

This is the sixth article in our series called A Place for Worship. Through this series, drawing on our experience with hundreds of church projects, we hope to provide a resource for churches who want to create facilities that help support their ministry goals.

Our goal is to explore important principles of how to create excellent spaces that inspire worship, encourage community, and facilitate spiritual growth.



"I was glad when they said to me 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'"

Ps. 122:1

One of the highlights of my Christian life was singing and playing music for worship services with my daughter. But at the time, we attended a church directly under the flight path of SeaTac Airport. The sanctuary had a lot of glass, and the walls and roof were not well-insulated. We would pray that a Boeing 727 wouldn't fly over the church during worship because it would drown out the music, or we might literally have to stop and wait for the plane to go past before starting again.

Well, airplanes are quieter these days, and that church has since been insulated and it has new triple pane windows. And my grown daughter now helps lead worship at her own church. But ever since those earlier days, I have been deeply aware of how important good quality design is in a worship space.

## Well-designed Worship Spaces

In this edition of our newsletter, we want to identify elements of a well-designed worship space. This might be used as a checklist to help you address a variety of important issues. Or it could be a list of questions to be addressed by your committee and design team during programming.

To begin, you need to identify who you are as a church and how you will use the worship space. Will it be used for traditional or contemporary services (or both)? Will it be a dedicated sanctuary or a multipurpose auditorium? What style should the space be in order to match your personality and ministry goals?

### Service Style

If worship is going to be a more traditional style, then you may want to incorporate things like stained glass, pipe organ (possibly with exposed pipes), dedicated choir loft space, or pews for seating.

Even the seating layout could be a major factor in the worship space design. Traditional sanctuaries can tend to be more linear with strong symmetry around a central aisle.

And the altar area in a traditional sanctuary is typically more of a dedicated, formal space with specific furnishings such as altar table, pulpit, lectern, font, etc.



A more traditional sanctuary with pews and a pipe organ.



Conversely, contemporary worship services tend to center around keyboard and guitar music rather than choirs and organs, so the design needs of the space are different. The seating is generally a more relaxed wraparound layout. And the platform area is typically more flexible and not a dedicated "sacred" space.

Many churches have both types of services in the same building, sometimes even in the same space. This takes creativity to make sure both styles are accommodated effectively.

### ***Dedicated or Shared Space***

Next, you will need to determine the degree of flexibility that's expected in the worship center. Will the sanctuary be a dedicated worship space or will it be shared with other uses like fellowship functions, community concerts, or even sporting events?

For example, if the worship center will be a full multi-purpose gymnasium, you will need to consider things like movable basketball hoops, sports flooring, sports equipment storage, protection of exposed AVL (Audio,

Video, Lighting) and tech equipment, and room acoustics for a large rectangular space with parallel walls.

For a more detailed discussion of flexibility, adaptability and expandability, please see Article 3.

### ***Character of Worship Space***

Finally, you will want to make sure the worship space matches your identity or "spiritual DNA", and meets your ministry goals.

The environment you create says a lot about who you are and what you value.

The answers to these critical questions will impact the worship space design in these following areas...

#### ***Foyer / Narthex***

The worship experience actually begins at the main entry and lobby where a lot of ministry happens. There should be adequate space for the lobby to function, and circulation should be clear.

The lobby might be used as overflow seating or a fussy child area with video monitors and speakers.

You may also need to consider a dedicated cry room, or special needs room like a quiet room or even translation booths for multilingual services.

#### ***Auditorium / Sanctuary Seating***

The seating layout should optimize sight lines from all points in the space and create a sense of the church community gathered.

You should determine early on what type of seating will be used. Will it be pews, chairs, theater seats, or even a mix.

Do you want natural light and views, stained glass windows, or possibly no windows? Or for flexibility, can you use motorized blinds to control the light?

#### ***Platform / Altar***

You must determine the degree of access and security needed at the platform area and what kind of environment is desired. Is it a liturgical altar area, only accessed by clergy, or is it very accessible to encourage congregational participation?

Will the church incorporate drama into normal worship services or for special services like Christmas?



Main entrance drop-off - clear from the parking



Main entrance - inviting outdoor covered area

### ***A word about accessibility***

Although churches are exempt from the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), there are local codes that require accessibility in churches. Further, many churches have as a ministry goal to make their space accessible and welcoming to all.

The current Washington State accessibility code requires assisted listening devices, wheelchair seating spaces distributed throughout the worship space (with companion seating), and access to the raised platform (unless it is under 300 SF), even to the edge of a raised baptismal tank.

So it is important to determine what kind of baptismal font or tank is needed, related to church practice. Can it be movable or does it need to be built into the main platform floor (you can provide a hard lid that makes that space usable for other functions)? Or is it a raised built-in tank, centered in the space for prominence?



## case study



Sanctuary Interior with north window blinds open



Platform area with video and lighting



Lobby Interior

This is also a good project to illustrate the importance of integration of technology into the worship space. We provided retractable projection screens on each side of the platform, a high quality sound system, and theatrical lighting hidden above curved acoustical ceiling panels.

