

## ***Essential Ingredients of a Church Design Process***

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By their very nature, church projects are unpredictable. Financial, leadership, cultural and ministry issues can create a slow-down, stop-n-go or even abandonment of a project. For success and sanity, an architect's design process must be flexible, adaptable and well defined. The strength of a well conceived church design process lies in its ability to encourage participation by user groups while the architect maintains a high level of control in design decisions. Critical ingredients also include leadership retreat, education sessions, large and small group discussion, visualization exercises and development of common design threads. The objective is to use a qualitative experiential approach that integrates design excellence and building function.

A quality church design delivery process should find people satisfied with the process, learning something they did not know before, and development of a loyal project ownership. A clear description of each participant's role serves to create an atmosphere of trust and cooperation.

Key phases in the design delivery process include:

- **Process Planning**
  - From inspiration to design. Steps include leadership retreat, establishing visions, goals, principles, catechetical sessions, scenario planning, master plan and the schematic design.
- **Implementation**
  - Set the design into documents for construction. Steps include financial commitment, design development, construction documents and bidding/negotiation in preparation for construction.
- **Transition**
  - Moving from paper to reality. Steps include construction, ministry training, leave taking, dedication and a post occupancy review.

Of these three project phases, the most critical is **Process Planning**. If the project does not start in a comprehensive and empowering manner, then succeeding phases will also fare poorly.

**Case Study:**

The Cathedral of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Dodge City, Kansas is a new cathedral for the Roman Catholic Church, dedicated December 9, 2001. The design process began in January 1998. The new cathedral parish combines two former parishes – Our Lady of Guadalupe which was primarily of Hispanic ethnicity and Sacred Heart Cathedral which was mostly of Anglo (immigrant European) ethnicity.

Focal and potential project buster issues that occurred during the **Process Planning** Phase included:

- The hiring Bishop retires at completion of schematic design. By right of office, the new Bishop has the option to scrap the design and start over, make design modifications, or proceed as is currently designed.
- Cultural prejudices existed between the Hispanic parish and Anglo parish. Diocesan and parish leaders had faith that the project would be a catalyst for creating unity from this cultural insensitivity.
- The unfolding scope of the project exceeded all pre-design concepts. A decision not to build unless 90% of the funds were either pledged, or collected, had the potential to scuttle or significantly reduce the project scope.

Elements of the **Process Planning** Phase that are critical; include:

- Leadership Retreat establishes the project purpose and empowers the building committee.
- Catechetical sessions are necessary for formation of critical design opinions by parishioners.
- Design and programming are intertwined, programming informs design and design directs program decisions.
- Each meeting offers both large and small group sessions thus supporting extroverts and introverts in the process.
- Church members have an opportunity to offer a design vision for consideration.
- The review of group visions establishes a set of common threads, or design elements.
- An experiential approach considers both aesthetic and function.
- Encouragement of a personal spiritual renewal was a consistent element throughout the design process.

The leadership retreat produced a statement of purpose and became the touchstone the building committee would return to over and over again. A series of parish meetings offered a platform for educating parishioners how rites and rituals of the church affect their design choices. Culmination of the parish programming meetings was a visualization exercise that allowed parishioner groups to present their conceptual plan for the future worship space. Common threads from the sixteen consensus plans provided the overall design direction.

The new Bishop took several months to review master plan and schematic design documents. He affirmed that the process the parishes had gone through was sound and was organized to allow parishioners to communicate their hopes and dreams.

As the parishes established unified pastoral and ministry teams, new relationships occurred and cultural differences were replaced with common goals and objectives. The building committee established an open process in which all minutes and decisions were published.

Fundraising for the project first occurred with the two parishes. A projected ability to raise \$2 Million was more than exceeded by a campaign which yielded almost \$4.5 Million in gifts and pledges. To complete the fundraising process, the new Bishop undertook a year-long pilgrimage to all the parishes in the diocese. His message of spiritual renewal and unity helped secure an additional \$4.5 Million in pledges and contributions.

The **Implementation** and **Transition** Phases moved forward with relative ease because the **Process Planning** Phase adequately incorporated the key ingredients for success.

**Lessons for use in other Church Projects:**

- Church building projects can be a catalyst to achieving greater things, such as personal spiritual growth.
- Goals of unity were achieved through an open-participatory design process and advancement of a common purpose.
- Spiritual renewal should be a part of a church project.
- Initial vision is achieved because the **Process Planning** Phase contains a reliable, trustworthy framework from which design decisions are discussed and implemented.