

FORUM

Worshiping at the altar of architectural change

CONNECTICUT has gone through some severe demographic buffeting since World War II. As Interstate 95 sliced through all of our coastal downtowns and Interstate 91 split the state in two, dammed up urban populations gushed into the suburbs and destabilized established urban neighborhoods.

This population shift was paralleled by changing generational values. Boomer parents invented custodial over-programming where every hour not spent in school is filled with music programs, athletics and every activity imaginable, rendering Saturday and Sunday mornings too booked for religious attendance.

Without competition from church, opportunities for new markets meant that state blue laws were voided and stores of all kinds were open 24/7. Although this is a

national trend, it is at its very peak in New England where less than 30 percent of the population now goes to church every week. Previous generations had twice the religious focus.

Social trends affect the way our buildings are used. Fortunately, most of the iconic church buildings built by previous generations' enthusiastic and optimistic congregations have at least had their shells survive despite the flight of their congregations.

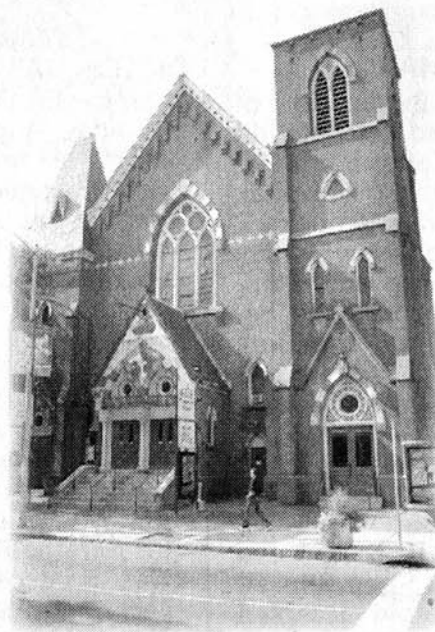
The Yale Repertory Theatre building on Chapel

Street is an obvious example. Formerly Calvary Baptist Church, the building was saved and converted to a new use as a theater in 1967.

Similarly, in 1972, Temple Mishkan Israel became the Educational Center for the Arts. The Church of the Epiphany on Forbes Avenue in New Haven came within inches of being knocked down for I-95's Pearl Harbor Memorial Bridge, then stood cowering underneath the tractor trailers only to become a plumbing supply store and a "Gentlemen's Club." A church again occupies part of the building.

The majority of buildings designed for worship were not abandoned, but without a captive audience of intact urban neighborhoods, they needed to attract new parishioners in a shrinking market — and aging populations need handicapped accessibility as well.

For example, when it was built in 1959, Bethesda Lutheran Church was meshed with the former Malley estate. Whereas the estate faced St. Ronan Street, the new church addressed Whitney Avenue beyond a parking lot. A lovely new entry was built



Peter Casolino/Register

The Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven is housed in a converted church.

in 1991 to draw attention and welcome visitors. Similarly, two years ago, St. John's Episcopal Church on Humphrey Street built a complimentary pitched roof side entry, reusing an existing doorway that provides an obvious entry into the parish hall that is stroller and handicapped accessible.

The Church of Christ Scientist building on Whitney Avenue was sold to Whitney Christian Life Church and ultimately the 1950 building by the architect Douglas Orr was designed into the new Worthington Hooker School.

The Christ Scientist congregation remains intact and in the 1990s used the sale proceeds to purchase a storefront on Chapel Street that was wonderfully renovated to become a much smaller and more accessible urban church.

The First Presbyterian Church on Whitney Avenue, built in 1968, added an air-conditioned parish hall that enabled it to enhance its social programs in 2005. United and Trinity churches on the Green have spent or are spending a great deal of time and effort to make their undercrofts, or basements, usable for their

parishioners, as has St. John's. The crowded timetables of today's families require one stop shopping for worship and activity accommodation where once separate parish halls were the order of the day.

St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church on Hillhouse Avenue has also gone through a major renovation of its undercroft. The renovation was necessitated by a fire, but it also had to deal with the issues that many older churches have of handicapped accessibility, heating and cooling systems and visual appeal.

It's not just architectural features that have been adapted to attract and sustain congregations. Christ Church on Broadway in New Haven spent more than \$1 million to install the Lively/Fulcher organ in 2005. Trinity on the Green is keeping souls in-house long after they leave this mortal coil by building a columbarium where cremated remains can be interred.

Our buildings mirror who we are and what we believe in. The worship spaces of New Haven are finding new ways to encourage people to take an hour or two of peace on Saturday or Sunday mornings. Too often, we assume "build it and they will come." However, the basic paradigm for existing parishes in New Haven is "adapt or die."

Duo Dickinson, an architect, writes about architecture and urban design for the Register. Readers may write him at 94 Bradley Road, Madison, 06443. E-mail: duo.dickinson@snet.net.



DUO
DICKINSON