



*Enhancing the Aesthetics  
of your Sacred Space*

By Stephen Marshall-Ward

AGO Workshop

**“Enhancing the Aesthetics of Your Worship Space”**

Stephen Marshall-Ward

Monday, June 29, 1:30-2:30PM

The Chapel of St. Ignatius, Seattle University

**Welcome**

Feel free to quietly roam this sacred space  
as you center your heart toward beauty, light and spiritual energy.

We will attempt the following journey together this afternoon:

Introductions

Introduction to the Importance of Aesthetics

Aesthetic Theory

Basic Aesthetic Principles in Sacred Space:

❖ Balance ❖ Harmony ❖ Energy ❖ Focus ❖ Symbolism ❖ Invitation ❖ Light ❖

Steps to Take

Conclusions

Discussion

Invitation

❖ Stephen Marshall Design, Inc. ❖ [www.stephenmarshalldesign.com](http://www.stephenmarshalldesign.com) ❖

Workshop-June 29, 1:30-2:30 p.m., Seattle University, St. Ignatius Chapel  
Presenter: Stephen Marshall-Ward, Owner & Senior Designer  
Stephen Marshall Design, Inc.

## Enhancing the Aesthetics of your Sacred Space

### Synopsis:

Understanding the freeing potential of aesthetics can lead to the development and design of space that transcends the confining capacity of the physical toward a transforming experience of Light and the Divine Spirit. Through a brief summary and sharing visual elements in the exceptional environment of The Chapel of St. Ignatius, Mr. Marshall-Ward will examine the basic characteristics of aesthetics that can bring spiritually-inspired life and beauty to our worship spaces. A brief time for group discussion will follow.

### I. Introduction

**Who Are We?** Welcome Everyone. Thank you for being here today. It would be lovely to take a great deal of time to really get to know each other – but, then we would not have any time left to discuss our topic for this afternoon. So, here is a quick summary about myself as a means of introduction: I have always been a student of buildings; I LOVE buildings. I have always been a spiritually-driven person. And, in the past couple of decades, I have been combining and organizing these two areas of my life into a system of helping faith communities as they answer some pretty important questions about who they are and the buildings they inhabit.

That's basically who I am. In the interest of the topic at hand, I would like to know who are you and why you are here today?

Here are four Questions. Let's get some good energy flowing... answer as quickly as you can... don't think too hard... just answer:

- ❖ How many people here absolutely love their worship space? In ONE word, tell us ONE thing that you love about it.
- ❖ How many people here wish their worship space was different than it is? In ONE word, tell us ONE thing you wish was different about your worship space.
- ❖ How many of you have a desire to take your faith community through the process of enhancing or redesigning their worship space?
- ❖ How many of you feel adequately educated to be involved in a discussion, arguing in favor of aesthetic integrity?

OK. This is all very interesting – and gives a launching place from which to begin. Here is a little story to get us started:

### II. Expressing the Importance of Aesthetic Decisions in a Sacred Space

Independent of each other, three groups of people want to improve their three different buildings for the purpose of worship and spiritual formation – each for their own communities. They address the challenge with three different approaches:

- ❖ The first group addresses their aesthetic improvements with one primary objective: spend as little money as possible in order to “get the job done” – while possibly throwing a little cash at a couple special interests that are important to some specific people in their group.
- ❖ The second group has in it some very intelligent people who want to systematically calculate something aesthetically pleasing. They debate at length over intellectual principles, personal philosophies and individual ideals - only to realize how very much they disagree about how their building should be developed.
- ❖ The third group - while keeping overall resources and a budget in mind - addresses their aesthetic improvements with several objectives: They want to create with vision, beauty and inspiration, attempting to reconcile their community's spiritual purpose with their physical facility.

Which group do you think has the best chance at ultimately creating the most spiritually-inspiring space?

I believe that the third group has the best chance at ultimate success. You see, they want to use their physical facility to enhance their purpose - or mission. They have set out to reconcile what would appear to be two completely irreconcilable factors: their physical space and their spiritual mission. The level of their ultimate success, I believe, has everything to do with their ability to reconcile these two realities in their world. In his book *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno says, "The rank of an artwork is defined essentially by whether it exposes itself to, or withdraws from, the irreconcilable." What if our buildings exposed what was previously conceived as irreconcilable between the limitations of physical space and the eager yearnings of the spirit-filled heart? How would they do this?

