

Tradition in Continuity

Considerations for the Development of Catholic Sacred Architecture



Lifting our Minds and Hearts to God, or Going to the Mall | Posted May 3, 2011

Here's a [brief news story](#) I came across recently – regarding the endangered status of traditional church steeples. Certainly it is a sad state, that the more traditional aspects of our ecclesiastical architecture – which are certainly meant to lift our eyes heavenward – are too often seen as burdensome financial liabilities.

A few interesting excerpts from the article:

...Architects and church planners see today's new congregations meet in retrooled sports arenas or shopping malls or modern buildings designed to appeal to contemporary believers turned off by the look of old-time religion.

Steeple may have outlived their times as signposts. People hunting for a church don't scan the horizon, they search the Internet. Google reports searches for "churches" soar before Easter each year. ...

Regarding the financial justification for steeples and bell towers, the need for cellular communications antennas has been a large part of the conversation with religious communities in the past fifteen years or so. Judging from our recent experience it is likely to remain so.

One church in the McLean, VA area reportedly leveraged this need for cellular antennas to their advantage.

Church leaders located a (cellular communications) company ready to deal, negotiated the design and "now we have a steeple, hiding two cell antennas, that gives us a really big profile on the horizon. It's elegant

and majestic and a win-win for us," Floyd says. It's also a visual contrast to a massive, modern megachurch across the street that boasts no steeple.

No surprise, says architect Gary Landhauser, a partner with Novak Design Group in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, who worked on nearly 30 churches in past 15 years. "We have done a lot of church designs, but we haven't done a steeple design in 15 years," Landhauser says. Today, he says, people want their church to look comfortable and inviting, "more like a mall."

Much could be said of a general Christian public that seeks comfort and a consumerist-based building type such as "the mall" as a deciding factor in their church selection.

There is a line in the middle of the Eucharistic Prayer that calls out to the faithful, "Lift up your hearts!" or in Latin, "Sursum corda!" It is easy to see that the traditional church steeple or bell tower serves as a physical symbol of this fundamental movement of our hearts, and the bells so often housed within supply the aural complement to the visual call.

However setting that larger conversation aside for another day, I was struck by an interesting overlap – although it is not noted specifically in the article. Considering how people "search" to find their churches these days, if an internet search is performed on your smart phone, your signal and the website content might in fact be beaming to you direct from a church steeple.