

Learning from the Past

Todd Flowerday's "Evolving Church Architecture and EACW" in the May issue of *E&A Letter* did an excellent job at putting the current period of transition in church architecture into proper perspective, for which the United States bishops' document, *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, can only take partial credit (or blame). But I do have to question John Voosen's (presumably rhetorical) questions, which Mr. Flowerday quoted. The questions imply that the only reason for building churches the way they were built in the past is "for a taste of nostalgia." This may be selling older forms of church architecture short.

My first experiences with church architecture were based on the well-known book by Bruggink and Droppers, *Christ and Architecture*. From this book, I learned the importance of integrity in the design of churches. I would agree that "faking" materials for the sake of pure imitation of older styles of architecture is hardly appropriate for church building. But I suspect that it is more than marble and stained glass that creates a feeling of well-being for many Catholics when they visit older churches. I was recently fortunate enough to gain further insight into what the real appeal of these churches might be.

I had been asked to design a new Catholic

church in a suburban area of upstate New York. The pastor of this church was a major catalyst for the new church. He was determined that it not be yet another example of what he called "living rooms for worship," an unfortunate metaphor used by many of the early members of the 20th century liturgical renewal when addressing the need for a new architecture for renewed rites. About halfway through the design phase, his father passed away. The funeral was held in the beautiful old church where this pastor had been raised in the faith. He began his eulogy of his father by talking about this building. In a poetic fashion, he recalled his first memories of this building—of the ornate pew ends that seemed like castle walls to a small boy, of the magnificent stained glass windows that told so many stories of the saints, of the beautiful sound of the pipe organ echoing through the space. These were his first religious experiences. Year after year he attended this church, and as he grew older, there was always more to appreciate—the craftsmanship, the paintings, the beauty of sunlight colored by the stained glass and, eventually, the beautiful mystery of the liturgy itself. It became for him a unique and special place, unlike any other with which he came into contact on a weekly basis.

From these words, I began to understand his vision for the new church building. He works very hard to make the liturgy

as accessible as possible to young children, as I witnessed when he knelt down to distribute communion to second and third graders at a school Mass. He wants their place of worship to have as much significance to them as his had to him. If this place of worship looks like a large version of their own living room or a hotel conference room or any other commercial space, then it will have no meaning of its own. No one would deny that what happens in the worship space is the most critical component of the worship experience. But, as any good architect will tell you, the quality of a space can either add to or take away from whatever takes place in that space.

For this client, no part of the experience is too insignificant to ignore. From the setting of the new building on the site, to the transition from the parking areas, to the quality of the gathering space, to the place for baptism, to the worship space itself, each aspect has been carefully considered and conceived to support the celebration of the liturgical rites *as we now celebrate them*. In no way is any of this meant to be a throwback to old forms of architecture for nostalgia's sake. Elements and materials that worked before are only incorporated into this new building if they effectively create a shelter and setting for the renewed liturgy. The pastor has asked me to question every part of "traditional"

church architecture to see how it served the liturgy of its time, and then to reinterpret these elements in a manner appropriate for a contemporary congregation celebrating its rites as revised by the Second Vatican Council. What has resulted from this process is a building that makes no attempt to mimic the style of any particular period of architecture, but is based on principles ranging from those of the early Christian churches to elements of Gothic design. By studying the philosophies behind earlier forms of architecture, we hope to recreate the spirit that they embodied so that today's young Catholics will have a complete and experience of the power of our rites.

Mr. Flowerday challenges communities who take liturgy seriously to test new architectural forms. I agree wholeheartedly. And yet, let us not overlook the potential lessons to be learned from the past. Our experiment has begun. Only time will reveal its effectiveness.

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What Do You Think?
E&A Letter welcomes your thoughts on issues regarding church architecture and art. The "Viewpoint" column can accommodate approximately 750 words. Write or e-mail David Philippart, editor, LTP, 1800 N. Hermitage Ave., Chicago IL 60622-1101; dphilipp@ltp.org.