ABSTRACT

Worship of all forms has been a part of culture for centuries. Clearly distinguishing between spaces of the profane and the sacred shapes the success of the churches. Tailoring such an experience to satisfy a multitude of people with varying backgrounds and points of view is a complex task, but even more so a rewarding challenge. Implementing specific qualities of light, material, scale, and structure, this new design of both the site and buildings of Faith Lutheran Church comes to fruition to create a sacred atmosphere, while combining a traditional practice with a contemporary form.

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At the western edge of Avon, Indiana lies 35 acres of rolling fields, lined with trees bordering three of four sides of the property, dotted with a patch of protected wetlands. Soon, this site will become the new home of Faith Lutheran Church, just one of many churches within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America synod. With a membership currently of around 200 people, the church desires to continually expand over the next 25 years into a new facility on this purchased site, attracting not only new members of the church, but also members of the Indianapolis community. To complete this task of designing a new building, I conducted research to expand my knowledge of not only my field of architecture, but more the specific distinction between sacred space versus profane space.

Spaces of the sacred and profane are qualitatively different. Research for the design of Faith Lutheran Church focused on what specific elements enhance the quality of an intimate and engaging worship experience, presenting an automatic comparison to profane spaces. Precedent studies were the bulk of this research. Alvar Aalto and Tadao Ando, two architects known for their sacred spaces, designed many buildings that were helpful in determining distinct characteristics of successful places of worship. Helpful features in Aalto’s designs for my own church complex included separate buildings for different functions and avoidance of distracting details in his Malm Funeral Chapels, the elevated site for his Lahti Church, the large windows in the Seinäjoki Church, and the three foci for the triad motif in the interior of the Church of the Three Crosses.

One method of research conducted was first-hand experiences in 5 of Columbus, Indiana’s churches (Grace Lutheran Church, First Baptist Church, North Christian
Church, St. Bartholomew’s Catholic Church, and St. Peter’s Lutheran Church). Such experiences helped to determine what characteristics in these circumstances helped attract interest and spiritual feeling. Some successful details noted to include in my design were a double door entry, light-colored materials, handicap accessibility, strategic daylighting, and a large narthex. These first-hand experiences were vital for an in-depth understanding of worship facility elements.

Precedent studies continued with many of Ando’s works. The Church on the Water has a strong relationship to nature, a geometric order, and lots of glazing to let in natural light. Other characteristics include framed vistas and a water court in his Pulitzer Museum, and a contrast between voids and solids in his Church of the Light. Other precedents included Jorn Utzon’s Baagsvard Church, with its white prefab concrete panels, white glazed tiles that reflect light, connecting pathways among the different pavilions, white light in the sanctuary that creates the feeling of spiritual elevation, and the elevated, billowy, and sloped sanctuary ceiling.

Religious buildings are metaphors—extensions of religious belief that have a powerful impact on the worship experience. Architectural appeal for all ages and backgrounds is important in facilitating each individual’s vision of their ideal church, where they can feel the most connected to their spirituality. According to Mircea Eliade, religious historian, people are looking for both stimulating and familiar architecture in a place of worship. Keeping this in mind, the new design of Faith Lutheran Church integrates traditional functions and characteristics with a contemporary form.

The site design enhances the focus and hierarchy of certain areas on the 35-acre site. A grid based on the angle of the road and the angle of the western tree line
forms an outline for many of the drives, buildings, and landscaping. Upon arrival, the main entrance takes you between two hills, each about 15 feet tall, creating a threshold between profane and more sacred worlds. When turning the first corner, immediately two straight rows of trees frame a view directly to the front and center of the sanctuary’s altar wall. Here the retention pond is visible as well. The closer in proximity the landscaping and this retention pond get to the church buildings, the more they conform to the grid, with the exception of the trees lining the drives which visually direct the cars from the street to one of three parking lots.

