

# Shaping Welcoming Spaces

Susan Eaton Mendenhall

**W**e shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us.” These words of Winston Churchill continue to teach by example as we enter public buildings, churches, and even our homes.

Anyone new to a space instantly asks three questions. These questions move through us very quickly and often are not recognized by our rational mind, but are definitely experienced in our bodies.

**Do I feel safe?** Safety may be physical and/or emotional. Am I able to see well enough to navigate the space? Does the space look/feel safe for me to enter? Why is no one here? This is not what I expected when I saw the exterior sign—it does not match what is inside.

**Do I feel welcome?** Are the people happy and engaging? Does the décor look inviting and well maintained? Does the space allow me to engage it as I am ready—giving me space to breathe and adjust?

**What is expected of me?** I’m here! What is next? Am I to check in with someone, help myself? Are there signs that direct me in my decisions/questions?

If we are not able to navigate through these three questions easily and effortlessly, we may choose to leave. If we stay, our general nature may be tentative or protective. Abraham Maslow created a pyramid called the Hierarchy of Needs, suggesting that human beings are motivated by their unsatisfied needs. Our very first need is to feel safe and secure. Until this is satisfied it is difficult to explore community and spiritual growth. Perhaps another way to engage these three questions is by **creating an environment for people to feel safe, included, and informed**. Have we thought of this as we create and shape our church spaces?

## First Impressions

These days first impressions often start with the church web page. More and more “church guests” are doing their homework on the Internet. Here is where they might see a view of the

building, pictures of the staff, and a list of activities. A great impression is made if the web design is engaging, allows for easy navigation, and has a clean look. Put things on your web site that a new person would want to know. Perhaps a blueprint of the church and directions to the site. This allows someone new to know where to park, where to enter the building, and how to locate rooms. Too many bells and whistles on a site can be annoying and may feel invasive to some people. Keeping the web information up to date is one way a church says, “We are alive, vital, and ready for YOU”.

New people notice everything! We may no longer “see” what is truly there because it is now familiar. New people are looking for ‘clues’ to this unknown place and its people. Everything speaks. Look at your facility with the eyes of someone new.

*Buildings speak a language.  
What is your building saying?*

- Is the **main door** clearly known? Do the doors encourage one to enter? Through what door do the members enter? What door would someone new be

likely to enter? Being able to see into a building through glass paneled doors assists a person in early navigation.

- Once inside, what **first catches the attention**—coat-rack, bulletin board, artwork, clutter, smells . . .?
- What three **signs** are first seen? What do they communicate? In what condition are they? Are they important to someone new?
- List **what is located in the first 10 feet** of entering the main door. Name all that happens in this area.
- **Where do people gather?** What causes them to gather? Is there enough space? What might be needed to enhance this experience?
- What parts of the building appear **cluttered**? Why? Are there items that are broken/past their prime or could be thrown away?
- **What about the building embraces the present and says that it is moving into the future?** What indicates that the facility and ministries might be living too much in the past? Are artwork and furnishings up to date? Is signage uniform and easy to read?

## Gathering Spaces

I call gathering spaces (frequently the first place we enter) the “room of introduction.” Here is where the personality of the church is first explored. How do you wish to introduce yourself? Notice how people move through this space. Remember that people—their attire, gestures, and voices—make a room seem full. Keeping all furnishings and displays at a minimum allows the energy of the people to be the accessory. Gathering spaces hold the diversity of people’s lives. Tasks and emotions happen in this space. This is where people are trying to find a person, allow a child to move more freely, greet a visitor, have a conversation, or pass through to another part of the building. Laughter, joy, concern, anxiety, and frustration accompany these tasks. To allow emotional space for these many tasks and emotions, take care that the area is not filled with excessive furnishings.

People are also looking for information in gathering spaces. Signage is very important. Directional signs for restrooms, nursery, offices, and the sanctuary are best positioned above the heads of people so they can be seen when the space is full. Try to keep all signs throughout the building with a similar look. Not only does this provide a harmonious feel to the building, but gives confidence to a new person of knowing what to look for as he moves through the building. Where possible use the international signage as this is very well identified and understood.

Gathering spaces are also places of waiting. Providing comfortable chairs as room allows and adding a complementary table to rest a beverage is welcomed hospitality. Having a variety of lighting possibilities allows for different moods and uses of this space. A combination of table lamps, overhead, wall sconces all invite this area to be public as well as more intimate for personal reading or visiting with a friend.

## Hospitable Worship Space

Worship space that offers flexibility is another form of hospitality. Think through the many ways the space will and could be used. What appointments would be appropriate when the space is used for a concert, a dinner, or a business awards event? Consider the varied uses of the space in each liturgical season. How could the space be changed to allow the congregation to experience the season anew? Give thought to how technical images will be projected and make sure that art and symbols are not limiting this possibility. Maintain a rule of thumb that all furnishings in the chancel and sanctuary space are moveable, which allows for varied expressions in worship style, congregational size, and multiple usages.

## Spiritual Welcome

Our spiritual sides are drawn to beauty and the natural world is beauty. Creating spaces that use and accent the natural woods, fibers, minerals, sounds, and lighting will open the spiritual dimensions and provide welcome for the soul. Use of healthy floor plants with sufficient space around them offers a restful expression. Eliminate plastic and artificial as much as possible.

## Cluttered Versus Empty Spaces

One of the greatest tasks is keeping clutter to a minimum as well as discernment in accepting donations. Members will offer furnishings that are “used but in great condition” throughout the church’s history. Usually these add to the element of clutter. Clutter depresses any space and us as we move through it. The description of the Upper Room prepared for the disciples is a good reminder of how to keep our church spaces . . . “spacious, furnished, and all in order.” Clutter often happens because our culture is not comfortable with empty space. We want to fill it with “something.” Be slow to add to empty places. Hallways might seem like empty space, but we forget that the movement of people takes room and creates energy. Hallways are also for spiritual, emotional, and physical transitions. As we move from one space to the next we change our intentions. Moving from worship to study to fellowship all requires a transition in thought. Allow the hallways to be simple and uncluttered to give people space to rest and re-group their thoughts. Use the rule of minimal appointments in as many places as possible. What makes the space in many monasteries so sacred and spiritual is that they have included only what is needed—nothing more. The simplicity of the space welcomes and offers room for our cluttered lives while at the same time helping us to focus.

*Experience shows that renewal of the building and enlargement thereby of its capacity for hospitality and service, has led to the renewal of the worshipping community in that place, and to growth in numbers as well as in maturity of faith.*

—Richard Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent*

### Buildings speak a language.

They tell us whether they are loved or ignored.

They tell us of the energy and spirit of those who use them.

They easily invite or distance someone new.

They encourage or complicate new ideas.

### Buildings speak a language.

Some buildings look tired and out of date.

Some buildings feel refreshed and vital.

Some buildings have no place for silence to reside.

Some buildings invite the soul to explore.

### Buildings speak a language.

What is your building saying? □

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