

A SHORT HISTORY OF CHURCH BUILDING

From its beginning, a critical part of Christianity has been the gathering of people worshipping together. By virtue of this activity, the “place” where they worship has become endowed with a symbolic form. Historically, when believers build their places of worship they have searched for a physical form capable of expressing this symbolic form. This form simultaneously reflects the specific character, mission and needs of the congregation, while also making reference to the universal nature of the Church. The search for this form has been guided by a series of questions the congregation must ask of itself. The very same questions must be asked today:

1. How does our faith and worship shape our building?
2. How do we determine our needs?
3. How do we find the right people to design and build this building?
4. What kind of resources will we require to get it built?

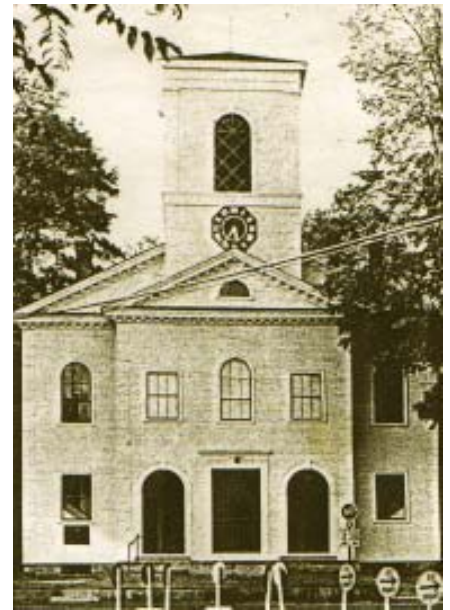
The congregation’s careful examination of these issues and the way they have implemented their vision have generated a rich history of church architecture.

THE HOUSE CHURCH

To the early Christians the word “church” referred to the act of assembling together rather than to the building itself¹. As long as Christianity was unrecognized by the Romans, Christians met where they could, mainly in their own homes. The character of these assemblies reflected the nature of their faith during that period, with an emphasis on introspection. The trappings of the material world were left behind; the real meaning of life was found in the spiritual dimension. Some of these houses of worship were entirely converted into places of worship. An example of this is the House-Church at Dura Europos. By removing a wall from the original living room, a space was created that was large enough for gathering the whole congregation in one room. At the center of the house is an open air court. The court was not used for worship, however, the meeting hall, baptistery and sacristy all look into the court for light and air. There are no windows on the perimeter walls and only a single door to the street for entry. The inward focus of the House-Church reflects both the introspection of the congregation as well as the necessary protection from authorities that were intent upon destroying the growing influence of the early believers.

THE BASILICA

The number of Christian worshippers increased gradually over the first few centuries with a substantial increase corresponding to the establishment of

