

Ecclesiastic:

Church and Marketplace

an Insight by Rob Adsett
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About two thousand years ago, the Romans built a temple to their gods. It's called the Pantheon, and it is probably the world's best surviving building from antiquity.

During the rise and fall of Rome it survived pretty much intact because it became a Christian church thanks to the Emperor Constantine. It's a massive building and an architectural masterpiece. The dome was for about 1900 years the largest ever constructed. The diameter measures an astounding 43 metres.

On a recent trip to Rome, I asked a taxi driver to take me to the Pantheon. "Sure," he said, "opposite McDonalds!" Oh no! Has it really come to this where an architectural masterpiece in stone and marble is known for its proximity to the latter 20th century 'froth and bubble' of McDonalds? However a thought had suddenly crystallised in my mind: At any time of the day or night there would be at least a thousand people milling around in the square outside the Pantheon. Perhaps this is where the church should be. Opposite McDonalds.

Quite apart from the churches that were built in the fields to serve the rural communities, the majority of old churches that are still standing today were built in the centre of the marketplaces and have become part of the very fabric of the urban experience.

In fact the Market Cross stands in many town squares as the symbol of fair dealing. Historically the church has had an influence in the town centre, and arguably in the heart of the community. So why this obsession with hiding our 20th Century churches in back streets and similar out of the way locations. The suggestion I want to make is to take the large churches out of the suburbs and put them on top of, underneath or adjacent to new or existing suburban shopping centres. If we are going to learn anything from history, I believe we have to put our places of worship back in the centre of things. Admittedly, small churches need to be in the community areas, but for many reasons the worldwide trend these days is to build larger churches. Today's mobile community is just as happy to get in a car and go to church as they are to go to the supermarket. Perhaps the demise of the local church in the community can be linked to the demise of the local corner shop. They simply can't carry the range and the variety of goods and services that the shopping centres can.

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I have heard all the arguments concerning the church's need for acreage, but I am still unconvinced in the majority of cases. I have found that most of the acreage becomes a maintenance nightmare and is really only there to provide car parking. Sometimes the only option is to turn surplus land into an aged care development to help financially with the original purchase price.

Over the last twenty years I've been widely involved in the design of numerous buildings for worship. At the time of writing I have no less than six congregations wanting to construct church buildings but unable to find "suitable" land. There is land available but it comes with traffic problems, the wrong zoning, is not large enough to provide the necessary car park, or is too far away from where the majority of the congregation live. In many cases the land is simply too costly. It is a dilemma, and a number of valid ministries are being severely curtailed or even cut short in their outreach potential as a result.

To look at it from a different perspective, Thomson Adsett Architects are very well known for our shopping centre expertise. Shopping centres typically consist of a large tract of land with an agglomeration of building shapes surrounded by a sea of car parking (regional shopping centres are sometimes different). But times are changing because customer expectations have now reached

the point where shopping centre proprietors are on the verge of covering all their carparks with structure to keep their customers' cars cool and in some cases dry. In other words, considerable sums of money are being spent to cover the parking areas. What a wonderful opportunity to utilise the airspace above or below car parking areas for church activity.

Just think of it, who would object? Certainly not the town planners or the local authority. They don't want churches in residential areas. To begin with they are too noisy and the car parking and traffic problems are a headache. I believe the shopping centre owners would be as amenable to the idea as they now are to the inclusion of cinemas. Why? Because they bring people to the centre and people become customers. If not above the car park, then perhaps within the shopping centre itself. Or next door to it or across the road from it. An eight cinema complex could, for example be increased to include a ninth auditorium which, on occasion, could be a movie theatre as well. The advantages for the shopping centre owner are numerous. To begin with, there are going to be more people around on Sundays, and possibly more people around in the evenings. This alone is enough to incite the interest of any potential owner, for more customers means bigger profits.



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I would argue that church facilities could actually be reduced in size by using some of the facilities in the shopping centre (coffee shops etc.). Perhaps the church could run the bookshop. Maybe the church administration could rent office space in the centre.

Now admittedly many congregations would not see this as a positive step because they believe they may lose their identity. But I would encourage them to just imagine what they have to gain. You have a ready made market “on your doorstep”. The people are overwhelmingly happy and relaxed as they normally are when they’re shopping. It’s a big thing for a non-Christian to step over the boundary onto “church turf”. This step is made easier when the line between church and public turf disappears.



It may even be so successful that the property committee can be disbanded and those faithful members be given Monday nights back again. The energy going in to fundraising for the church debt could be redirected.

Admittedly there are always practical reasons why some sites simply wouldn’t work. There are also some denominations that wouldn’t entertain the idea for fundamental reasons. But is this idea any crazier than the collective decision that the banks made ten years ago to decimate the number of branches and use ATMs instead? There is no doubt in my mind that a fresh approach must be taken to church buildings.

There is also no doubt in my mind that the active church today should be right in the middle of the marketplace. If for no other reason than to declare that God is interested in, relevant to, and vitally involved with us, the pinnacle of his creation.

Rob Adsett

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