

3-1-1957

Contemporary Church Architecture in the Lutheran Church of America

Arlis J. Ehlen

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ehlen, Arlis J. (1957) "Contemporary Church Architecture in the Lutheran Church of America," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 28, Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol28/iss1/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Concordia Theological Monthly

VOL. XXVIII

MARCH 1957

No. 3

Contemporary Church Architecture in the Lutheran Church of America

By ARLIS J. EHLEN

A GREAT many of the churches built for Lutheran congregations in recent years show the strong influence of contemporary developments in architecture. These buildings usually depart so noticeably from the traditional ecclesiastical styles that certain questions quite naturally come to the mind of the interested observer: I. What originally led these congregations to choose the contemporary idiom for their new churches? II. How, exactly, do the modern churches differ from the older ones, and in what ways are they still similar? III. How have church members, community, and visitors reacted toward the new churches after they were built and in use?

A study undertaken by the present writer sought to discover representative answers to these questions. The firsthand material on which the following was based was gathered chiefly by means of personal correspondence with pastors of various congregations that have built contemporary churches. Questionnaires were returned, and further material (chiefly printed brochures) was submitted by correspondents from thirty-nine Lutheran churches, representing most of the best examples of contemporary architecture in the six largest Lutheran bodies of the United States.¹

"Church architecture," reads a statement in a professional journal for architects, "is probably the most backward field of architecture in the United States, because behind it is the most confused think-

¹ In the Bachelor of Divinity thesis (on file in the Pritzlaff Memorial Library, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis) which the present article epitomizes, the thirty-nine churches are listed by name and are cited individually in support of statements made in the text.

ing."² The writer's hope is that the material offered hereunder may be found useful, if even in the smallest degree, toward dispelling some of this unfortunate confusion.

I

What influenced the congregations under study to select the contemporary idiom for their new churches? No doubt a significant role in its adoption is played by the person who makes the first serious suggestion that this approach be considered. In order to find out who that person most often was, the first item on the questionnaire sent to pastors of modern Lutheran churches was this: "From whom did the initial impulse toward a modern, functional approach to your architectural problem come?"

According to the answers which correspondents gave to this question, it was the pastor himself who most often made the first suggestion toward a contemporary style (in 64 per cent of the cases). Next in order of frequency was the architect (46 per cent), while it was least common for the initial move to be made by lay members of the congregation (31 per cent; the percentages overlap, since often more than one was mentioned in a given instance). The very important part played by pastors in bringing contemporary architecture under consideration by the congregations may be due both to their wider acquaintance with its possibilities and to the leadership which they naturally exercise in their congregations.

But what were the actual reasons that brought about the ultimate selection of a modern design instead of one of the traditional styles? The second item on the questionnaire reads: "What were the factors that influenced the choice of this approach?" Nearly all the replies offered useful information on this question. These data have been gathered into various groups, each one describing one of the persuasive factors that have led many Lutheran congregations to choose a modern, functional approach to their architectural problem.

The church with a message for the present day prefers a contemporary architecture. This basic, if rather intangible, factor appeared in various forms in a number of the replies received.

² F. H., in a book review, *Progressive Architecture* (February 1952), p. 146.

Some made it quite clear that a truly vital Christianity will be reflected in a vital approach to church architecture. Such an approach welcomes the use of present-day materials and techniques of building—even when these differ from those of the classic periods of church architecture and result in a church edifice that differs in appearance from the traditional. Many of the replies expressed in some way the feeling that it is desirable to follow the present-day trend in architecture. Some recognized consciously that if the church really has a message for the modern world, she can and should express this fact by using modern materials and techniques in her architecture. Part of the church's responsibility is to christen every area of contemporary life and culture—architecture not excepted—and to use it in the service of her Lord.

Modern architecture is more likely to fulfill the requirements of functionality. The word *functional* is, of course, a broad term, and many of the factors following below are simply aspects of it. But functionality in general has evidently been a very important factor in the choice of contemporary architecture. It was second only to economy in the number of times it was mentioned in the replies. The meaning of the term may be described thus: the functional way of designing and constructing a building is that way in which the most suitable materials available can be combined most simply, strongly, and economically for a given purpose and at a given location. Among contemporary architects the principle that "form follows function" (or, further, that "form and function are one") is a fundamental axiom. The functional approach is taken for granted even if it may not always be consistently applied. As one pastor expressed his architect's attitude: "The only solution to an architectural problem is to study the needs, the site, and the problems, and then to express that solution in the simplest, [most] economical solution possible."

