

Edifice complex? Sublime architecture: Sublime architecture

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 15, 2004](#) issue

Scripture assures us that “we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” But pastors and lay leaders end up spending a lot of time fussing with the church structures—the “physical plant,” as we have learned to call it. Designing, building and maintaining structures have occupied the church’s attention, inspired its imagination, and called forth labor and sacrifice perhaps more than any other set of tasks.

Most of us feel a little guilty about that overwhelming commitment to buildings, our “edifice complex.” We tell people over and over that the building is not the church; the people are the church, the *ekklesia*, the called-out, beloved community. We say that we could do just fine without the building, in fact might even be freed up to be a more faithful church if we didn’t have to maintain the building. People listen to us respectfully but remain unconvinced.

Some of the worst moments and most painful conflicts occur because of buildings. Do we redecorate, and how? Expand, renovate or reconfigure? Replace carpet? Tear down and start again? Shutter, sell and close? Pity the pastor who does not appreciate the importance of the building, and the significance the church’s people attach to it.

Roman Catholics and Episcopalians don’t seem to have the same hang-ups about buildings that we descendants of the Puritans do. We have something of a love-hate relationship with our real estate, and we’re pretty sure that of all the idolatries the church is prone to, the idolizing of one’s building is the worst. A Calvinist visiting St. Peter’s in Rome experiences a spiritual crisis, a wrenching conflict between an appreciation of all the beauty and a suspicion that someone made a very big mistake here.

Church buildings, regardless of their age, style and size, say something about what happens in them and also around them. I heard Jean Bethke Elshtain say one time

that the mere existence of a church building, even a closed one, has a measurably healthy affect on its community. Roger Kennedy, in his handsome book *American Churches*, writes that church buildings are a reminder of an “alternate way of stating reality.” I’m reminded of that observation every day when I report for work in an English Gothic cathedral-type building nestled between skyscrapers, four-star hotels and expensive department stores.

Pastors, church leaders, and anyone who thinks and cares about churches, cities and neighborhoods will profit from [Gretchen Buggeln’s reflections](#) on four recent books on church architecture. I will suggest one more book: Ross King’s *Brunelleschi’s Dome*, the fascinating story of one of the world’s artistic and engineering miracles, the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence, completed in 1436. The architecture is so sublime that Michelangelo arranged to be buried just inside the front door of Florence’s Santa Croce so that on resurrection day the first sight he saw would be Filippo Brunelleschi’s dome.