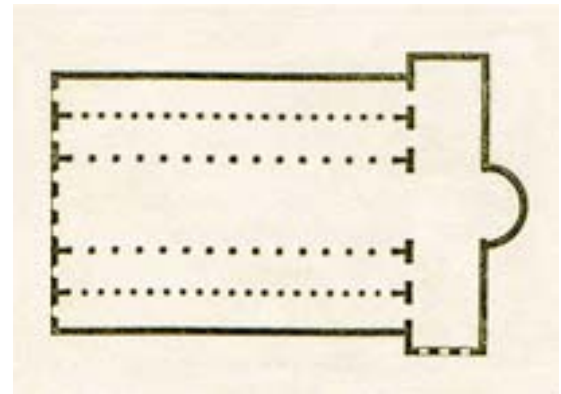


Early New England church



Shaker Meeting House

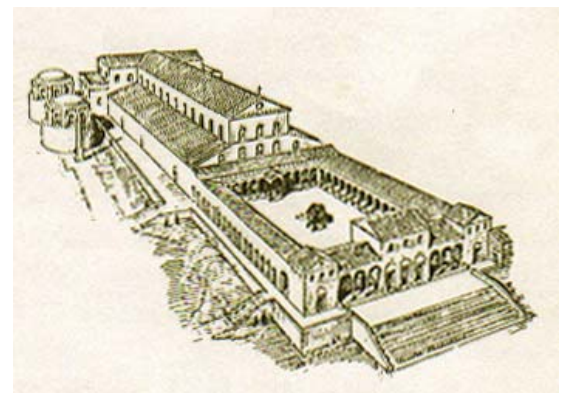
Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire. Congregations soon outgrew the meeting halls of the House-Churches and so began to create buildings specifically suited to house their worship. Christians, again, wanted to express in their buildings the context of their faith. The concepts of “path,” representing the road inward to one’s soul and “center,” the point at which the meaning of life is revealed became the fundamental spatial relationships that guided the form of the early Christian church.² The interior focus of the House-Church was transformed to an emphasis on the artwork of the inner surfaces of the building and a careful introduction of natural light to the interior. In this way, the Christian faith was symbolized in terms of a building, the spaces that composed the interior, and the way light came into the building. The congregation had asked the right questions and a building form was created to symbolize the faith and life of the church community. This form was a unique adaptation of the Roman basilica that combined a longitudinal axis with a vertical axis to symbolize the long path of life and the moment of salvation, at the crossing of the axes, in which God is revealed.



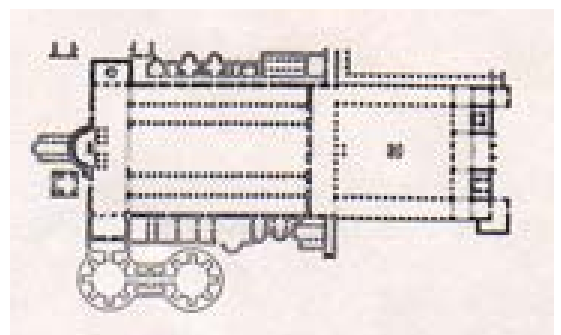
Roman basilica

THE MONASTERY

With the fall of Rome and the rise of Christianity, the importance of temporal political power and the material world was subordinated to the belief in a heavenly and eternal king. The physical characteristics of the architecture reflected this shift: the gravity and man-made order of Rome is replaced, with an architecture that de-emphasized its own weight, substance and material presence. It began to create images that more strongly referenced eternity and the spiritual nature of the world. According to Christian Norberg-Schulz in his book *Meaning in Western Architecture*, “The Christian image of the world cannot be understood in terms of ... natural, human or historical phenomena.... Only by developing his own *inner* self can man find true ... meaning and that development meant to follow Christ. The center of the Christian world, therefore, is something more than a concrete, natural or man-made place. It is the abstract point where the meaning of life is revealed.”³ The early Christian environment did not mix comfortably with the earthly city, or the political power of its environment. Instead it found a means to express itself more purely: the monastery. The monastery was an enclosed system; its role within the city was that of a model, an aspiration, an example, not itself part of the community.



aerial view early monastery



plan

As the Christian faith grew and developed, subtle but important shifts in emphasis began to reshape social and physical structures. The individual search for God became part of a collective wish to bring God to the world. As populations increased, the role of the monastery became more genuinely educational and therefore more interactive with the

