

# Church Architecture and Sacred Space

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When is a Church more than just a building? The simple answer is always. The more in depth answer lies, as it so often does, in the definition of terms – and a bit of historical perspective. The architecture of Church buildings has always been a mixture of the theological and the practical. The Christians of the first centuries celebrated the Mass in private homes. This was the practical response to persecution in the first three centuries. Once Christianity was no longer outlawed in the Roman Empire (thanks to the Emperor Constantine) magnificent structures were built for the celebration of the sacraments and the worship of God. The theology of the day was a key to the design of these early Churches (especially Basilicas and Cathedrals). The building itself was meant to convey the truths of the faith and to orient the worshippers to the act they were engaged in.

Over time, the significance of the architecture became more advanced; always keeping pace with developments in the understandings Christians had about themselves, about God and the relationship between them. This trend reached its zenith in the construction of the great European Cathedrals which still draw throngs of tourists in our own day.

While the Church has always insisted on a theological grounding for the construction of her buildings, the practical element has never been lost. The reason why there are so many different styles of sacred architecture is that; practically speaking, one made use of the prevailing trends of the day in popular architecture and suited them to the Divine purpose. That Divine purpose is part of what is called the principle of sacramentality. All of creation, properly understood, points to God. Everything in the created order can bring to mind the God whom we worship and adore. Sacred architecture and design is simply one aspect of this larger reality

Today, and particularly here in Montana, one does not simply design grand and glorious structures without counting the cost. Most often one simply makes the best use of the resources available – and often that means adapting the structure one already has.

This does not mean that we simply “muddle through”. There is a wealth of published material on Sacred architecture – from secular and Church sources; as well as guidelines for the decoration or refurbishing of a Church building. In keeping with the practical, while not neglecting the theological, what does a design or refurbishing/decorating seek to accomplish?

1. **Create a “Sacred space”.** The Church should seek to bring the faithful to understand that they are entering a special place. As we no longer are limited to private homes, the building should awaken the people to the fact that they are entering the place where God dwells in a unique manner. The building should not resemble the corner diner, or a multi-purpose center.
2. **Create a sense of Community and Communion.** The reason most Churches have an open floor plan is practical (need to fit everyone in) and theological. At baptism we entered the mystical body of Christ and are now a single Christian family. Our worship must bring us together physically to symbolize the fact that we are all one in Christ

3. **Make room for saints and angels.** When we pray: “Let us join our voices to the choirs of angels in Heaven as we pray...” before the Sanctus (Holy, Holy, Holy Lord...) we are acknowledging that the saints and angels are truly present with us and – more importantly- we are present with them at the altar on High. The Book of Revelation shows us the liturgy being celebrated in Heaven and our worship is one with that eternal celebration. This is why Catholic Churches have traditionally made great use of statues and other forms of art depicting the saints. A mistaken interpretation of the Second Vatican Council led some Churches to remove the art and statues, but thankfully this trend is being reversed.
4. **A place for everything and everything in its place.** Remember when the choir loft was actually used for the choir and musicians? This was done so that the people could join their voices with the seemingly disembodied voices coming from above – again the choirs of angels. Bringing the music ministry to the front of the Church loses this important connection and makes it more of a human performance. Similarly, the raised area around the altar (the sanctuary) has lost its sense of a place of sacrifice set apart from the larger gathering space. The place for the priestly act of offering sacrifice has become crowded by any number of persons/activities. It is a place truly set aside for the miracle of the transformation of bread/wine into body and blood.
5. **Catechesis without words.** In the days where most people were illiterate, art was used to convey the events taking place in the Mass. The saints greeted us at the door; biblical scenes were enacted along the side walls and behind/above the altar were scenes of the crucifixion/resurrection or last judgment. The art conveyed the action for those who could not understand the Latin words. While we no longer use Latin (though we should use some) most people still could use visual aids in understanding the events taking place.
6. **Movement towards the Divine and Eternal.** St. Pius in Billings is a great example of how the design of the Church symbolizes the Christian life. The Baptismal font is near the entrance, the altar is central (yet still set apart) and the doors behind the altar lead to the cemetery. Just as one moves physically through the building one is reminded of the Christian journey through life.

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