliminate any unnecessary barriers that might keep someone from visiting the church.

Contemporary worship styles have helped revitalize new and existing churches by providing a more relaxed atmosphere and material with which
people today can identify. Pastors and worship leaders are using new technology, music, and drama, to tell old stories in new ways – ways that will deliver the message to worshippers who may have never heard this material before. An integral part of this experience is creating an environment, both physical and psychological, where worshippers feel comfortable accepting a message that has the power to change their lives.

The contemporary form of worship was introduced in the 1970s as mainline denominations started to experience declining membership. Willow Creek Church in South Barrington, Illinois, is recognized as one of the earliest churches to introduce the contemporary style of worship, as well as one of the most successful churches in the nation to practice contemporary worship. The approach at Willow Creek is simple – “create an environment that doesn’t feel ‘churchy’ and eliminate any unnecessary barriers preventing spiritual seekers from placing faith in Christ” (White 1). Presently, worship services at Willow Creek include more than 15,000 people each week, as well as a full offering of mid-week amenities and programs. The upbeat music and more
personalized sermons that characterize worship at Willow Creek and thousands of other contemporary churches around the country are allowing people to relate to the Biblical teachings and apply it to daily life.

Contemporary churches also have revolutionized the traditional definition of “worship.” Worship for the church member is no longer confined to an hour on Sunday morning, but has become an integral part of daily life. Worship can happen at any time, with any person, and is the physical representation of faith in daily life. This emphasis on daily spiritual growth has made contemporary churches much more aware of their impact on the surrounding community. Steve Sjorgen, pastor of Vineyard Community Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, writes, “Another characteristic of health is being a ‘real life’ church. A real-life church teaches the Bible in such a way that we equip people in their families, work, and relationships” (3). One charge that has been made against mainline churches has been their unwillingness to be intentional about growing and their continued emphasis on maintaining current membership rather than growing. Tracy Keenan, an associate pastor
of Southminster Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, writes,

"Church health is a matter of focus: a focus on Christ, not the church. Our
focus determines whether we have a survival mentality or a service mentality.
If the primary emphasis is on maintaining our building, or on getting more
people or money, it's a clue that our focus is on survival" (1).

As in business where it is imperative that the needs of the customer
are understood, the church also needs to understand the needs and
expectations of the people. Today's generations — the "busters" and beyond
— are growing up in a very different world than that of their parents. What had
meaning for their parents or grandparents seems to be irrelevant today.
Contemporary churches seek to address this change by actively involving
younger generations in reaching out to their communities while paying
attention to their own spiritual journey.

Contemporary churches have an outward focus and are actively trying
to seek out the un-churched. "By adopting unthreatening architecture, the
large churches are finding another way to lower psychological barriers against the church edifice" (Trueheart 17).

Contemporary Churches

Small Groups

In addition to an array of activities and support groups that get people involved with church outside of Sunday worship is the role of small groups. One of the most life-changing activities is the concept of small groups.

Bridgeway is committed to developing caring friendships through small groups. It is in a small group that individuals can best be cared for and learn to care for others, we can know and be known in Christian community.

A small group is three to twelve people who gather to build meaningful relationships with each other, study God's Word, serve in mission, and care for others in Christian love. Small groups are the key component for accomplishing the Bridgeway's mission, which is to "connect people to Christ, each other, and the world." They believe that the opportunity to have

“At Willow Creek a while ago word came back that some newcomers felt overwhelmed by the size of the church, and even some members who were trying hard and sounded cheerful actually despaired of ever finding a place in its vast and impersonal honeycomb of God-driven busyness. As it sought to address this problem, Willow Creek found echoes of the solution in the secular world. Lee Strobel, a Willow Creek leader who wrote one of the best-selling books in mega church literature, Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary, likes to illustrate the concept by referring to an ad for the Continental Bank of Chicago (now Bank of America) that confronted popular mistrust of huge impersonal institutions. Continental, the campaign said, was "the big bank with the little bank inside" (Trueheart 18).
authentic relationships and life-impacting friendships happen best in the context of a small group.

