

Design Narrative for the Sanctuary

Of Pasadena Covenant Church

Sanctuaries differ from auditoriums in that sanctuaries tell a story through art and architectural design. They function as sign posts pointing to an unseen reality beyond the present moment. They are meant to be places of meaning that open the possibility for awareness of the Holy One. In designing these spaces, we tend to focus on functionality, comfort, and cost. Though those elements are important, might there be more to explore? What is our story that we want to express through the interior design of the building?

Beginnings

The Pasadena Covenant Sanctuary story began in 1922 when twenty-six Swedish immigrants fleeing famine and poverty in Sweden formed a church in Pasadena. Two years later, they laid the cornerstone for a two-story structure designed, built, and funded by the frugal and pious members of the congregation. The name, Swedish Tabernacle, captured their refugee status as people in search of a better home.



1947 Sanctuary



By 1945, the Swedish congregation which was then called Mission Covenant Church had recently transitioned from speaking Swedish to English. They hired a correspondence-schooled Swedish architect, Anton Johnson, to build them a new worship space that was attached to their original worship tabernacle built in 1924. Two years later in 1947, Mr. Johnson gave the Swedish congregation a Spanish looking Mission Revival style church. Patterned after the Santa Clara Franciscan Mission, the structure came with fortress-like walls, a watch tower, and light filled stained glass windows depicting the Good

Shepherd.

It was as if Mr. Johnson was saying, “Plant your Swedish seeds of faith in the soil of your adopted homeland. Live into your Mission Covenant heritage and seek the welfare of your new neighbors. As you journey as pilgrims to your eternal home in heaven, remember your King. He is your fortress who will protect you. He is your watch tower who is looking out for you. He is your light along the dark path. He is your shepherd who lays down his life in love for you.”

And so, the young plant grew. Members came and went through their way station on the corner of Lake and Santa Barbara avenues. Over the years new churches were planted. Outreach to the neighborhood as well as around the world happened. The faith of the parishioners was strengthened through creative worship, thoughtful Bible teaching, and heart-felt community life. Meanwhile, the silent walls of the Sanctuary witnessed countless baptisms, dedications, weddings, funerals, concerts, and congregational meetings.

A Room With A Story

The 1947 sanctuary designed by Anton Johnson featured stained glass art depicting the good shepherd and his sheep in a pasture. That artwork must have been meaningful to many of the immigrant Swedes who grew up on farms. The main east window, however, was designed in such a way that it let in light, heat, and sounds to point of becoming a distraction. (Read the *Challenge of the Window* for more information) So in 1972, it was covered over thus stripping the room of its biblical imagery. In addition, the ceiling was lowered four feet to accommodate HVAC ductwork. In the process the basic orientation of the room was changed from being a vertical rectangle to a horizontal one. As we renovate the sanctuary space in 2022, what Biblical images might speak to twenty-first century urban dwellers, be consistent with the mission revival bones of the building, and also fit the design space? I recommend two possible design themes for the room.

Option One—The Sanctuary as Mission Outpost and Way Station

The façade of Pasadena Covenant Church is similar to that of the Spanish Mission in Santa Clara. Those Franciscan facilities functioned as mission outposts and way stations along the El Camino Real (the King’s Highway). They sought to provide religious education, vocational training, food distribution, and health care for the community around them. Though they became places of cultural imperialism and failed to live up to their noble purposes, they represent a nugget of an idea worth remembering. They were also places where travelers were refreshed and equipped for their journey.



During the week, Pasadena Covenant functions as a social justice center providing services for a variety of at-risk communities in the neighborhood. On the weekend, the faith community gathers to be encouraged and equipped for the journey of life. And a brief study of the membership roles over the past one hundred years reveals that we are a transitional community always changing and on the move.

Option Two—The Sanctuary as a Garden

Spanish style homes often featured an interior garden around which rooms were built. French doors looking into the garden created an oasis of refreshment. In many ways, the garden is a cultivated pasture, less wild and more civilized. The garden is also a major Biblical theme--the Garden of Eden in Genesis, the Garden City of the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelations, the Garden of Gethsemane, and the Garden tomb of the resurrection. The garden is a sacred space of encounter between God and his people—a sanctuary. The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery puts it this way:

“The garden is the image of the ideal that heightens whatever activity occurs within it. It signals nature at its best, romantic love at its best, human well being at its best, spirituality at its best. The garden of bliss is a moral and spiritual norm against which fallen experience is judged and towards which the human spirit aspires.”

