

# SACRED

# STORYTELLERS

DESIGN INTERVENTION VOL 2

by MEL MCGOWAN



As co-founder and Chief Creative Officer of PlainJoe Studios, Mel McGowan creatively leads the unique multi-disciplinary Spatial Storytelling<sup>SM</sup> studio, which integrates the multiple disciplines of master planning, architecture, interior design, show set design, environmental graphics, and themed attraction design in the creation of compelling experiences and environments around the world.

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# SPATIAL STORYTELLING<sup>SM</sup>

“The most powerful person in the world is the storyteller. The storyteller sets the vision, values and agenda of an entire generation that is to come and Disney has a monopoly on the storyteller business. You know what? I am tired of that bullshit, I am going to be the next storyteller.” - Steve Jobs

Story forms. Story transforms.

Story forms who we are and story has the ability to transform who we can become.

Story is at the core of the human condition. From the earliest cavemen to a contemporary campfire, each generation passes on collective and individual meaning through story. Story defines who we are, why we are, where we come from, and where we could go. Without narratives which connect the dots of our experience we can only exist as schizophrenic creatures reacting to immediate stimuli.

In indigenous Australian culture, narrative “songlines” are not just rhymes to entertain children or creation

myths for spiritual formation. They are used as pre- “Google Maps” navigation systems across vast distances. One’s life or death could be determined by remembering the words which describe the lay of the land and the origin and location of landmarks and waterholes across the unforgiving Australian outback.

Jesus was a sacred storyteller. He told an epic three-part “metanarrative” of creation, brokenness, and redemption. Jesus used more than just words to tell the sacred story that we call the Gospel or the “Good News.” He used all of Creation itself, adding His own spit to the dirt for just the right texture. There was a time when the Church, his Body on earth, led the world in sacred storytelling, by using then “state-of-the-art” technologies such as stained glass windows and the printing press to tell the transformational story of the Gospel.

That is no longer the case.

One of the greatest storytellers of the 20th century was a relatively uneducated, impoverished, struggling artist named Walt Disney. Born in 1901, he learned to move

beyond his limitations as an artist in telling stories in two dimensions. By the time of his death in 1966, he had mastered the art of telling stories in three-dimensional space and was creating a (Walt Disney) World twice the size of the original city of Manhattan. The Walt Disney Company was just ranked No.1 on the World’s Best Regarded Companies by Forbes.

What was his “special sauce?”

During my decade at Disney, I learned from fellow alumni that counted themselves amongst the “Sorcerer’s Apprentices” who had learned “at the feet” of the master storyteller himself. They taught me that one of the many ways Walt Disney was remarkable was in his unique brand of humility. Unlike the other great storytellers of his century, including Martin Luther King Jr. and Billy Graham, he did not have the gift of traditional oral storytelling. In fact, he struggled to overcome his midwestern drawl when reading scripts on camera. From the earliest days of the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio, he always sought out better artists, animators, architects, and artisans than himself

to help him convey stories in ever-increasing palettes to many more than he could ever reach in one room. In fact, he not only overcame his personal limitations as an artist and a verbal communicator, but developed entirely new narrative art forms in animation and the original “virtual reality” of three-dimensional narrative space with the assistance of architects and engineers that he dubbed “imagineers.”

We call it Spatial Storytelling<sup>SM</sup>. It goes beyond artists to include dozens of disciplines from branding to building. When done correctly, it immerses and engages all five senses, triggering visceral or emotional responses which are the hallmarks of the top destinations on the planet. It goes beyond architects and their dictum that “Form Follows Function” to remind us that throughout history, spaces have told stories and that form can (and should) follow “fiction” or narrative. When every one of thousands of design decisions march to the beat of the same “Big Idea,” one plus one can, in fact, equal three. When mind, body, and spirit are engaged, transformation happens.



# 1 POVERTY ENCOUNTER

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

One of the greatest lessons I learned while working for Walt Disney Imagineering was the idea that “everything speaks.” In other words, whether you’re building a high-tech thrill, planting flowers around Sleeping Beauty’s Castle, or taking out the garbage, people take notice and “hear the story” you’re trying to tell through the settings you create.

But life isn’t a fairy tale. In fact, life can be downright unlivable for millions of children in poverty today. And try as we might to ignore it, it’s a story that needs to be told... and heard.

Born as a spark of imagination in the mind of Children’s Hunger Fund (CHF) President, Dave Phillips, Poverty Encounter is an immersive, walk-through attraction that tells real-life stories of suffering children by portraying realistic scenes of impoverished communities around the world.

Think of it as the “anti-Epcot,” revealing some of the world’s worst living conditions, rather than its best. Visitors come face-to-face with the gut-wrenching truth of poverty and the injustice millions of people suffer every day.

But the story doesn’t end there. Poverty Encounter displays Children’s Hunger Fund’s unwavering desire to support the compassionate work of local churches.

Every detail in the exhibit speaks loudly about the opportunities for evangelism, salvation, and hope created when local churches provide food and essential resources for the hungry in their communities. It’s a front-row seat to what’s possible when the church takes a stand against suffering and starvation.

Perhaps my favorite part of the exhibit is how it ends. At this attraction, guests don’t exit into a gift shop. Instead they step into CHF’s working warehouse to work together packaging food for delivery to needy families.

Now that’s what I call action speaking louder than words.





“Our goal is to share the stories of real children, to help visitors understand not only the pain and the hardships, but also the joy that children living in these conditions can have. We aim to shift their perspective about what it means to care for others around the globe. Whether living in a garbage dump in Guatemala or a home here in the U.S., kids are kids....they all smile, they all laugh, they all have dreams.”



**Dave Phillips**  
**PRESIDENT**  
*Children's Hunger Fund*





# 2 SADDLEBACK CHURCH

LAKE FOREST, CALIFORNIA

One of the Bible's great metaphors says that life is a journey from one place to another. From the garden we walked. His Word lights our path. Broad is the road to destruction. Jesus is the Way. He goes to prepare a place. You get the idea.

