Is It a Public Space?

St. Thomas Aquinas Church is open to anyone, but caters almost exclusively to a particular group—Catholics. Within this group, however, it is unique in allowing the gathering of both University students and community members. As a public space it allows for this interaction which may not otherwise take place. Though it also serves as social space, the church has a primary function of worship. Within the context of a certain community, St. Thomas Aquinas is a successful public space.

History

St. Thomas Aquinas Parish began as an outgrowth of the University’s Catholic student organization. In 1967, a church was built on the current site to serve the Catholic population of the University and community. In 1995, a new sanctuary was built adjacent to the original one in order to accommodate the growing parish, and the original church building was used as a parish center. Last year, this was torn down, and the new Parish Center will be completed on its site in 2004.

Social Space of Entryway (right)

Currently the space of the most public activity in the church is also the main entrance and exit, carrying a steady stream of traffic before and a large rush of people after each Mass. This photo shows some of the bulletin boards which cover one wall, conveying information about the happenings and interests of the community beyond Mass. Through this space, people are directed to other events which are public to this community.

New Social Space in Parish Center (far right)

A year from now, the entryway will connect the sanctuary with this new public space currently under construction. It will feature a large hall for gathering as well as smaller spaces for specific groups. It will have many of the activities of a public space, but will actually be more closed off physically than either the entryway or the sanctuary. These existing spaces are more visible and accessible even though they are less suitable for certain activities.
Could it be improved?

The major improvement to the public space of St. Thomas Aquinas will be completed with the building of the new parish center. What the church currently lacks is a large, appropriate place for people to socialize. The only such spaces now are also major places of travel and don’t provide much room for those who aren’t walking. The parish center, though physically less open, will be more appropriate for this interaction.

Typical Seating Patterns (below)

This diagram of typical distribution of students and community members on a Sunday Mass shows that the two distinct groups do not generally segregate. Though on the smallest scale students tend to sit only with students, they are most often not far from a family or elderly couple. Each section is used to some degree by all people. This interaction is important to both groups. Many students remark that they like coming to this church because it reminds them of their families at home and provides an escape from the same University faces. Some families even live closer to another Catholic church but come to St. Thomas so that their kids can see college students who are strong in their faith.

Types of Space (right)

This diagram shows the primary different types of space at St. Thomas Aquinas. The sanctuary is used for worship, and social activities are not generally appropriate except for conversation as people move in and out. In the entryway, some people gather to talk before and after Mass while others use the space only for movement. This space also accommodates bulletin boards for various groups within the parish and often tables for people to discuss or distribute information about a particular event or program. There are other exits, but most people pass through this space on their way out, so it becomes the real center of public activity for the church.