Before we can talk about how to head this direction, I would like to talk briefly about what stops us from doing this. What challenges do we face?

In one word, share with us ONE of the challenges facing you in creating aesthetically-successful physical space:

Challenges: Economy/Limited Resources/Lack of Knowledge/Personal Agenda/  
Fear/Anxiety/Traditions/Limited Personal Ideals/A World in Need/Poverty

There are many challenges that stand in the way of great aesthetics. But, I am a firm believer in the power of faith and art to come together in a bold statement, energizing entire communities and even entire cultures around that which inspires us toward spiritual awareness, awakening and enlightenment.

Matthew Whitney, one of the artists presently being shown in my Methodist Church's Art Gallery accompanies his art with the following statement:

*"I paint to visually meditate on the brokenness and beauty in life, creation, and faith. When I consider the world, with all its poverty, injustice and evil, I see it and cling to a belief, a notion, a truth, that there is here still beauty to be discovered, seen, and experienced. In our age we blissfully devour our natural resources for fleeting comfort, while media bombards us with so much content that our senses become duller still." He continues, "In my work I seek to slow down and search for beauty that seems to grow ever more scarce, or corrupted by our selfish means, or made irrelevant in our teachings. I seek in my work to brush back this surface level of our current existence to find the spiritual and mysterious elements of reality, always seeking Truth, and thus hoping to communicate that our collective story is to struggle with answers to the great questions of life."*

His art is, indeed, moving and spiritually powerful – drawing the viewer toward a deeper understanding of God.

What if our buildings – not just our art – could do this with equal persuasion? Some do; most do not; what are the differences between those that do and those that do not?

Let's look first at this worship space we share today: Created by Architect Steven Holl, this space has won numerous design and architectural awards, putting Steven Holl "on the map" as an extraordinary architect. Most notably is that Holl's plan for the chapel won a design award from the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and the scale model of the chapel has been selected to become part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Why? Why has this place of worship and spiritual formation garnered such notoriety? It is, after all, just walls and a roof, stone and wood, metal and glass, light and shadow - using the same materials that are in hundreds, even tens of thousands of other buildings. What makes this one different and so special? In one word, what do YOU think it is? What do you view as the defining distinctive toward success? **I propose that its creators brought together these two factors: they possessed a clear understanding of aesthetics and a clear understanding of the PURPOSE of this building.**

### III. Aesthetic Theory/Philosophy of Aesthetics

There has been much philosophizing about Aesthetics/the Theory of Aesthetics and the accomplishment of successful Aesthetics. There is much to be learned about this potentially-transforming spiritual topic. And, I think, it may be best served when truly addressed on a spiritual level.

Soetsu Yanagi, who espoused a philosophy that included a marriage between art, beauty and utilitarianism, said, *“Beauty is a kind of mystery, which is why it cannot be grasped adequately through the intellect.”* He believed (through his Mingei theory) that art – the beautiful – is to be useable by common people in common life. This is what we should be trying to accomplish – on some level – with our worship spaces: Inspiring, everyday beauty that draws people toward God and draws them toward wanting to know God.

We could continue to philosophize: Plato, the founder of philosophical aesthetics, places enormous emphasis on “measure”; meaning, the determination of relationship through knowledge of proportion. While Plato and Aristotle addressed art from a point of view based in politics and metaphysics, Augustine based his philosophical approach to art in the Scriptures – looking at art as a profound expression of personal faith, a connection to the Divine. Many philosophers since these three profess varying ideals and thoughts about the purpose and function of the beautiful in society.

An enormous question that arises – when philosophizing about aesthetics – is, “Do we really need it?” Do we actually NEED art, beauty or an ascent toward aesthetic integrity in our buildings of faith? Can’t people worship God when surrounded by that which is ugly? Can’t they find God in a desolate, artfully-barren room or countryside? Well... yes, of course! One could argue that there would be less to distract the common person if there was not art – nothing of particular beauty – in our houses of worship. These, too, are not new thoughts. And, YES, it is correct that art for art’s sake in the place of worship can be just another form of idolatry. Artistic presentation for the sake of personal aspirations alone can be simply self-serving.

