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## The Architectural Works of Edward A. Sovik: Opening Ecumenical Dialogue

Sean Paul Fredsti

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, sfredsti@aim.com*

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**The Architectural Works of Edward A. Sovik:  
Opening Ecumenical Dialogue**

by  
Sean Paul Fredsti

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of St. John's University,  
Collegeville, Minnesota, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Theology

School of Theology  
St. John's University  
Collegeville, Minnesota

November, 1998

This paper was written under the direction of

*Michael Kwatara, OSB*

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Michael Kwatara, OSB

Sean Paul Fredsti

has successfully demonstrated the use of

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in this paper

*Scott Richardson*

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Signature of Director

Scott Richardson

*April 22, 1999*

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Date

# The Architectural Works of Edward A. Sovik:

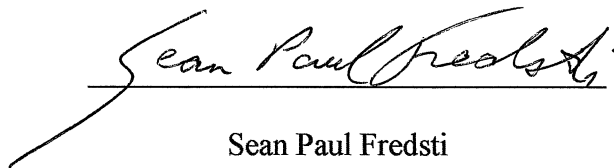
## Opening Ecumenical Dialogue

The contemporary architectural work of Edward A. Sovik is an expression of his thoughts and his religious training. In his “Non-church” design, there is material expression that serves today’s ecumenical dialogue.

The church buildings designed by Edward A. Sovik are the culmination of his own theological studies and reflections. His work gives us an opportunity to engage in ecumenical dialogue. This is most seen in his “non-church” design. The theme crosses the denominational expressions which often separate us. Because this design theme is an expression of basic theological understands they go beyond his immediate Evangelical Lutheran roots and invite us to reflect on fundamental themes in Christianity.

We can trace the ecumenical dialogue that surrounds his work in Worship magazine. This paper traces the full set of articles that appear in Worship.

*This paper may be duplicated*



Sean Paul Fredsti

November 1998

# The Architectural Works of Edward A. Sovik : Opening Ecumenical Dialogue

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## The Church As Living Stone

Kirken af levende stene bygt  
Nede i menneskevrmlen-  
Grundet paa klippen hviler trygt,  
Pegende opad mod himlen.  
Tusende storverk sank i grus,  
Intet dog rokked Herrens hus.  
Herren alene ske ære.

Bygde vi hjem i fremmed land,  
Kirken vi med os dog have,  
Lad os da holde vel istand  
Fædrenes kostbare gave.  
Bygge vi vil paa sandheds grund  
For vore børn til sidste stund  
Kirken, som aldrig skal rygges.

Bygge vi vil vort kirkehjem -  
Bolig for fremtidens slegter -  
Bringe vor sten til muren frem,  
Skjærmet af Israels vægter.  
Bygge vi vil til sol gaar ned,  
Komnier han selv med søndagsfred,  
Sjælen gaar ind til sin hvile.

Sjælen blir klædt i himmeldragt,  
Frem bliver smykkerne baarne,  
Medens vort støv i grav blir lagt,  
Ringet fra kirkens taarne,  
Himmelens jubel-kirkens sang-  
Blander og bærer klokkens klang  
Kommende slegter imøde.<sup>1</sup>

The Church is alive and, as this poem above expresses, even the stone buildings we build are alive from our acts of worship. Our way of worship

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<sup>1</sup> A poem by Gjermund Hoyme (first president of the United Church) taken from John S. Johnson, Minnesota: En Kortfattet Historie av Nordmændenes Bebyggelse av Staten, Deres Gjøremaal, Foreninger og Livsvilkaar, (St. Paul: McGill-Warner Co., 1914) 275. See translation in appendix A

has changed over the years. We have become divided over our understanding of what it means to be Christian. The beauty of our gathering places offers an often overlooked source for unity and ecumenical dialogue.

When Edward A. Sovik attempts to recapture the theological roots of our places of worship in a design he calls “Non-church,” he incorporates the traditions of the past with present day changes. The resulting edifices reflect fundamental Christian themes that connect Christians of many denominations. While his designs stir discussion, they also create moments of dialogue across ecumenical boundaries. Rather than being monuments to a creed, his designs foster living Christian community and worship.