For kids, the journey metaphor is no more applicable than in the Proverb that says, "Train up a child in the way he should go..." Parents and children's ministry leaders alike strive to lead their kids, to help them find their place in the world and understand their identity as children of God in a way that is both meaningful and fun.

The story's big idea is an island paradise where elementary-aged kids ascend from one level to another as they advance from grade to grade. The youngest kids begin in "Skuppeton Harbor" learning about God's creativity while building meaningful relationships with others within a vibrant nautical village.

Next, early elementary kids set forth to discover God's voice in their lives as they ascend through "Mountain Meadow Pass." Themed like a mountain trek basecamp, kids experience energetic and interactive worship.

Finally, late elementary kids arrive at "The Peak," a mountain top airfield from which even greater adventures can be achieved. There, kids are reassured that God is with them on their journey, giving them strength and ability to climb higher, dig deeper and run their race with endurance.

**Parents and children's ministry leaders alike strive to lead their kids, to help them find their place in the world**

At Saddleback Church, Pastor Rick Warren wants the kids of the church to sense their place in the story and look forward to the adventures on the path ahead, no matter their age. At the time of this writing, Rick and his team are pursuing a radical redesign of their expansive children's ministry facility to create an exciting journey like no other.







“Paul says, ‘I become all things to all men so I may, in some way, win some.’ What he meant was he let his target determine his approach. When with Jews, he communicated like a Jew. When he was with Gentiles, he communicated like a Gentile. I’m sure if Paul came to Southern California, he’d learn to communicate in Southern Californian terms.”



**Rick Warren**  
**LEAD PASTOR**  
*Saddleback Church*





# 3 ORANGE COUNTY RESCUE MISSION

TUSTIN, CALIFORNIA

Ask anyone who the **least**, the **last** or the **lost** in our society are and the first answers you'll likely get are the poor, homeless or prisoners. We might even include the sick, disabled and elderly. Now if I asked you what you think about cafeterias at homeless shelters, prisons, hospitals and nursing homes, what do you see?

I envision a cold, stark institutional-type place. It smells bad and is monotonous with rows of benchlike seats and people herded through in orderly fashion. Not all cafeterias, of course, but many are not places where I would want to eat. Not even once, but especially not every day.

Jesus tells us to invite the poor, the homeless and the sick to the wedding feast. He says to treat the poor as we would the rich. And when we do that to the least of these, we do it to Jesus. So when PlainJoe Studios was asked to do some Spatial Storytelling™ for Restoration Café at the Village of Hope, a transitional living facility owned and operated by Orange County Rescue Mission (OCRM) in Tustin, California, that's exactly what we thought about.

We wanted the 300 residents of the Village of Hope who eat three meals a day at the restaurant-style café to know they are as important as the richest men on earth. We wanted them to know they are valued and loved. We wanted the last to be first on this side of heaven too.

In fact, that's the mission of OCRM. It's the most unique homeless rescue mission and the most restorative.

Entering the Village of Hope feels like walking onto a college campus. The residents are even referred to as students. OCRM believes that in order to restore hearts and lives, they must surround those they help with hope and beauty. Students are provided with counseling, education, job training, shelter, food, clothing and health care.

The mastermind behind this unique community is OCRM President and CEO Jim Palmer who has been there since 1992. When asked where he got his ideas for restorative care, he says, "I just followed God's prompting and listened to Him through prayer. I also considered whether I would want to stay here. If it wasn't good enough for me, then it wasn't good enough for our students."

Palmer says, "I remember one woman who came in with her children. She was so happy that she turned to me with tears in her eyes and said, 'It's so beautiful! Are you sure we get to stay here?' That's the kind of response we aim for!"

The OCRM is not a place designed with your typical church budget of just get it done "good, fast and cheap." They chose to aim higher, reflecting the same sense of self-worth that God has for the people who stay there. The OCRM shows people they are the beloved sons and daughters of a King! They shouldn't get a Motel 6, God wants to pour His favor on them with the Ritz!



Palmer says, “Art is not an option.” He knows that beauty, art and creativity are critical to elevating those with broken spirits. The OCRM intentionally designs their campus around art aesthetics. The Ahmanson Family has generously donated an exquisite art collection to the campus. Roberta Ahmanson is a writer who focuses on religion, history and art. She believes beauty is essential to human life.

Space without design is functionable. A space designed by narrative is not limited by culture or trends. I love this because it’s a chance to be unique. Anybody can create a cool environment, but nobody has your unique story to share. In Spatial Storytelling,<sup>SM</sup> we talk about telling a story in three dimensions – setting, characters and plot. In this case, the setting is the Restoration Café, the characters are the students and the plot is about the restorative care they receive at OCRM.

Our creative team brought bright, yellow stars to the design to reflect light and joy. We used the quote, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime,” because it is so representative of the OCRM. Restoration Café does not just handout food, it changes lives.

In partnership with another local firm, Gensler, we designed the space to include porcelain, faux-wood floor tile with colored walkways. A mix of high and low

colored tables and modern aluminum chairs ensure the space does not feel boring or institutional. The exposed beams give the space character and LED lighting complements the architectural beauty. The 5,500 square foot space accommodates over 300 people now and includes a stage and sound/video system.

Our team used a variety of materials for signage from tin ceiling tiles to wood cutouts. Instead of just saying, “Established 1965,” we said, “Serving Up Hope Since 1965.” We added creative art incorporating values of OCRM like love, compassion, grow and inspire. We also included the OCRM mission and vision statements with inspiring scripture verses. The result is a beautiful, engaging and empowering space – not at all like your idea of a typical homeless shelter cafeteria.

Most people think form follows function, but I believe form follows fiction. Storytelling in design evokes emotion, shares ideas and can even give a person a sense of self-worth. That self-worth can be invaluable to someone who is poor or homeless, looking to overcome an addiction, to complete their education or find a job. The result is not at all like your idea of an average homeless shelter cafeteria, but a beautiful, engaging and empowering space.





