



a place for worship

Article 2
February 1, 2018

This is the second article in our new 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 church facilities that help support their ministry goals.

We will explore important principles of how to create excellent spaces that inspire worship, encourage community, and facilitate spiritual growth. We look forward to sharing this journey with you. - Steve Hammer, BPH Architects



“...yea, though I walk through the valley...”

When I was a young child, my grandma had me memorize the 23rd Psalm. I still consider it one of my favorite Bible verses. And now that I am a grandpa, I have been thinking back to this powerful verse.

Although we may ultimately want to dwell in the house of the Lord forever, sometimes we find ourselves walking through the valley.

In creating A Place for Worship, one of our most important jobs is (with God’s help) to navigate the valleys the best we can.

is it attainable

This article will focus on the important subject of project feasibility, and interestingly, the 23rd Psalm comes to mind. Sometimes the most difficult part of planning a church addition or remodel is dealing with regulations and restrictions placed on our projects. At times, it can feel like the valley of the shadow of death.

We wish we could just skip all of the red tape and be about the business of creating space for ministry. But unfortunately, this is the reality of the world we live in. So how do we move from being overwhelmed to being hopeful? The key is to prepare ourselves, manage our expectations, and approach these issues with wisdom and patience.

There are three critical elements that should be part of a feasibility study for every project, **Regulatory Research**, **Space Programming**, and **Master Planning**, and these three need to be done before the building design moves forward on a project.

Regulatory Research

One of the biggest mistakes that can be made on a project is to assume we just need to get a building permit and then we can start construction. The reality is that we need to do comprehensive research on all regulations that affect a given project.

These regulations include not just requirements from the building department, but from land use and zoning, critical areas, storm water drainage, fire, traffic, health, and utility departments, to name a few.

All of these departments have their own codes and regulations, and sometimes they even conflict with one another. The most important first step is to have a pre-application meeting with the jurisdiction and make sure representatives from all of the departments are present. That way, critical issues can be identified and discussed openly.

And the design team needs to have the expertise and experience to know what questions to ask and then interpret the information for you in laymen’s terms.



Many churches are located in zoning districts that require a Conditional Use Permit (or CUP). This can be a lengthy and complex process, so it is good to be aware of it up front.

During this process, the design team will prepare preliminary drawings, studies, and reports, including a master site plan, critical areas report, traffic study, civil engineering calculations and drawings, geotechnical report, etc.

Selecting the right team will help assure that the process will go smoothly. And a creative and proactive design team can help minimize cost impacts from code issues, which helps you to be a good steward of the funds you are entrusted with.

In addition to the costs for the CUP, the church should also allow enough time for this preliminary work to be completed, and for the jurisdiction to complete their review. Once the CUP is approved, then the project team can start working on the building permit.

It should be noted that even when moving into an existing building, there may be permits required, including a tenant improvement permit and a change of

occupancy permit if the existing building is not used for assembly.

Space Programming

Concurrent with the comprehensive code investigation, it is important to determine the ministry goals of the church for the project. This is done through the process of space programming.

The goal for space programming should be to balance the 5 functional areas of the church: Worship, Fellowship, Christian Education, Administration, and Parking / Site.

...a roadmap to help you determine the ultimate potential of the site...

Following is a link to an excerpt from the proprietary spreadsheet we have developed and fine-tuned over the last few decades.

Sample Church Space Program

With this tool, we can enter the existing attendance figures and project them forward based on goals for growth. We can then generate a room-by-room summary of all the functional areas of the church. Although this is a great way to quickly generate a program, it is more important that the architect gets

to know you as a church, and that their program is a reflection of your unique ministry goals.

Master Planning

Once the regulatory restrictions and space programming are determined, the next step is to develop a master plan. Think of it as a roadmap to help you determine the ultimate development potential of the site.

The master plan marries the code information with the space programming, and considers multiple site and building concepts to determine the design that works best for the church.

The master plan can be divided into multiple logical, affordable phases to be implemented over time as the church grows. And oftentimes, the phases can be planned to minimize cost impacts from regulations, such as limiting a second floor size to eliminate the need for expensive elevator.

A critical aspect of feasibility is affordability, so it is important to get a good budget estimate as part of the master plan. It should account for 4 main components: Building Hard Cost, Site Hard Cost, Soft Costs (sales tax, permits and fees, FF&E, etc.) and Entitlement costs (things like land costs, utility extensions, street frontage, etc.)



The space programming for a project should be a reflection of the ministry goals of the church. The spaces have to be the right sizes and configurations to function correctly. Here is a lobby space of over 7000 SF that can double as a fellowship area. It provides the amount of space needed in a light-filled welcoming space.



about bpharchitects

A leader in church planning and design in the Northwest, BPH Architects has worked on over 600 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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Bart Shorack



Steve Hammer

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



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