The design philosophy for church buildings by Edward A. Sovik is the culmination of his own theological studies and reflection. His work gives us an opportunity to engage in a unifying religious dialogue. This is most seen in his “Non-church” design. Because this design is an expression of basic theological understanding, it goes beyond Sovik’s immediate Evangelical Lutheran roots and invites us to reflect on fundamental themes in Christianity.



## Sovik's articles in Worship

In a 1997 article in Worship magazine, Mark A. Torgerson outlines his impressions of Sovik's works in church architecture. Sovik is described in this article as a "theologically sensitive, Evangelical Lutheran architect."<sup>2</sup> Torgerson writes about Sovik's work in "Non-church" worship spaces as reflecting an attitude of flexibility in the worship space and multi-purpose in its design. He indicates that Sovik puts emphasis on the people who gather in these spaces and their mission of service to the world.

Torgerson points out that Sovik began his architectural training and practice in the midst of the modern movements including the liturgical movement. He received his architectural training at Yale and supplemented his studies with theological formation at St. Olaf College and Luther Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.<sup>3</sup> From these studies, Torgerson states that Sovik emerged with a predisposition toward an understanding of Christ that focuses more on Christ's humanity, especially the servant model, than on Christ's divinity. During his theological studies, Sovik also became acutely aware of the liturgical movement both in Europe and North America

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<sup>2</sup> Mark A. Torgerson, "An Architect's Response to Liturgical Reform: Edward A. Sovik and his "Non-Church" Design," Worship 71 (1997): 19.

<sup>3</sup> Torgerson 26.

and its effect on the renewal of liturgical life in the Church. Sovik's basic philosophy could be summed up as understanding a church building as that which is the "house of the *people* of God" in opposition to the "house of God."<sup>4</sup>

Torgerson further states that Sovik received a great deal of inspiration to change church architecture from Vatican II. In particular, Vatican II indicated to Sovik the need for the congregation to participate in all the activities of worship. Sovik's own interest in reforming worship expressed itself in his elimination of the distinction between the nave and the chancel areas, the abolition of the communion rail, the institution of a basilican area for the clergy, and the celebration of the Eucharist in an atmosphere of joy, with an emphasis on the active participation by all assembled both clergy and laity.<sup>5</sup>

Sovik was influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright especially in the use of "organic principle" which is creating physical spaces in tune with the materials at hand.<sup>6</sup> His modern approach to liturgical worship included such concepts as intimacy, humility, flexibility, and light. He emphasized the importance of the gathering of the people in a mission of service.

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<sup>4</sup> Torgerson 27.

<sup>5</sup> Torgerson 28.

A great deal of the practical inspiration for Sovik, according to Torgerson, came from Sovik's experience in Europe. Sovik's guidelines for "Non-church" design took about twenty years to take shape. The starting point for his Non-church architecture is the incarnation of Christ. Humility and hospitality were the hallmarks for modeling a church after Christ, the servant. In Sovik's seeking to communicate the idea of the incarnate humble Christ, he paid particular attention to the scale of the church. He did not want the people to feel diminished. He eliminated balconies and galleries so that there would be no division among the community and created a sense of unity in their activity. He would often place the baptismal font at the entrance of the church with a pump mechanism giving the sensation of it being a pool of water rather than a static collection. Music and choir stalls were often located off to one corner of the church building.

Perhaps the hallmark of Sovik's work is his pursuit of the asymmetry of the furnishings. According to him, the asymmetry maintains a certain tension in the space. Sovik wanted to celebrate the presence of God amongst the people. His concept of God is that of a mobile God, moving amongst his people. Instead of being stationary, many of the church furnishings, especially

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<sup>6</sup> As a side note, Wright was a great devotee of Thomas Jefferson, and you can recognize the same Deist theology in Sovik's work. An example is his use of natural materials apart from an ordered divine plan.

the altar, were either placed asymmetrically in the church building or constructed of materials that allowed for it to be moved in the sanctuary area. In this way, the worshipping space reflects the myriad aspects of God's character, especially that of Him being actively present and mobile in the Christian community. God present among His people is such a basic Christian theme that it serves as common ground for many sectarian discussions.