So, what of beauty? I espouse – even passionately cling to - the philosophy that glances at the world around us – filled with anger, hate, greed, jealousy, fame and power – as a place in desperate need of something with intentional meaning – something beautiful and inspiring – that calls us out of our mundane existence and draws us toward God. This approach to aesthetics within the church has its challenges and weaknesses. But when it is realized in its finest usable and accessible form, something extraordinary happens to those with open spirits:

*Time becomes Space  
Space becomes Boundary  
Boundary becomes Balance  
Balance becomes Harmony  
Harmony becomes Energy  
Energy becomes Movement  
Movement becomes Rhythm  
Rhythm becomes Focus  
Focus becomes Meaning  
Meaning introduces Light  
Light Infuses and Transforms*

### IV. Creating Aesthetically Pleasing Spaces

So, enough philosophizing...HOW DO WE ENHANCE THE AESTHETICS OF OUR WORSHIP SPACES? So far this afternoon, I have been attempting to point out the reality that one cannot try to improve aesthetics without at least a basic understanding of aesthetics – some thoughtful philosophy regarding it.

Now, I would like to present some elements that are critically important to accomplishing successful aesthetics. We could discuss and debate for days about aesthetic theory and about each one of these principles. All I am attempting to do today is give you a very quick overview to get you thinking about these important elements.

- a. Balance: Balance includes Proportion and Scale - what Plato calls “measurement” – is critical to successful and pleasing aesthetics. Palladio – one of the greatest architects in western history - became a student of architectural proportion. When studying the works of Vitruvius, Alberti, Da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Palladio, one understands very quickly that proportion is an enormously important consideration when attempting to succeed with creating anything artistic. Look at the interior of L.A.’s [Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels](#), designed by José Rafael Moneo. When an object is proportionately successful, it catches the attention of the observer – it creates a connection to our innate sense of what Plato calls “measurement.” Leonardo says, “Every part is disposed to unite with the whole that it may thereby escape from its own incompleteness.” In writing about Leonardo Da Vinci, in his book “Leonardo Da Vinci – In His Own Words,” William Wray says, “One of the functions of art is to allow us to escape from, and challenge the narrowness of our own vision and discover something of the breadth and depth, beauty and wholeness of life.” Vitruvius, Alberti, Michelangelo, Palladio, Da Vinci, and many others continue to draw us back to the proportion of the human body as the measure of complete proportion. This is why we might say, in passing one house, “Oh, Dear, that is so ugly! What were they thinking?” While seeing another house, we might say, “That is so beautiful! I could definitely live there!” Each response probably has something to do with proportion, balance – how your eye and, therefore, your mind processes the measurements of the building or space.
- b. Harmony: Harmony is birthed from an understanding of Proportion but also includes color, texture, and Light vs. Darkness. I like to say that Harmony has to do with “Thoughtful Elemental Connections.” In other words, everything must connect. Look for ways to create meaningful connections. In the creation of this [Chapel](#), Steven Holl created a metaphor: He describes it as “seven bottles of light in a stone box” with each of the seven bottles or vessels of light corresponding to a focal aspect of Catholic worship. At the [Temppeliaukio Church](#) (or “Rock Church”) in Helsinki, Finland (designed by Tuomo and Timo Suomalainen), the church is literally hewn out of the rock, where the walls of the church are actual walls of this enormous rock. The ceiling is a dome covered with copper wire. The interior is lit by natural light streaming through 180 vertical window panes that connect the dome and the wall. Successful connection does not happen by accident. It is intentional. One must have an understanding of how things fit together. I often tell the story of the woman in a Committee meeting. (ART and Creativity by Committee is an ever-interesting way of life, by the way...) This dear and honest woman, when seeing the paint color we chose for her church’s Sanctuary, said something like, “Oh my God, that is the ugliest color I have ever seen!” We constantly remind our clients that we do not choose color or any other element of a project because it is OUR FAVORITE. We choose it because it helps in the process of harmonious connection. It serves its own purpose in the scheme of harmonious environment – connecting each individual part to the success of the whole. Leonardo Da Vinci said, “Every part is disposed to unite with the whole - that it may thereby escape from its own incompleteness.” By the way, we held our ground with the “ugliest paint color ever,” and won an Award from the Northwest Design Awards using that paint color. When one Chaplain, later to be another client of ours, first entered the space with the “ugliest-ever” paint color, she told me that she stopped in her tracks and stood still for ten minutes – just taking in the beauty around her.
- c. Energy: When developing a sense of energy toward a particular design, I think most often of the structure of music. Influential and relevant music has both proportion (or balance) and harmony (or connection). It also has rhythm. Some would say – though this is not always true – that rhythm is the driving force (or energy) within music. And yet, we often ignore rhythm when we talk about design. Energy in design could be defined as “Rhythm through Dramatic Spatial Pace”. Again, [St. Ignatius Chapel](#) is a perfect example of successful “Dramatic Spatial Pace.” From the moments of approach one is drawn around to the doorway to discover a calming reflecting pool of water on the way. The tower, rising out of the pool, gently points to the door –

which is no common doorway. The door clearly states that this is something special – something different. The number of lights in the door corresponds with the number of “bottles” that protrude through the overall box. Successful energized “spatial pace” draws us through an intentional rhythm and toward a particular focal point.

