

The Assembly Space

It should be self-evident that the shape, furnishings and decor of any room will either support or hinder the activities that take place within it. Nobody, in their right mind, would attempt to host a dinner party in their bathroom! So, when designing any space, the first question to ask is: what is it for? The answer is not always straight forward. In the case of a church assembly space a common answer might be “worship” but, according to Canon Law, the space may also be used for any purpose which promotes worship, piety or religion¹. Thus, the gathering space may legitimately be used for such things as concerts of sacred music, catechetical instruction, ecumenical workshops, etc. but not, say, for meetings of the local residents’ association - unless the local bishop has first given it the “all clear”.

The word “worship” incorporates two very different forms of activity. The first we might call “liturgy” and the second “devotion”. Liturgy (literally “the work of the people”) is a group activity; you cannot have a liturgy on your own – just as you cannot have a birthday party on your own. In designing a worship space the most important liturgies to consider are, of course, the Sacramental liturgies: baptisms, confirmation, reconciliations, Eucharist, marriage, ordination, and the Sacrament of the sick). Then there are other non-Sacramental liturgies to think about such as the Good Friday service, charismatic worship and so on. Some of these non-Sacramental liturgies can also be devotions, e.g. the Stations of the Cross. By “devotion” I mean all those other types of worship which can be done alone, such as praying before the Blessed Sacrament, saying the rosary etc. Devotional spirituality is distinct from liturgical spirituality but both should live in a symbiotic relationship where one supports and nourishes the other.

Unfortunately, liturgical and devotionally activities make opposing demands upon the shape of space. Liturgy generally calls for large, open, exuberant halls where, hopefully, more than “*two or three can gather together*”² in His name, where people can exchange greetings and, dare I say, make a noise! Devotional activities usually call for more intimate, quiet “*go into your private room and close the door*”³ type spaces conducive to personal prayer and contemplation. Discomfort, objection and even open conflict can ensue where the same space is used for devotional and liturgical activities, not to mention the other legitimate activities. You only need to think of the annoyance felt by that pious lady in a church somewhere near you who is trying to concentrate on her rosary while people are gathering noisily for a busy Sunday mass.

The competing demands of liturgical and devotional spaces were partly responsible for the introduction of Blessed Sacrament Chapels following Vatican II. The other reason for their introduction was to emphasize the important distinction between the Eucharistic action of the Mass and the Eucharistic species reserved in the Blessed Sacrament. At Waterlooville, there will be no Blessed Sacrament Chapel, a tabernacle will be provided near the main altar but not in competition to the altar as the principal focus of the space. This is all in accordance with current norms prevailing in our country. It is hoped that the competing demands of the new space, in terms of liturgy and devotion, will be reconciled through ongoing formation of the community; and, when the space is used for other legitimate activities that do not fall under the general umbrella of worship,

¹ CCL # 1210

² Matthew 18:20

³ Matthew 6:6

the community will consider temporarily removing the Blessed Sacrament to avoid offending some and inhibiting others.

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* is the Church's highest form of liturgical law and guidance. I believe that when it states that "...full, conscious and active participation... is the aim to be considered above all else..."⁴ it is very serious. In a nut shell, the Church is teaching that full, conscious and active participation in the liturgy – particularly the Sacramental liturgies - is the most expedient way to holiness. The same Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy emphasises the four-fold presence of Christ in the Mass: in the Eucharistic elements, in the Word proclaimed, in the person of the minister and in the Church when it prays and sings i.e. in the assembly.⁵ Traditional Catholics might find the presence of Christ in the assembly a little hard to swallow, especially that part of it which consists of single mums with noisy kids – but therein lies the challenge. The architecture and appointments simply need to respond by devising suitable ways in which the foci of four-fold presence may be made more apparent – altar, ambo, chair, plus, of course, that assembly bit!

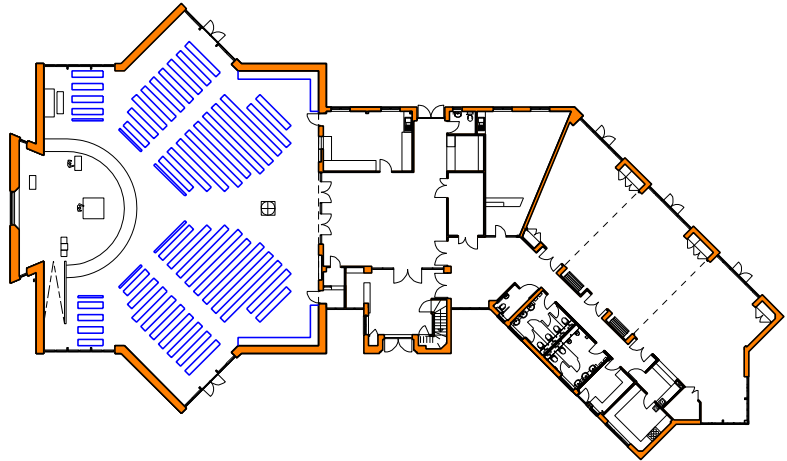
What emerges out of all of this is the need for proximity, flexibility and a sense of gathering. Proximity is required because the further one is situated from the action the less is the sense of participation – with a notable drop-off occurring at about 15 metres. Flexibility is required because the liturgies, devotions and other legitimate uses of the space are many and varied and the overarching objective is that the form of the space should support, not hinder, any particular activity. A sense of gathering is needed to emphasise the communal nature of liturgy. The plan form of the Waterlooville assembly space originated from two squares one of which is turned through 45 degrees and superimposed on the other. The resulting container allows 400 people to assemble within 15m of the principal liturgical foci and for alternative seating arrangements to fit comfortably within the shape of the envelope. Typical examples are shown in Figure 1.

Winston Churchill famously remarked: "*We shape our buildings, thereafter they shape us*". He was referring to how the colleges of Harrow and Sandhurst and the halls of Westminster had formed his own character. The success of the assembly space at Waterlooville will be judged by how it supports the worshipping community in its full, conscious and active participation in the liturgy, in its devotional exercises and, ultimately, in its quest for holiness. I guess the jury will be out on that one for some time!

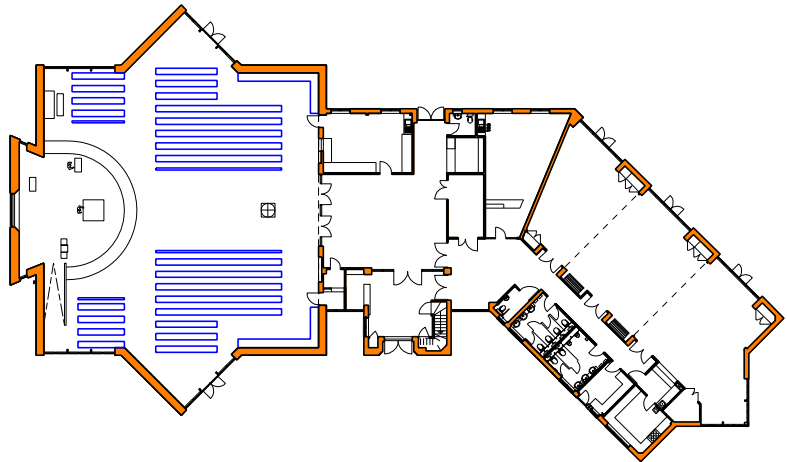
⁴ CSL #14

⁵ CSL # 7

Radial / fan shaped seating



Collegiate / antiphonal seating



Processional seating