Video technology has improved over the last several years. Projectors and LCD displays are brighter, so it may not be as critical to darken the worship space to see the video images.

The ceiling diffusion panels, together with acoustical wall panels, also help provide a balance in the room acoustics.

We hope to send out another newsletter in the near future that addresses this concept of integration of technology in greater detail.

Christ's Church Federal Way is a good project to showcase many elements of a well-designed worship space.

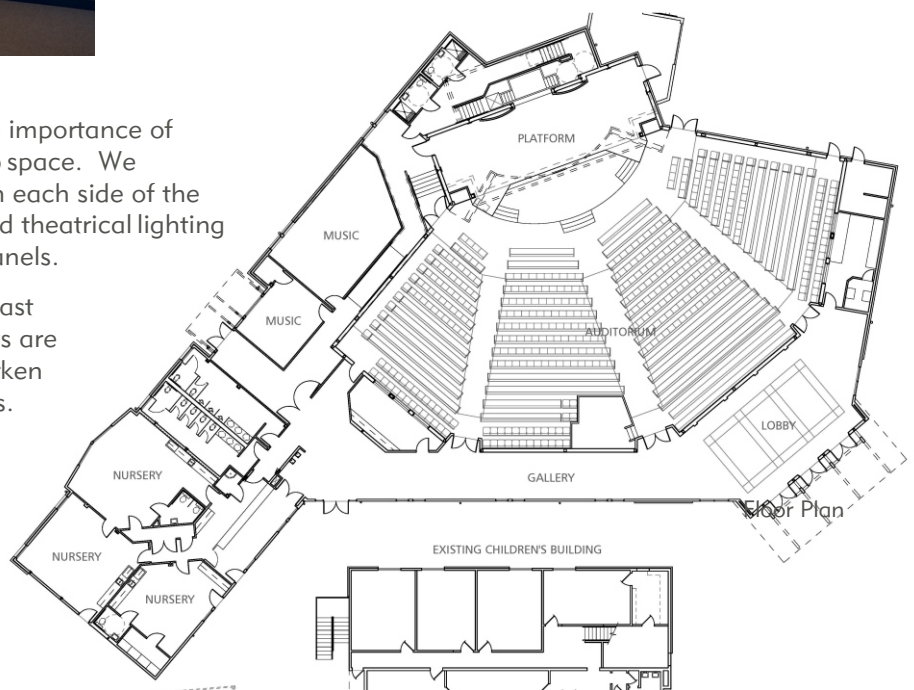
Starting from the parking lot, the drop-off and main entrance are highly visible, and it is clear where to go (see previous page photos). The lobby itself is large and allows for coffee service, comfortable seating and potential for worship overflow.

The seating area design is somewhat unique. The church has a mix of traditional and contemporary worship elements and they wanted to include pews in the project. However, they wanted the functionality of a wrap-around seating configuration. And even though it is an 800+ seat auditorium, the permanent back row is only 11 rows from the front of the room, and the angles of the seats provide excellent sight lines from every place in the room.

The church also liked the idea of theater seating that would make the space very comfortable and welcoming, so we designed a combination of pews in the back half of the room and theater seating in the front half. The theater seats have a continuous pew back to match the look of the pews. We also planned for stacking chairs with matching fabric at the perimeter for overflow or future expansion.

This space is also unique in that it accommodates both a natural daylight setting (with views of the treetops and sky), and a black box theater with video and artistic lighting. Since the windows are on the north side, the light is relatively even and easy to control. We also provided motorized blinds to darken the room when needed. To the left, you can see the sanctuary being used both ways.

Wheelchair access is provided to the platform from a ramp that runs behind the main wall.





## about bpharchitects

A leader in church planning and design in the Northwest, BPH Architects has worked on over 700 church projects since 1979.

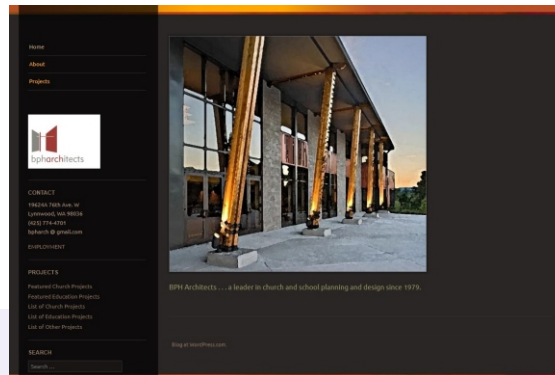
We are a small business providing highly individualized service to our clients. Our principals, Bart Shorack and Steve Hammer have direct hands-on involvement in, and they are committed to success for every project.

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## Planning a project?

If you are planning a project, or if you would like further explanation of concepts introduced in this article, we would like to be a resource for you.

Please call or email us to schedule a free 45-minute phone consultation. You can send us a PDF of your current floor plan and any ideas you may be considering, and we can discuss the process, provide information on feasibility issues, and brainstorm the project with you.