- d. Focus (“Relevancy toward a Purpose”): If a room has too many things that are all the same size, whether large or small, the space begins to feel cluttered and messy. Clutter, to me, is the opposite of focus. Clutter means that things are there without purpose and without connecting to a sense of balance and harmony. When focus works correctly, everything in the space works together to create [harmony](#), balance and a rhythm toward a particular focal point. Whether in a living room, where the focus may be a beautiful fireplace or in a sanctuary where the focus may be a spiritually-connected Altar or a gorgeously-ornate Torah Ark, everything in the room should work to bring focus toward that singular focal point. Secondary focal points are certainly possible – and almost always happen - but are most successful when they, too, help to point to the intended focus in the room. The energy in the room is completed as it arrives at the focal point. You can experience this by being cognizant of your surroundings as you enter a room. Where is the rhythm of the space taking you? Where do you ultimately end up standing and stopping? Where you end up looking is most-likely the focal point of the space. When redesigning the Sanctuary at Queen Anne United Methodist Church here in Seattle, we considered and developed this element. The congregation wanted a central focus in the room – a circular gathering of the people around a central Altar. To help bring focus to the Altar and the center of the room, we designed a sculpture that would draw the eye from any point in the room toward that central point and ultimately down to the Altar.
- e. Symbolism (or Meaning): Symbolism has to do with “Personal Connection.” And “Personal Connections” are just that – they are personal. One has to have an understanding similar to the creator of the symbol in order for the symbol to have the impact that was intended. Throughout each of the examples today, there is great symbolism. A Methodist understands that the Holy Spirit is symbolized by a dove and that the Altar is the point to which the worshipers look for the Sacrament of the Eucharist – or, as they call it, Communion. They gather around the Lord’s Table, where they are served the symbols of Christ’s Body. Christ was anointed by the Holy Spirit and has sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in them – among them and in them – to make a spiritual difference in their lives and ultimately in the world. So, for a Methodist, there is great [symbolism](#) in this descending sculpture: the Holy Spirit descends into their midst and ultimately transforms – bringing light and life. No matter what your faith practice is or what your theology is or what your traditions are, creating symbolism that connects to the personal understanding of the worshipers is powerful and inspiring. It helps to bring focus, meaning and spiritual energy to the worshipers’ experience.
- f. Invitation (“Warmth through Accessibility and Beauty”): If you have a powerful and meaningful focal point in the space but you have no visual invitation to it, the rhythm that could ultimately call us from our daily routine into the spiritual experience may be lost. Invitation is the space’s first step in the rhythm of spiritual experience. Yet, it is often the most ignored. What calls us? What about the space would welcome and even actively invite the passer-by to participate – to connect to what is possible inside the space. Once again, this [Chapel of St. Ignatius](#) is a perfect example. It seems that the many times I have come to this place, I have been aware that there is almost always someone outside, admiring, studying, photographing, or at least contemplating the exterior of this unusual building. It is difficult to pass this building without noticing it. It calls to you out of its silence to say, “I’m here for a distinct purpose... come in and see.” As the person walks around it, there is no doubt how to enter. Eventually, after quietly reflecting on the expanse of the pool their eye might rise up the gentle tower to discover that the top of the tower gently points the eye back to the building that attracted them in the first place. So, they turn and approach the massive and intriguing doors, without even thinking about why. Upon entering, their body is almost pulled in the direction that the designer wants them to go. Through balance, harmony, rhythm, energy, and symbolism, the intrigued pilgrim is drawn toward the light within the inner space. In the Chapel at Bayview Retirement Community, whose shell we renovated over

the past couple of years is now being furnished with beautiful pieces of furniture and art. Previously, the Chapel could only be accessed by traveling down a long, narrow hallway, turning a dark corner and entering a cave-like environment. After studying what they wanted to accomplish, we reoriented the space and created a new, light-filled entry that draws the community members into the space directly from their main lobby area = INVITATION makes an enormous difference. As seen in these [“before and after”](#) photographs of the Queen Anne Church, we worked with the Committee to make subtle changes to the exterior main entry in an effort - working within the vernacular of the building’s existing design - to open the main entrance to the community – inviting people in – instead of maintaining a barrier between the building and people.