Churches of varying sizes have used this new concept to enrich relationships within the church at a more personal and intimate level.

Ralph Neighbor, who recently retired as president of Touch Outreach Ministries in Houston, Texas, writes,

Around the world today — far more so overseas — healthy church life is built around cells, basic Christian communities that allow the people of God to join together, responsible to and for each other. The true cell church does not see the cell as a small group attached to a larger blob of protoplasm called church membership. The true cell church is a community of Christians numbering usually no more than fifteen who are the body of Jesus Christ. Here we find people who care about each other, accepting accountability and responsibility to and for one another, exercising the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament, the church is called the oikos, the household of God. The early church was composed of household churches (2).

One other important aspect to contemporary churches is the effort to identify one's spiritual gifts and fit them in the churches' various ministries. By matching people to these ministries, the church becomes a team where everyone is involved. Traditionally, pastors have been involved in every
aspect of church life. As the head of the church, the pastor was the point person for each aspect of ministry. Although an active pastor is desired, such responsibilities weighed heavily on one person, making it difficult when a pastor would relocate or retire. Many churches become totally dependent on the pastor and are at a loss when the pastor relocates because they are not just losing the pastor but the head person for each ministry. With a team-oriented structure, the pastor becomes less of an authority figure and takes on the role of a coach or shepherd. This structure depends on the use of people's contribution in the church based on their spiritual gifts. No longer is the pastor the sole organizer and provider for the church, but teams are formed to handle each aspect of ministry. Bridgeway has several teams—worship team, praise team, set-up team, children's ministry team, hospitality team, and many more.

Contemporary Worship

George Hunter, author of *Church for the Unchurched*, points out examples of how the church has attempted to reach the common people.
Martin Luther translated the Scriptures into German vernacular, and the Lutheran Church adapted then-contemporary folk music, including drinking songs. The Methodists under the Wesly brothers 'agreed to become more vile' to reach the common people—preaching in fields and town squares (Trueheart 9).

Contemporary worship is yet another way to connect with the "common people." One major difference between a contemporary church and a traditional church is the selection of music and instrumentation in the worship service. Contemporary music utilizes many types of instrumentation. The organ that once was the key instrument in worship has been replaced with instruments like electronic keyboards, drum sets, and guitars. These instruments produce music that connects with people.

In addition to the organ, the choir has been removed. Instead, music is often led by a praise team consisting of the instrumentalists and usually around five vocalists. The choir loft, which used to take up a sizable area of the sanctuary has been removed and replaced by a multi-purpose stage allowing for more space for seating. Instruments, usually owned by the

"Howard Clark, the pastor of the Northwest Bible Church, in Dallas, remembers a young staff member saying to him, 'I don't have an organ. None of my friends has an organ. Why should I listen to an organ on Sunday" (Trueheart 9).
individual musicians, have replaced the organ that was once a considerable expense for a church.

Most songs are written recently; however, Pastor Josh Hunt, author of "Introducing Contemporary Worship Into a Traditional Church" writes, "You could take a very traditional selection of songs, add the right instruments and the right feel and it would sound reasonable contemporary" (2). The traditional hymnbook has been replaced by LCD projectors. Using a projector raises the worshipper's head and frees up hands to allow for a more spiritual worship experience.

Paul B. Brown, author of *In and For the World* notes Cobb Anderson, in her collection of contemporary prayers: "The tragedy of liturgy today is that we have made the language of worship so abstract that it is nearly impossible to sense the joy and blessing of life in an earthy and real way" (3). Some feel that the old hymns are the only ones appropriate for worship but even these once were contemporary. It is certain that every piece of music was contemporary at one time in history.

