

Beyond Hagia Sophia

George Jabbour

To the Editors:

Joseph Clarke's review of the book *Theology and Form* by Nicholas Denysenko reminded me of my experience designing and constructing Saint Mary's Antiochian Orthodox Church in Mays Hill, New South Wales, Australia. My building and development firm took over when the parish could not get financing to build an elaborate, Hagia Sophia-like design. The late Archbishop Gibran (Ramlawi) entrusted me with the project and I wholeheartedly accepted.

I did my homework, consulted with the authorities, and researched acoustics at the State Library, where I quickly discovered the proceedings of a symposium of North American acoustic engineers on churches. The fact that I found this volume so readily was a sign. The design of a church needs to limit reverberation time to 2 seconds for speech to be clear. It seems that in the old Western cathedrals, which had longer reverberation times, people developed a drawn-out chant to enable worshipers to catch up with the sound. Armed with that information, I had a meeting with our late archbishop over a drink and discussed our plans. I asked him whether he was more interested in full-bodied sound or clearly intelligible speech. He told me a parable. Many years ago when he was a young priest, he was reading the Gospel at Saint George Cathedral in Beirut and the protopsaltis of our church was present. The protopsaltis

later said to him that that he would have brought out the scotch if he had known he was coming to read the Gospel. Apparently Father Gibran was outdoing himself in chanting the Gospel. The archbishop told me that he was very embarrassed and learned a big lesson. In other words, he wanted above all intelligibility of speech.

I also asked the archbishop what he would like to call the church, and he said Saint Mary's. I replied that we already had a church dedicated to her. He said that he had met a woman, now in Australia, who had been his nurse in Lebanon. She told him that his mother had dedicated him to the Virgin Mary. He also told me how he came to his vocation as a priest. How, as a child, he was told by his father that the family could no longer afford to keep him in school. How he subsequently sat on the rocks facing the sea, contemplating his future, and was inspired to visit a leading resident of El Mina to ask for help. How he was able to continue his studies, and how when he could afford it he set up a scholarship to help educate people from poor backgrounds. How he had been betrothed seven times to no avail, as the pull of the priesthood prevailed. He was a poet and a great man.

I visited the Scottish-born architect James MacGillivray, and he brought out a pile of books on the architecture of Hagia Sophia. I asked him to put all that away. I said, God gave us



Saint Mary's Church, Mays Hill, Australia. Completed 1998.

our faculties and he expects us to use them. We moderns have at our disposal far more than the ancients: from reinforced concrete to glass to steel, greater engineering capabilities, and so forth. I said to him that all I needed from him was a space to hang our icons, explaining that all the heavenly hosts join with us in celebrating the Liturgy and that we need to be surrounded by such cloud of witnesses.

We had onboard a structural engineer of many years' experience, Tony Jammal, who is Orthodox. He gave us good advice on our chosen method of construction: a steel frame with brick walls and a roof clad in copper tiles. Our site sloped down toward the rear and we decided to build a hall under the church to utilize the slope. I also arranged a meeting with the acoustic engineer Louis Challis, who had worked on the acoustics for our great Parliament House in Canberra. We met with Louis and told him that we wanted to pick his brain for a couple of hours, and he gave us great advice. I had firsthand knowledge through

personal experience as a church member. I placed a lot of exits, made sure the stairs were comfortable, provided disabled access and ensured that the acoustics were right. The total price tag for the new church building was a fraction of what the neo-Byzantine design would have cost.

Many years down the road, I had the opportunity to build another church, Saints Peter and Paul parish, in Doonside, New South Wales. They had been in the wilderness for many years, borrowing halls here and there, and needed a church badly. I started the process but then passed it on to a friend and fellow builder, Nicholas Daoud, who is Orthodox and had always wanted the chance to build a church. He used the same idea of putting the hall under the church and utilised a steel frame. With that design, they were able to afford to build their church.

I note that both churches are well attended. It seems that we successfully overcame our attachment to "Hagia Sophia" designs.

Now on the drawing board is the parish of Saint Nicholas in Bankstown. To make the project financially feasible, we are hoping to design the church on top of a childcare center, with a shared parking lot. This way, income from the child care would support the running of the parish and would be used as leverage to finance a new church.

God bless and kind regards,
George Jabbour ✱



George Jabbour is the CEO and founder of Cuzeno Builders and Developers, Sydney, Australia, and has over 55 years of experience in the industry. He has extensive knowledge in development, project management, construction, and strategic planning. He is also the owner and operator of Beauty Point Retirement Resort in Sydney.