

Don't Remodel, Re-Light!!

By Tony Hansen

There has been an interesting trend in house of worship construction over the last few decades, the large ornate cathedrals are being somewhat replaced by more traditional common use facilities. As we all know, the building does not make the church, the people do. So, it is quite exciting to see the freedoms that have gone into some construction projects. Many designs are leaning towards theatrical or more multi-use spaces that are not limited by a single construction element. Some times this is driven by cost, other times it is for a unique look and there are still plenty of other good reasons. One possible con though is that the congregation will get restless over the years and will often remodel their space, sometimes repeatedly. A space that was designed to be used for a flexible variety of purposes will often not have a very distinct décor and will become plain after a while. To combat this we will see facilities being re-painted, doors or windows being added or removed, stages re-built, new banners, new woodwork or woodwork removal and the list goes on. As a lighting designer I have been asked on several occasions to look at the lighting during these re-do's. This article doesn't apply only to remodeling, but is just as applicable to new construction. However, in most cases with new construction lighting is either a major part of the overall architecture or it is value engineered out to the first remodel. This is what has led into a very popular series of seminars that I present entitled; "Don't Remodel, Re-Light!". You fortunate reader now have the opportunity to glean this valuable knowledge for your own.

Seriously though, there is a mindset that will allow large amounts of money to be spent on physical attributes of a remodel such as paint and plaster, but less tangible items are not to be considered. Consider that if you spent X amount of money on new paint, new carpet and a re-work of the stage, this will be a great new look for your congregation the first Sunday they see it. It will still be exciting for several weeks, but a year later it will still be the same. Additionally it is possible that you will not have access to your space for several days or even weeks during this remodeling. What if it was possible to have a new and unique look to every Sunday, every Wedding, every Baptism, every scout troop meeting and spend less money and downtime on the remodel? By a unique look to every Sunday, I am talking about subtle color changes and intensity to help set a mood. The walls can have a purple hue for Lenten season and a nice orange tint for the fall festival. The wedding that evening will have a special look custom tailored to match the bridal colors and nothing is ever done to the actual facility.

A proper lighting system can do all this. One of the concerns that people have is that their off-white walls are too plain. For lighting, this is great. Humans tend to be a very visual creature and yet we forget that sight is simply seeing the light that is reflected off of the objects around us. In other words, we can change the appearance of the world around us by controlling and limiting the light that is available to be reflected. This sounds very elementary but many people will forget these basic rules when we present the power of the lighting system. I am not talking about adding a few more par cans to the stage. There is certainly a great deal that you can do with a par can, but most facilities will not have someone dedicated enough to constantly re-do the color, position and focus of several lights and be consistent each time. This is what spurred the development of the intelligent light. This light is what helps us create a controlled environment that can be constantly changed and manipulated to provide custom looks at the push of a button. This is usually about the point in the seminar that I have to calm down and remind people that the lights we are talking about have been used for concerts and tours but they are capable of beautiful static looks as well. To some, when I bring up intelligent lights they bring up concerns over their use in their facility. An intelligent light does not have to move while its lit to be utilized to its ability and it is no different from the par cans and ellipsoidal's that are currently in use. They are simply little robots that allow us more flexibility for each instrument. The question I will ask the listeners is if they can tell me the difference between a concert light and a church light? The usually don't consider that the answer is simple, its the operator. Adding these lights into a space does not make it a disco or give the feel of a rock n roll tour, this will only happen if proper understanding, restraint and training isn't given to a capable media team.

Usually the last concern is cost. These lights aren't cheap and can cost from \$3000 to \$9000 and more per light. A new control console is often needed and some support wiring and rigging. However, it can cost tens of thousands of dollars to re-paint a large room and carpet isn't cheap either. I have seen remodels easily exceed a quarter of a million dollars, you can buy a lot of lights for that money. The lights need to be looked at as a capital expenditure and not an increased media budget. These fixtures will add to the value and marketability of a space and can likely be used to generate revenue. They will also make the next seasonal show or concert a lot easier. As I mentioned earlier, the install can often take place without any downtime to the facility and the lights will give you the ability to "re-paint" your room each week. Unfortunately you may or may not be able to use your existing equipment, it really depends on what you have. This is where new construction has a great advantage. We have actually consulted on a few new build projects where we were able to save money by using only intelligent lighting and eliminating the infrastructure of a conventional light system. With intelligent lights, there is no need for a home run dimming system and dimmer racks to be installed because these lights have internal dimming and actually can't even be plugged into dimmers. Usually there will be far less fixtures installed which means less impact on the building and less rigging necessary. It may even be possible to eliminate those catwalks and use another approach since you don't need to get to the lights to re-focus or change color. This is not to say that the lights can be inaccessible, it's just that it may be possible to utilize winches or lifts to hang and maintain the lights. One of the biggest and yet most overlooked advantages is that intelligent lights tend to use far more efficient light sources and you will use less fixtures so your electrical supply, electrical usage and even air conditioning costs can go down substantially. Sometimes we just need to work with the architects and get them to rethink their lighting approach.

The first step for many congregations is to get a demo of the appropriate gear from a knowledgeable consultant that can help lead in the proper direction. An alternative to an actual demo would be to have a lighting design firm create a visualization, rendering or even animation of your facility with the new lights. This can be especially powerful if you are building a new facility because it may be the first time that you can actually see your room as a solid entity. It can even be used to help envision a seasonal or special production before the scenery is built. Many times the impact can not even be explained. I did a demo for one church that was rather extensive and involved the creation of several looks to be presented to the board for review. I offered the looks and "painted" the room with light for many different scenario's. When it was all done, I turned the system off and we turned the normal room lighting back on. I was asked by a board member what this "look" was and I explained it was their usual lighting that they have used for every service thus far. He wanted to know why it looked so plain and what had I changed. I had to explain that I had changed nothing but now the room was just lit, not illuminated. They voted for the system on the spot.

One of the unforeseen surprises to me was the power of "Branding" the individual services. At one install, I was standing in the control booth above the congregation as the teen night attendee's filtered in. The room had a dim, talk show style of look to it and was very stylized to appeal to this age group. One girl stopped right below the booth and commented on a rotating globe pattern that was on the floor in light "Wow, they finally gave us our own room". At first I found the comment to be quite demeaning until I thought about the impact of her words. By changing a few light looks, this room had become distinctly their room. They felt a different ownership than they had felt before and now there was an additional feeling of belonging. Lighting can have a very powerful impact in transforming a space between different functions. Sunday morning can have a very comfortable traditional look, but the Sunday evening contemporary service can be a little more laid back and yet a little edgy all at the push of a button. Have I mentioned that I love my job?

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