

Immanuel Baptist in Skiatook celebrates its new sanctuary

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=4668>

There is no doubt that the most gratifying moments in an architect's career are when a building is finally finished, but the best of those moments is when the building is a church.

Recently I participated in an evening service at Immanuel Baptist Church in Skiatook, where we have just completed the construction of a new 40,000 square foot, 750-seat sanctuary building. Meeting in the old sanctuary, Pastor Jim Standridge spoke to the congregation about how nearly thirty years ago, they had moved from an even older and smaller sanctuary to the one where they were now seated, and had never dreamed that they would ever need anything larger.

After some songs led by Dr. Carver and the choir, and a few words from Brother Jim, a shofar was blown as we all walked from the old sanctuary to the new one.

As we entered the new sanctuary, the music began, along with some of the most joyous singing you have ever heard. Then Brother Jim got up to speak, and looking out and smiling over the crowd that nearly filled the pews he said, "I don't think we built it big enough!"

What followed was one of his powerful sermons and a beautiful communion service. I enjoy working with all my church clients, but there are some that I just enjoy working with more than others. From the beginning of the project, the staff and the people of Immanuel Baptist took me in and treated me like one of their own.

Not all churches are like that, you understand. Most churches treat their architects respectfully, but some just don't want much of a relationship.

But the folks at Immanuel Baptist, and especially the staff, showed a keen interest in not only my professional skills, but also my spiritual well-being, and demonstrated it with a gift of hospitality that I have never seen in any other church.

When we began to design the building, one of the first things they requested was that the office area was to be a warm, inviting place where anyone was welcome to stop in and have a cup of coffee and talk, which is exactly the way their office had been for years. While many churches view their offices as a private place, theirs was exactly the opposite.

It was obvious from my first visit that their office had become what we call, in architectural lingo, a Third Place, a place where you are always welcome and everybody knows your name. It was the non-alcoholic version of Cheers, a social hub that is treasured by the congregation. But it had another purpose. The associate pastors, Bill Bowman and Sabrina Miller, told me that ninety percent of the evangelism conducted in their church took place in the office. The sanctuary was where the edification of the church was done, where Brother Jim delivers sermons

that don't mince words or spare feelings, but delivers them with such love and compassion that only the hardest of hearts could reject the message.

The sanctuary was a very important space to them, naturally, but they wanted something unusual. They wanted a large glass wall behind the pulpit that placed the sanctuary in full view of the street that led to downtown. They wanted people to see and understand that the Gospel was being preached there. Between the pulpit and the glass wall stands a huge cross over the baptistery, symbolic of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Above the pulpit stands a sixty-five foot tall steeple with a seventeen-foot-tall cross on top, tall enough to be visible from the main street of downtown. Below the steeple is a small chapel that will be open to anyone who wants to have a quiet place to meditate and pray.

Many academics and urban planners believe that churches no longer have anything to contribute to their communities, but in Skiatook they still get it. Churches provide a positive influence on urban life and fill a desperate need for service to fellow citizens.

And while some of those same academics and urban planners look for ways to use eminent domain and tax dollars to create urban renewal, old homes around Immanuel's new building have been fairly purchased, torn down, and new ones have been built in their place. Urban renewal, church style.

The New Urbanists believe that they can recreate the kind of community that has for hundreds of years naturally blossomed around American churches. Some even believe that the churches aren't necessary, that they are a relic from the past.

But Immanuel Baptist is no relic. This is a church that should be seen as a model of what churches should be.

Thank you Brother Jim, Bill, Sabrina, Paula, Dr. Carver, Olin, and the many others who gave this architect the greatest joy to practice his craft. I promise not to be a stranger.

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