

Deconstructing Christianity

By Carolyn Pione

The problem before the Vineyard Church in Mobile, Alabama attracted architect David Baird's attention by what its congregation might call divine intervention.

He and his wife were visiting a Point Clear resort for a quiet weekend and decided to attend the nearest Vineyard church. After the service they chatted with members of the small congregation and learned about their planned move from the suburbs to downtown. The problem? The church had a non-existent budget and a plethora of ideas about how to spend it. The pastor of the growing community, Michael Woods, felt a calling to minister to the "Generation X" age group who frequented hip Dauphin Street downtown. But how to draw them off the street and through the door, especially with no budget?

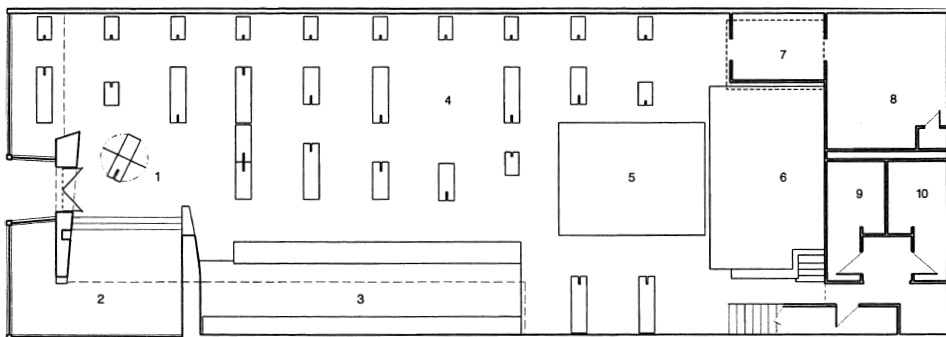
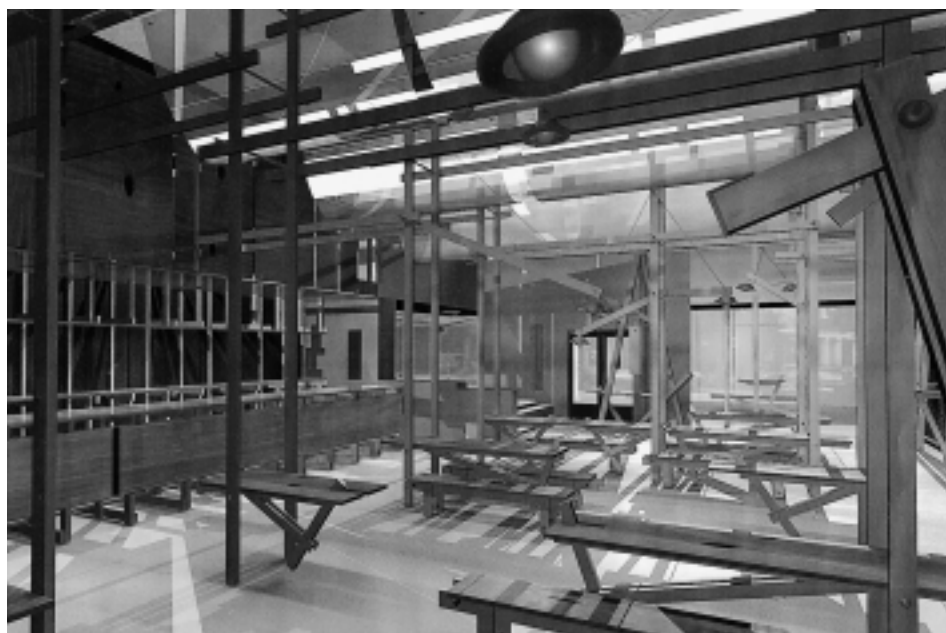
For Baird, the problem presented a unique design challenge to create a space for worship while catching the interest of notoriously young cynics. He decided to keep the building the church had already rented and design a space that could double as a nightclub/coffee shop and worship center. The church had some specific needs—a reading room, a dressing room, bar and seating area. Its members wanted to present an image

consistent with their church's mission—simple, utilitarian, and, most important, inexpensive.

"I wanted to create an interior architecture that had not been sanitized," says Baird. "I wanted to ex-

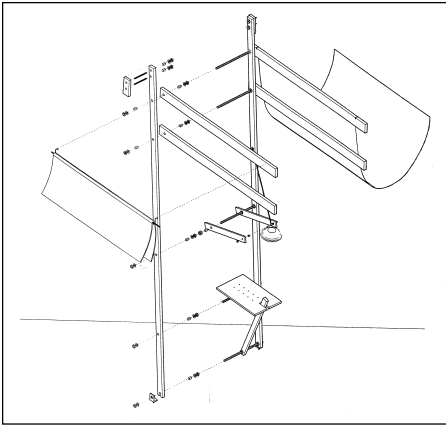
press the church's youthful sensibility and stripped-down approach to Christianity."