### **Architecture and the Ecumenical Movement**

In 1969, Worship magazine published a work by Edward Sovik entitled, "Revolution, Place and Symbol: Reflections Two Years Later."<sup>7</sup> In this brief article, Sovik gives an outline of some of the changes in architectural themes as reported in an ecumenical conference. Sovik states that a church recalls the Christian community to a sense of joy, hope, and the other attitudes which are all the fruits of the spirit. He continues to say, "the problem of holy places is then partly a matter of how they function in communities."<sup>8</sup> He supports the idea that today sacred places are not possible but that sacred times are.<sup>9</sup> He is of the opinion that God is only honored in

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<sup>7</sup> Edward A. Sovik, "Revolution, Place and Symbol Reflections Two Years Later," Worship 43 (1969): 496-500.

<sup>8</sup> Sovik, "Revolution, Place and Symbol Reflections Two Years Later" 499.

<sup>9</sup> Sovik, "Revolution, Place and Symbol Reflections Two Years Later" 498.

circumstances and surroundings where people are also honored. The concept of our relationship to community as reflecting our relationship to God is an important one for Sovik. Architecture then should create an environment or at least provide an environment for this sort of community interaction allowing for an authentic encounter with fellow Christians and with God. Bringing our attention to Church as community recalls the desire for unity and the all the People of God to be as one.

### **Symbols That Cross Sectarian Boundaries**

In his article, "Images of the Church,"<sup>10</sup> Sovik outlines some of his basic architectural ideas. He believes church buildings are also a symbol, a "clear image of what the community really is or should be."<sup>11</sup> He sees that any renewal in the church should also create a renewal in the architectural designs. Sovik saw medieval churches as reflecting a disparity between those worshipping and those conducting the worship. He saw the clergy as performing the worship event and the people as merely attending the worship. For him, the medieval churches were representing the crusaders of Christ. Church architecture had the image, like the crusades, "of the army of the Lord

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<sup>10</sup> Edward A. Sovik, "Images of the Church," *Worship* 41 (1967): 130-141.

formed in ranks moving to distant goals into an idea of consequence.”<sup>12</sup> He juxtaposes this medieval concept with today’s idea of the church militant, a “sort of fifth column.”<sup>13</sup> He sees the church as a gathering place, a sort of “encampment”<sup>14</sup> rather than an army on the march.

In this article, Sovik has a strong concept of the House of God as the House of God’s people. He sees the image of the Church as that of a community focused on the present world, not on the world to come as in the middle ages. The image of the church, Sovik believes, is a heavenly enclave that must be replaced with the image of church as being God’s life among human society. He rejects the idea of worship as a drama. But he accepts the idea that the congregation, as well as the clergy, act in worship. He sees that the “core of Christian worship is the constant and reliable assurance that God has the initiative in our dealings with him.”<sup>15</sup> While this may be controversial, it is not confrontational.

He goes on further to indicate that, “God does not need our offerings himself. It is our brothers who need them, and it is they who are blessed

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<sup>11</sup> Sovik, “Images of the Church” 130.

<sup>12</sup> Sovik, “Images of the Church” 131.

<sup>13</sup> Sovik, “Images of the Church” 131.

<sup>14</sup> Sovik, “Images of the Church” 131.

<sup>15</sup> Sovik, “Images of the Church” 134.

when we respond to God's coming among us, and we who are blessed by God's coming among them."<sup>16</sup>

Sovik rejects the idea of the church in-the-round with the altar and the sacramental activity being the center. He sees that, "there is something inappropriate in a formal image which gives the center to the altar table and relegates the other symbols and actions of the liturgy to a miscellany of arbitrary positions."<sup>17</sup> This reflects his idea that the hand of God is in continual motion. He also rejects the idea of the church as being a place for those seeking a private peace with God. He sees worshippers not being alone with God, but in only the context of community.