Modern architecture better meets special needs. In a variety of special needs and problems the contemporary pattern was thought to offer a better solution than any traditional style. Such special situations included the need for future expansion, the necessity of accommodating educational, social, and other activities, the problem of limited space, and so on. The functional approach, it is found, applies to any set of needs and offers an individualized solution for

each. Many Lutheran congregations have come to realize this new adaptability and to choose the contemporary approach on this account.

The simplicity of modern architecture appeals to many. "The simple and clean lines" of contemporary architecture are an appealing factor in its favor for many of the people involved in building churches today. One architect expressed the conviction that not only he himself but also the pastor and members of the congregation with whom he had worked had built their church "in the belief that spiritual quality is more forcefully achieved by simple means than by badly built and pompously designed monuments."

Modern architecture is considered more honest. An architect's honesty will not allow him to make something seem to be what it is not. This attitude is directed against the deceptive practices that have long been common in architecture, especially, it would seem, in church architecture, where richness and grandeur are often simulated when the cost of their genuine form is beyond reach. "A building can be the visual expression of a dishonest action."³ Among the replies received, explicit references to the honesty of modern architecture were found to be few (although forceful). On the other hand, it is to be noted that the more luridly dishonest practices which were once common are now falling into disuse.

Modern architecture appeals to many as being more beautiful. Already there are a number of people who think highly enough of the new architecture to report that they were influenced in their choice of the modern style by its beauty or attractiveness. One architect wrote that in the church under consideration he "acted in the belief that beauty emerges not from stale ornament but from such simple, basic things as light, space, texture, and color." The conviction that such things can produce real beauty is one that will no doubt become more and more common as examples of the new architecture become more numerous and better known.

Modern architecture offers greater distinctiveness. Some have seen in contemporary architecture not so much its beauty as the fact that it is different and distinctive. It is inevitable that so long

³ Abbé Negre, quoted by Jean Labatut in "Architecture Today: A Symposium," *Liturgical Arts* (November 1950), p. 24.

as churches of contemporary design are still in the minority they will seem to the ordinary person to be "different," perhaps strikingly so. Some congregations have considered this to be a valuable factor, whether for aesthetic reasons or for its publicity value.

A church in a modern architectural idiom fits better into a community in which other structures employ this idiom. In a number of cases it was felt that the style of architecture used in nearby buildings or in the community as a whole had influenced the choice for the church building. But this type of reasoning, convincing as it may sometimes be, is not basic and cannot be defended in cases where the architecture of the community would seem to call for a church built in a style of the past. In such cases historical precedent may be appealed to, as one pastor did, by pointing out that many of the beautiful Old World cathedrals exhibit in one building several distinct architectural styles because of the long time required for their erection.

The influence of an architect may help bring about the choice of modern architecture. When an architect works very closely and sympathetically with the members of a congregation, it is inevitable that he himself can become a highly influential factor in bringing about the adoption of a good modern design on the part of the congregation's members. This factor was dwelt on at length in several of the replies received.

Modern architecture is usually found to be more economical. The relative economy of the functional approach to architecture, as compared with the traditional approaches, was the subject of a separate item on the questionnaire: "How much more, proportionately, would it have cost to construct equivalent facilities in a traditional style?" Even without such special prompting, no doubt, the relative economy of construction would have been a very common reason for choosing the modern approach. The fact that the point was specifically raised in the questionnaire made this factor even more prominent, and makes possible some revealing statistics.

A total of thirty-one of the thirty-nine replies offered a direct answer to this question. Only one correspondent thought that the cost of his church would have been "probably less" if it had been done in a traditional style. Two more thought that in their cases

the cost of the two approaches would have been about the same. But these were the only three out of the thirty-one who were of the opinion that they had not saved money by building in a modern style. Among the others there was a wide range of answers. Estimates of how much more a building in the traditional style would have cost than the one actually completed ranged from 9 to 600 per cent! Even if we do not take into account the church which in the report is valued at 250 to 600 per cent above its actual cost by those who did not know it, the average reply was a fraction under 44 per cent. Hence the average pastor thought that if traditional had been chosen instead of modern, the cost would have been 44 per cent greater than it actually was. It is apparent that the average Lutheran congregation in the United States which has built in a modern style is confident that in so doing it saved a very sizable amount of money. No doubt the comparative economy of a modern over a traditional method of church construction has proved to be one of the most convincing factors of all in leading Lutheran congregations to choose a modern, functional architecture.

