



MULTI-PURPOSE, FUNDAMENTALLY

By Buddy Siebenlist

Photos courtesy of Siebenlist Architects

Do you remember when you first began to hear the term “multi-purpose” used in discussions about your church? Do you remember when multi-purpose sounded like a high-tech buzz word used by savvy professionals, or experienced pastors and church leaders? Do you remember when the concept of multi-purpose space and/or buildings was so exciting because of all the potential it represented for your church?

If so, if you can hearken back that far in time, you may not want to admit it, because it dates us both.

I remember when the mere notion of multi-purpose use for churches seemed like it would revolutionize the way church sites and campuses are developed. While I’m not sure how long ago that was, I do remember when the concept of multi-purpose use was at the vanguard of church design and operation...because it still is.

While it is not a new term anymore, incorporating multi-purpose space is simply how church buildings are used today. It is who we are, as churches, and it is not necessarily

exclusive to region or denomination. Whether or not the idea was first conceived for a church, the most diverse and prolific use of multi-purpose commercial building types is by churches.

Of course, the typical benefits of a multi-purpose building are quite familiar, as well as the reasons why it has been so successful with churches. Virtually every master plan for a new or relocated church campus seems to begin with a multi-purpose building as its first phase. I have even heard them commonly referred to as “Phase 1 buildings.”

But, even as the first buildings onsite, the hierarchy of a skillfully done master plan will indicate a supporting role for multi-purpose buildings, relative to future campus structures. It is in this supporting role, and because of it, that multi-purpose buildings are defined as less architectural and less expensive.

Certainly, there are many more reasons why multi-purpose buildings are such a popular option for churches. Multi-purpose buildings are versatile, allowing new or growing churches time to define a scope of ministries before committing to more specific-use buildings (i.e., sanctuaries, administration, schools, etc.).

Also, multi-purpose buildings, as less expensive structures, allow the church to continue with all of its ministries and operations, while raising funds for subsequent phase buildings. Multi-purpose buildings are also easier to construct (usually), which gives the church the option of the quickest building solution, if that is important to the church’s agenda.

So...this is the multi-purpose building type that has been so strongly tied to church development, the multi-purpose building type we’ve grown up with, the one we’ve all learned to know and love. That explains it.

Actually, there is more. The exciting part about multi-purpose buildings, at least to me, is that it is the fundamental model for all other church buildings, the church building paradigm. While it may not be the most exciting or architectural building on the master plan, a closer examination into the successful history with churches reveals more than just the buzz words of cheaper, quicker, and versatile. There is a deeper substance to the constitution of multi-purpose buildings.

As we know, the mission and message of the church does not change, but the method and manner of delivery changes all the time.

The generational and cultural changes that are ongoing every day, combined with the rate of technology, all compound and affect the methods of ministry. For churches, trying to position their ministries in the mainstream of life experience, the types and methods of ministries are changing and evolving faster every day.

As a result, churches and ministry leaders are seeking more and more flexible solutions for their facilities. Like multi-purpose buildings, the entire church campus could better support this range of dynamic ministries if it were able to be versatile and flexible.

I remember the pastor of a cowboy church, who I loved. He was a great guy, and he had a tremendous vision for his church and ministry. At the end of a rodeo or horse show, with a wireless microphone, he wanted to ride up to a point, push a button, and have his new facility transform from a rodeo arena into a sanctuary environment, as he began an altar call.

Now that's versatility! (Actually, I still think about a solution for him from time to time.)

The point is that the principles of success that have made multi-purpose buildings so



pertinent to church use are the same fundamental principles required for all church planning: versatility and flexibility.

Master planning is a great example. Today, master planning is common for all types of venues, not just churches. Schools, government facilities, retail development, commercial facilities, manufacturing, and corporate headquarters, among others, all understand the value and importance of master planning. However, master planning for churches is unique in a number of ways from any other type of master plan.

For churches, the ability or provision to add a wing of classrooms, or several rows of pews, is not master planning. That is simply

expansion.

Master planning for churches requires a high level of insight and understanding about church operation, so that this understanding can help create solutions and scenarios for a variety of ministries, as well as solutions to expand and eventually redefine the particular ministry completely.

Fortunately, the leadership today of virtually every progressive church knows the importance of master planning. Every church should have a master plan. It's Biblical!

In the process of creating a customized master plan, unique to your church's unique site and unique body of members, the master plan designers must thoroughly understand

Siebenlist ★ Architects

903 593-5536
FAX 593-5564



1204 FIRST PLACE
TYLER, TEXAS 75702



800 530-4941
Siebenlist.com



the ministries that your church offers today, in addition to the ministries your church and leadership will offer in the future. Can your pastor and/or the leaders of your church define the ministries that will be in place 10 years from now? Specifically and in operational detail? Five years from now? Two years?

Probably not. Church leaders are probably engaged in ministries today that could not have been predicted four or five years ago. For example, the use of iPods and MP3 players has opened the doors to a number of new ministries, such as podcasts and the daily download of devotional messages.

So, if it is virtually impossible to predict all the future ministries, how can a master plan be done that will accommodate these future, unknown ministries?

The answer: with versatility and flexibility, the same fundamental principles of multi-purpose buildings.

The church body is a dynamic institution, and its master plan and every structure in it should reflect the same dynamic character, providing for the buildings to change, adapt, and

grow in more than one way or one direction. A thorough understanding of church values and operation is required in order to create a variety of different expressions and opportunities, each with versatility and flexibility.

In summary, I have great respect for multi-purpose church buildings and the integrity of their existence. In a single package, they represent the fundamental whole of church building existence, expression, and outreach. The church body is alive and well, and free to grow and follow its Divine Guidance, utilizing all its forms of expression, in a multi-purpose building. When the same can be said for the entire master plan and all its building components, well, that's an exciting thought. RPN

Buddy Siebenlist, AIA, is president of Siebenlist Architects, Inc., www.siebenlist.com, a design, construction, and real estate development firm specializing exclusively in church projects nationwide, and a consultant to the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention since 2002.