

Vosko review

Art and Architecture for Congregational Worship: The Search for a Common Ground.

Richard S. Vosko. Collegeville: Liturgical Press 2019. Pages, xi+236. ISBN 978-0-8146-8471-9 (pbk.).

As large churches rise only upon solid foundations, so Richard Vosko builds the soaring theme of his book upon the bedrock of common ground. Readers of this journal who expect a book on architecture to focus on nuts and bolts, candles and chairs, will find their gaze shifting toward the heavens above and the earth below in order to view the full theological context into which a church building fits.

Vosko acknowledges the differences of social opinion that foil the formation of loving communities, but, as he sagely observes early on, “Buildings stand because of the tensions between certain parts of the structure pushing against other pieces” (p.11). A building of contrasting forces can school people in the principles of harmony. He aims not just for common ground, but for the common good.

Any analysis of past trends in church architecture emphasizes the distance between the divine and the human, and indeed between clergy and lay. In an era when diversity unfolds in ever greater complexity, societies—and buildings—look for ways of lifting up what is common. With one eye on tradition, Vosko keeps another eye on innovation that can build on the successes of the past to create spaces that engage the spirit of the present.

As the Second Vatican Council introduced a revolution in the liturgy of the Catholic Church, changes in architecture were bound to follow. The Constitution

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on the Sacred Liturgy considered little about this concern, but the implications of a full, conscious, active participation of the faithful soon demanded buildings in which worshipers could feel that they are indeed the priestly people gathered to offer sacrifice “not only by means of the hands of the Priest but also together with him” (GIRM 95). To respond better to their elevated responsibilities, the faithful needed buildings offering them physical proximity to ritual action. Effective worship spaces achieve a symbiotic relationship between the sacred building and the sacred ritual (p. 97).

In classical art, music and architecture, the golden mean governed the achievement of beauty. Vosko finds additional criteria through nature’s use of rotundas. He invites worshipers to rethink the shape of sacred buildings. After all, believers may encounter God not only from above, but also from within a gathered assembly.

Furthermore, sacred spaces serve and inspire the people. They aim to do more than gather communities for worship. They prepare people for their ministry outside the building as well. A sacred building lifts an individual into a personal spiritual realm, and it builds the sense of community during the time of worship; however, sacred space also sends the same individuals back through the doors after worship and into the service of others.

At the conclusion of his book, Vosko analyzes the architecture of mega-churches. At first these seem distant from the long tradition of sacred spaces, yet they share certain themes: the construction of grand sacred spaces that accommodate a large number of people, where a designated area is set aside for

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those who lead the worship, and where leaders both invite participation in worship and expect social action when worshipers go forth into the world.

Vosko's final pages will get readers thinking about sacred spaces in new and engaging ways, questioning how they perceive the realm where God resides, exploring how buildings engage the sorrows and joys of people, defending the diversity of architectural styles, affirming the contribution of contemporary artistry, and promoting the multiple uses of churches in an age where ecological concerns lead to opportunities for believers of different kinds to share common ground.

Vosko's book will engage all those planning a construction of new sacred space, the renovation of older churches, or a better understanding of how their sacred building either supports or challenges their own sense of God, community, and service.

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“Book Review: *Art and Architecture for Congregational Worship: The Search for a Common Ground*, by Richard S. Vosko.” *Worship* 96 (October 2022):380-382.