II

In what ways do the completed church buildings differ from the older, more familiar type of church, and in what ways are they similar? The principal sources of information for the answering of this question have been the fund-raising brochures, dedication programs, photographs, etc., which were so kindly sent to the writer by many congregations at his request, as well as the descriptions of these churches which have appeared in church and architectural periodicals.

Basic Shapes. Rather than describe either ground plans or elevations in detail, we attempt here simply to indicate, in broad outline, the basic forms of spatial organization in the churches under study, comparing them with churches of the past.

By far the most common ground plan (as was to be expected) is still that based on the rectangle. In its simplest form this plan calls for four straight sides, forming a single rectangle that encloses within it all the main elements of a church: nave, chancel, and narthex, or entryway. Five of the thirty-nine churches under consideration use this simplest of all floor plans, including even the

narthex within the basic rectangle, whereas eight more make the narthex a separate and somewhat narrower addition to the basic rectangle. Both of these plans result in a spacious chancel that extends the full width of the nave. Variations of the simple rectangular plan include three churches in which the chancel is narrower than the nave, one in which it is wider, and one example of the cruciform plan. All eighteen of these churches, however, have what may be termed the single-room type of nave.

Another eighteen, on the other hand, have naves which are divided by the addition of structural aisles along one or both of the side walls. Most of these adopt the basilica plan, in which the side aisles are roofed over at a lower height than the nave proper, so that the walls of the latter rise above the level of the aisle roofs and form a clerestory. With the aisles separated from the nave itself by the pillars that support the clerestory walls, a tall, narrow nave is achieved which tends to direct all attention toward the chancel. Most of the basilica-type churches have a chancel of the same width as the nave exclusive of aisles.

The other three churches of the thirty-nine are nonrectangular in floor plan. One is octagonal, with the altar in the center, while the other two are triangular, the altar being placed in the apex of the triangle.

Thus already with respect to the basic disposition of space it is apparent that there is no lackluster uniformity in contemporary Lutheran architecture. Yet there has been no wholesale departure from the basic shapes that have long been regarded as the most suitable for church bodies in the main stream of the liturgical tradition. More than 45 per cent of the churches studied have adopted some form of the basilica plan, with its aisles. This is probably a higher percentage than that of the recent past. Most of the others retain at least the long and relatively narrow shape of the nave, which characterizes the best tradition in ecclesiastical architecture. While deferring to good tradition, however, contemporary church architects have been willing to adopt modern techniques and materials. This will become more apparent as individual details are taken up.

Orientation. The usual terminology for denoting the various parts of a church is still based on the assumption that the chancel

is oriented toward the east. Except for two or three instances, however, almost all traces of that tradition seem now to have been lost. Many of the churches face toward other directions.

Techniques and Materials. Certain building materials are available in modern times which the designers of the historic ecclesiastical styles did not have at their disposal. Each of these makes possible, even necessary, methods of building which are different from those practiced in previous centuries. As is to be expected, these changed methods of construction usually affect the appearance of the churches now being built.

One of the most interesting of these developments is the laminated arch, which is glued up from separate pieces of wood to form a long, curved framing member. Thus a single, graceful part serves the functions both of a vertical post in the wall and of a principal rafter in the roof. Eleven of the churches under study use this technique, with a considerable variety of effects. Related to it in function is the so-called "A"-frame type of construction, of which three examples occur in this group. Here the principal framing members are straight rather than arched, but they, too, extend in one rigid piece from ground level to roof ridge. The building's cross section, therefore, forms a steeply pitched isosceles triangle.

The steel frame is much used in church construction, but in most of the examples studied the steel skeleton is completely concealed and receives little expression on the surface. Several of the churches are built with reinforced or prestressed concrete in arches, walls, or roof; more make use of this material in the more prosaic form of concrete block. These and other modern materials have had the effect of causing more than half of the churches under consideration to have roofs pitched at fifteen degrees or less from the horizontal.