# ARCHITECTURAL EVANGELISM

In my first decade of designing sacred spaces, I was accused of and called many things. Some have said that I am breaking “inviolable rules of liturgical design” that involve ascension and natural light. Some have confused my Disney attraction design background with the Attractional Church growth model. The only label that ruffles my feathers is that of a “church architect.” The truth is that many people, including most architects, have a pretty limited view of church architecture, which goes something like the children’s rhyme:

“Here is the church.  
Here is the steeple.  
Open the doors and see all the people.”

In my time, I have seen churches struggle to emerge from an internally focused paradigm that can create a “holy huddle,” a members-only Christian country club. In the process they often overcorrect and become Billy Graham Crusade evangelism machines.....only to then realize their deficiency in making mature disciples. Sincere missionary zeal has led many to seek alternatives to the limited paradigm of local church architects, who have been “rubber-stamping” the

same designs for decades. Unfortunately, few viable alternatives have been available.

Door Number 1 leads to the “multi-useless” gymnasium or warehouse. In the name of “stewardship” (defined as being as cheap as humanly possible), dollars and time spent on intentional design are deemed wasteful, opulent, or simply unnecessary when those same funds could go into digging a well in Africa or paying for an extra seat for an unsaved soul. Builder-led committees either find church design-build companies or volunteers to “get ‘er done.” Unfortunately, they miss Jesus’ memo on burying the talents and ignoring longer-term return on investment. These warehouse churches will become future “Malls of Generica” dotting America and the world. They seemed like great functional ideas, but they are unloved placeless machines for consumption or conversion, with little to offer their communities in the way of incarnational space for relationship, discipleship, or a taste of Heaven on Earth.

Door Number 2 leads to a “Gnosticism of Place” in which arrows are thrown at the “Mega/Seeker-Sensitive/Attractional/Church Growth” model (along with its

corresponding debt). The pendulum swing leads some to consider building and debt an evil to be avoided at all costs. Some are successful at creating and even multiplying weekly events in borrowed space, including schools and theaters. Ecclesia is reduced to event planning. However, like a young adult sleeping on a friend’s couch, if the church is healthy it realizes that growth brings the need for a home.

When I was asked by my first pastor/client to design a space where Christ-centered community could flourish and be a blessing to its city seven days a week, he had just fired the most prolific church architect in the U.S. He basically wanted an “anti-church architect” to blow up the paradigm and revolutionize the concept of sacred space. This appealed to my “Punk Rock” sensibilities and allowed me to radically rethink my own paradigms of story, space, and community.

What I know is that great design facilitates connection. Poor design gets in the way, creating isolation, insecurity, and confusion. Modernist architects sought to shed the layers of story and meaning of former “-isms” so they put up “the projects” and Soviet

housing blocks which vertically separated children from mothers and horizontally separated lives into distinct land-use bubbles. The psychological, environmental, and social results of this “Brutalism” were disastrous. Generic vanilla high-rise Hiltons sprouted across tropical beaches around the world, destroying any sense of place and connection to the local people and their land.

In contrast, imagine getting a back rub staring at a coral reef in an overwater Tahitian bungalow or worshipping in a centuries-old cathedral. Destinations can either lift the spirit or crush it.

Great design reflects the image of the God who introduced himself as an Artist and an Architect when we read “In the beginning, He created.” It continues his ongoing work of restoring broken relationships and connections represented in the cross: horizontal connections between people (husband and wife, parents and children, families and neighbors) and vertical connections to the Creator and his creation.

# 4

## NORTHSIDE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

SPRING, TEXAS

One of Walt Disney's key artists was struggling to create a new concept for Disneyland. Frustrated, he threw up his hands. Walt responded with characteristic optimism, "Just do something everybody will like."

As simple yet impossible as that statement seems, it's an idea many sacred storytellers are beginning to embrace. That's what the church coffee shop model is all about. Build it and they will come. The fun happens when churches get radically creative and build something irresistible.

At Northside Christian Church in Spring, Texas, Pastor David Garrison knows this instinctively. He wanted to create a place that had the same magnetic draw as a regional park or family entertainment zone. Above and beyond the notion of a campus styled after a town square, their park would be open to the public inviting believers and non-believers alike.

So they designed their campus around a fishing pond they keep stocked year-round. They built playgrounds

and picnic areas for family gatherings. Basketball and volleyball courts, as well as a disc golf course, are a gift to a community hungry for connection. As families and individuals from the neighborhood come to the park to fish, eat, or play, they also become acquainted with the generous people of Northside.

The church building is a draw on its own. Its uniquely eye-catching exterior recalls a national park visitors center and includes walls tiled entirely with old license plates. Most visitors coming into Northside for the first time cite the building and the park as the things that initially drew them in.

But here's the twist in the story. David and his team did not build a welcoming place that sparks curiosity in passers-by just to be "something everybody will like." They built it for the sake of creating intentional relationships that lead others to God.





“The mission of Northside is, ‘Welcoming everyone, wherever they are, to become growing disciples of Jesus.’ We live and breathe that mission and our campus needs to be in perfect sync with that statement... and it is!”

“This project was an experience of innovative creative planning with intention. I remember Mel telling us how the buildings needed to face the community inviting them in and how the plaza in front would be like open arms welcoming them home. God has used that kind of thinking to draw literally thousands to our campus and into our ministry.”



**David Garrison**

**LEAD PASTOR**

*Northside Christian Church*





# 5 CENTRAL CHURCH

LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

In the heart of the Las Vegas Valley is a thriving ministry that has grown from a church with 4,000 weekly attendees in one location to more than 20,000 gathering across eleven campuses around the world. Central Church is a humbling and profound reminder that sometimes what happens in Vegas doesn't always stay there.

Senior Pastor Jud Wilhite is driven to relentlessly share “uncensored grace” with Sin City. So he and his ministry team put their heads and hearts together to reinvent the way members and visitors alike experience Central.

The original Central campus was more reminiscent of a stale hospital than a dynamic ministry a stone's throw from Vegas. What it was transformed into was a veritable oasis; a “River of Life” running through the 55-acre desert property. The idea was based on Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well.