What Baird created was a design using materials from a home improvement store. He compiled a kit



ground level

Vineyard Church, Mobile, Alabama—designing a space that could double as a nightclub/coffee shop and worship center.



The design used materials from a home improvement store that could be compiled into a kit of parts the congregation could assemble itself.

of parts the congregation could assemble themselves. The parts would transform the building shell into a multifunctional space but would also be removable should the church relocate. “The idea was to create an architecture with off-the-shelf items that could be assembled with rudimentary skills and a minimum of craftsmanship,” explains the architect.

The plans called for a stage and a backroom for the Christian-oriented bands that would play to draw young crowds; a small bar that would serve soft drinks; and long, narrow tables that could be lifted vertically when more space was needed.

Baird believes that religious architecture should express the values and convictions of the people who use it. For the Vineyard, this meant reaching back to the simplicity of the early Christian church.

“Materials, including the bolts and screws, are exposed. Unfinished two-by-fours and plywood are sealed with a clear polyurethane,” Baird comments. “It’s an architecture that has not been disinfected.” Curt Cloninger, a 27-year-old artist who serves as worship leader, says, “Part of what we do is to be normal, not polished, just the way we are, and God will use that to appeal to people who are looking for a less-than-rehearsed church experience.”

Growing a church

The Vineyard was founded in the mid-’70s with the idea of “doing an ancient thing in a contemporary way,” according to its late founder John Wimber. There are more than 400 congregations around the country that meet wherever they can find space, whether in a renovated convenience store, casino, hotel, gym or strip mall.

The original Vineyard church was in a tiny metal building on Mobile’s Eastern shore in 1997 in a family-oriented suburb. But Pastor Mike Woods decided to move the church downtown, believing, “You’ve got to fish where the fish

“Their budget was less than \$7,000, which ruled out conventional methods of construction. Saving \$50 was a big deal.”

are feeding.” They haven’t lost any members since the move and have picked up new members in their target range. Already 150 or so young people have wandered in to have coffee or to listen to the music.

“As an architect, David pointed us in the right direction, although we haven’t been able to implement it all,” says Woods. “We researched not only our needs but also the history of the church and its mission.” The architect comments, “Their budget was less than \$7,000, which ruled out conventional methods of construction. Saving \$50 was a big deal. They must remain in control of the budget and the outcome of the project. They implemented as many of the suggestions as they could but some things they say just happened.”

Baird says he knew they might not have money to complete the plan, but he thought the process was still valuable to them and to him.

“Architects don’t know how to effectively partner with people like this and it keeps us from serving an untapped market. We need to rethink the way we do business so we can deliver an appropriate service to people of less means. I don’t say I’m there yet, but I see this project as a step in the right direction.”

The congregation’s reaction to Baird’s ideas were mixed; the younger people ran along the lines of “Oh, cool.” The baby boomer generation, which included Michael Woods, was slightly bewildered, although it recognized the plans weren’t designed to speak to it. But Kathy Starling, a 28-year-old grade-school teacher, said, “His design did speak to me because he explained why he had incorporated certain things. I don’t know a thing about architecture, but I was impressed with all the things he took into account.”

Another said: “David was the preacher the Sunday he came to make his presentation and he talked

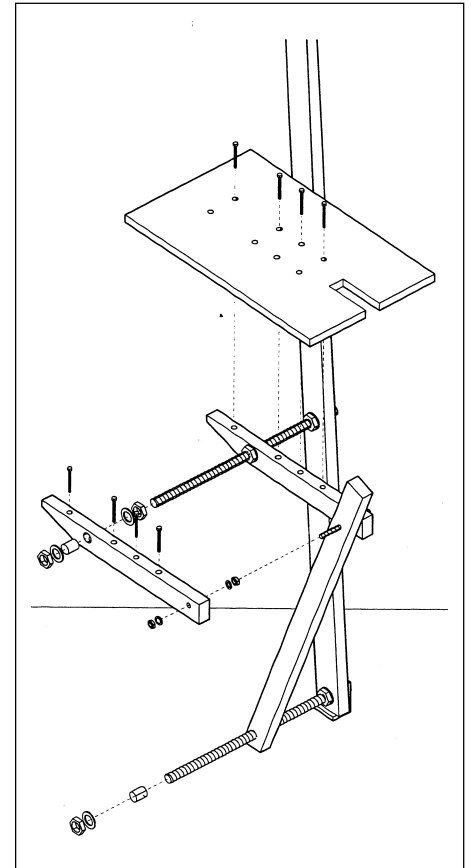


Table (6’) assembly.

not just about the space but his ideas of cities and art.”

A third parishioner observed: “Working with Baird and seeing the plans put the relationship between religion and architecture into a whole new light. When you’re a Christian, that’s the most important thing, but if you’re an artist that’s almost as important. The church is often not that responsive to innovative art.”

