

Lessons of the New England Meetinghouse
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By Brett Donham

Buildings are our most enduring historical markers.

In ways their designers and builders could not have envisioned, they are a reflection of the time during which they were built. They hold up a mirror to the values and priorities held by those who commissioned and built them. Architecture is, in part, a social art, created to house human activity. Changes in the design of churches, for example, respond to changes in the form of worship or liturgy and to changes in the way the body of Christ sees itself. Changes in architectural style and taste generally happen slowly, evolving incrementally from one era to another because of innate conservatism (buildings cost a lot of money) and because buildings, unlike clothing, last a long time.

This article explains how the early Puritan meetinghouse evolved into the steepled Colonial and post-Colonial church that many view as the quintessential American church building. It also describes how the early meetinghouse can influence and inform contemporary church building design.

Today's architects might ask what they can learn from those who designed our early meetinghouses—and if those lessons have any applicability today, when you can log in and listen to sermon podcasts on some churches' websites. The basic lessons learned a few hundred years ago still apply. As did the Puritans, today's lawyers, plumbers, professors, firefighters, and others seek spiritual renewal and a sense of community in their churches.

They will not find that sense of community in a podcast—they will only find it in a space that fosters and enriches their religious experience.

Religious fundamentalists were responsible for the early development of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and southern New Hampshire and Maine. They were Puritans, religious refugees from England prior to the successful Puritan or Cromwellian revolution of 1649. Considered zealots, many in their leadership were highly educated, particularly at Cambridge University.

In the New World, they formed essentially a religious state or theocracy, where town and church were one and the same. One had to be a member of the church to be a voting member of the town. Everyone, admitted to vote or not, was levied taxes to pay the salary of the minister, the construction of the minister's house, and the construction of the meetinghouse. The faithful met in the meetinghouse on Sundays and religious holidays, in the morning and, frequently, again in the afternoon. On other days, the same building housed the same people with the same moderator to conduct civic affairs, vote on taxes for road improvements, schools construction, and other town business.

The form and size of these meetinghouses was determined by several considerations. Structural limitations forced by heavy timber construction was one, but more important was the need to clearly hear the unamplified human voice and the number of people in the “catchment” area. Puritan and later Congregational services were a liturgy of the word. To provide some context, there were no hymns during services in the 17th century and the early part of the 18th. Prayers, gospel readings, and their explication constituted a two- to three-hour morning service and, frequently, an equally long afternoon service. Dozing off during

the service was a punishable offense. All of this put a great premium on being close to the speaker. Civic meetings and the annual town meeting created an equal imperative.

Fortunately, another factor limited the number of people who could attend the religious services and civic meetings. In a rural farm setting, walking distance determined the number in the congregation. Depending on topography and rivers, this might be a three to four mile radius and include 200 to 250 people. As some towns grew, new meetinghouses, a second or third parish, would be created in outlying areas where more people settled. A building that held 200 to 250 people, all of whom had good sight lines and who could easily hear the speaker, would look like this:

OLD SHIP MEETING HOUSE, HINGHAM, MA



Source unknown. Found in public domain

In a dense urban setting like Boston, a third floor was often added to accommodate more people.

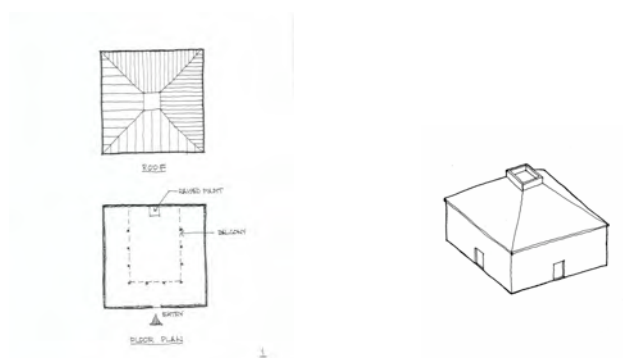
OLD BRICK MEETING HOUSE, BOSTON, MA



Credit: Library of Congress

The architectural characteristics of those buildings were a square plan with a pyramidal form for the earliest buildings; a fat rectangle with a two-gable roof for later ones (since a gabled roof was a lot easier to frame than a hipped roof); the main entrance in the middle of the long wall; and a raised pulpit in the middle of the wall opposite the entrance.

PLAN IMAGE



Drawings by Brett Donham

By the mid-1700s, the square plan had evolved into a rectangular plan.

HARRINGTON MEETING HOUSE, BRISTOL, ME



Photo by Brett Donham

In the wealthiest communities, some of these churches became quite elaborate.

ROCKY HILL MEETING HOUSE, AMESBURY, MA



Credit: Rocky Hill Meeting House, Amesbury, Mass., a Historic New England property

The Puritan meetinghouse continued to evolve. A separate bell tower, which called worshippers to services in a society where only the wealthy had clocks, was added to one end of the gabled form.

WEST BARNSTABLE, MA



Source not known. Found in public domain

Next, another entrance door appeared in the base of the attached bell tower, even though the main entrance remained in the center of the long façade with the raised pulpit opposite.

FIRST PARISH, COHASSET, MA



Photo by Brett Donham

In time, the bell tower became more engaged with the main volume of the building and the main entrance migrated to the base of the tower, but the raised pulpit remained in the middle of the long façade as at the Old South Meetinghouse in Boston.