We dreamed up design elements inspired by the desert climate, recasting the sanctuary and supporting buildings to evoke Anasazi cliffside villages embedded within the mesas and canyon walls. The building mass forms a slot canyon that provides shade and shelter from the elements. And Central's team chose to evoke a signature Vegas ultra-lounge in the building's lobby and cafeteria areas—a design decision which fosters connections to God and one another.

Stories about Las Vegas and the people they're about are powerful. They can be life-giving or life-destroying. Our team helped bring the Vegas stories of God's grace to life in every touch point of the church's brand experience, both in person and online.

**“Spaces evoke powerful feelings. Sometimes we are aware of how our surroundings affect us and other times we are not, but we are still impacted. A space can help us feel welcome and even inspire joy or faith. It's important to spend our resources on environments that reflect our deepest values because we spend so much time in them. I'm thankful for creative people like Mel and his team who push the envelope and haven't given up on creating our sacred spaces.”**



**Jud Wilhite**  
**SENIOR PASTOR**  
*Central Church*





# 6 SHEPHERD CHURCH

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Imagine if Los Angeles, the world's cultural capital and dream factory exported God's truth instead of Hollywood's "false north" of political correctness and moral relativism. Imagine if a church expressed the diversity of the City of Angels and offered a taste of Kingdom come.

That's Dudley Rutherford's dream. Dudley pastors Shepherd Church, the 12,000-member congregation dubbed "the most racially diverse church in Los Angeles" by the city's mayor. In this place where so many different shapes, colors, and cultures come together, he wants to see the church become a "city set on a hill" that illuminates the culture with the transforming truth of the gospel.

So when it came time to build a new worship facility, they took it as a calling to create a place that radiates the beauty of Christ for the whole city to see and declares the "true north" of truth and light.

Dudley knew any action must start with prayer, so they constructed a 60-foot prayer tower from which to reflect and pray for the 4 million residents in the city below. Concentric circles set into the ground below radiate out from the tower illustrating the expectation that God would act in response to the prayers uttered there.

A meandering pedestrian plaza follows the path of 12 iconic stone pillars, each topped with a lighted torch. Graphics on the pillars tell the story of the 12 apostles from one direction and the 12 tribes of Israel from the other, offering an educational discovery trail.

Outdoor fireplaces, seating, and water features create an inviting gathering place right across the street from the area's busy shopping district. A series of amber-colored, LED-lit cattails sway in the wind to capture the eyes of surrounding Angelenos.







“When I look around at the new design of our campus and our new worship center, I can’t help but feel joy and excitement for the people in our community and in our city who will come and learn about Jesus Christ. I think we’ve succeeded in creating a warm and welcoming environment that honors God in all the details, big and small. And we’ve built this new worship facility not only for the lives that will be transformed for Christ today, but also for future generations.”



**Dudley Rutherford**

**SENIOR PASTOR**

*Shepherd Church*





# 7 SUMMIT CHRISTIAN CHURCH

SPARKS, NEVADA

Just north of Reno, between casinos and Nevada's vast wilderness, there's a community at a crossroads. In this unique place, where economic booms and busts come with the territory, people are desperate for a higher view and solid ground.

That's why Pastor Steve Bond of Summit Christian Church in Sparks, Nevada is dead serious about creating an architectural space that invites relationship and inspires hope.

Reno's recent economic growth presents an exciting opportunity... and a pressing problem. Families pour into the region faster than homes can be built. Summit's facilities were leveraged to the hilt and inadequate to accommodate the population explosion.

Although the space limitations presented a unique challenge for reimagining the campus design, the people, place, and culture of Northern Nevada offered a creative opportunity for storytelling in physical space.

The region provides endless opportunities for outdoor recreation, so the design adopted a rugged, trailhead aesthetic that sparks a sense of fun and adventure. Confining people to hallways prevents them from stopping to build relationships, so covered walkways were designed facing a dramatic center courtyard. This blurs the line between indoors and outdoors while facilitating movement that allows for spontaneous and meaningful interaction.

Summit's highest priority was to create space that welcomes the growing population. With an eye on the future, the new 1,000 seat auditorium is designed to be expandable to 1,500 seats when they reach capacity again.

Steve's prayer is that the architecture would reflect Summit's love and desire for deep connection with the community they serve.

**Summit is located in Reno/Sparks, Nevada which is nestled next to the towering Sierra Nevada Mountains. The mountain vibe permeates our valley. As a result, for our church to speak the language of our community, it is vital to reflect the outdoors "mountain house" theme. The mountain-themed environments at Summit put people at ease and help them to feel like our church is a place they can relate with. In many ways, the architectural themes at Summit open the door so they can hear the Gospel more clearly!**

**PlainJoe Studios has been an incredible team to work with! They are among the most creative and talented people I've ever met!**



**Steve Bond**

**SENIOR PASTOR**

*Summit Christian Church*







# POSTMODERN WELLS

Most church architects consider the work of designing and building church structures akin to a modern-day version of Solomon building God's temple, and they consider it a high calling. In fact, the industry gold standard for church architecture is dubbed the "Solomon Awards."

However, I feel like my calling is a little more humble. I believe that God basically handed me a shovel and said, "Dig, boy."

From my read of the scriptures, Jesus didn't command us to build more holy temple structures. He said that we are his temple. I find inspiration from a place called Jacob's Well.

Here we meet a Samaritan woman. She hadn't been searching church websites to shop for a place to worship that weekend. Like many of our current generation outside the walls of church buildings on Sunday, there were far too many physical, cultural, and spiritual distances for her to cross. But that didn't stop the God of the universe from busting through space and time to connect with her where she was.

I believe we are called to dig more Jacob's Wells, where the unchurched of today can enter into conversations with believers and taste living water, even when they are doing "normal" things like working out and having coffee. We need to create space in our lives and in our communities where we build a bridge instead of building church walls that separate the church and unchurched, the lost and the found, the Body of Christ and the community.

To be clear, I'm not talking about just serving Christian lattes on Sunday morning in a lobby that copied colors from the local Starbucks.

