Pitching God's Tent

The first chapter of John's gospel is one of the great philosophical formulations of the Christian faith. It is also our biblical mandate for taking church architecture seriously. When John speaks of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:14), he is using an architectural metaphor: literally, God pitches God's tent among us. The incarnation is not simply an idea, but God's way of being in the world. Our worship spaces have always functioned to structure a central dimension of the way in which we are the Body of Christ. It has been said that we shape our buildings; then they shape us.

Must the Building Always Win?

Architects have a saying: "The building will always win." Perhaps this is an overstatement, but the truth in it is apparent as we strive to achieve faithful and vibrant worship. Try being an hospitable community in a space with no area to greet people. Try to inspire a sense of praise and thanksgiving in dull surroundings. Try making a joyful noise in an acoustically dead space. Try forming a biblically literate people, for whom the Story is deeply rooted in their identity, in a space devoid of the classic symbols of the faith (e.g. the Book, the table, the font). Try to "move" people, emotionally and physically (e.g. move to the music, greet one another with the peace of Christ, go forward for communion or laying on of hands), in tightly packed pews with narrow aisles.

From Domus Dei to domus ecclesia

Many of our spaces, old and new, need to be re-examined and renovated with a view to the demands of worship in a contemporary context.

Over 30 years ago Vatican II spoke of the need for "full, conscious, active participation" in worship, but many of our worship spaces continue to be structured like drab movie theatres, turning congregations into passive audiences and worship leaders into performers. One congregation took out a few pews at the back for gathering before and after worship and found this made their space much more welcoming. Another took out a few pews at the front, which enlivened their celebration of the sacraments and their ministry of laying on of hands with prayer. Still another ripped up the carpet to find that the hardwood floor provided the needed sounding board to reinvigorate their congregational singing. Flexible seating and furnishings are proven means of opening up a host of "moving" possibilities in contemporary worship spaces. Our Domus Dei (house of God) needs to become a domus ecclesia (house of the church, the gathering), where supporting the action of the people's work in worship is the priority.

Reflect on your domus ecclesia. View and discuss the United Church video on church architecture, Places of Worship (available through AVEL and detailed in the ad at left). Walk around your worship space with your worship team or committee. Ask yourselves, What do we do here? What does this place say about who we are? What kinds of people are being formed by this space?