Leonard Sweet, author of "Church Architecture for the 21st Century writes, "The Protestant Reformation that followed the invention of the Gutenberg press in the 16th century ushered in an architectural revolution. To move the church into a print culture, in which people could read instead of simply absorbing what others told them, required massive changes in spaces that would be used for worship and teaching. Today we are undergoing another kind of spiritual awakening as the church undergoes a postmodern Reformation from print to screen. That revolution can't happen without altering the physical space of the church" (2)."
In addition to changes in music, contemporary worship also has changed the relationship between the pastor and his or her congregation. The Reformation brought the pastor up close and personal with the congregation by moving the pulpit and communion table out of the chancel and into the nave. Early church leaders realized that the separation of the clergy from the people was conflicting with Jesus' teachings. Jesus' disciples were instructed to be with the people not apart from them. While the Reformation brought the pastor close to the congregation, the pulpit still somehow separated the pastor from the congregation, both physically and spiritually. In contemporary worship, the pulpit has been removed and there are few barriers between the pastor and his congregation. The image of the pastor was brought to a more earthly realm, someone who knows and is familiar with life's struggles. It is an attempt to indicate the validity of the sermon coming from one who understands, not from one who condemns. In this new relationship, the pastor becomes more effective in reaching parishioners. The church becomes more real.
George Hunter, a church scholar writes in his new book, *Church for the Unchurched* that churches “are dramatizing a truth that missionaries have known for decades...to reach non-Christian populations, it is necessary for a church to become culturally indigenous to its ‘mission field.’ When the church’s communication forms are alien to the host population, they may never perceive that Christianity’s God is for people like them” (Trueheart 8).

**Church Architecture**

Throughout time, architects have found church buildings to be challenging, notably to design a space that could move one’s spirit. They often have displayed the peak of an age’s architectural achievements. The Gothic cathedrals of the 13th century soared to heights never thought possible, each one being more magnificent than the one before. Today, the church’s presence should not be one of power and domination, but rather of connecting with people in a more intimate way. James White, author of *Christian Worship in Transition*, writes, “We are more inclined now to look at a
church as a social part of the townscape which fits in with its neighbors rather than as a monument which dominates them” (147).

The form should help reveal the message of the church. An unknown author writes, “But in the meantime we need buildings to keep the wind, rain and sun out while we remind ourselves of these realities. But they are more than that: our architecture ‘preaches’ the gospel too. We are aesthetic beings, and our surroundings reinforce or contradict what we say. Buildings are more than a functional necessity” (Buildings Preach Too 2). “We shape our dwellings,’ said Winston Churchill, ‘and afterwards our dwellings shape us.’ Our church building should be less like a fortress and more like an open place. The architecture should suggest openness to the world and symbolize outreach to the community” (Buildings Preach Too 3).

The sanctuary should be arranged in a manner that encourages community worship. Cathedrals were arranged along a narrow nave leading to the pulpit or baptistery, leading to more of an individual worship. “The linear church worshipper makes the long pilgrimage – on foot or with the eye
to the mysterious Presence at the front. By contrast, the circular concept of worship portrays it as a community affair with the worshippers’ shared experiences of God of central significance” (Buildings Preach Too 3).

Natural light has been an incredible tool within church architecture. Cathedrals used color and light to display the beauty of its sanctuaries. Unfortunately, with many contemporary churches light is often seen as an annoyance. The use of LCD projectors has darkened our sanctuaries. In many cases windows are omitted from the sanctuary. This is unfortunate since as new technology like flat screens become more affordable they may replace the projector. The absence of windows affects those inside and sends a message to those outside the church. The lack of windows outside conveys that something within is private and not to be disclosed. Those inside the building are blocked from what is happening in their community. Windows are a way of acknowledging and connecting to activity outside.

“The church is a sanctuary in the world, not a sanctuary from the world. It is not a place of escape from this present time to some other time or from this
world into some other world. Its worship is not indifferent to the events of the history in which we live, much less aloof from them” (Brown 9).