Two phases of construction would be undertaken over the next 25 years, based on funding and projected need. The first phase is thought to include elements to simply establish the congregation and draw people to a more permanent location. The fellowship building would be constructed first in an attempt to establish a preliminary worship facility. Also, a drive and parking would connect the building to the street to the south. To draw people to the site from the nearby Indianapolis community, a baseball diamond and a football field, along with more parking, would be added for use by local schools and sports teams. Landscaping and general infrastructure, such as water and sewer utilities, would also be extended all at once to the various building locations. When sufficient funds were raised, phase two would be developed. Phase two would include the sanctuary building, the educational and administration building, and the remaining parking lot and landscaping, as seen in the site plan.

In addition, other unique components enhance a user’s experience on the site. A preexisting component of the site is the area of wetlands to the north. This area is protected by the federal government through the Clean Water Act, and also further
controlled by some state and local regulations. Wetlands are nature’s water filters that help to reduce and prevent flooding. In this way, they are a vital connection between resources of both land and water. Although not always taken into consideration, preserving wetlands is an essential responsibility of citizenship. These valuable areas are home to a multitude of wildlife and many unique plant species. To increase knowledge and support of wetland protection, our site’s wetlands can serve as an educational destination for nearby schools. A path and small platform area through these wetlands will facilitate active, in-nature education.

Just to the east of these wetlands is a small apple orchard, following the site grid, which could be used for various ministries such as the food pantry. Visible on much of the site, a walking path borders the main elements, passing by the community ball fields, then adjacent to the fire pit and shelter, the wetlands, the church buildings, and over the two hills to either side of the road below. Smaller paths also reach to the edge of the retention pond, and in through small garden areas among the three buildings.

The sanctuary, the most sacred building on the site, was the primary focus of my design project. As previously mentioned, the trees frame the view of the sanctuary exterior upon entering the site, similar to the framed vistas of Tadao Ando’s Pulitzer Art Museum. This first impression exhibits the building’s function with a large cross-shaped void in the façade, framed by expansive strip windows on both sides. The white concrete panels, attached to a steel structural frame, and the elevated site, contrast appropriately with surroundings, signifying a place of importance and sacredness. This resembles the method used in the Baagsvard Church, where Jorn Utzon used prefabricated concrete panels and white light to give the feeling of being elevated.
Similarly, both the Baagsvard Church and Faith Lutheran Church designs employ a sloped sanctuary ceiling evident from the exterior.

The next direct view of the church shows the entrance, which engages automobile traffic with an extended overhang that doubles as an exterior balcony for the upper level. The overhang is the first step in moving to the most sacred spaces of all. The first set of doors at the lower level leads to the functional spaces (welcome center, bathrooms, coat racks, storage, and mechanical space). These spaces were designed to be on the lower level so as not to distract from the reverent ambiance of the sanctuary. A long ramp, the second transition toward the most sacred space, ascends to the upper level narthex, with an increasing amount of daylight following the circulation path upward. The space, directly adjacent to the ramp is open to the upper level, with the material on the floor below consisting of a tiled mosaic to further suggest and confirm the purpose of the space above, while inspiring people’s curiosity. The open space also allows for a controlled amount of daylight to penetrate the lower level. The series of transitions from street, through the lower level, to the upper level, create a hierarchical gradient, leading up to the most significant space above.

Ascending the ramp to the narthex and sanctuary on the upper level, the amount of daylight and openness of the space increases. At the top of the ramp, the first dominant visual object is the set of double sanctuary doors, specially designed to signify the sacredness of the interior. These wood doors have repeated horizontal glass inserts, forming the shape of a cross, which allow for fractional views inside the sanctuary. When the doors open, the wooden cross over the altar, highlighted with a frame of translucent glass and strategically positioned skylights, hangs in the front of the
sanctuary as the apex of the transitional experience into this sacred place.

