

Beacon Hill Baptist

How we approached the design of a new church in the Midwest prairies, by *Daniel Rosbottom and David Howarth of DRDH*

Owasso, on the edge of Tulsa in Oklahoma, is quintessential suburban America; an apparent non-place of shopping malls and tracts of housing, whose folksy elaborations fail to escape Dan Graham's withering photographic critique of the 1960s. The myriad churches, their artificially lit, climate-controlled interiors swollen in the competition to attract ever larger congregations, echo the commercial buildings that surround them, often distinguished only by the clip-on spires that rise above the parking lots. Its once remarkable prairie has largely been lost to what Kenneth Frampton describes as 'the ruthless flattening out of the contours in a typical American, suburban subdivision'.

The old Midwest is still here, but you need to look for it. The new church is set within 100 acres of preserved prairie that our clients, the Beacon Hill Baptist Community, have owned and tended for a number of years. It is a very beautiful landscape, an almost >>



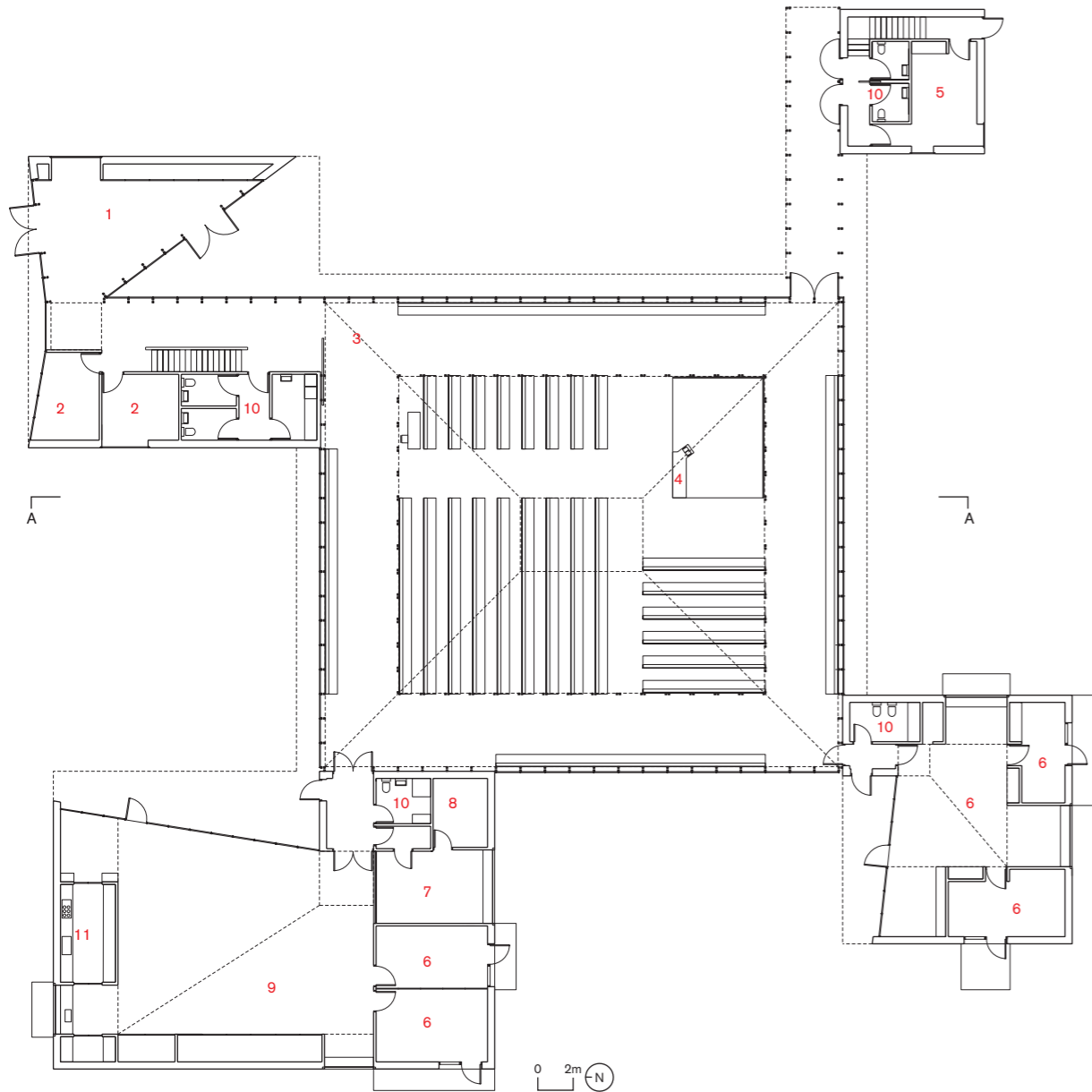
Site plan

- 1. Church
- 2. Lake
- 3. Pavilion
- 4. Baptismal pool
- 5. Cross

Right Photograph of laser-cut MDF model showing altar in worship hall



ALL IMAGES DRDH

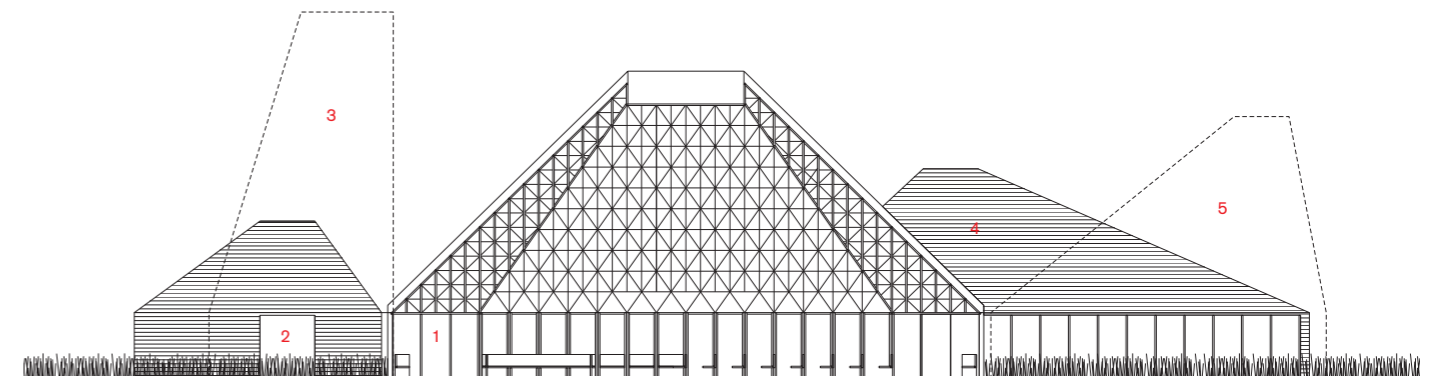


Ground floor plan legend

- 1. Entrance
- 2. Offices
- 3. Worship hall
- 4. Altar
- 5. Library
- 6. Classroom
- 7. Music room
- 8. Store
- 9. Fellowship hall
- 10. WC
- 11. Kitchen

Section legend

- 1. Worship hall
- 2. Children's House
- 3. Library/bell tower
- 4. Fellowship House
- 5. Entrance House



Section A-A



Ground floor

imperceptibly rolling topography of tall grasses that they intend to steward both for their own congregation and for the growing suburban community they will serve.

Historically, churches have spoken to a landscape through their form while their spaces looked inwards, removing worshippers from the physical world to focus better upon the spiritual. Attending outdoor summer services on the site, the potential for a more intimate relationship between church and land seemed immediately



apparent, recalling their earliest incarnations as open-air altars, or the biblical tabernacle the Israelites took with them into the desert. Both ideas resonate with the traditions of American Baptists who carried their church as they travelled out into the Midwest. We therefore proposed that not only should the church feel intrinsically part of the landscape, but also that the landscape should be fundamental to the experience of the church.

A church's form is what signifies it within the collective memory of its congregation and the wider community. Recently, working in the very different context of Norway, we explored this through a design that knowingly referenced the particular form and scale of a previous church on the site and thus addressed a commonly understood iconography.

