

The expansion and use of art galleries and churches in New Zealand



Above: Spreydon Baptist church complex, Christchurch.
Photo: Andrew Clarkson.

Below: Cathedral of Notre Dame, Paris.
(from old postcard).

Damien Skinner in a recent article¹ reflects on the building boom in public galleries around the country over recent years, led by the flagship for these changes - the building and presentation of Te Papa. Considerable discussion of building issues included reference to the plans to radically redevelop two significant regional museums, the Dowse (Lower Hutt) and The Suter in Nelson, and quotes from the *New Vision Report* of 1997, which suggested 'more attention is being paid to the needs of the arts consumer at the expense of the arts producer.'

As part of this expansion, there has been a change in approach with more investment and focus on management and less on curation.

Skinner draws our attention to the tendency to extend building space, sometimes with spectacularly impressive architectural designs, without always giving adequate consideration to exhibition programme development and professional practice. Part of the reason for expansion, he says, is simply the need to better service what the galleries already have. Helen Telford mentions the need for climate control, improved security and staff accommodation. However, the writer goes on to say that often the act of meeting these very real technical needs can open a Pandora's box of responding to changing ideas of what galleries are and how they function in the community. He gives extensive quotes from his various sources, especially from the Suter and the Dowse. Critical questions and issues are raised for both the visual arts community professionals serving the arts and the wider community. It also raises fundamental issues as to the function of galleries and their relationship with the community.

Temples of art and worship for the community

There are fascinating parallels in this and the debate about the relevance and the use of church buildings to the communities in which they exist. In the debate

about both buildings of faith and art, we are reminded to not lose sight of the core function that justifies their existence. For galleries this is the preservation, development and presentation of art. Churches' core function is to facilitate the gathering of God's people to strengthen them in their faith and mission. An integral part of this is in serving the community, local and global. There will be no living and ongoing development of either art or faith if the local 'temples' of these sectors become too inward-looking in seeking to promote their core functions. Their world view, strategies and, therefore, buildings must be outward-looking and relevant to embrace the communities in which they are placed. Without this, there will be no ongoing dynamic faith or art as there will be fewer followers in the next generation. The danger in placing too much emphasis on building programmes is that the original vision and purpose of the institution can be lost in an attempt to be open and relevant to the community, partly in an effort to fund greater operating expenses.

'Church', Middle Ages and today

First, what is 'church'. One of the Greek words for 'church' suggests simply 'God's people gathering together'. Church buildings are meant to facilitate meaningful worship. In the Middle Ages the great cathedrals were not only centres of worship, preaching and encouragement of faith; they were community centres, out of which the first universities grew (from the cathedral schools). They also integrated art, architecture, faith, and worship in a way that was accessible and understandable to a majority of the population. The stained glass windows helped both to instruct in faith and to inspire artistically even if the preaching (mainly in Latin!) was not meaningful. Over the centuries the community function of the cathedral/church building has often shrunk to that of simply being a place of worship by a few.





Top: Spreydon Baptist worship auditorium.

Above: Spreydon Baptist worship auditorium (external detail). Photos: Andrew Clarkson.

A contemporary 'cathedral' in the community

There are a growing number of exceptions to this. Spreydon Baptist church complex in Christchurch is a clear example. The buildings in Lyttleton Street are used literally day and night for a range of community and church groups. The worship auditorium is transformed back into a gym as the seats are stowed away under the stage at the end of the last Sunday service. Other activities on site during the week include a fulltime day care centre for children, holiday and after school programmes for children, a range of youth activities, divorce care group, craft classes, a cafe: *the Hub*, solo mums' activities, music and movement for young mums, and an English Language school, to name but a few. Many other community services based here are operating physically in the wider community. These include Kingdom Resource Trust (budgeting advice and interest free loans), various services assisting those with mental health needs (Stepping Stone Trust, Sarona House, and a trust providing chaplaincy services). A cross section of gender and age groups in the community are addressed. These include working amongst local high schools 'at risk' youth, various services to neglected women, including those in prison², those working with the elderly providing both accommodation and outings. Chrysalis Seed Trust, as one of these services, seeks to serve visual artists nationally. The key challenge for the church here is how to cultivate an aesthetically-pleasing contemporary environment that will fit the

range of physical activities and complement the worship, especially for artists and others who are visually inclined!

Damien Skinner in his article mentions (referring to the plans for the Suter and Dowse galleries) '...both galleries reflect the transformation of the monolithic gallery - modelled indirectly on the 'temple' of culture sited above the city - into an institution physically and conceptually open to people and activities other than aesthetic contemplation'.

Perhaps part of the confusion about the role of public art galleries is the use of the word 'museum', which suggests a static preservation of the past. Why can't there be models of both churches and galleries that allow their core mission, while also being relevant to the wider community?

I suggest we reflect again on the way that the great cathedrals of Europe functioned in the Middle Ages and seek to learn from that remarkable synthesis of faith, art, architecture and community. They typically took hundreds of years to construct, stone by stone, as the community maintained over the generations a commitment to implement the original vision and purpose of these great galleries of community and faith³.

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1 Damien Skinner, *Build it and They Will Come: The Expansion of Art Galleries in New Zealand*, p. 93-95, *Art New Zealand* No.116 Spring 2005.

2 Details of these community services can be found by contacting Spreydon Baptist church ph 03 338 4163 or by visiting www.spreydon.org.nz

3 Mark de Jong referred to the building of Notre Dame in a recent address at the SALT Conference.