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The Changing Nature of Church Design

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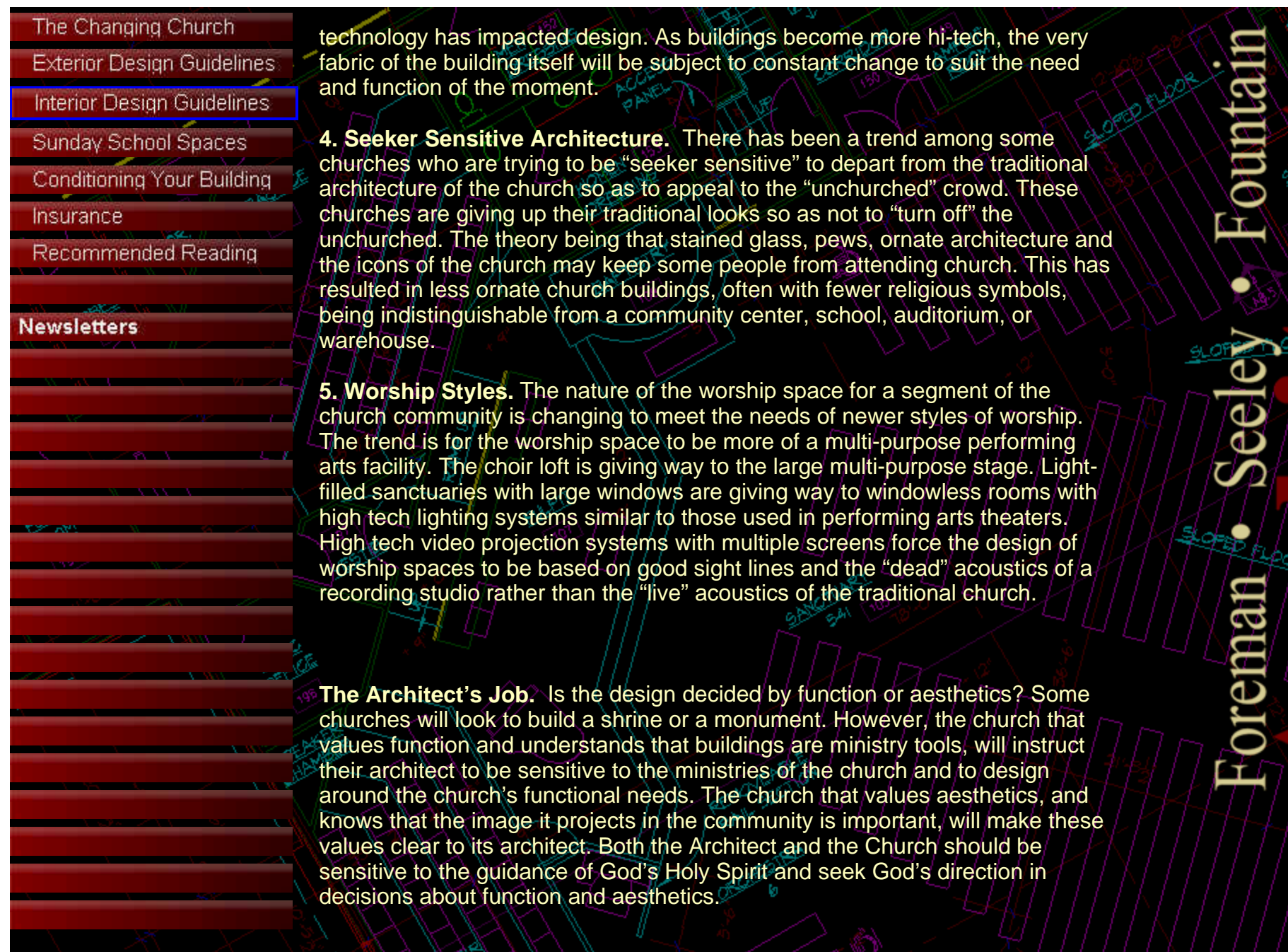
The typical church building of the 20th century looked a lot like the typical church of the 19th century. However, the style and look of the typical 21st century church will be very different. These differences started happening in the last 20 years and will continue to happen for the following reasons:

1. Cost. Traditional design and ornate architecture are expensive and very labor intensive. Church Architecture is becoming simpler and plainer due to tight budgets and the need to build more building for less money. Even large churches that can afford “nicer” buildings often choose to spend their money on space and technology rather than traditional design features.

2. Multi-purpose. We are being forced by budget constraints into finding more and more ways to use the same building space for many different functions. The trend is to have large rooms that can serve as worship and fellowship spaces, as well as for indoor recreational activities. Smaller spaces used for educational purposes are being created out of larger spaces and in many cases groups of classrooms can be opened up to form larger assembly rooms by use of operable walls. This multi-purpose nature of many building spaces is having a profound impact on the way our buildings look. The “warehouse” look that some churches have today is partly the result of the trend toward multi-purpose space.

