
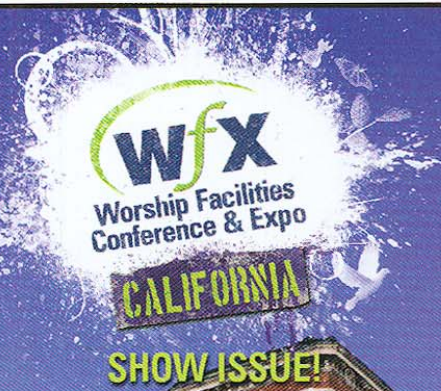


MAY/JUNE 2009

# Worship

The official facilities magazine of 

## FACILITIES



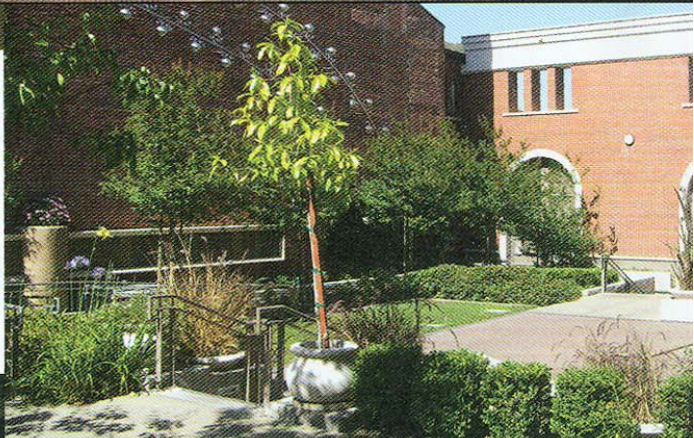
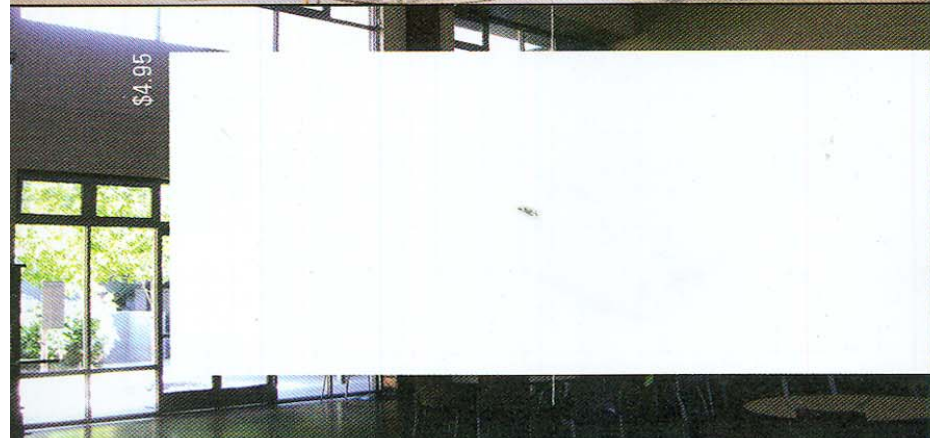
### First Congregational Church, Long Beach, Calif.

A historic downtown church reinvents itself

Design for Community Connection  
Architects define and refine the role of church