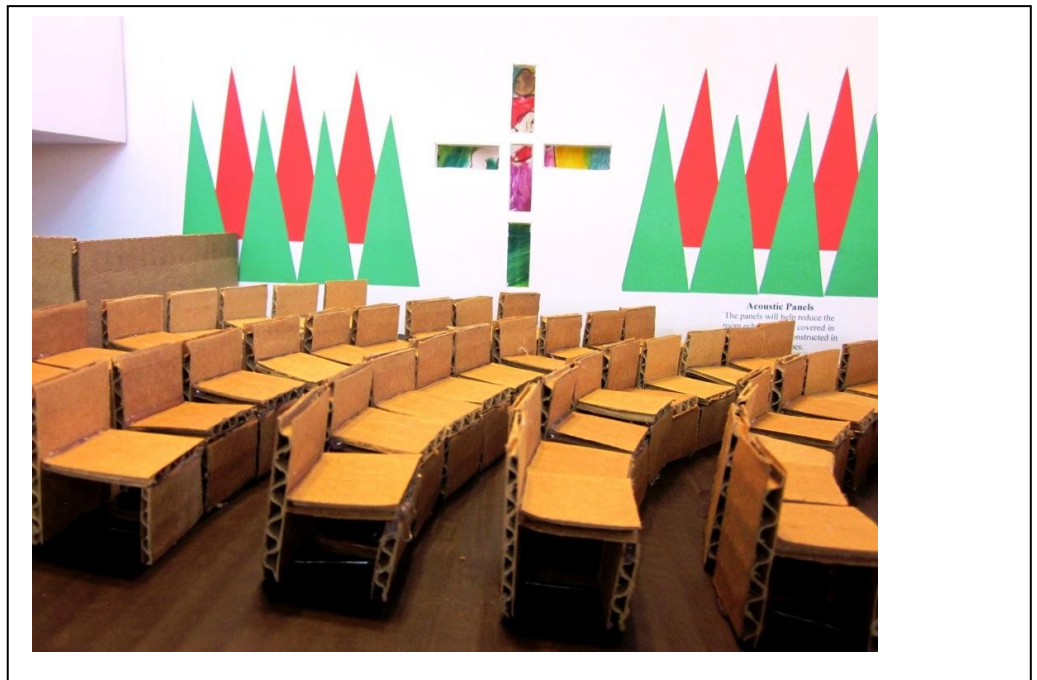
The garden theme incorporates the ideas of planting, harvesting, pruning, thriving, fruitfulness, growth, seasons of life, beauty, nature, nurture, etc. By the way, the garden theme is already hinted at in the current structure. The stained glass window in the east stairwell depicts Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. The central balcony image is of the resurrected Jesus outside the garden tomb.

Design Ideas for the Sanctuary

The ideas presented below are samples of what might be done with the east and west walls to express the two themes. The decision was made to install acoustic panels to help lessen the room echo. The plan is for members of the church to construct the panels that are made of wood framing, acoustic material, and fabric. The ideas show here give examples of various sizes and shapes.

East Wall—Cross with Trees.

A window in the shape of a cross using the textured architectural glass that stands 9 feet high with beams 14 inches wide could be built in the sound wall in front of the shepherd window. The shepherd image would be blurred but light would come through. It is on the cross that the shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Leaves and branches could be painted on the wall to emphasize the garden theme and reference Apostles Paul and Peter’s comments that Jesus was hung on a tree.

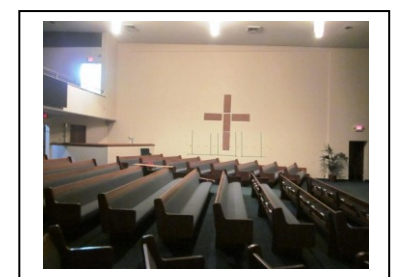


The acoustic panels used to absorb echo will be attached to the wall on either side of the cross window. The panels could be constructed in the shape and color of trees to fit the theme.



East Wall—Cross with Fig Leaves and Snake

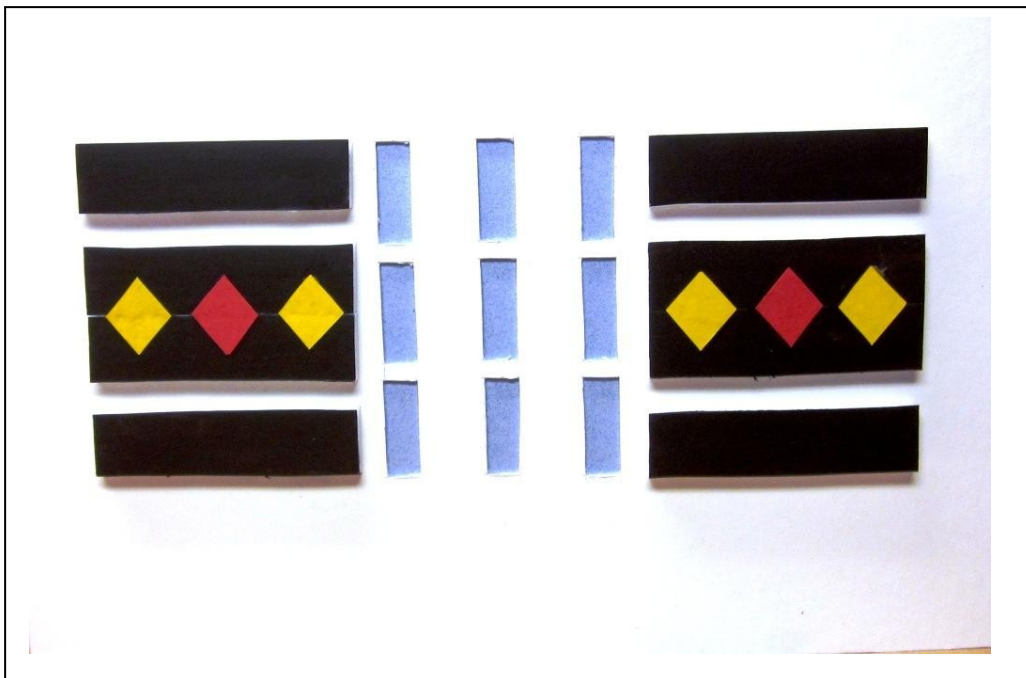
The four long panels on either side of the cross measure 2 x 8 feet. The image below is a template of the actual size of the cross in the room.