Sovik comments that, "Nothing in liturgy says that the altar should be on axis with other elements artificially paired on either side of it."<sup>18</sup> Here he explains that the design of sacred space should respond to the character of its use. As sacred space and sacred practice have changed, so church architecture should also change. His recognition of this change facilitates discussion about contemporary ecumenical issues instead of simply invoking past differences.

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<sup>16</sup> Sovik, "Images of the Church" 134.

<sup>17</sup> Sovik, "Images of the Church" 136.

<sup>18</sup> Sovik, "Images of the Church" 138.

## Visualizing Ecumenical Theology

In a 1966 article by Sovik entitled, “The Architecture of Kerygma,”<sup>19</sup> he explains that art is essentially a means of communication and architecture is a form of art. Architecture becomes, for Sovik, a concrete way to inspire and invoke discussion.

Sovik begins this article by pointing out several misconceptions regarding the nature of art. The first misconception is that its purpose is to give pleasure.

Another misconception of art is being a demonstration of skill, an exhibition of virtuosity. Again, Sovik has an insight that helps ecumenical dialogue. Art and architecture should not simply be an exercise in technique, but actually should communicate meaning.

The final misconception which Sovik warns us about is the idea that art is self expression. A church building is not simply a self expression of the people of God. Sovik says that, “From the point of view of Christian piety the notion of the artist as one whose interest is simply self-expression is intolerable. The Christian is a John the Baptist who points away from himself.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Edward A. Sovik, “The Architecture of Kerygma,” *Worship* 40 (1966) : 196.

<sup>20</sup> Sovik, “The Architecture of Kerygma” 198.



Sovik makes an attempt to clarify what art is and how it communicates by giving five distinct categories. He first states that architecture as an art form is different from poetry and music. Architecture has a certain utilitarian aspect; keeping people warm and out of the rain are examples. Here, economic and technical considerations often come into play.

Second, architecture uses forms and shapes that should be consistent and appropriate with the theology of the church. The symbol of the church architecture is effective when it creates Christian unity. Here, Sovik points out that in order to incorporate the idea of Christian incarnation, the architect must incorporate the finite, the ordinary, the secular, the everyday rather than emphasizing the transcendent deity. He calls this visual theology.

A third way architecture is different is that should be “ethically faithful.”<sup>21</sup> We should see the church as being an example of how Christ the Lord took on himself the human form of a servant. The church buildings should follow this example and serve the needs of the people in all aspects not just in divine expression. In this way, he lays the foundation for his later work of non-church and the multipurpose activity of the church building including non-liturgical functions.

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<sup>21</sup> Sovik, “The Architecture of Kerygma” 204.

The fourth way architectural design is different from other arts, is in the concept of integrity. The church building should be seen as integrating into the community rather than standing out and away from the community.

Architecture should imply a certain sense of honoring God and witnessing to Him. The church building should not be the culmination of the community.

The fifth way that architecture differs is in the way it can be a witness of the faith. Such things as indirect lighting, dim vaults, exaggerated height, are seen as merely artifices. Sovik believes that “any good work of architecture, because it is a work of art, can serve as no other human activity can, as an analogy of the holy.”<sup>22</sup> He sees a certain parallel between the mystery of art and the mystery of the holy. He warns against the temptation of combining the two. He cautions that we cannot escape from art: “You are artists in spite of yourselves; you cannot escape making symbols. If you try to escape you will as often as not make bad symbols, symbols of untruth, or stuttering, inept and self-contradictory ones.”<sup>23</sup>

Sovik states that for architects, “all we do becomes a symbol and witnesses to what we are and what we believe; and the churches we build will

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<sup>22</sup> Sovik, “The Architecture of Kerygma” 207.

<sup>23</sup> Sovik, “The Architecture of Kerygma” 207-208.

reveal us for what we are and what we believe.”<sup>24</sup> And indeed in Sovik’s later “Non-church” designs, we see a great deal of Sovik’s theology revealed. His later notion of multipurpose worship space, hosting both liturgical and non-liturgical functions, is an indication that he sees the church as a self-expression of a people in turmoil wrestling with the secularization of everyday life. Sovik attempts to bring religion to everyday life rather than making everyday life come to religious significance. Sovik sees it as important that the divine is made readily available to the ordinary lives of people. Sovik’s work capture the tensions we have today, the same tensions that often frustrate ecumenical dialogue.

