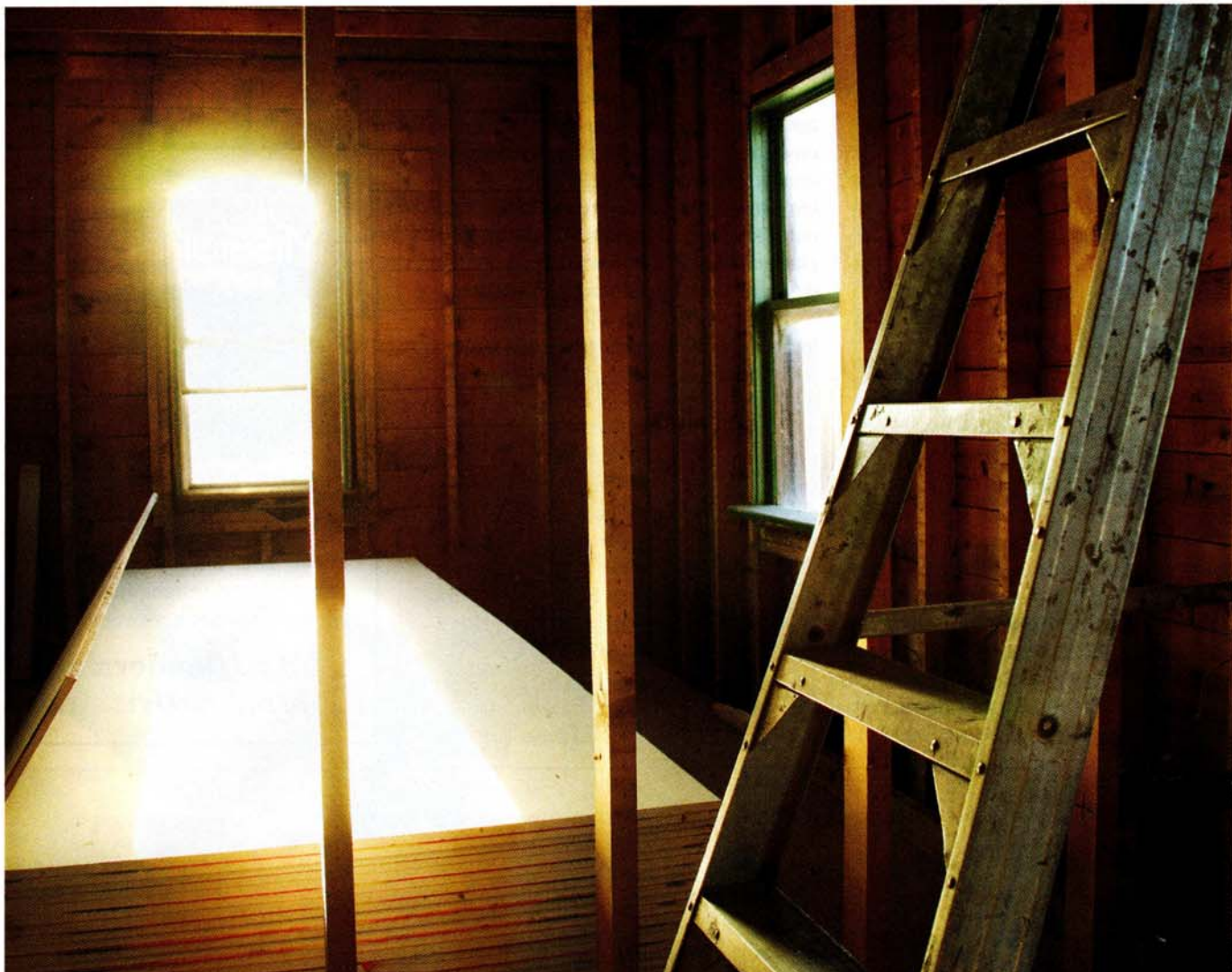


# Church Makeover



## PLAN A PROJECT WITH IMPACT

BY TARA BEECHAM



**Great renovations and additions don't happen by accident. Here's what experts have to say about making the most of your makeover opportunity.**

Most renovations and expansions are designed to meet the obvious needs: create more space, update the look, and fix what's broken. Too often, though, church leaders stop there, and miss the opportunity to make strategic plans with their makeover that will propel their ministries to new levels.

We talked to several prominent church architects, and asked them to address the issue of planning a makeover project. These experts have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly in church designs, and are well qualified to lead you through a renovation project that is likely to exceed your initial expectations.

Our experts are Jim Couchenour, director of marketing and ministry services for Cogan, based in North Lima, Ohio; David F. Shultz, president and principal architect of David F. Schultz and Associates in Barrington, Illinois; and Buddy Siebenlist, president of Siebenlist Architects in Tyler, Texas.

**What should change about the way churches and architects approach most makeover projects?**

**Couchenour:** One of the best ways architecture can change is to first of all determine the client. Are we designing a facility primarily for people within the church, or for people outside of the church? It comes down to the DNA of that church. Is that church intent on reaching the unchurched, or intent on discipling the people already in the church?