3. Technology. Air conditioning and heating systems, elaborate lighting, sound and video systems are allowing us to use buildings in ways we could not imagine only a few years ago. Buildings are becoming high tech tools for worship, entertainment, education, working, and fellowship. The technology is driving the design and the way buildings look are partly a result of the way

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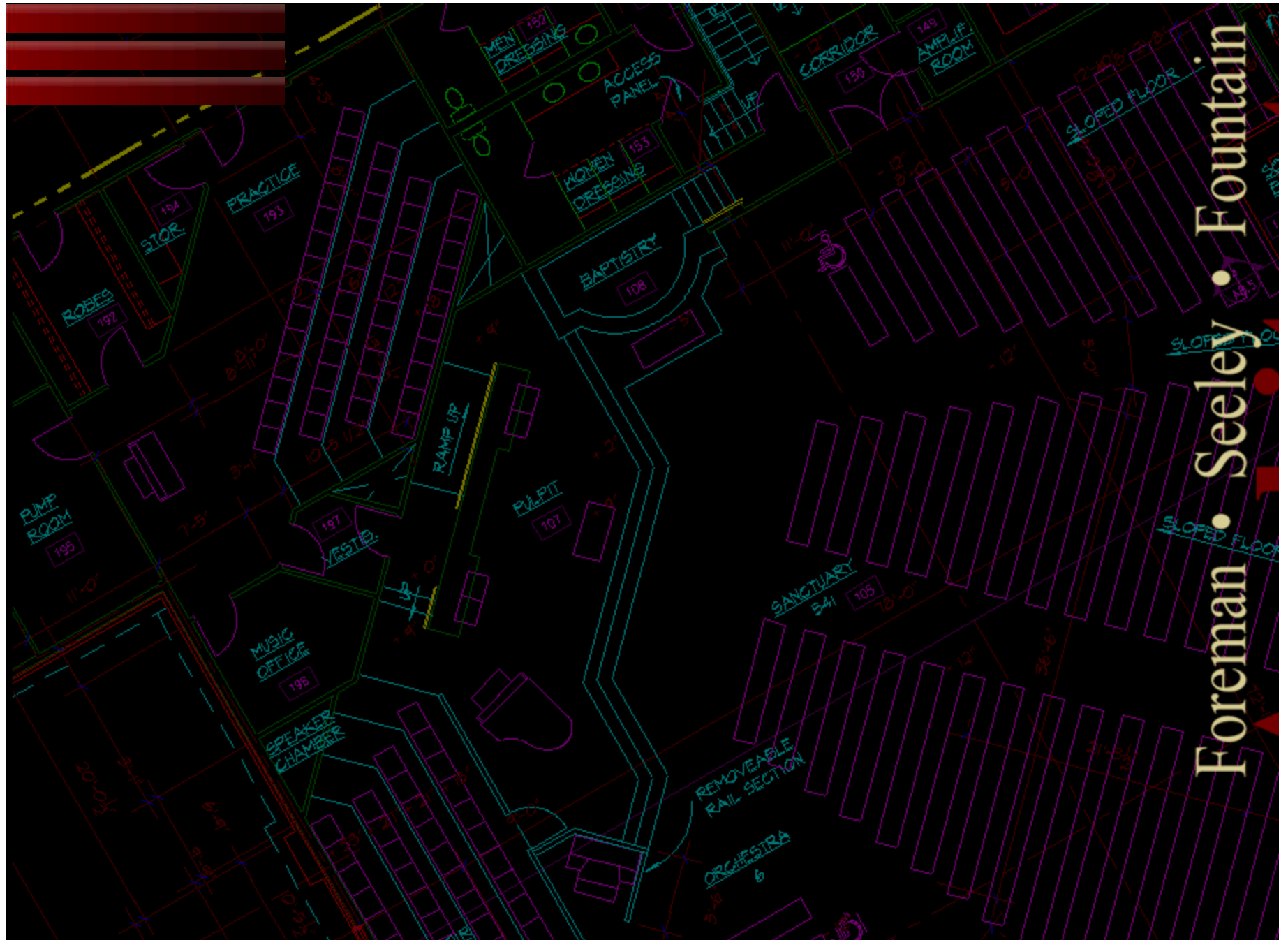
technology has impacted design. As buildings become more hi-tech, the very fabric of the building itself will be subject to constant change to suit the need and function of the moment.

4. Seeker Sensitive Architecture. There has been a trend among some churches who are trying to be “seeker sensitive” to depart from the traditional architecture of the church so as to appeal to the “unchurched” crowd. These churches are giving up their traditional looks so as not to “turn off” the unchurched. The theory being that stained glass, pews, ornate architecture and the icons of the church may keep some people from attending church. This has resulted in less ornate church buildings, often with fewer religious symbols, being indistinguishable from a community center, school, auditorium, or warehouse.

5. Worship Styles. The nature of the worship space for a segment of the church community is changing to meet the needs of newer styles of worship. The trend is for the worship space to be more of a multi-purpose performing arts facility. The choir loft is giving way to the large multi-purpose stage. Light-filled sanctuaries with large windows are giving way to windowless rooms with high tech lighting systems similar to those used in performing arts theaters. High tech video projection systems with multiple screens force the design of worship spaces to be based on good sight lines and the “dead” acoustics of a recording studio rather than the “live” acoustics of the traditional church.

The Architect’s Job. Is the design decided by function or aesthetics? Some churches will look to build a shrine or a monument. However, the church that values function and understands that buildings are ministry tools, will instruct their architect to be sensitive to the ministries of the church and to design around the church’s functional needs. The church that values aesthetics, and knows that the image it projects in the community is important, will make these values clear to its architect. Both the Architect and the Church should be sensitive to the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit and seek God’s direction in decisions about function and aesthetics.

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