In today's culture, the idea of going into debt to construct a multi-million-dollar facility that is designed to operate for a few hours one day a week does not go over as well as it used to. Unfortunately, rather than anticipating any blessing to their city, the reaction of public officials to new church development plans is usually more akin to that of a LULU (Locally Undesirable Land Use) such as a strip club. "So you're basically going to take this piece of real estate off of our property tax rolls, not pay sales tax, and piss off your neighbors with overflow parking, noise, and traffic, huh?"

Building more facilities that largely sit empty six days a week does not feel like good stewardship of God's garden. Locked church doors don't allow relationships, discipleship, or personal or global transformation to happen.

We have been on a global journey seeing how God's people can create postmodern wells that serve as hearts and hubs for their communities every day.

There was a time when the very first structure sited at the center of any community was sacred space. They existed as the "anchor tenant" of the town square, plaza, or commons. In today's world, we have land use zones for just about any other use besides churches. Churches have to "beg for the forgiveness to exist" through a land use process known as a Conditional Use Permit, and these permits don't come easy. Join me in "stealing our spot back" by creating postmodern wells which people are drawn to and where today's Temple, the people of God, can connect with those who need him — all week long.



## 8 2|42 COMMUNITY CHURCH

BRIGHTON, MICHIGAN

Historically speaking, sacred spaces are located in the heart of the community—and not by accident. Wherever humans gather to create civilization, they instinctively designate centralized locations where community connection and worship rituals can happen with ease. From indigenous villages and the Roman forum, to New England village greens, “town squares” become the hub from which all other societal activities radiate.

David Dummitt, the pastor of 2|42 Community Church in Brighton, Michigan, could feel the pain of a community in need of connection. He recognized that a traditional church building constructed on the outskirts of town stood little chance of being a magnet for the lost and hurting. So instead, David and his team set about to create a modern town square, a community center, built for genuine connection with the people of Brighton.

They purchased an abandoned, dilapidated warehouse along the town’s main drag in what might have been considered the worst part of town. Designers restored the building, reusing as much of the building and its resources as possible to communicate a sense of restoration and transformation while maintaining some of its antiquity.

What began as a building you might see on *The Walking Dead* became a thriving, multi-functional community center where people connect, worship, enjoy coffee, bring their kids to play indoor sports, or even take fitness classes.

They effectively created a refuge for children and families in close proximity to where they live, work, and learn. It’s the postmodern well in action.





“If we followed a normal plan, we would have built on the outskirts of our area where land is cheaper and waited for the community to come to us. Instead, we bought the ugliest place in town—but a place that’s close to the people we want to reach.”



**Dave Dummitt**

**LEAD PASTOR**

*2|42 Church*







# 9 TRUE NORTH CHURCH

PERTH, AUSTRALIA

It's one thing to create a place where people feel compelled to gather. It's another to keep it open to the public all week long. The old habit of churches holding vibrant gatherings on the weekends and turning into ghost towns during the week is tired to say the least. Seven-day church isn't just a model. It's all but a command from the moment the in-dwelling Spirit made our seven-day bodies his temple.

True North Church in suburban Perth, Western Australia, decided their church should become more to the community than a building open on Sundays.

Senior Pastor Dean Groetzinger and his team envisioned a multi-purposeful facility that would foster connections to God and one another. It would be open to the public and minister to the surrounding communities every day of the week. And no matter a person's age, origin, wealth, or status, there would be a place for them to connect and flourish spiritually at True North.

To do so, they created a separately-branded space on their campus called "The Block," a collection of spaces that would meet community needs in a variety of ways. The Block houses 115 Collective, a coffee shop and cafe that encourages connection; Compass Early Learning Centre, an early childhood educational space complete with a nature playground and discovery program; The Loft, a co-working space available for community use; and The Point, a 400-seat event venue equipped with state-of-the-art A/V equipment.

What resulted is a church that gives back to their surrounding community in a massive way. True North draws members and visitors alike into an immersive, three-dimensional life experience that encourages connectivity at multiple touch points and transforms lives along the way.

**"Our goal was to create a place that would build bridges to people who would never even think about attending a church on a Sunday, and so it was important to create a space where the average person would find themselves beginning to see their path crossing with the church."**



**Dean Groetzinger**

**SENIOR PASTOR**

*True North Church*



# 10 GRACE CITY CHURCH

WENATCHEE, WASHINGTON

Two hours east of Seattle, where the Columbia River draws near to the majestic Cascades mountain range lies a unique, agricultural town called Wenatchee. In this place where hard work is expected and innovation is rewarded, people hunger for connection with others.

Pastor Josh McPherson leads Grace City Church in Wenatchee where members share his passion for incarnational ministry both inside and outside of the church. The church is known for its thriving partnerships with the broader community and Josh believes the stories of the city and the church are intertwined.

In recent years, Josh began to see a new vision for Grace City; to build a thriving campus that will harness the entrepreneurial spirit of Wenatchee's people, draw families in for recreation and education, and introduce the unchurched to Jesus.

The heart of the campus will be a co-working space called The Intersection Co-Lab, where entrepreneurial-

minded locals, startups, freelancers, small business, and large enterprises can interact and work alongside one another as they grow their businesses.

The 900-seat event space will function as a cost-effective, flexible auditorium for Grace City's worship services, and will also be available as a community event space.

The people of Grace City are also the people of Wenatchee, so Josh sought to weave the story of the region into the physical design of the campus.

The children's ministry area, called Grace Town, will pay homage to the Wenatchee area and its agricultural heritage and include an interactive children's museum during the week. In The Landing and Story Tower, guests get an elevated view of the Columbia River, the Cascade Range, and the picturesque orchards that are a signature feature of the region.

**“We refused to build inside the old paradigm: member-only club, open one day per week. What if we came together and leveraged our resources and combined our generosity to build something that could be received by our community as a gift?”**



**Josh McPherson**

**LEAD PASTOR**

*Grace City Church*





# WIRED FOR COMMUNITY

We are wired for community by our Creator.