The church should strive for flexible spaces. “For the first time in history, we had to build not for a particular change but for change itself as a permanent reality. Our church architecture had not only to accept the possibility of change but to make it feasible” (White 143). Technology is constantly redefining the way we live. One way in which the church can remain flexible is by not building sloped floors within the sanctuary. Sloped floors automatically rule out any other activity. Sloped floors are only necessary for exceptionally large congregations. Another way is to use removable seating. Chairs are becoming very popular within sanctuaries. In addition to being more flexible, chairs will accommodate more people than if pews were used. With the chairs removed, the sanctuary will serve other functions and optimize the use of its space.

Having visited a variety of contemporary churches, I have been exposed to architectural solutions to various space needs. Each has
revealed what is important to churches today. Hope Lutheran, one of the fastest growing Lutheran churches in the United States, has recently built their own structure in West Des Moines, Iowa. Although they have yet to build the sanctuary, the current structure can seat up to eleven hundred people. With the use of flexible doors this space remains ready for a variety of functions. Their facility reflects the desire for beauty through the use of materials and graceful in the simple cruciform found in the walls which tie the building together. Natural light also illuminates much of the interior spaces, uplifting one's spirit.

Another growing contemporary church is Third Reformed Church in Pella, Iowa. The manner in which their children worship hour is structured helps children learn through a variety of activities. Unlike Sunday school classes, which used to be led by one teacher in a relatively small class size, Third Reformed Church's approach involves much larger class sizes, which then are split into smaller groups. Throughout the hour, the groups will rotate
around the room and experience the lesson in many different ways, such as with crafts, Bible stories, and drama.

Both churches provide outdoor spaces where the church can gather. They use their lawn as an extension of their building, whether it is for small gatherings or group worship. Hope Lutheran has provided a concrete stage to make outdoor worship feasible, and Third Reformed has planned to build an amphitheatre, which can serve as an outside classroom or for larger group functions.

**Bridgeway Church**

**Background**

Bridgeway is part of one of the oldest denominations in the United States, the Reformed Church of America. (RCA) According to the RCA website, www.rca.org, the RCA has roughly eighty-three churches in Iowa, and two private colleges—Northwestern in Orange City, and Central in Pella.
About seven years ago a committee from the classis, the local governing body for the RCA, began looking at different sites to plant a new church. Ames was identified as a potential site initially because of the RCA connections with campus ministry at Iowa State University. It was also discovered that many students from RCA backgrounds were attending ISU. They did a demographic study of Ames and found that only twenty to thirty percent of the population attends a church. Only five to six percent of college students were involved in ministry, which is higher than the national average. They felt that Ames was a good location to begin a new church. Over the course of the next six to seven years, a steering committee was formed to begin forming a core team for this new church. In 2000 a pastor was hired and the group began meeting weekly for prayer. Out of this small group a vision began forming for Bridgeway—"Connecting people to Christ, each other, and the world." Bridgeway leaders realized that in order to impact lives for Christ, they needed to maintain a culturally relevant worship style.
Contemporary worship places a stronger emphasis on connecting with all people by being culturally relevant.

Bridgeway wishes to use small group mentality in response to growth. Many churches, as they mature and grow experience shortages of space. There are many creative ideas to optimize available spaces, but sometimes even with these innovations churches are forced to relocate. Bridgeway is to be a church of small groups. The same concept behind small groups is brought into the idea of the church at large. As the church grows and reaches its capacity, it will break off and relocate in the community.

Meredith Drive Reformed Church in Des Moines is a strong and vibrant church and has been acting out this way of handling growth. Located on eight acres, this congregation of fifteen hundred has reached the capacity of their facilities. Rather then abandoning their existing building and constructing a new facility, their response has been to start and support new churches. The idea of a church campus has been used to define this new church structure. This way of planting churches has proven successful. The
key is having 50 – 100 members volunteer to help support these new
churches. With a church body already established, newcomers feel more
comfortable. For most new churches funding and support are critical for the
first few years of existence, and with the support of an established church like
Meredith Drive the success rate is much higher.

Through my conversations with Pastor Brian Steenhoek, he sees
Bridgeway reacting in a similar manner. Their facilities therefore need to
provide spaces for seminars and ample office space to possibly act as the
home base for these new churches that would most likely be without their
own structure for some time.