As indicated in this 1966 article, the founding principles of Sovik’s architectural theology makes him the leader of the “Non-church” architectural school. Sovik departs from the notion that the world is passing and that our worship is an activity which allows us to transcend to the eternal, to the world of order, to symmetry. Sovik directs our attention to honoring our duty to our fellow human beings rather than our duty to honor God by lives of holiness, transcendence and other-worldliness.

Sovik is a pioneer in the liturgical movement. In visual expression, he took the call for liturgical reform to heart. He applied his theological

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<sup>24</sup> Sovik, “The Architecture of Kerygma” 208.

understandings to his artistic expressions and began a discourse that crosses boundaries.

## **Beauty - A Place for Common Prayer**

After attending the 1973 *International Congress on Religion*, Sovik wrote about the power traditional places in the Holy Land still have over the human religious experience.<sup>25</sup> The Congress was attended by people of many faiths who can trace their roots to the Holy Land.

Those who attended (including Sovik) were reminded by Paolo Soleri, who spoke at the congress, that we do not need to look as far as the Holy Lands for holy places. Our very lives are sacred and when there is a place for human affairs, it becomes a holy place. While Sovik comments that this statement can be misconstrued, the basic idea of places not being made holy by simple location was appreciated by Sovik.<sup>26</sup>

On Sovik's return trip from the Holy Land, he visited the Parthenon. Here early Christians had worshipped after their pagan ancestors. Sovik was taken by the beauty of the place. According to Sovik, because a place

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<sup>25</sup> Edward A. Sovik, "Sacrality, Place and Symbol," *Worship* 47 (1973): 547.

participates in beauty it becomes a place of common prayer. This quality of beauty “penetrates the veil of holiness”<sup>27</sup> and provides a place for worship by all. An appreciation of anything of beauty, including architecture, can be a means of ecumenical communication which provides for a place of prayer and understanding.

## **Conclusion**

We have looked at several articles that appeared in Worship about and by Edward Sovik. In all his works, he expresses his own theological insights. Because he focuses on fundamental Christian themes, his work is understood by many and promotes ecumenical dialogue. In the language of beauty and art, that provides for common prayer, he links the traditions of Christianity with the need to express the changes that have divided us over the centuries. In his “Non-church” design, there is a material expression that serves today’s ecumenical dialogue.

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<sup>26</sup> Sovik, “Sacrality, Place and Symbol,” 548.

<sup>27</sup> Sovik, “Sacrality, Place and Symbol,” 550.

## Appendix A

*Translation of A poem by Gjermund Hoyme (first president of the United Church) taken from John S. Johnson, Minnesota: En Kortfattet Historie av Nordmændenes Bebyggelse av Staten, Deres Gjøremaal, Foreninger og Livsvilkaar, (St. Paul: McGill-Warner Co., 1914) 275.*

The church built of living stone  
Down in the human swarm-  
Founded on the rock rests secure,  
Pointing upward toward the sky.  
Thousands of monuments sank to gravel,  
But nothing has move the Lord's house.  
To the Lord alone be praise.

When we built a home in a foreign land  
We had the church with us,  
Let us then preserve  
Our fathers' precious gift.  
We shall build on the ground of truth,  
For our children to the final hour,  
The church, which will never be shaken.

Build it we shall, our churchly home-  
Abode for the future's kin-  
Carry our stones up to the wall,  
Shielded by Israel's watchmen.  
Build it we shall till the sun goes down,  
He comes himself with Sunday peace,  
The soul goes in to its rest.

The soul will be clad in heavenly robes,  
The jewels will be carried forth,  
While our dust is laid in the grave.  
The peal from the church's towers,  
Heaven's rejoicing-the church's song-  
Blends with and bears the sound of the bell  
To meet the generations to come.

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