East Wall with Trinity Window

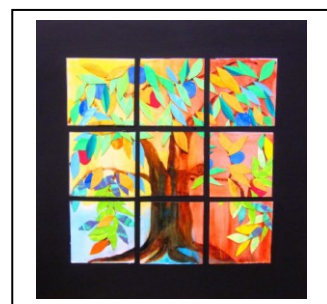
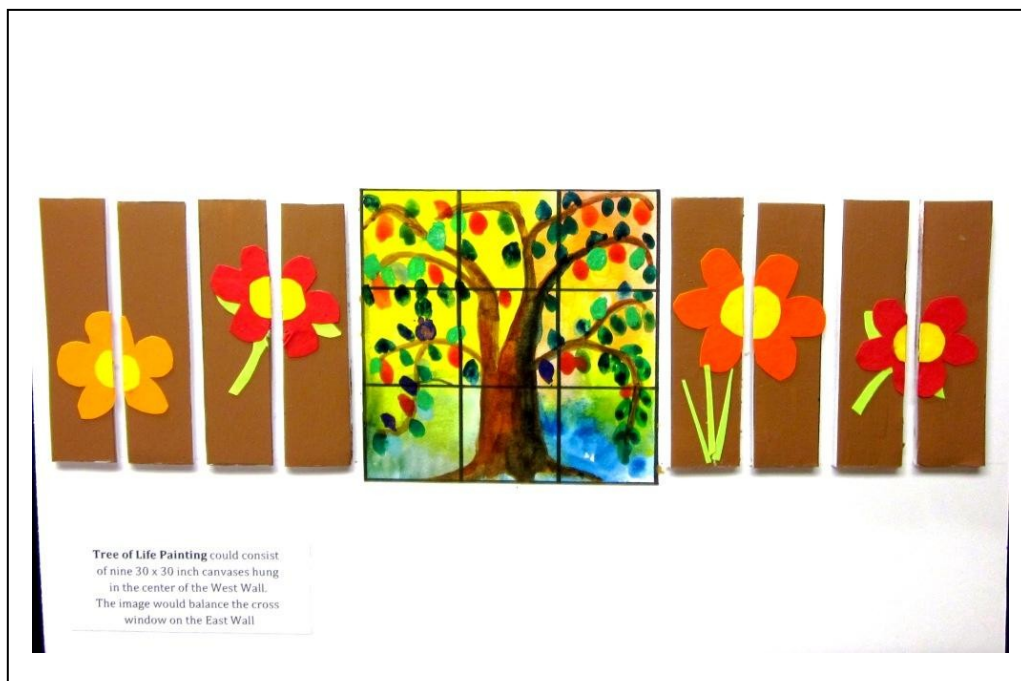
Instead of a cross, we might consider a trinity window of three rows of three windows of textured class 14 x 36 inches each.

The acoustic panels could be mounted horizontally with the central panel measuring 4 x 8 feet. The diamond shape appears in other parts of the room. Colorful fabric could also be used instead of what I have shown here.



West Wall—Tree of Life

The central image could be the Tree of Life painted on nine 30 x 30 inches canvases to balance the cross window on the east wall. Incorporated into the image could be some of the history of the church. The acoustic panels on either side of the painting could complement those on the east wall. Below is a more detailed image of a possible painting.



West Wall Cross

If the Trinity window was used on the east wall, a cross could be installed on the West wall.

The panels shown here measure 3 x 3 feet each. Face images of people we support through our various ministries could be included on the panels.



Back Wall—six Georgia O’Keeffe style colorful flowers 3 x 3 feet could grace the back wall. Local artists from the church, art center, or the job center could be commissioned to do the artwork. The back wall could be a rotating gallery for artwork

Balcony—Open two side windows 36 x 60 inches currently covered by a sound wall to add light in that area. Curtains could be used to darken the room when needed.

The Design Narrative



Might we imagine members of the congregation and their guests walking past our watchtower on Santa Barbara Street and stepping into their metaphoric Mission Revival fortress each week? Passing through the Spanish lobby, they step into an interior garden sanctuary. They are surrounded by images of flourishing vegetation that symbolize where we have come from and where we are going. They take a seat between two trees and remember their Savior’s sacrifice upon the tree of death so that they might lay hold of the fruits from the tree of life. Like the tree in

Psalm 1, they are nourished by the Word. They cultivate the garden by giving themselves in worship. And when the service is over, they return to their adopted earthly home to seek the welfare of their neighbors.

Steve Stuckey

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