

Church Architecture & Restoration Issue

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The entry to the Parish House at Calvary Church, Pittsburgh, was moved from its original relatively remote and inaccessible location (left) by using a basement window (center). The new entrance is more conveniently located at grade. (Photos courtesy of The Design Alliance Architects; photo at right by Ed Massery)

From Vision to Realization

Careful planning, continuous communication are keys to church restoration projects

By Christie Kopitzke

Undertaking a major construction or renovation project may be one of the most intimidating, but ultimately rewarding journeys for a congregation. Episcopal churches can benefit from their institutional familiarity with self-study and

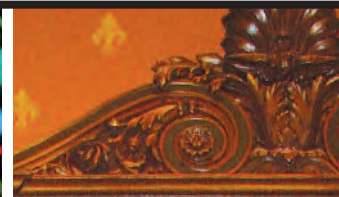
parish profile exercises when planning for such a venture. The physical requirements of the project, coupled with an understanding of the spiritual needs and aspirations of the church's membership, serves as the lynchpin of the enterprise.

Though most congregations are best

served by involving a design professional early in the planning stages, there are several steps that can, and perhaps should, precede consultation with an architect:

- Articulate the expectation of capital improvements. When the scope of

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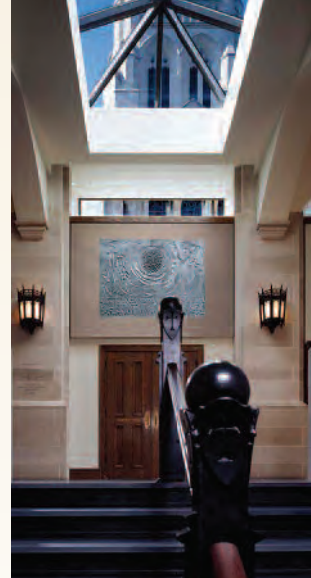
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The new reception area (left) uses an atrium to open up space at Calvary's parish house, while the approach to the parish hall (right) includes a skylight. Ed Massery photos

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work becomes more significant than a handful of necessary repairs or additions, the vestry must make the congregation aware that a substantial project is on the horizon. A wealth of detail is not required at this point, but the recognition that it is in the offing — months, or even a year or two ahead of formal preparations — begins to establish the environment in which it will occur.

- Identify a vision and/or a building committee. The committee should encompass a core group of six to 10

people who should be able to cooperate and achieve consensus. In some cases, it may be advisable for one group to identify the needs of the church, and then turn the work of oversight to a separate building committee.

- Review the mission statement, if the church has one. Keep it in mind and perform an internal needs analysis by gathering a range of input from individuals, groups and programs within the parish, and from the larger community it serves. Expressing what the church

presently does and what it wants to do, according to Brian Tempas, AIA, of Cunningham Group Architecture of Minneapolis, is a necessary prerequisite to the discussion about "how the facility can complement [those aims] and enable them to be successful."

- Place the project into local context. This also may be a time to consider the church's relationship to the community and neighborhood in terms of sustainability and local enrichment. Begin to think about whether it is

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The new elevator at Calvary's parish house uses forms and materials appropriate for its setting.

important that the project includes a commitment to local labor and material suppliers. Should preference in the work be given to re-use of material that has not yet exhausted its useable life over installation of new materials?

- Evaluate the financial position. A realistic appraisal of present and future capital, debt and potential sources of funds (including grants) provides a basis for decision making once architectural planning moves forward. Determine how well the existing fund-raising apparatus meets the anticipated need, and investigate new resources through meetings with treasurers, finance committee, bankers, accountants, and other financial, investment and/or fund raising professionals.

- Consider and establish new lines of communication. Transformation of a church building can be an intensely personal experience for those involved. Ensuring that all feel included and respected lays groundwork for realistic expectations and collaborative, ongoing participation. It is probable that existing means of communication will need to be augmented in order to achieve and maintain the degree of involvement required through the project's full lifespan. John R. Dale, AIA, of Harley Ellis Devereaux's Los Angeles office, recommends, for example, planning to video record public meetings and workshops. This creates a complete record of events.

Initial consultation with an architect may take several forms.

- A design professional within the congregation may be able to provide some early guidance, through and beyond the preliminary steps discussed above.
- An architect with whom the church may have an established working relation-

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ship should be consulted and provided the opportunity to apply for consideration.

- A call may be issued to up to a dozen firms to submit credentials, from which three or four may be selected to interview and, in due course, submit proposals.

- Funds may be raised specifically to engage a short list of architects to create limited concept drawings based upon the internal needs analysis and opening discussions with the building committee.

Any or all of these approaches pave the way toward selection of the project architect, a relationship that may be a commitment of years, or even decades, in the case of an extensive or multi-phased project.

Making that choice often involves the building committee touring other churches or public facilities that one or two "finalist" firms have designed, and having candid conversations with references. A firm under final consideration may not have specialized in church architecture, or may not have had the opportunity to design for a church. More crucial qualifications than previous church experience are that the individuals involved have skills at building consensus, respecting the sacredness of the spaces involved, and an ability to listen and to educate.

The benefits of choosing a design professional prior to investing a great deal of energy and, perhaps, anxiety, on specific design plans and expectations are considerable. "Turning stones" and answering questions is part of the architect's training, offers David Ross, AIA, of The



Exterior and interior views of the Chapel of the Holy Spirit at Breck School, Golden Valley, Minn. The design was honored by the American Institute of Architects.

Photos courtesy of Cuningham Group

Design Alliance Architects of Pittsburgh. Assumptions, both positive and negative, about what will be required of the forthcoming work, may prove groundless upon consultation with an expert.

Finally, the importance of creating a master plan that encompasses all aspects of the big picture, while also breaking it into smaller phases, cannot be understated. Carefully shepherding the creation of such a plan can make it

possible for even the most extensive work to be realized in orderly, well-funded stages. Jill Gotthelf, an associate at Walter Sedovic Architects in New York City, and a veteran of the 18-year restoration of a 19th-century Manhattan synagogue, points out that this is the formula that grant-making organizations like to see, lightening the financial burden on the congregation.

The planning process crystallizes and elevates, beacon-like, the inspira-

tion essential for carrying each of those affected by the work through the many challenges on the path to its realization. It offers the opportunity to think not just about what comforts or economies can be realized in the immediate term, but to both honor the history and shape the legacy of the tangible and spiritual space. □

Christie Kopitzke is a free-lance writer who lives in Racine, Wis.

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