Among the more traditional building materials, brick is by far the most commonly used. Stone as a major building material appears very seldom in the contemporary churches. The careful use of color characterizes several of the churches, and the science of acoustics has had its influence in the design of others.

We now turn our attention to certain of the individual components of a contemporary Lutheran church building.

The Chancel and Its Furnishings. In contrast to the relatively small chancels of many Lutheran churches from the recent past, almost three fourths of the contemporary churches studied have chancels at least as wide as the nave itself (not including aisles). Furthermore, modern architects have succeeded, perhaps better than many previous ones, in directing all attention toward this part of the church with its altar. An important part in this achievement is due to the many ways developed by contemporary architects of setting the chancel area off from the nave and making it more conspicuous. One such technique is the flooding of the altar space with natural light, usually by means of windows hidden from the worshippers' eyes. This idea is used in at least seventeen of the thirty-nine churches — almost sufficient to qualify it as one of the distinctive motifs of contemporary church architecture.

About half the altars are of wood, the other half of stone; one is sheathed in copper. The use of a dossal curtain or a reredos with the altar appears to have become less popular, only about ten occurring. A new motif, however, which has become very commonly accepted in contemporary Lutheran churches, is that of the very large cross placed against the east wall of the chancel, above the altar. Of the churches for which the writer has information on this matter, twenty-five display a large cross of the sort described, in contrast to a mere four churches which have only the traditional cross on the altar. The great majority of these are simple crosses, without the corpus; an actual crucifix is used in only three cases. Almost every one of the churches is equipped with a Communion rail, usually of a very simple design. The sanctuary lamp occurs at least twice, an ambry once.

Furnishings Outside the Chancel. Pulpits of modern Lutheran churches exhibit a wide variety of shapes, but almost no variety at all in materials. As far as could be determined, the pulpits of all the churches under study are built of wood, in major part at least. Some are of plywood, others are more traditionally constructed. Shapes include, in order of frequency, the square or rectangular, the octagonal, and cylindrical, as well as several of more irregular form. In two churches the "center" aisle of the nave is actually off center, so that about two thirds of the nave seating is on the same side of the church as the pulpit.

Nave seating is, in almost all cases, provided on pews of the ordinary variety. For the pews a few architects chose a design to harmonize them with the rest of the building.

Data on baptismal fonts was more limited than on most previous items. The cases in which information was available again show a profusion of different designs and materials. One church has a separate baptistery (but visible from the nave), while several others have the font in an area marked off by being made somewhat lower than the nave floor.

Choir and organ were placed in or near the chancel in fourteen of the churches for which such information was available, while in sixteen they were placed in the rear of the nave, usually in a loft.

Windows. The matter of windows, as might be expected, is one in which there is considerable departure from older architectural styles. Glass is now far more easily obtainable than it was in the periods when the historic styles were developed. Furthermore, modern construction materials and techniques make more of the wall space available for use as window area. One expects, therefore, to see large expanses of glass employed in modern church architecture. In many cases this expectation is borne out. Five of the churches have an entire wall in glass, and in many others a good deal more than fifty per cent of a wall is a window area.

But many architects, apparently, have concluded that too much uncontrolled light, or too much of a view through the windows, may tend to distract the worshipers' attention from the altar area. They have therefore invented various devices for overcoming this difficulty, most of them in the form of louver boards standing on end and cutting off the line of sight through the windows. Even where modern construction techniques make it possible, from an engineering standpoint, windows are not always provided in great profusion, and many completely windowless walls are seen. Modern architecture allows the freedom of asymmetry, so that one of the side walls may have windows while the opposite side has none; thus worshipers are not disturbed by direct sunlight during the time of the day when services are usually held.

Stained glass is found in fewer of the churches under consideration than clear glass. This may be due either to the modern tendency toward lighter interiors or to the economic factor.

Artificial Lighting. Lighting fixtures suspended from the ceiling are still used in modern churches (some are well designed in harmony with other furnishings), but are no longer the most common source of artificial light. Several newer techniques now appear more often: cove lighting, diffused upward from a long trough, which is usually placed along the lower edge of the clerestory wall; and sealed-beam spotlights, mounted at the level of the ceiling.

The Entrance. The center of the west façade is the traditional position for the main entrance of a church, and it is still more commonly chosen than any other single location (twelve out of the thirty-nine). But in the majority of cases the entrance is placed in various other positions—either elsewhere on the west end or on the north or south side. There is little uniformity of design in this respect.