An Architectural Philosophy

Baird knew the church’s needs and financial limits were not mutually exclusive of good design. His challenge was to create something meaningful for the Vineyard members while teaching them about architecture.

“Architects communicate well with chairmen of the board but generally do a poor job relating to people of low to moderate means,” he says. “Most people can’t afford our services as they are currently structured. One reason I took this project was to explore ways of delivering a viable architectural service to this population. I also believe that, in a democratic system, the architectural profession risks being marginalized by ignoring the needs of the majority.

“The Vineyard people needed the project to work, they could only afford one space, and so that space had to serve several functions.

“Another characteristic is their need to be involved in the decisions being made. It’s a big investment for them. Our post-modern culture is more concerned with image than with content. For the architectural profession, this has meant focusing on those who can afford to be preoccupied with image.”

Carolyn Pione is a freelance reporter and editor in Baton Rouge, La. *David Baird*, architect/designer, is a professor in the School of Architecture at Louisiana State University. The intern architect for the project was *Ivan Rupnick*.

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Book Resource

Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X by Tom Beaudoin

“God may be eternal—but Generation X is a moving target,” says Tom Beaudoin, a Gen Xer, in the opening pages of his book. Instead of cries for attention, he asserts that his generation is engaged in a deep spiritual quest but because of the ways they go about it they are being written off by the church.

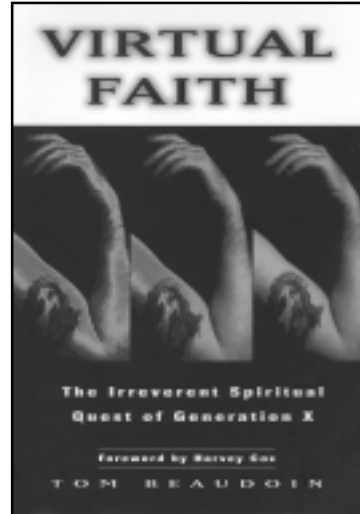
They’re staying away from most churches but love songs about God and Jesus. In a sense they are trying to liberate Jesus from the clutches of the Church and find a personal relationship without the corporate trappings more to their liking. Theology and popular culture are on a collision course in this group. Beaudoin says that GenX’s “suspicion

of institutions implies a threefold emphasis for ministry for Xers: a return to humility, a willingness to go virtual, and a renewal of mystical practices or spiritual disciplines.” (p. 161).

Most churches (including most Disciples of Christ churches) have seemed to say, through our inaction in reaching out to this generation, that we hope the next generation will be something more to our liking—maybe they will be a little

less weird and a little more like us—don’t count on it.

Virtual Faith is published by Jossey-Bass, San Francisco. More information is available from www.josseybass.com.



A note from the editor

A passion for new religious strategies and buildings for new generations seem to appear on our radar screens too late. In the last century, if we were a quarter century behind the curve, we could make some corrections better late than never and still reach those who sought the message we offered. If we wait 25 years to make corrections in the current generational climate, however, we will have lost a generation and failed on our mandate to take a message to all the world.

When I saw this article about the low-cost renovation effort to

house some specific ministries, I wanted to share it with you for a couple of reasons. First, I applaud this architect who took it as a challenge to work within a budget at which many architects would have laughed. Secondly, I applaud this congregation, who let God lead them into some new (and no doubt uncomfortable for many) territory.

Perhaps you will find this article useful. As always, I welcome your comments and your ideas for future issues. Feel free to contact me in any of the ways listed on the back of this issue.

— Ryan D. Hazen

Walter Blackburn—Great Disciple Architect Remembered

Walter Blackburn, a great architect and faithful churchman in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) died on August 9 at the age of 62. His influence on his profession and on his community will be felt for many years to come. He served his local congregation and was a former board member of Board of Church Extension. One of his most recent designs, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, now in progress, will be the world's largest African-American cultural facility.

In the October issue of *AIArchitect*, a monthly newspaper to the national architectural community, Marga Rose Hancock, Executive Vice President of the AIA Seattle, spoke of Blackburn in this way, "For many of us, the true receipt of his example—of bravery and belief, of vision and values, of compassion and righteousness—has made a difference in our hearts and lives, and in the causes we care about. I envision Walter as a model of the thoughtful,

respectful acceptance we owe each other as human beings."

In concluding the funeral sermon for Walter, his pastor, Bishop T. Garrott Benjamin, reminded everyone not to forget "the dash" in

"Walter Blackburn, 1938 - 2000." Walter couldn't do anything about his birth or death date, but he controlled that dash—that time in between—and witness his remarkable achievement.



Shown here with Harold R. Watkins (left), retired BCE president, is Walter Blackburn, who served as a BCE director from 1989-1994.

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