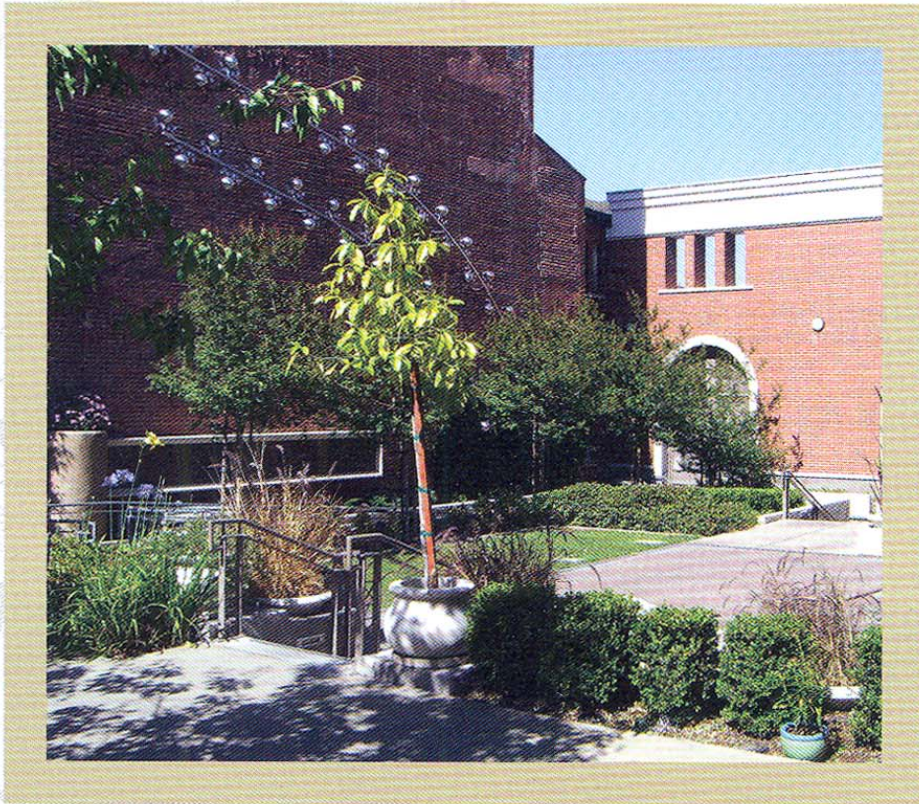
An A/V Gear Guide for Pastors

Finance: Readers Ask, Experts Respond



# The ART of *Reinvention*

*First Congregational Church of Long Beach, Calif.,*



*builds for  
its community  
while preserving  
a historic  
church home*

By Rachel Allen

## **RENOVATION INSIDE AND OUT**

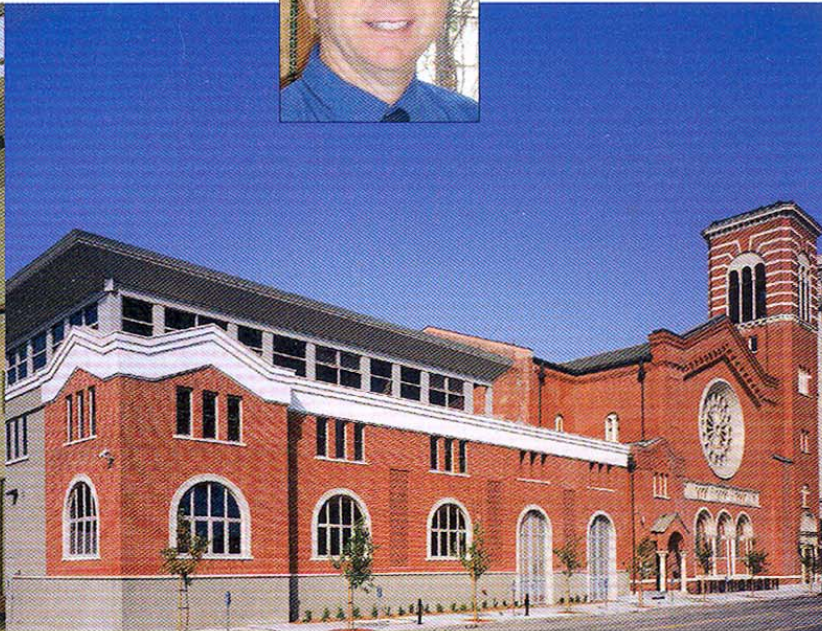
In the renovation of First Congregational Church, the outdoor space was given as much thought as the indoor. From the conception of the building plans, First Church expressed its need for outdoor mixed-use gathering space and flexible meeting space for a variety of community programs.

*"The historical aspect created many challenges,  
but teamwork and level-headedness always prevailed."*

— Richard Fricke, president, Charles Licha Construction, Encino, CA



Photos courtesy of Domusstudio.



#### COURTING FELLOWSHIP

First Congregational Church in Long Beach, Calif., has been a downtown fixture for nearly a century. A recent renovation by San Diego's Domusstudio Architects helped the thriving city church offer its members and local community more gathering areas—with both outdoor and indoor places to connect, hold meetings and enjoy recreation.

A new gym/fellowship hall allows the church to offer both a parolee hoops game and a seated banquet in the same day. The space serves as a hub for summer day camp and area youth programs as well.