I once heard a community developer describe it this way: “We are basically a herd species. Somewhere along the way, some of us got separated from the herd and lost our way...we are just now realizing that we are lost and are trying to find our way back.”

The American Dream of the single-family home in suburbia has been about separating ourselves as far as we can afford from the next nuclear family. It has largely been sold on the promise of escaping the city and re-entering a bucolic, Eden-like garden setting. We are willing to “drive to qualify,” moving further and further away from the hearts of our cities in order to afford the mortgage on this dream.

However, God has always been serious about community. Before the beginning, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit “did life together” in community. “In the beginning” God created a perfect setting for community – Eden -- for vertical connection with Him, as well as horizontal connection with another human. After the cleansing of the flood, God chose a particular people -- a community – to tell His story and to reveal His

presence, grace, and love. For the past few thousand years, His temple, His body, His bride, and His presence has not been contained by a tent or a building, but somehow is said to be present in Christ-centered community, or the Church.

Today, the word and concept of “community” is being kidnapped from us.

Today, we have special interest communities ( “the gay community,” the “evangelical community”). Single-family detached tract residential builders have renamed themselves “Community Builders” and christened their single-use tracts “Master Planned Communities.” The leading Real Estate Development trade and research association, Urban Land Institute (ULI), defines Community Centers as shopping centers anchored by a discount or department store with a typical “gross leasable area” of 150,000 to 300,000 square feet... a.k.a. a “strip center” or “big box center.” Cities use the term to describe indoor sports complexes, while churches have used the term to update and to try to externalize the use of their good old “multi-useless gymnasiums” and “Family Life Centers.”

Three-car “garagescapes” have replaced the tree-lined front porch streetscapes of small town America and they are increasingly recognized as socially isolating and anonymous. Anonymity is also a common critique of the Sunday morning experience in the darkened rows of “black box” contemporary megachurches (many of which describe themselves as a “Community Church” to differentiate themselves from mainline denominations). Ironically, many of these “faith communities” are essentially once-a-week gatherings of dispersed families from the same 20-minute drive radius as a big box retail center. Given the placeless homogeneity of much suburban sprawl (the same big-box retailers, tract home builders, gas stations and “vanilla” office parks), the word seems to be invoked specifically to compensate for the lack of authentic community.

However, the biggest threat to the classic definition of “community” may be technology. The internal combustion engine killed “Main Street” and the walkable scale of human settlements and towns. Today tools like the internet and social media seem to offer a tempting alternative in the virtual “spaces” of Facebook, chat rooms, and Third Life, yet these options for online community may actually be killing the richness of face-to-face interactions. The Constitution protects the rights to public assembly and free speech and assumes these rights would be exercised in physical places, but are the “real” places obsolete? Fundamental shifts are occurring in the way that “Generation Text” deals with each other and their world.

The fact is, when you divorce the word “community” from the reality of a particular human-scaled “place,” you fundamentally lose something in the mix.

The story arc of the Bible moves along a trajectory from a Garden to a City. Just as God called Nehemiah back to restore the city of God, I believe God is calling Christians today to redeem and restore sustainable Christ-centered community back in the heart of our neighborhoods, even – especially -- where endless agglomerations of suburban subdivisions have never previously had a heart.

Every church should define their “community” beyond their property lines. Various strategies include: developing surplus acreage of surface parking lots into mixed-use community buildings that create a “drawbridge” to the community; recasting churches as performing arts / community centers that are more readily recognized as “anchors” for retail / town center development; joint-development strategies with mixed-use / new town developers which reserve ministry building pads, while minimizing the amount of dedicated Sunday morning parking required (for example, sharing office / retail parking spaces); and redeveloping “obsolete” retail / big-box anchors and centers as “Main Streets” or church-anchored “piazzas.”

The challenge can sometimes seem daunting: to create sacred space in the heart(s) of the city, to bring a bit of the Kingdom of Heaven to Earth... to build something that calls those outside the herd to the heart of a real community led by Christ. But if we are truly wired for community and called to connection, it's time to tell this story with the structures we build.



# 11 GRACE PLACE

BERTHOUD, COLORADO

Somewhere between Denver and Cheyenne, Wyoming, is a sprawling community with a tremendous view of the Rocky Mountains. For a growing church in need of space, it could be tempting to slap together a tilt-slab, warehouse-style building for the sake of “stewardship” and efficiency. But in beautiful country like this, a building like that could be more of a curse than a blessing.

Grace Place in Berthoud, Colorado, is a church passionate about reaching the “burned, bored, and bypassed.” Pastor Clay Peck understands the need for the church to open its arms to the community beyond the congregation. And he wants their new building to reflect that.

Shunning the “big-box” ideal, Clay sought a design that would position the church to be seen as a crucial (and beautiful) community destination that points people toward one another, toward their creator, and serves the greater good.

Lines are blurred between the indoors and outdoors by the presence of double-sided fireplaces, glass garage doors, and thematic elements that direct attendees attention outside toward God’s architecture.

The Outpost a 9,000-square-foot kids’ ministry space, is themed as a junior ranger training camp featuring an indoor climbing structure and an outdoor play zone. Thematic elements include canoes, historic trail maps and a unique vantage point where “etched glass” window graphics identify each of the peaks of the majestic Rocky Mountain Front Range.

During Sunday services, the rooftop deck and fireplace acts as a “Court of the Gentiles” for those who may not be ready to attend church services, but want to take in the majestic mountain view while the sermon and music are broadcast outside.

The story being told at Grace Place is not just about characters and plot. It’s about the view.





“We want this to be for the community, not just for our members. This fresh, outside-the-box, community-oriented, architectural-evangelism approach totally aligned with our church culture.”



**Clay Peck**

**LEAD PASTOR**

*Grace Place*





# 12 NEW VINTAGE CHURCH

ESCONDIDO, CALIFORNIA

Every Friday night in the summer, thousands flood Grand Avenue in Escondido, California, for a vintage car show. The music, the food, and the rumble of polished horsepower draws families from near and far. But when those events aren't happening, the street is a ghost town.