Many interesting techniques have been used by modern church architects to give architectural importance to the main entrance. Some of these have been very successful in emphasizing the entrance and making it inviting. Probably the most common device is the use of a covered porch over the approach to the main doors. Another method much in evidence is that of associating the main entrance with the tower.

The Tower. No tower of any description is to be found on seven of the thirty-nine churches. Among the rest, the most popular type of tower is one of substantial bulk, rising from ground level to a height usually greater than that of any other part of the building. Almost all are very simple in outline and retain the same dimensions from bottom to top, in contrast to the progressive narrowing toward the top and the transitions from one cross-sectional shape to another that characterize Gothic or Georgian-Colonial towers. By far the most common material for such towers is brick. In place of a full-sized tower a few churches have spires or flèches set atop the roof. A number of architects have devised various modern substitutes for the traditional tower, such as brick or concrete pylons, open-work designs in steel or wood, or large free-standing crosses.

The tower, or its equivalent, is most often placed at or near the western end of the church. In this respect contemporary architec-

ture is following what is probably also the most common usage of the past. Almost every one of the towers included in the survey has at least one representation of the cross appearing prominently on it. Only about five contain bells, although a number of the rest are designed to accommodate one or more bells in the future.

The chief functional purpose of most of the towers seems to be that of publicity. Usually the other purposes to which they may be put in modern churches (e. g., to enclose stairways or entryways) hardly seem to justify their existence. Perhaps publicity, or the attracting of attention, to the church and its meaning, has always been the most important function of a church tower.

Ornamentation. There appears to be a widespread dearth of surface ornamentation in modern Lutheran churches. The once commonly used Christian symbols and figures are not generally seen in the new churches. Some of the correspondents expressed an awareness of this relative deficiency. The only universally used emblem is the cross; and because of the lack of other symbols this one is sometimes definitely overused. There are many churches in which no other ecclesiastical symbol or figure appears. A number of churches do, however, display carved, embossed, or appliquéd symbols on the front surfaces of altar, pulpit, font, etc. Several notable exceptions to the general trend provide fine examples of the kind of artwork which might be commissioned and executed for other modern Lutheran churches.

III

How have church members, community, and visitors reacted toward the new churches after they were built and in use? Information on this was compiled from the questionnaires returned to the writer. Three of the questions dealt directly with this subject: "Now that the church is built and in use, what criticisms of it do you and your parishioners have? How extensive is any dissatisfaction among the parishioners? What is the typical reaction of the community and of visitors?" The validity of the answers received depends not on whether they are completely objective in their reporting but on the fact that they reflect the thinking of persons very closely connected with the individual churches.

Reactions of Pastors and Parishioners. Of the thirty-nine churches

in this study, two did not report on this question, two expressed a predominantly negative reaction toward their new church, eleven said that some dissatisfaction did exist among the members but was very limited, and all the remaining twenty-four reported that (at the time of writing, at least) there was no dissatisfaction at all. Several of the latter, however, indicated that at first there had been some dissatisfaction and opposition among the members, but that this died down as the people became accustomed to its appearance and better acquainted with its advantages. It may be safe to conclude that as contemporary design in churches becomes more widely known and used, it will come to be generally accepted.

Reactions of Community and Visitors. All eighteen of the replies that made reference to community reactions reported these to be predominantly favorable. A number have found the publicity value of the new modern churches to be high; some even traced a distinct rise in church membership largely to this factor. It appears, therefore, that Lutheran churches of contemporary design are, in general, making a very favorable impact upon the communities in which they are located — and that in many cases the contemporary design itself is a factor in making the church better known and in enhancing its witness in the community.

Most of the correspondents also reported on the impressions of the visitors who have come to their new church. Their typical reaction, according to these replies, is "very good," "excellent," "very much impressed," or words of similar import. Even the two correspondents who themselves reacted negatively toward their new churches reported that visitors find them to be beautiful. A number of replies made special mention of the large number of visitors which their churches had attracted.

In closing, it seems appropriate to quote a pastor who wrote of the few who dislike the contemporary trend: "Personally, I think that those who always stick to the traditional lack vision and imagination. . . . By and large," he concludes, however, "people do like modern architecture in a church. That has been our experience."

St. Louis, Mo.