Inside the sanctuary, centered on the middle aisle, this wooden cross hangs, as it has and always will in Faith Lutheran Church, bringing the symbols of the past into the building of the future. A cross-shaped translucent piece of glass rests in the wall directly behind it, while the altar is directly below. Noticeable from the entry, wooden baffles of varying sizes, suspended from the sloping ceiling above the pews, reflect both light and sound. These baffles, similar to the “acoustic clouds” in The Greater Boston Vineyard Church in Massachusetts reflect daylight from the skylights onto the ceiling above, and then into the large space below, illuminating with more ambient light than direct light. The skylights are strategically placed to create a gradient of daylight, with the brightest light shining on the suspended cross at the front, visually directing the focus of the congregation. Softer, more colorful light washes over the side areas through tall stained glass panels, which span between angled white concrete panels that extend to the height of the sloped ceiling. These panels not only penetrate the interior of the sanctuary, but also extend through the contemplation hallways on the perimeter of the building, as well as to the landscaped spaces on the exterior to capture and direct the diffused light to the interior. The areas on the sides of the sanctuary, where these panels project, house the choir on the left and the musical equipment on the right. Other elements in the front include the pulpit to the right of the altar, and the existing baptismal font to the left of the altar. The walls behind conceal a ramp for handicap accessibility and set of stairs to account for the two-foot elevation change inside the sanctuary itself. When seated in the pews, this difference is evident because of the slope of the floor. The gradual slope better accommodates people of all heights,
with better views to the front. With the summit of the ceiling rising to 40 feet in the front of the sanctuary, the intermediate walls which conceal the circulation to the altar stand at only 20 feet, to reduce the scale of the space and focus the congregation’s attention toward the cross and altar.

With the challenges of the wide span of over 100 feet across the sanctuary came the opportunity of using steel, a more contemporary material that contrasts with traditional churches of wood. A series of steel trusses, spaced every 8 feet, carry the ceiling of the sanctuary. This system connects to the curtain wall on the south and southeast walls, with lightweight concrete panels and strip windows attached to a steel frame. The spaces of the building excluding the sanctuary and south walls are standard stick frame construction because of the much shorter spans and economic sense. The materiality of the sanctuary are a burgundy carpet for the floor and darker wood for the baffles, pews, and other details to contrast with the white walls at the front, focusing attention and giving warmer atmosphere.

A cry room in the back of the sanctuary has direct visual access when children are being fussy, and a sacristy with direct access to the front of the sanctuary through large light-flooded contemplation hallways that extend around the perimeter of the sanctuary level. This extensive hallway, with direct views to the intimate landscape outside, allows for a peaceful place to retreat for some time to reflect and pray. Here one can see again the large angled panels that penetrate from the exterior into the sanctuary, allowing light to enter.

The two subsidiary buildings on either side of the main sanctuary building house the educational and office spaces to the southwest, and the fellowship spaces to
the northeast. Shown in the supplemental plans, the building to the southwest has a designated area upon entry for office and administration spaces, followed by a large storage space, which is adjacent to the food pantry and ministries space. This space includes a separate entry from the exterior, for convenient access for the community. The north part of the building consists of a large space divisible by moving partitions, sizeable bathrooms, and a mechanical space. Also, a smaller parking lot is in close proximity to the administration area. The other building to the northeast of the sanctuary building centers around the fellowship hall. The spaces that operate in conjunction with it are the kitchen, bathrooms, mechanical and storage, and a large exterior porch for nicer weather. These two buildings support the main function of the congregation, enhancing the complete experience of congregation members.

"History suggests that times of transition, such as moving into a new century, are often accompanied by an atmosphere of uncertainty that can foster a renewed search for the sacred." Situations in both the world and personal lives can boost attendance in worship facilities. It is hard to always tell what draws people to church. Current events such as conflict in the Middle East, rising gas prices, and increasing unemployment in an uncertain economy are just a sample of the global problems that could encourage a heightened search for stability and divine comfort.

As history has shown, periods of uncertainty emerge cyclically. Spiritual desire, coupled with the appeal of this stimulating architecture will be keys to the success of this particular place of worship. With this new, inspiring design and an anticipated increase in attendees, Faith Lutheran Church will grow to have a greater impact on the world through its witnessing and through its notable architecture.
WORKS CITED


JOURNEY OF Faith
SANCTUARY INTERIOR RENDERING