**Shultz:** I would listen to what the church wants the space to do. Do →



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you want flexibility? Is circulation working correctly? Are people entering in the right spot? We've done three projects now where we've turned the inside of a church around. I strongly recommend using an architect that really understands the rich palate of different church traditions and the aspects that are cutting edge. Churches are far behind recognizing the paradigm shift.

### **When renovating, how much importance should a church place on updating its architecture to remain relevant?**

**Siebenlist:** We believe that church architecture is relevant only when it is done in truth. In other words, the most effective church design is one that truly represents the church body within. Each church is unique, and one of the most effective tools in outreach is a design that communicates the character and purpose of its members.

**Couchenour:** Church leaders will often go to other churches to see what they did. That only works if that other

church is called to do what you do. If it's reaching unchurched people in the community, then I would look at places where unchurched people in the community hang out.

With my church, we went into the community to places people go to hang out. What is this telling us about places people like to hang out in our community? Then we asked, "How can we translate this into what we do with our building renovation?" We want to make our building as familiar and comfortable as possible to people who are unchurched in the community.

### **What are some important design elements that every church should consider in its makeover plans?**

**Shultz:** A lot of our clients are excited about a "third gathering space." You've got a narthex space, a worship space, and the "third room." It's a place for people to connect.

We try to keep our buildings all one floor. Accessibility is essential, espe-

cially as the baby boomers are aging.

Children's ministry should be the finest facilities in any building. Often they are just classrooms. Provide smaller education facilities for special needs children. Provide facilities for the community.

I dislike how segregated we are. We're so unwilling to look at different ways of worship. When we bring together multicultural groups, we need to incorporate things they bring.

**Couchenour:** One of the best things churches can do is to provide multiple spaces for people to belong. So often we have felt we need to get people into the main auditorium. Maybe in your foyer you have plasma screens, with the service being shown on the screen. Maybe people want to experience the service at a table with three or four other people.

I'd provide gathering spaces. I would also have some element of food as part of the gathering time. I think that's a really important element these days to help people belong and connect with each other.

Themed environments are becoming much more popular both for children's areas as well as adults. There is a heavy emphasis on audio, visuals, and lighting to define spaces now.

I would use a lot of artwork, and I would try to use artwork created by people in the community.

**Siebenlist:** Of course it depends on the particular church, but flexibility, adaptability, and expandability are features with underestimated importance. Churches are dynamic, changing, living organizations. The challenge is predicting the dynamics so a facility that can adapt in multiple ways will serve the church more cost-effectively.

### **Many new churches lack the architectural elements that traditionally identified churches. What are churches doing today to identify themselves?**

**Couchenour:** Recently, the church sign has become very important because now brand identity is important. Rather than the building embodying who the



church is, the sign incorporates that with the color and logos.

For many people, their first impression of a church is the church's website. The brand identity comes through the church website, and that carries over into church signage when they get into the building. We try to get churches to think in terms of ministry space instead

of the building and physical space and how that relates to brand identity. Virtual space that people experience becomes very real to them.

**Shultz:** We try to practice something called visual theology. A church we did in Michigan—Pilgrim Congregational Church—wanted the name "Pilgrim" reflected. We made a bow-shaped →



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[exterior] to the church itself. It's those kind of things that bring people back for more.

**Siebenlist:** This is typically answered by the ministry goals of the particular church and its ministry leadership. The focal point or emphasis is usually the presentation of the service itself—the sermon, video, music, production on stage, etc. In this case, church design should enhance the production acoustically, with dramatic lighting, and so on. Traditional items like stained glass and ornate detailing can still be used, if they are not distracting to the stage production.

**In planning a renovation, how much emphasis should church leaders place on including multipurpose space?**

**Siebenlist:** Multipurpose design is simply a requirement for church facilities today. Effective design of these spaces will allow the ambience of the space to transform along with the configuration. This enables a multipurpose space to support a worship service with reverence and inspiration, and later be transformed to equally support a fellowship dinner.

**What can be done about the challenges of trying to get so much use out of one multipurpose space?**

**Couchenour:** Use changeable signage on the outside of the room. There are a few ways to do this: plastic hard copy, or more high-tech using a digital screen. Be as portable as possible, using portable walls, portable storage containers, and portable stages.

Another thing is raised flooring—you can put all the mechanical systems and electrical systems under the raised floor. You can move the furniture and walls without having to get into electrical systems and ventilating systems and things like that.

**When planning a renovation, cost is always a factor. What can churches do to meet their project objectives at the lowest possible costs?**

**Couchenour:** Look for ways to expand your ministry space. Can you add another worship service? Can you add a video venue to your gymnasium? Churches don't always ask, "Have we been as creative as possible in coming up with other ways to add additional ministry space?" If they need more



space for services, have they looked at the option of multiple services?

Also, churches do not always understand the actual cost in terms of the renovation and the inflationary cost. Allow for the unknown cost for the ministry building. Some churches say, "Well, let's add another story to the existing building." But the existing building can only do that if it was designed to carry that load.

**Schultz:** Retrofit costs begin to add up, at least in the Midwest and on the East Coast. Many municipalities in the Chicago area now require sprinklers in residences. So be prepared to budget appropriately, and work with an architect who knows these things. Other than a hospital, a church is the most specialized building there is. ◻

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