"Designed for worship, but built for service." Those were the words of Margaret Bixby at the 1914 dedication of First Congregational Church in Long Beach, Calif. The daughter of an East Coast Congregational minister and wife of Jotham Bixby, a member of Long Beach's founding family, Margaret worked to establish the church based on her conviction that Christianity is not only to be practiced on Sundays, but is a way of living that should infiltrate every part of a person's daily activities.

Margaret's attitude is timeless, similar to the church's physical home. First Church's

Florentine Renaissance building has been a fixture of downtown Long Beach for almost a century. Completed in 1914 at a cost of \$165,000, it is filled with ornate mahogany woodwork and Tiffany glass, seats 1,000 people, and houses a 4,226-pipe, 70-rank Moeller organ. The church is also listed as a Long Beach historical landmark, and has been the setting for several television shows and movies. Beauty and a proud heritage aside, First Church is dedicated to social justice and outreach, an outlook that propelled them to acclimate to a new century and boldly serve their fellow man. Over time, that stance called for more space with plenty of

#### FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH AT A GLANCE

**Weekly Attendance:** 500

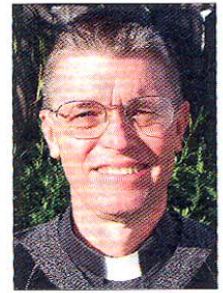
**Denomination:** United Church of Christ

**Style of Worship:** Traditional

**Special Ministries:** Parolee Orientation, Meals on Wheels, Homeless Drop-In, Rainy Day Shelter



*"[Our new courtyard] is a green and peaceful space—in the midst of a crowded concrete urban setting—that is appreciated by our surrounding community."*



— Jerry Stinson, senior minister, First Congregational Church, Long Beach, CA

flexibility. A small site in an urban location would seemingly limit their imaginations, but instead, their surroundings inspired them to merge the foundation of their past with the vision for their future.

That same spark of inspiration was multiplied when Domusstudio Architects was interviewed for the project in 2001. Domusstudio produced a strong record in church design, but also showed a great understanding of the church's direction and passion. "First Church is a creative and artistic group of people," says David Pfeifer, principal with Domusstudio, which is based in San Diego. "We listened, and then brought [more] creativity and struck a chord."

Once the team began to assemble, the challenges and solutions started to take form. First Church staff retreated for a weekend to discuss their needs and vision and invited members of the Domusstudio team to join them. At the end of the weekend, the whole group was together on pragmatic necessities, as well as the philosophical direction of

the church: to remain and grow as a part of revived downtown Long Beach.

#### **FINDING A WAY TO CONNECT**

First Church expressed the need for outdoor mixed-use gathering space and flexible meeting space for their numerous programs. A gym was required to accommodate

an expansive summer day-camp and sports activities for the youth of the church. Similarly, space for social events and a kitchen were desired (food for the local Meals on Wheels program is prepared at First Church). Parking was also a concern for the small site. Tantamount, though, to the church and the government powers that be in California, was preservation and respect toward the original 1914 building.

