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THEME ISSUE
Adding on, Making New



The new design establishes a presence for the church on the street, creating a sense of mystery.

light touch by David Keitel

First Presbyterian Church of Burbank, California, is a common story of an old church, untouched for years and tired. We took the old dark box and introduced window and skylight punctures, allowing natural light into the space. The stained-glass windows were traditional dark glass, so along with the introduction of natural light we kept everything white inside to allow the colored rays from the stained glass to bounce around the space. The old sanctuary had a long center aisle; the new design brought the chancel forward and people closer to the worship team, all now wrapped around a new off-centered chancel. The offset chancel allows focus on the liturgical elements while creating a balanced

platform for the music team and a shorter diagonal main aisle. We were challenged by the existing concrete chancel steps and platform, so we simply added to what was there and brought the design forward. We also increased the size of the balcony to bring its seats closer to the worship team. A new larger narthex was infilled under the existing balcony. A new door and a walkway on the balcony level were added to provide ADA access from the new elevator that services all the buildings in one central location.

On its exterior street side the existing church had two tower bases that looked incomplete—as if an intended tower had never been built—so we completed it by adding a lightweight perforated copper screen, providing a contemporary feel on the street corner, above a new prayer chapel and on top of the new elevator tower that was pulled back into

the courtyard. A skylight roof above the new prayer chapel will have colored LEDs lighting the opaque skylight. The colors will change with the liturgical season, and can be seen by the community glowing behind the perforated copper tower. We dug out the interior courtyard space to expose the basement to natural light and to connect it to the courtyard by external stairs and elevators. The newly created space will be home to the youth program. The basement-level courtyard, the new main-level courtyard, and the new upper-level bridge off the elevator tower create a dynamic three-level space where everyone is connected and part of one large group, rather than confined by closed entries and internal corridors. The new configuration will look very active to the community and will be inviting and non-threatening to visitors. Circulation is clear and says “Welcome.” 

David Keitel is the Senior Associate with the San Diego-based firm Domusstudio Architecture, which has completed over 200 church projects throughout southern California over the past 26 years (domusstudio.com).



Above: The design for the new sanctuary interior shifts the center aisle and plays against the orthogonal geometry of the space.

Left: Tired interior before renovation design