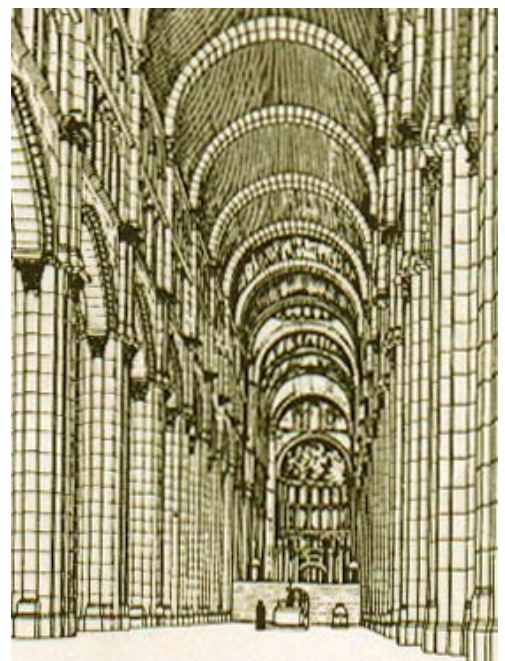
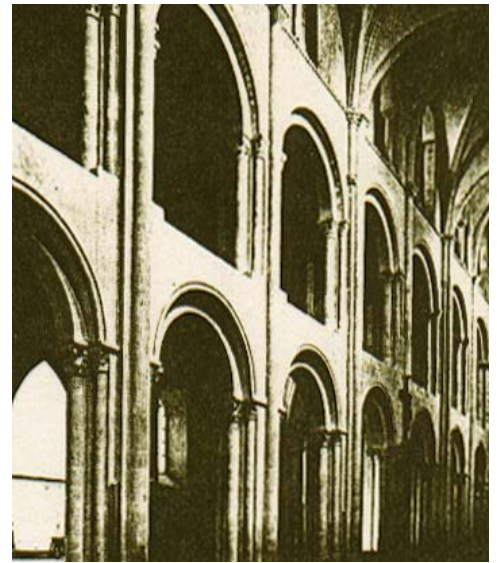
community. The community, as an urban entity influenced by the monastery, regained importance as an expression of “the city of God” on Earth. In these cities, God was seen as a direct and continuous presence, not as a remote potentate. This period was known as the Romanesque period because of the reappearance of a strong and permanent civic order. The architecture of this period clearly and coherently express that order. The new civic order, was founded upon and integrated with Christian values; it was, at once, grounded and spiritual. The town is an extension of the monastery and, as such, it manifests the Christian inward focus: it is a self-sufficient and walled entity with the church as its core. Norberg-Schulz calls this organization a series of “protected places: protected from within by the experience of the existence of God and from without by symbolic enclosure and solidity.”⁴

ROMANESQUE AND GOTHIC CHURCHES

The notion of God as a continuous presence found architectural expression in an increased emphasis on verticality in the nave of the church. Where previously the dome at the crossing had represented the revelation of God in a discrete location, in Romanesque and especially Gothic cathedrals that revelation is symbolized by a verticality that is extended into the entire nave. Clerestory windows and vaulted ceilings intensified the connection to the sky and de-emphasized the material presence of the building. In the Gothic cathedral, God’s presence is immediate and, through the cathedral, He communicates very directly with mankind. For the medieval Christian community the architecture of the cathedral made manifest God’s order on earth. Each stone of the building’s structure was carved to represent a piece of that order. History, technology and spirituality were all part of this stone encyclopedia; man’s position as a fragment of a much larger order is made abundantly clear. In order to perceive this larger order, one must first accept one’s place in the kingdom of God.⁵ Faith was seen as a precondition in which reason could exist. It was, therefore, through the cathedral that meaning could be brought into the lives of men. The congregations and church officials were keenly aware of this emphasis which clarifies the dominance of the cathedral over the village or landscape within which it is set.

THE RENAISSANCE

The Renaissance was characterized by an increased faith in mankind as God’s creation and therefore as a manifestation of his wisdom. According to Norberg-Schulz, “in the Renaissance divine perfection no longer consisted in the transcendence of nature, but was found in nature itself.”⁶ Government, as a manifestation of man’s power of reason, emerged as a separate entity from the church. In this age of investigation and discovery, men sought to integrate a realistic approach to nature with an idea of divine cosmic order. As in other ages the church sought to represent this search in the



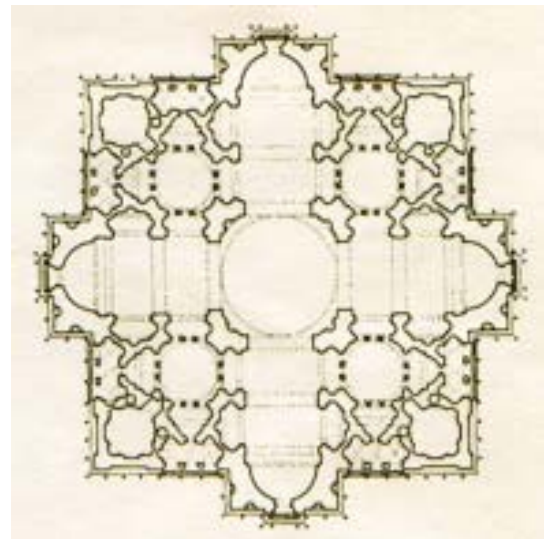
architectural expression of their building. Interior and exterior space was clearly defined and design of these areas was carved out with an emphasis on mathematic geometry, a symbol of man's reason expressing God's order. The town itself was similarly conceived with an organization gathered around a central piazza. From this place, an orientation was established that could locate the major streets and public buildings of the town the church occupied. The church, as one of these major points, however, shared its preeminence with important civic structures of the community.