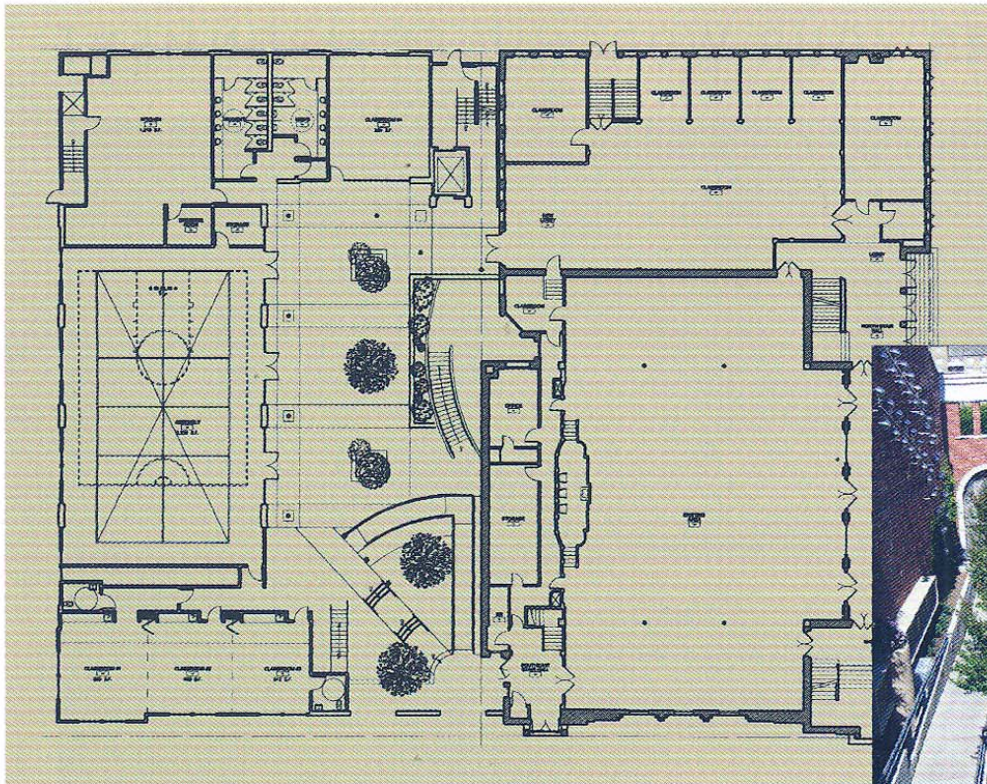
The solution introduced by Pfeifer and his team was a separate two-floor addition connected to the old via an enclosed courtyard. The space would be named Pilgrim Hall, the name of an education building demolished years earlier on the same site and replaced by a parking lot. To replace the parking spaces, First Church purchased adjacent land and set up rental agreements with City Hall and other downtown businesses not using their lots on Sundays. However, before a shovel could hit the ground, permissions had to be granted by the Secretary of the Interior and the Historic Resources Board. "The historical aspect created many challenges, but teamwork and level-headedness always

prevailed," says Richard Fricke, president of Charles Licha Construction of Encino, Calif. Those factors combined with due diligence resulted in a beautifully blended, 17,000-square-foot addition. In terms of space, the \$3.4 million project has provided everything First Church needs to continue the service it is passionate about.

#### **BEAUTIFULLY BLENDED**

To the passerby, First Church, with its bell tower and Italian craftsmanship, was always a striking part of the downtown scene. With the addition of Pilgrim Hall, the visual interest has compounded, and now the eye is carried the length of the joined buildings and a person cannot help but contemplate the seamless marriage of historic and contemporary. "The Secretary of the Interior requires clear differentiation between the new and old," says Pfeifer. Therefore, the designers' objective was to complement the historical without competing with it. To accomplish this, the architectural elements of the church building were mirrored in the arched gateways and windows of the addition. The terracotta of the original building was mimicked by pre-cast concrete placed at the roofline and around the windows of Pilgrim Hall. The banded brick prevalent in Florentine style was also alluded to by the pre-cast elements, while the vaulted gym roof and wainscoting make the modern statement needed to separate the two structures.

The courtyard is raised from the street, creating a welcoming front porch feel and making it an ideal primary entrance for both buildings throughout the week. Inside



### GREEN SPACES MERGE OLD AND NEW

A site plan shows the marriage of the old and new elements of First Congregational Church. The design and building team clearly planned out green areas in an outdoor courtyard to serve as a community gathering oasis in the urban concrete setting.



### A WELCOMING COURTYARD

The church's new courtyard is raised from the street to lend a front-porch feel to facility users and passersby. The terracotta of the original building was mimicked by pre-cast concrete placed at the roofline and around the windows of Pilgrim Hall to artfully meld both past and present.

the courtyard, lush landscaping and level changes create a space that is truly removed and relaxing. Exposed brick contrasted with smooth concrete offer an urbane sophistication and warmth all at once. According to Pfeifer, the space is open and light-filled, but still secure and private enough for weddings, memorials and casual fellowship before and after services. "It is a green and peaceful environment—in the midst of a crowded concrete urban setting—that is appreciated by our surrounding community," adds Jerry Stinson, senior minister of First Church.

Interconnected with the courtyard is the actual wood-frame and structural steel building. The indoor portion is two floors built over a partial basement. It has a four-stop elevator and is full of light, as well as bright colors and textures. "The church wanted this building to contrast with the historic, which is very dark and formal," says Stinson.