OLD SOUTH MEETING HOUSE, BOSTON, MA



Source not known. Found in public domain

Following the American Revolution and into the early years of the 19th century, change came more rapidly. The country experienced an economic liberation and great growth and prosperity. The dis-establishing of religion—or the separation of church and state—

meant that a town's taxes no longer supported the Puritan—now Congregational—church. Other denominations flourished, including Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal (formerly Anglican), Universalist, and Quaker. The Unitarian-Congregational split added more change.

Liturgy and music were added to services and the old forms of building seemed outdated. The faithful sought to build noble edifices to celebrate their prosperity and to compete with one another. Another change was that architectural pattern books became increasingly influential. In the centers of wealth, Palladio's classic, *Quattro Libri Del' Architettura* and James Gibbs' *Book of Architecture* were well known and widely used for inspiration. In rural areas, pattern books such as *Country Builder's Assistant* by Asher Benjamin were even more widespread. These books led the way towards the evolved form of church we know today: the entrance under a large fully integrated bell tower, a long nave, and a smaller form housing a raised chancel at the far end.

ABINGTON, CT EAST HADDAM, CT OLD HEAD TIDE CHURCH ALNA, ME



Source not known. Found in public domain



Source not known. Found in public domain



Photo by Brett Donham

The 1950s and '60s liturgical reform redefined church services as a gathering of the faithful in community. This was a coming together of a body of people with shared traditions, needs, and interests—not a lecture or a passive observing of an arcane activity at a distant altar. The altar was seen as the Lord's Table, which was brought forward into the middle of the congregation. The community gathered around it for the Lord's Supper.

Baptism, once a private affair, became one where the whole community present pledged to support the person being baptized and the font came out of its dark corner into a central place in the church building. Lay participation from the seated congregation became a regular part of the service.

Today's worshipping community is trying to be just that, a community. People are drawn to churches in part because, in today's fractured society, they have a need to be part of a supportive community of shared values and beliefs. This implies a size where most everyone knows one another (about 200 to 300 people) and a building with good sightlines, where everyone sits close enough to feel involved in the central activity, and where everyone can easily see and hear each other. Despite Blackberries, iPods, e-mail, and instant messaging—or perhaps because of them—people yearn for a sense of community and find it in churches.

The forces shaping the design of today's churches—modest size, centrality of focus, and a physical sense of community—are those that shaped the early New England meetinghouse. While the contemporary visual expression of these forces differs in most cases from the early model, the modern floor plans are remarkably similar to them.

From Palladio, to Christopher Wren, to frugal New England with its abundance of cheap wood and its Puritan legacy, and then to the growing prosperity of a new country, the image of the American church building evolved to the iconic form of the double pitched roof and steeple/bell tower that for the last 200 years has defined “church” as many in this country understand it. There is some comfort in having such a universally accepted image.

However, the fundamental message of Jesus is revolutionary and unsettling. Housing this message in a safe and comfortable architecture would seem a contradiction. Our current state of church building architecture perfectly reflects our ambivalence towards the meaning of the Gospel; is our faith a comfortable and safe refuge from the world or is it a radicalizing uncertain place for changing the world? How will the churches built in our time be viewed by churchgoers in the future? What will these structures say about us and how we lived? As they did in the 17th century, today's religious buildings serve as a mirror to the values and priorities we now hold. Our buildings will tell us, in ways we may not realize, how we answer these questions.

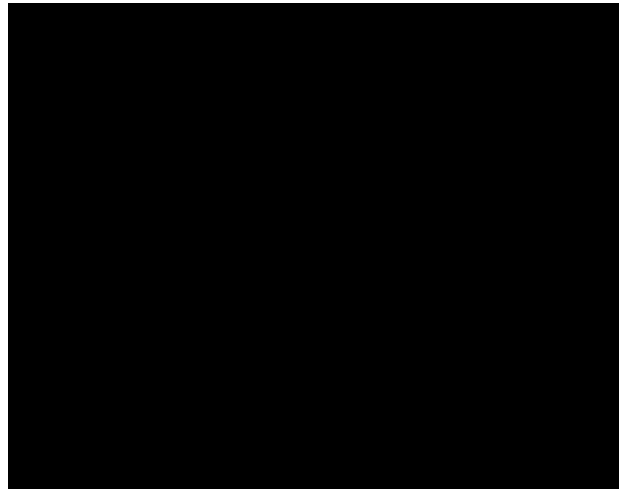
Authors Note:

This history and context has shaped my thinking about my own church designs. I see “church” as the gathering of faithful people and a church building as a place that helps form community. All the gathered are ministers. A few are charged with leading the gathering and administering the sacraments, but all participate and have roles in the service. I believe the space should reflect the gathering. Everyone should easily see and hear one another. I believe in a clarity and simplicity of architectonic expression, and a modest celebration of the necessary structural elements. The space should look like a room, but a special room. It should be a container, but one with some aspiration. It should be filled with light entering from on high. It should reflect the importance the community attaches to it; it should be memorable.

ST. PAUL’S CHURCH BROOKLINE MA & CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,
BROCKTON, MA



Photographer Hutchins Photography Inc.



Photographer Steve Rosenthal