A generous cloister allows for relaxed circulation and an enlarged congregation

In Oklahoma, given the lack of architectural precedent, we instead sought inspiration from American Realist Andrew Wyeth's mid-20th century paintings of barns and prairie farmsteads. Their dark, clustered silhouettes informed our desire for a church that would offer a familiar figure, while at the same time signifying its special purpose. The paintings led us to an ensemble of pitched roofs that shift in relation to each other as you move around them. This strategy also recognised the breadth of activity the community is engaged with beyond worship, arranging complementary functions

Left View into worship hall at entrance
Above Massing model from west

within a series of connected 'houses', rather than a large, single volume.

The Entrance House, Fellowship House, Children's House and library tower pinwheel around the House of God, their skewed forms and asymmetrical siting counterpointing its centred-ness. Circling the perimeter of the sacred space, a generous internal cloister allows for relaxed circulation and, occasionally, an expanded congregation. Each function connects via this ambulatory and thus the act of worship becomes the physical focus of all aspects of church life. A degree of separation between the sacred and secular is created through a veil of close-centred pairs of columns that mark each row of pews and offer multiple, non-hierarchical entrances. The altar is traditionally placed at the eastern end, but the arrangement of seating, as a number of differently >>



sized and orientated fields, reinforces the permeable relationship between the church and the landscape on all sides. It also serves the practical purpose of allowing a number of different scales of congregation to meet.

While the church's form and geometries are spiritually significant to each other, each element also has a particular relationship to the landscape. The surrounding houses create vistas and establish deep thresholds of approach and entry that frame the horizon from the glazed perimeter of the central space. Their links to the landscape are more controlled, with a series of windows and covered porches which open on to the smaller external spaces between them. These will be treated in different ways, from tended garden, to hard surface, to mown grass.

The geometries of each porch relate to those of the hipped roofs and extend out to form lines that echo the traces of old fences and watercourses. These will demarcate 'land-rooms' through mowing, trees or change of surface, and will accommodate parking and community activities across the seasons. These visual and sacred lines also extend to a new lake, which will hold the baptismal pool within it and where a memorial pavilion will stand on the water's edge. Together these elements draw the landscape into the sacred life of the church. ■

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SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTIONS

From a distance, the collection of forms appears similar, although the dominant roof of the sacred space is the only centrally focused, symmetrical form. Roofs and walls will be clad in cedar shingle, scorched to resist insect infestation, with deep metal gutters where necessary. The exception will be the tower, which is envisaged as masonry or cast.

Internally, each house shares the common spatial theme of a central, roof-lit volume, held within a deep ancillary edge. Tectonically however, the relationship between the sacred house and the surrounding secular houses will be very different. The latter are balloon framed, like their domestic counterparts, and are lined and materially abstract.

In contrast, the internal construction of the central house will be a revelation, embodying the spiritual and the symbolic within its construction. Although fundamentally different in resolution, this approach was inspired by the churches of Sigurd Lewerentz and by Borromini's symbolic geometries. This 18 x 20 metre space materialises through a delicate lattice of 2,982 small timber elements. Each digitally cut (CNC) piece has a cross-section of eight centimetres and is connected to the others by 720 metal crosses that will glitter in the shifting light that falls from the rooflight above.

Top left Structural model **Top right** Memorial pavilion with lake and church beyond **Facing page** Photograph of model showing view towards music room in fellowship hall

The sacred space is defined from the larger interior volume through a double-skin construction. This hybrid of space-frame and double-skin dome draws visual comparisons to a woven timber fabric, recalling the tabernacle of Biblical tradition.

The inner layer is composed of equilateral triangles that symbolise the Trinity. Each timber is roughly the height of a person, equating to a human, rather than building, scale. Other timber elements of the same cross section form intermediate vertical bracing and pairs of columns at one-metre centres. The individual delicacy of the timbers means they are only able to support the building as a whole. They are a congregation.

The project will be constructed in phases, beginning with the Fellowship House and the Children's House. This allows the community to move from its existing home, freeing funding for the remainder. With the exception of the sacred space, the building uses low-technology domestic construction, retaining opportunities for the congregation to be involved in the building process. The project was developed in the UK with structural engineers Greig-Ling with input from King Shaw Associates on low-energy heating and cooling. A local contractor with engineering expertise is taking on responsibility for the detailed engineering design and certification.