THE CHURCH IN AMERICA

As European society developed in separate directions during the period of exploration and political diversification, so the architectural styles followed suit. Baroque architecture in Italy developed differently than in Germany, France, and England. This was also reflected in the ideas and emphasis that the church sought to express in its building. With the increasing turmoil within Christendom that the reformation brought, the buildings began to reflect the ideas of the local congregations. This concept of the church responding to the local community reappeared as villages and towns in the New World sought to establish their congregations as the center of their settlement.

An American Main Street community may seem rather remote from Medieval and Renaissance Europe. Yet what remains unchanged and, in fact, timeless, is the community that understands itself primarily in terms of its faith and its civic structure. American churches have their roots in the New England Meeting House, a building that often acted as a place to gather in both capacities. These buildings were very simple spaces with high ceilings and ample natural light. Spatially, this reflects the timeless Christian character of worldly simplicity and inwardness. The flexibility of the space allowed for the educational capacity of the church as well as exhibiting a distinctly American economy. As villages and settlements developed into towns and cities, the churches became critical elements of the civic expressions of the young nation. They were both the center of spiritual guidance for the congregation as well as the source of political activity for the community. The architectural expressions of many of these churches sought to express the unity of these two forces. Much of the political sources of the country came from ancient Greek democracy, while the spiritual guidance came from the New Testament. The architectural expression of many of these churches began to become neo-classical in style reflecting the unity of the political and religious center of the community.

America was also an environment where many congregations sought to



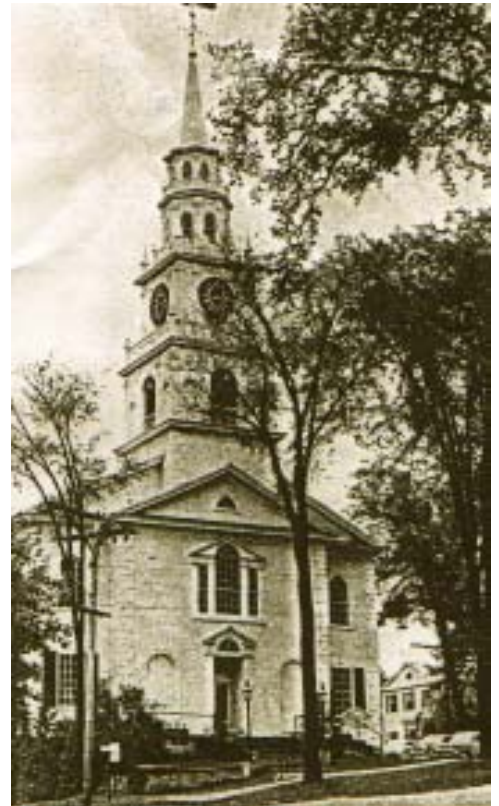
St. Peter's

establish utopian communities that were expressions of the Kingdom of Heaven on the earth. These communities tended to be located away from urban centers and developed their own manner of expressing their faith in their building. The Shakers took this relationship between building and faith to an extremely thorough level of correspondence.

The American church, whether urban or rural, has always represented a symbolic expression of the community, either in the heart of the town or at its periphery.

Today, as urban areas are built to capacity and the population is growing the fastest in the “middle landscape” of suburbia, new challenges face the congregation that seeks to create a built expression of its faith. Careful planning and thoughtful involvement of the congregation as a building program begins can create a new facility that communicates the role of the church in today’s community. This will help continue the role that the church has played over the centuries as a source of guidance and refuge for society.

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- ¹ Michael Komechak, “Historical Perspective”, *Building and Renovation Kit for Places of Catholic Worship*, Archdiocese of Chicago, 1982, page 9.
- ² Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Meaning in Western Architecture*, Praeger Publishers, 1975, page 119.
- ³ Norberg-Schulz, p. 146.
- ⁴ Norberg-Schulz, p. 180.
- ⁵ Norberg-Schulz, p. 222.
- ⁶ Norberg-Schulz, p. 252.