

Truth in beautiful spaces

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [February 5, 2014](#) issue



Fulda, Germany, cathedral nave. [Some rights reserved](#) by [barnyz](#)

I was sitting with my family in the pews of a stunning Romanesque sanctuary on Christmas Eve. A very large mosaic of the transfigured Christ hovered above the chancel. The candlelight reflected on our faces and the stone walls arched far above us as we sang “Silent Night.”

As I sat I wondered—when did we stop taking church architecture seriously? It’s almost impossible today to get a serious sanctuary building project off the ground. Instead we’ve littered the American spiritual landscape with big-box “worship centers,” 50-year-old A-frames with felt banners scarring the walls, and 200-year-old Puritan wannabe churches with peeling paint and bells that no longer work. But if you ask about this—and I have—someone will shrug and say, “It’s just a building.”

Christians used to devote themselves to church building projects that lasted well over a hundred years. Everyone once thought that was a grand idea. Now they’re

just buildings.

Do we think this way because the church has become more conscious of the poor and feels horrible about spending money on bricks and mortar? I would love to think that's the reason, but I doubt it. When a congregation builds an inexpensive warehouse worship center it's usually not so they can give millions more to missions.

Is the problem that we just can't afford beautiful sanctuaries? Maybe, but I am amazed at how much a congregation spends on expensive sound equipment, choir tours through Europe, state-of-the-art websites, church schools and multiple pastors. Our treasure has always followed our heart.

Here's another explanation. We all learned the childhood lesson that a church is not a building or a steeple, but open the doors and you'll see all the people. At least this explanation is grounded in a theological conviction that the church is composed of the diverse body of Christ.

My last idea: Christianity has a historic fascination with the early church and those who huddled together in homes and catacombs. But this wasn't a choice the church made. Private homes and catacombs were all that was left for the persecuted church. As soon as it was legalized the church immediately used Roman basilicas for its worship.

The fourth-century basilica was just a public meeting hall before the church baptized it. The place where the magistrate sat became the bishop's chair, the table on which official imperial business was conducted became the table of the Lord, and the elders began to sit around the table where the city leaders used to sit as jurors. It was once a non-Christian public building. Then it became an ancient big-box worship center. No art, no religious architecture and no effort at beauty.

Why, in the centuries that followed, did we start to think more seriously about sanctuaries as places designed to reveal God's holiness? Why did the church spend money as a patron of religious arts, and why did we invent the organ and go crazy about music? Why did we develop Gothic cathedrals in the 12th century? Why did frontier churches in America carefully construct buildings that reflected their simple but sturdy gospel? Maybe it's because the soul of the church yearned for more than a utilitarian theater or lecture hall. We wanted sacred space.

I'm not advocating for a return to expensive building programs. I understand that whatever it is that makes space sacred is very dependent on cultural context. But it isn't enough to worship simply by talking about the gospel. Even if the church is meeting in a high school gymnasium, there has to be some encounter with beauty because it can never be separated from truth.

"One thing have I desired of the Lord, . . ." David said, "that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all of the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple" (Ps. 27:4, KJV). There it is—sacred truth and beauty are one thing.

Our gospel is not just more words about God. Truth has a twin sister called beauty who beckons us to bow the knee. This beauty may be seen through the icons on the walls of an Orthodox church in Eastern Europe, or the stark white walls and high pulpit of a Congregational church in New England, or the palm leaves intricately woven to form the roof of a sanctuary without walls in the Amazon rainforest. But it all helps worshipers "behold," which is one of the angels' favorite words. It doesn't have to cost much; it just has to attempt the beauty of holiness.

The sanctuary is the place where people gather week after week to remember that the holy is also in the places of their lives that are not so beautiful. It is where they bury their parents and spouses, baptize their babies and walk beautiful daughters down the aisle to a groom wearing a naive grin. Pastors sit alone in this sanctuary after a hard visit to a nursing home and ponder what God is doing in the lives of the congregation he loves. All of it is a way of beholding the sacredness of life. To behold such holy work we need holy spaces.