At one time, the art-deco theater at the top of the street, was the hot spot to meet friends, take in a show, and enjoy community life every day of the week. The theater still stands, but it's gutted and useless in a downtown district that desperately needs a people magnet.

That's why Tim Spivey, Lead Pastor at nearby New Vintage Church offered to purchase and renovate the historic theater. When the theater reopens as "The Grand," it will operate as the anchor tenant for the district drawing pedestrians and shoppers further up the street past neighboring businesses who could definitely use a boost of foot traffic.

**"It gives us a chance to flip the paradigm from one where the church occupies a building and tries to convince the community to come inside, to building something for the community to occupy, and inviting the church in."**



**Tim Spivey**  
**LEAD PASTOR**  
*New Vintage Church*

What excites me most is the ways in which the church plans to utilize the space during the week. Outside of weekend worship services, New Vintage will offer the building as an arts and performance center for the community.

The children's worship room can become a dance studio during the week. Classrooms become space for art or music lessons. The theater itself, which will serve as the church's primary weekend worship space, will also be available as rehearsal and performance space for theater groups, film festivals, or musical acts.

Tim says the church is rallying around this idea because they know what it will mean for their neighbors to see a church participating side-by-side with the community. When it opens, The Grand will stand as a shining beacon to which the community will be irresistibly drawn.





# 13 BAYSIDE CHURCH

GRANITE BAY, CALIFORNIA

Our God is a God of strategy and purpose. And as humans made in His image, we're divinely called to be strategic with our resources and with the stories we tell to the world.

The leadership team at Bayside Church in Northern California found themselves with an unusual property problem. They had property it didn't make sense to sell, property being leased, and property that needed to be developed—and it all required strategic money management and planning to transform it into spaces that both honor God and invite the community.

**“...as humans made in His image, we're divinely called to be strategic with our resources and with the stories we tell the world.”**

Pastor Ray Johnston responded to this call with an ambitious master plan that would revamp their existing campus while establishing new sites that strategically connect them to new communities in the area.

First things first, Ray initiated “design intervention” at their existing Granite Bay campus. They transformed a collection of concrete block buildings into a facility that

would be visually exciting and draw in new members. They designed a café, redesigned their lobby, and re-themed their kids' ministry space to reflect the concept of Jesus as living water—where kids “dive in” as River of Life Explorers.

Nearby in Roseville, the Bayside team developed 100 acres into recreation space for the community, an anchor tenant, and a hotel. The vibey, urban Topgolf entertainment and event venue came in as their tenant. This strategic choice proved successful, with the combination of amazing food, a driving range, and gathering places.

Bayside also transformed the industrial warehouse next door into an indoor/outdoor park for families. They covered lobby floors with AstroTurf and brought in fun lawn furniture, effectively creating an atmosphere that felt welcoming and relaxing for guests.



**Ray Johnston**  
**LEAD PASTOR**  
*Bayside Church*









# THE HEART OF STORY

I consider myself privileged to sit at the feet of some of the most dynamic storytellers and communicators of our generation. From Rick Warren to Max Lucado to George Lucas, we have had the opportunity to hold their arms up by telling stories in ways that go beyond what oral, written, or filmed narrative permits.

To some, the art and craft of sacred storytelling starts and stops behind a pulpit. In an increasingly post-Christian world, that is no longer an option. If we aren't successful storytellers from the ether to our environments, from branding to building, we lose. We call this three-dimensional storytelling. In fact we have structured our entire organization around these three dimensions:

Strategic Storytelling distills and visually communicates the tribal DNA and collective personality of a tribe and its unique journey. Digital Storytelling creates "virtual space" on a website or VR which serves as a "front porch" to a community. Spatial Storytelling™ orchestrates the fields of architecture, master planning, interiors, graphics, landscape design, engineering, and many other disciplines in order to allow people to literally step into storytelling spaces.

How do we discover the unique story God is writing in each distinct mission field? Just as a good missionary needs to start by being a cultural anthropologist, we start by closing our mouths and opening our eyes and ears to the soil-specific context we are in.

At film school, I learned that story is based on a "tripod" of character, setting, and plot. For every one of the hundreds of spaces I've designed, I have started a "Blue Sky" Discovery phase by assembling the right people in a room, often in a "story circle" that emulates the primal story spaces of humans gathered around a fire circle. The agenda for the day is a simple Venn diagram of three overlapping circles representing the three components of story.

## CHARACTER

(The "Who?"): Working with Brad Abare and the Center for Church Communication, we facilitate a unique "DNA" distillation process which articulates the way your unique Character creates value, how your Relationships transfer value, how your Identity embodies value, and how your unique Voice expresses value. The physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual aspects of a

collective identity are visually developed as early "StoryBoards" which communicate through imagery rather than through words just what makes up your "special sauce."

## SETTING

(The "Where?"): The vast majority of institutional architecture is "placeless" and rubberstamps the same functional solutions regardless of location. The reason I spend time in an airplane just about every week is we have learned it is simply impossible to discover and celebrate the unique "sense of place" without being there, walking the streets and finding out just what it is that has caused people to choose this spot in all of God's creation. I was mentored by a real estate guru who liked to talk about getting out and "tasting the dirt." Each setting exists in a unique end of an ecological spectrum from nature to the urban core. Our designs can either ignore, fight against, or celebrate the strengths of the God-made and man-made attributes of that setting.

## PLOT

(The "Why?"): In the world of Disney Pixar CG animated films, each minute of film costs over a million dollars. You can imagine why scenes that don't move the plot forward don't make the cut. When choosing to steward precious ministry dollars it is essential to know the essence of the plot in order to edit out inconsistent "nonessentials." This may sound abstract, but it can literally mean decisions like simply removing ugly carpet in order to expose hardwood floors or concrete foundations – surfaces which carry the story of redeemed materials, people, and place.

In the heart of the intersection of these overlapping "story circles" is where we typically find a "Big Idea." A Big Idea has the power to create an internal logic for thousands of design decisions that have to be made in the life of a project. It is this internal consistency that eliminates the chaos and contradictions of ugly and mundane man-made environments. More importantly, a Big Idea is one that results in transformation and integrates the who, the where, and the why into a "what" that points to the ultimate reason for the story ... leading people to Jesus.