The basement serves the church's youth group, providing them with plenty of meeting space and a youth music room where the

**QUICK-LINKS:**

**Charles Licha Construction Inc.**

General contractor  
(818) 881-6300 • www.charleslichaconstruction.com

**Domusstudio Architects**

Architecture, interior design, planning  
(619) 692-9393 • www.domusstudio.com

**First Congregational Church**

Long Beach, Calif.  
(562) 436-2256 • www.firstchurchlb.org

**RESOURCES:**

- Brick: Pacific Clay Products
- Cabinetry: Nevamar
- Carpet: Bolyu
- Ceramic Tile: Dal Tile
- Deck Treatment: Crossfield Products
- Gymnasium Floor: Superior Floors
- Linoleum: Armstrong
- Precast Concrete: California Precast
- Preformed Rubber Stairs: Freudenberg Building Systems
- Restroom Partitions: Bob Rick
- Roofing: Berridge
- Rubber Bases: Flexco
- Stucco: Frazee
- Windows: Eagle

Also on the first floor is a 20-unit computer lab. The lab is open to church members, but is also a large part of a homeless drop-in ministry on Sunday afternoons. The homeless are able to communicate with family and friends via e-mail and utilize technology in their job searches.

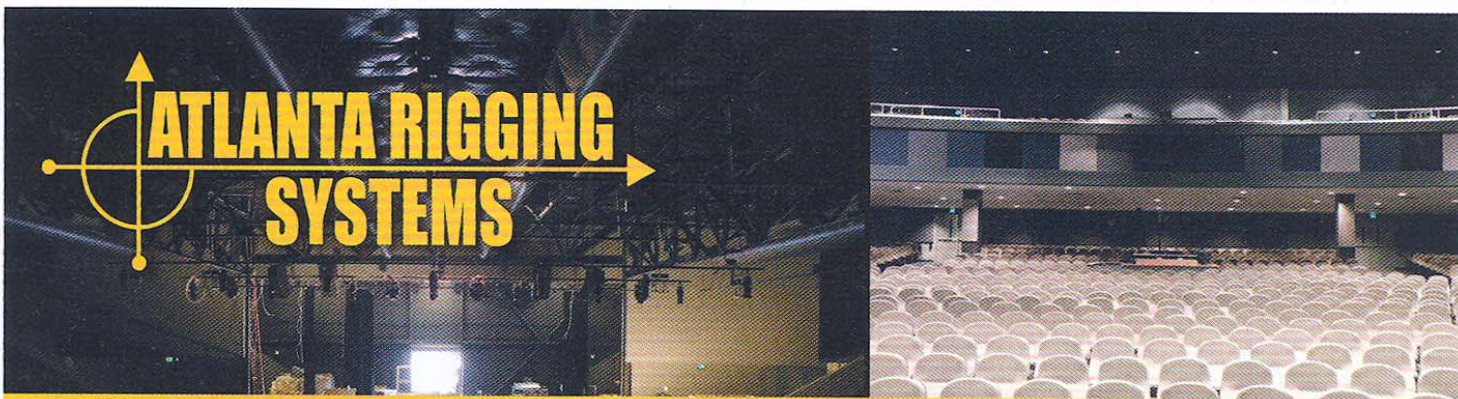
The second floor has classrooms for older elementary and junior high students, as well as three classrooms completely dedicated to adult education. Two would-be offices have been converted into counseling rooms and "Sacred Space," a 40-seat chapel, also occupies the floor and can accommodate small weddings and funerals. The chapel is filled with light from windows and its design was inspired by Eastern religions, making it another area distinctive from the sanctuary. To tie the second floor to the courtyard, an L-shaped balcony runs

along the courtyard side of the floor and overlooks the outdoor space.

The building's many uses and users encouraged First Church to avoid any group-specific design or themes. "It's a less threatening space for all types of meetings to be held," Stinson points out. He goes on to say that Patterson Hall (the gym space) is frequently used for large community meetings held by City Hall. That comfort level is precisely what First Church had in mind when the project commenced. Now, every time a member of the Long Beach community steps foot over the threshold, the church is reminded they made the right decision.

Pfeifer concludes, "Architecture can't solve the world's problems, but it can create places where good things can happen."

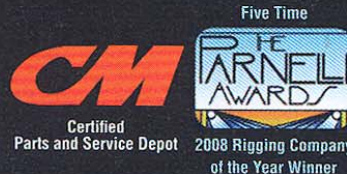
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