- g. Light (“Transforming and Infusing”): Light is tremendously powerful. Here, we see an interior view at Los Angeles’s new [Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels](#). The interior of the Cathedral is brilliantly illuminated with a warm glow from its high windows which are made – not of glass – but of Spanish alabaster! Light is tremendously powerful. It is transforming and infusing. Light is not only the symbol of life – it gives life. Everything in our world is drawn toward light. WE are drawn toward it – sometimes without even noticing. We are drawn to sunny beaches to feel the warmth of the sun radiating through our bodies. An ill-placed plant desperately reaches across the room toward the window – crying out to its owner to place it closer to the Light. In the next image, we see the interior of the [North Shore Synagogue](#) in Kings Point, New York, designed by Alexander Gorlin. This cube of Light is intended to symbolize the Holy of Holies in Solomon’s temple. I quote from Michael J. Crosbie, who explains this wonderful symbol of light, “Over this symbol is laid a second: an intricate assemblage of fractured planes within the cube that recalls the Kabbalistic creation myth, in which the order of the original universe is shattered. Inside of this broken structure floats the Eternal Light contained within a geometric vessel that appears as a fusion of triangles. Directly below the shattered cube is the ark, the doors of which open to reveal a ritual curtain that covers the Torah within.” These are both examples of large amounts of light.

But the amazing thing about light is that a little bit goes a very long way. I’ll never forget the time that, as a small child, riding in my parents’ car through the dark wilderness somewhere in the western United States - it was SO dark outside, you could not see anything. Then we came up over a rise and could see - way off in the distance - a bright light shining. Wanting to find a place to stay, we were all drawn to that brilliant light. We drove and drove, descending down off the elevated passage, onto the valley floor and toward the light. We drove for another thirty minutes toward that brilliant light. Upon approaching, we realized what we had been seeing all this time – what had drawn us across the high desert floor, pulling us out of the darkness – was one small light bulb hanging and boldly breaking the darkness from its place on the hotel porch. I’ll never forget that image. The smallest amount of light, when strategically placed, can make all the difference. See here, [“The Church of the Light”](#) in Osaka, Japan (designed by Tadao Ando in 1989).

## V. Steps to take in Developing Sacred Space that is Aesthetically Pleasing

Steps can be taken to change our [worship spaces](#) so that they actually connect to the message we say we embrace. These steps can be taken through understanding, focus, and careful decisions. With simplicity and boldness, our worship spaces can live in harmony with – and point TO – that message. Begin by understanding and asking the important questions. Then listen to the basic principles of aesthetics to guide you toward successful design. Over the past several years, we have intentionally developed a proven process that helps us take a community from where they are to where they ultimately want to be. Unfortunately, we do not have time this afternoon to talk about this intentional process. If you are serious about discovering this process, you can visit our website, [www.stephenmarshalldesign.com](http://www.stephenmarshalldesign.com).

## VI. Conclusions

In conclusion, let me say that – amidst this crazy, often- disadvantageous world – many people still desire to experience God. Very few people desire, at their core, to primarily experience buildings. In creating meaningful Sacred Space, the building is not the END. God is the End. A relationship with God – with a Higher Power of Spiritual Energy – with the Master Creator – with The Great Spirit – whoever one thinks He or She is – a relationship of some sort with this Great One is the End. Many people have this desire to know and experience God. Yet, many of our spiritual spaces confine our spiritual desires – focusing us back to our undesirable realities. Understanding the power of aesthetics to connect to and for the “Spiritual” can lead us to the development of space and visual elements that transcend and free the confining power of physical existence toward a transforming experience of Spirit. **Successful aesthetics** transcend their own inherent physical limitations to reconcile what is otherwise irreconcilable. In our worship spaces, we have the opportunity to bring Light in surprising quantities, invitation through intention, focus in good measure, balance, harmony, and rhythm – all emerging from our distinct message that we believe can change the human heart and ultimately the world.

## VII. Discussion

### VIII. Invitation

- a. Bibliography
- b. Email contact
- c. Website at SMD