



10 Takeaways

From *Making Space* research journal series with Barna Group

As a church architect and builder for nearly twenty years, research has always been at the core of my work to serve churches. Over the past decade we've undertaken a journey with Barna Group to better understand how the built environment forms faith in people and communities. These are a few of my takeaways from our *Making Space* research.

DEREK DEGROOT, AIA

1. The Church Should Rethink Beauty as Mission

Beauty isn't optional – it's critical to the mission of the Church. While 84% of congregants believe church buildings should reflect God's beauty, only 37% find their church beautiful. This stark gap represents both a challenge and an opportunity for church leaders. Beautiful spaces don't just please the eye; they shape the soul and point to God's infinite desirability. Consider partnering with artists, architects, and designers who understand how to create spaces that spark transcendent experiences. Every element – from lighting to materials, from color schemes to artistic elements – should work together to reflect divine beauty and inspire spiritual awakening. The investment in beauty isn't superficial; it's a strategic approach to creating environments where people can more readily encounter the divine. Consider establishing a dedicated "Sacred Arts" committee that can thoughtfully curate and maintain your space's aesthetic elements while ensuring they align with your theological vision.

2. The Modern Church Should Embrace Sacred Architecture

With 91% of people agreeing that churches should be easily identifiable as churches, and 62% expecting them to stand out in their community, there's a clear mandate for distinctive, sacred architecture. Your building should tell a story and point to something greater. Don't shy away from traditional elements – 72% of people prefer traditional over trendy designs. This preference for traditional design doesn't mean outdated or stale; rather, it suggests incorporating timeless elements that have historically helped people connect with God. Consider how your architecture can create a visual journey from the moment someone approaches your building to when they enter your worship space. Elements like height, light, and proportion can all work together to create a sense of transcendence. Partner with architects who understand both contemporary functionality and sacred architectural principles to create spaces that speak to both tradition and relevance.



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3. Design for your Community through Generous Engagement

Churches that thrive are those designed for daily community use, not just Sunday services. With 74% of never-churched and 88% of de-churched people believing churches have a community care responsibility, your space should facilitate continuous community engagement. Consider how your facilities can serve community needs throughout the week. This might mean creating flexible spaces that can transform from lobby areas to community gathering spots, or dedicated areas for specific community services. The key is to design with intentionality – every space should have multiple purposes while maintaining its primary sacred character. Consider creating a community needs assessment team that can identify specific ways your building could serve your neighborhood throughout the week, from providing co-working spaces to hosting community events to offering quiet spaces for prayer and reflection.

4. Create Intentional Spaces for Spiritual Formation

Given that 54% of disciplined Christians say it happens primarily at church, and 74% of Americans want to grow spiritually, your space should intentionally facilitate spiritual formation. Design areas for both group discipleship and individual reflection, recognizing that 31% of adults say peace and calm make a space spiritual. This means creating a variety of environments – from intimate prayer corners to group study rooms to outdoor meditation gardens. Consider how different types of spaces might serve different aspects of spiritual growth. The layout should create natural progression from social to sacred spaces, helping people transition from everyday concerns to spiritual focus. Include elements that aid in reflection and prayer, such as thoughtful artwork, scripture displays, or symbolic design elements that can serve as teaching tools and meditation focal points.

5. Prioritize Relational Spaces

With 57% of Millennials and Gen Z prioritizing relationship-building over sermons, your space should facilitate meaningful connections. Create intentional gathering spaces, conversation nooks, purposefully designed thresholds and community areas that encourage organic relationship development. The design should flow naturally from worship spaces to fellowship areas, making relationship-building an integral part of the church experience rather than an afterthought. Consider how furniture arrangement, lighting, and acoustics can either encourage or inhibit conversation. Create "perches" – areas where people naturally want to linger and talk. This might include café-style seating, comfortable lounges, or outdoor gathering spots. Remember that some of the most meaningful conversations happen in transition spaces (or "hot-spots") – hallways, entryways, and between-space areas should be designed to facilitate natural interaction.



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6. Build for Psychological Safety

84% believe churches should be safe places for hurting people. This means designing spaces that feel welcoming, secure, and peaceful. Consider how your space can create environments that promote emotional and spiritual healing through thoughtful design, lighting, materiality and layout. This goes beyond physical safety features to include elements that create psychological safety – clear sightlines, open spaces balanced with more intimate areas, and thoughtful wayfinding that helps people feel oriented and secure. Color psychology, natural materials, and biophilic design elements can all contribute to a sense of peace and safety. Create spaces that serve as sanctuaries in both the spiritual and practical sense, where people can feel protected and nurtured as they process their pain and seek healing.

7. Incorporate Natural Elements into your Designs

Nature is considered the most transcendent space by 70% of people. Look for ways to incorporate natural elements into your church design – whether through windows, indoor plants, outdoor prayer gardens, or natural materials. This connection to creation can enhance the spiritual experience. Consider creating transitional spaces that blur the line between indoor and outdoor areas, allowing natural light and elements to become part of the worship experience. Use materials that reflect the natural world – stone, wood, and water features have a “scaled intricacy” that resonates with us as humans – to create a sense of connection to God's creation. Develop outdoor spaces that can serve as extensions of your ministry areas, creating natural sanctuaries for prayer, meditation, and small group gatherings. Remember that bringing nature into your space isn't just about aesthetics – it's about connecting people with the Creator through His creation.

8. Design for Peace and Transcendence

31% of adults associate spirituality with peace and calm. Create spaces that help people disconnect from daily distractions and connect with God. Consider acoustic design, color temperatures, quiet prayer rooms, and contemplative spaces that facilitate spiritual reflection. This might include creating “zones of silence” throughout your building – designated areas where people can step away from the noise and activity to find moments of peace. Pay attention to the progression of spaces, creating natural transitions that help people move from the busy outside world to places of spiritual focus. Use lighting, sound design, and spatial arrangement to create environments that naturally encourage contemplation and prayer. Consider how different times of day might affect these spaces and design for flexibility in creating peaceful environments.



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9. Find the Intersection between Beauty and Function

While beauty is mission-critical (84% agree), it must serve a purpose. Every beautiful element should enhance the worship experience and support ministry functions. Partner with architects and designers who understand both aesthetic excellence and ministry needs. This means thinking through how beautiful spaces can also be functional spaces – how form and function work together rather than compete. Consider the maintenance and longevity of beautiful elements, ensuring that your investment in beauty can be sustained over time. Create spaces that are both inspiring and practical, where aesthetic choices support rather than hinder ministry activities. Remember that true beauty often emerges from the perfect intersection of form and function, where every element serves both a practical and aesthetic purpose.

10. Invest in Transformative Spaces to Disciple your People

Remember Churchill's wisdom: "We shape our buildings, thereafter they shape us." Your building impacts your church's culture, spiritual formation, and community engagement. With 74% of Americans wanting to grow spiritually, your space should be intentionally designed to facilitate transformation. This means thinking deeply about how every aspect of your building can support spiritual growth and community formation. Consider creating spaces that can grow and adapt with your community, that can support multiple types of ministry activities, and that consistently point people toward spiritual transformation. Develop metrics to measure how your space impacts ministry effectiveness and be willing to make adjustments based on what you learn. The goal is to create environments that actively participate in the transformative work of the Gospel, not just contain it.

We specialize in *designing, building, and furnishing churches* so that people can transformatively experience who God is and who He created them to be.

Aspen