# 14 CROSSWINDS CHURCH

LIVERMORE, CALIFORNIA

In Livermore, California, there sits a historic, century-old dairy farm. Despite its urban location and position near a BART transit station, the property is lush and scenic. It's a callback to the classic agrarian landscapes of the region.

Before Pastor Chris Coli and CrossWinds Church acquired the old farm, it was in varying states of disrepair. Barns and water tanks sat rotting on the property, which had once been home to a "worker's village." Previously, CrossWinds made its home in a Bay Area industrial office park. But for a congregation that describes itself as "gathered and scattered" (that is, gathered together to worship and connect, then scattered beyond the church walls to reflect Jesus in the world), Chris felt that it was time for something more.

Chris and his leadership team wanted to use their new property to convey a story of restoration in the community: restoration of the land, restoration of the materials, and restoration of lives through the promises of God. "Gathering and scattering," both a biblical and agricultural concept, is reflected throughout the property, taking cues from God's architecture and the history behind the land.

They built an 11,000-square-foot, 900-seat auditorium trimmed with reclaimed wood from the remaining dairy structures. Modular trailers were restored to house kids' ministry space; playful garden walls and canopies are also finished with reclaimed materials. They even added a 29-foot silo play structure for kids to enjoy.

When Livermore local Robert Jones drove by the property, he was intrigued by its transformation. His curiosity eventually led him to visit the church. "I see what God's guidance did to this old run-down dilapidated dairy," he said at his baptism, "and I have faith that he can restore this old imperfect sinner into something beautiful."

**"Our project was built on a 100+ year old dairy farm with multiple barns, farmhand residences, and an old dairy building that had fallen into disarray. It was a decaying rotting skeleton of something that had once been thriving and necessary for the community. Mel helped us develop a vision for the property that would tell the story of how God can restore our dry bones in our spiritual lives through the restoration and development of this old campus into something new and thriving again."**



**Chris Coli**  
**SENIOR PASTOR**  
*CrossWinds Church*







# 15 RESTORATION ROASTERS

CORONA, CALIFORNIA

There's a specialty coffee shop in Corona, California, that is making the invisible, visible. It's name says it all; "Restoration Roasters" exists to help restore the lives of Corona's homeless community.

Blake Ryan, director of the Corona-Norco Rescue Mission, was inspired to open a coffee shop with purpose: to continually fund the mission, provide vocational training for its residents, and bring exceptional coffee to the community in the process.

The idea sparked on Ryan's first visit to a coffee roasting facility. The moment he realized how many people were involved in the business of creating specialty coffee from the bean to the cup (it's the second-largest commodity industry in the world), he knew he was on to something. He saw coffee as an opportunity to provide valuable skills for transformation in the lives of the mission's students.

With stories of transformation in mind, designers took special care throughout the construction process to use reclaimed materials that would have typically been thrown out or devalued. Everything down to the logo's typeface was designed to convey a sense of nostalgia (bringing back the good) with a modern, hopeful flair.

Rescue Mission students are continually trained and released back into the workforce, gaining skills in retail, barista, and customer service operations. From concept to branding, from design to execution, every facet of Restoration Roasters represents the process of lovingly restoring the rescue mission's students to a productive life in society. And the coffee tastes amazing too.





“God saw the beauty when he made each one of these people. Most of these people have lost the ability to see that beauty in themselves. People on the outside see them as worth less than other people. Through Restoration Roasters, we hope that beauty will be restored within themselves, and that other people will see it also.”



**Blake Ryan**

**DIRECTOR**

*Corona-Norco Rescue Mission*





# 16 MOSAIC CHURCH

WINTER GARDEN, FLORIDA

You'll never forget the pungent smells of mold and standing water inside a dark, abandoned building in Central Florida. Critters scurry unseen in the warm blackness as water drips down through gaping holes in the unrepaired roof. The building might/should have been condemned, but someone with a vision believed it could be made new if they just let in a little light.

Renault van der Riet, Lead Pastor at Mosaic Church in Winter Garden, Florida, believes that the story of his church—just like your story and mine—began in a garden called Eden; that pristine garden oasis which was broken by sin, rescued by Jesus, and restored for eternity.

In search of a new home for Mosaic, Renault and his team located a 78,000-square-foot big box store that had been left to the elements—without form and void. It seemed like a perfect place to make a stand, to let in the light, and create something beautiful and new.

Just like restoring a messed up, stinking building, Renault wanted to use the space to illustrate Mosaic's story and influence the redemption stories of people in the surrounding communities.

Visitors entering the restored building are drawn toward a contemporary interpretation of the Tree of Life, one of the iconic trees from the creation story. Trellises and garden arbors overlook seating areas designed specifically for relationship-building and connection opportunities.

What was once a dark and empty shell became a flourishing garden filled with light and life. As Renault repeats the story of "rescue, identity, and mission," he encourages his congregation to actively participate in God's plan to restore creation to its original purpose of cultivating relationship with God and people





“It seems that whatever we step into together, the Gospel ripples out from there bringing light, life and freedom to those we serve. We captured this concept with concentric circles rippling out throughout the building and even in front of the building. The story of the Gospel redeeming a community is being told even as you park your car.”



Renault van der Riet

LEAD PASTOR

*Mosaic Church*







"Spaces communicate powerful things. Sometimes we are aware of how our surroundings affect us and other times we are not, but we are still impacted. A space can help us feel welcomed and even inspire joy or faith. I'm thankful for people like Mel and PlainJoe Studios who care deeply that the spaces we inhabit reflect our deepest values.

Mel McGowan and PlainJoe Studios are the absolute best in capturing the needs of an organization and turning that into amazing spaces to help facilitate the mission. Their sense of design and attention to detail and budget is truly inspiring and remarkable."

—JUD WILHITE SENIOR PASTOR  
CENTRAL CHRISTIAN CHURCH LAS VEGAS