Currently, Bridgeway Church is worshiping at the Ames City Hall
Auditorium. Being a mobile church requires creativity and flexibility. They
have utilized a system from Portable Church Industries (PCI), to reduced set-
up and tear down after Sunday worship. This equipment is designed to make
set up and tear down easier and less time-consuming for the volunteers.
Storage carts house all their sound, nursery, hospitality, and furniture needs.
These carts are stored on a trailer during the week. Although the need for such a system with a building of their own is probably not necessary, the flexibility it allows is going to be important in solving the church's space needs in the future.

**Program Needs**

The church's main program includes the following:

1. **Sanctuary**

   Assuming two Sunday services, the sanctuary for a congregation of eight hundred needs to provide seating for five hundred that allow for fluctuation in service preferences. This area will allow for multiple activities.

2. **Lobbies and lounges**

   Lobbies and lounges need to provide space for social gatherings and casual meetings. They serve to reduce the congestion after services and should be located throughout the building.
3. Nursery facilities

The nurseries should be close to the sanctuary to allow for easy pick up and delivery.

4. Classrooms

Children's education should be able to accommodate large group activities as well as smaller gatherings. These spaces should have a clear identity within the church and be separate from other classroom spaces.

5. Offices

Offices should be arranged around a central gathering area to encourage interaction between church staff. This arrangement also eliminates a hierarchical placement of offices that is often found in more linear hallway arrangements.

6. Kitchen

The kitchen should accommodate multiple serving locations.

7. Gymnasium
The gymnasium should allow for ball sports, banquets, and small gatherings but does not necessarily have to be full-size.
THE DESIGN

Site Selection

Church statistics have shown that one acre of land will sustain one hundred and twenty people in attendance or one hundred and fifty people at its capacity. It is possible to increase this figure to two hundred with additional services and multi-use space. The space needed for Bridgeway at eight hundred in attendance would require six and two-thirds acres; however, the Reformed Church of America encourages new churches to locate on ten acres or more to accommodate any necessary program expansions in the future.

The site I have selected for Bridgeway Church is approximately twelve acres and is located in the Somerset subdivision in Ames, Iowa. When considering a site, I recognized many churches in Ames have located themselves outside the city boundaries. One obvious reason is the availability and cost of land. Also, many communities often resist new
churches within their neighborhoods for fear of increased traffic. Although land surrounding the city is less expensive, I feel that by locating the church outside the city its presence will be lost within the community. It also rules out the ability of anyone without vehicular transportation to attend.

The Somerset location was decided partly because it is one of the few remaining areas of land within Ames that could accommodate a ten-plus acre site. The surrounding areas are largely residential and much development is expected just north of the subdivision. In addition, Somerset offers an increased sense for developing community by adopting some new urbanist concepts that seek to provide a more vibrant place for people to live. By selecting this site as the home for Bridgeway Church it is hoped that its access by public transportation, its potential for pedestrian traffic and its presence within a growing community will allow a young church the best possible chance at reaching the needs of the community.
Site Placement

The property slopes gently to the south and has a dominant east-west axis. To capitalize on solar energy, I decided to arrange the church toward the south and elongated it to increase daylight areas. The main entrance is located in line with the sanctuary and two secondary entrances are off George Washington and a service alley. Parking is often an unsightly necessity with most churches. Unlike thirty years ago when attendance could be estimated taking the number of cars in the parking lot and multiplying by three, today that has dropped to two. Four hundred spaces are necessary for a congregation of eight hundred. To reduce their impact, I have broken them up and have separated them by a pond, which sets off the sanctuary. This pond, in addition to its aesthetic quality, will also serve as a means to retain water from the parking lots and the building.
Site Plan
View from across the pond

Front view
Growth Management

Bridgeway is designed in phases. The first phase is the construction of the church sanctuary and an education wing. Churches seek out a building not only for practical necessities like shelter but also to have a physical presence within their communities. To obtain this identity the church sanctuary, being the most prominent space within the church, should be its original structure. It is common for churches to begin with a multipurpose building such as a gymnasium and later construct the sanctuary, but this often does not create a desirable presence within a community, often resulting in a "dumb box." Although churches choose to construct this structure first because of costs and flexibility, I believe churches are too quick at ruling out a sanctuary for its first structure. Rather they need to create a sanctuary that is more flexible. It is disappointing that a sanctuary, being one of the largest areas of the church and the most expensive, often remains unused outside of Sunday worship.
One concern in building the sanctuary first is the need for the sanctuary to accommodate growth. The first church body might number between two and three hundred, and if that sanctuary is meant for five hundred it might feel rather empty. This is not desirable, especially for new churches. To respond to this, I have arranged the sanctuary in a way that it can be partitioned off through the use of sliding doors. The sanctuary can hold three hundred with the partitions closed and five hundred when they are opened. The side areas can be used for needed additional classroom space in phase one and be un-programmed space in the completed structure. The upper floor to the sanctuary can also be used for additional classroom and lobby space. It also can be easily converted to additional balcony seating if necessary.

The front lobby will allow people to congregate after the service and serve as a buffer from the outdoors to the sanctuary. In addition to this main gathering area, the church provides other areas to gather. A café provides an informal space that overlooks the back lawn. Also, just outside the church
Offices is a small rotunda that is another space suitable for casual conversation. This area also can be used as an alternative space for larger gatherings up to two hundred. The main hallway, which measures 10' wide, allows for conversation without impeding the flow of traffic.

The gymnasium has been separated from the main building, which allows it to function independently from the church. Also, by pulling it away from the main building, it allows a passage to the amphitheatre.

The circulation is simple. One main hallway extends from one end to the other and is interrupted by a gentle curve. This hall is day lit by clearstory windows that help reveal the hall from the exterior.

Outdoor spaces are desired for church functions. The design provides a patio off of the café and an amphitheatre to allow the congregation to enjoy outdoor activities. The main hallway is extended into the site as a path, which gives access to parking and the amphitheatre.
Building Aesthetics

Super-imposing circles centered at key areas of the building create the curvilinear form of the building. These areas include the children’s education and the information center. In response to their critical role, the impact of these ministries is revealed in the building by forming the walls of the sanctuary. Like a drop of water that disturbs a still pond, these areas also radiate and impact their surroundings. The circulation of the church was developed from this simple figure, which implies motion. The soft curving lines of the structure was sought out to provide a more pleasing experience, but more importantly to suggest that the church is not a stagnant institution bent on rituals but one that reflects the dynamic qualities of life.

The church’s low profile helps it settle into the landscape. The height of the sanctuary is intended to draw one's attention, using the side education wings to help set off its soaring roof structure. The gymnasium, being of a larger volume, was placed to the back so it would not compete with the
sanctuary. To reduce its impact further, I chose to lower its floor within the site.
CONCLUSION

Based on the characteristics of contemporary worship reviewed, I believe my proposed design of Bridgway Church fulfills both the space requirements and achieves the desired image of a contemporary church. Its strong axis unifies the entire building and provides a clear set of organization. Its curvilinear form is both easily accessible and well day lit and provides desired areas for casual meetings. I believe the horizontal nature of the building allows it to fit into the “townscape” of Somerset; however, the central sanctuary with its soaring roof identifies it as a place of worship.

The flexibility of the sanctuary makes it possible to serve a variety of activities, and its circular arrangement is suitable for community worship. The rotundas serve to distinguish the various functions within, revealing the multiple parts within the church. In all, the building’s form has a sense of unity and, even though very different from a traditional church building, it respects tradition with its “casual” symmetry and gabled roof.
Looking back, I noticed that locating much of the program on one floor made it challenging to create desirable elevations. Although the sanctuary is to be the focal point, having two levels can allow for opportunities to create more interesting exteriors, while reducing its footprint on the site.

I found church architecture to be challenging and enjoyable and look forward to someday being involved in other church projects.
REFERENCES


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