

# Student Ministry Space: Thinking Outside the Box

*By Gary Nicholson, AIA*

Student Ministry space is becoming more than a room with four walls and a few old worn-out couches many churches have settled for. To attract students, and be effective in ministry with them, churches are getting more creative about how they design Student Ministry spaces.

There is a definite trend toward making some area of the building designed for a weekly Student Ministry worship service. This can double as a student department assembly space on Sunday morning, while it accommodates the way students worship. Often, these include a stage or platform area with room for a praise band, skits, drama, etc. These will usually include room for four to six instrumentalists (drums, guitars, bass, keyboard, etc.) and one to six vocalists.

Video projection screens are becoming standard fare in these spaces for the "video generation". Keep in mind that video technology is changing rapidly, so prepare for upgrades as the standards change. Sound systems are a given for those who are using a praise band, as well. Most utilize a portable system, so it can make the trip to camps and retreats with the group when those times come.



A word of caution is in order here: Be careful not to allow the environment to seduce you into making student Sunday school another performance time. It should be an interactive time for Bible-centered worship, discipleship, evangelism and ministry. Student ministries continue to provide some amazingly talented young people who are very capable of leading in worship, but if Sunday school loses its teaching edge, or small group dynamics, our churches could be in real trouble.

Some churches are using a thematic approach to the design of spaces. They use objects, as well as graphics to depict the theme. LifeWay's Church Architecture Department

recently assisted a church who is using the name "The Hanger" for the Student Ministry facility. The interior as well as the exterior of the building is designed to reinforce an aeronautical theme with parts from old airplanes. They even hung a small airplane from the ceiling to grab attention!

A fishing theme can be created by hanging fishing nets, life preservers, rods and reels, bait bags, signs, and model boats. If the ceiling is high enough you might even bring in a real boat to hang from the rafters!



Another church is using a 180 (Turn Your Life Around) theme. The rooms are designed with a jazzy exposed-structure design, with wall graphics to reinforce the theme. This is a little more versatile, since the theme can change with some paint, whereas the "hanger" theme will take much more to update. Yet another church has used an automotive theme and used car parts and road signs throughout to create a fun atmosphere on a budget, but not to interfere with the teaching process.

You could also use themes such as, "the crossing" (railroad theme), a fifties soda shop, sports themes, and many others. Let your imagination run wild with the possibilities! It will depend on the budget you have to spend and the creativity of your designer, but most churches can provide something in the way of an environment that offers more than four walls.

Lighting is often used to accent the platform area and create a sense of drama in the space. The type of fixtures used should allow for a variety of settings, depending upon the mood you want to create.

Stage lighting is often used for special effects and to help focus attention on the platform. These may require extra or special electrical circuits, so it will be important to anticipate these in the early planning stages.

Bright fluorescent lights are good for general Bible study, but some incandescent fixtures will add warmth and allow you to dim the lights for effect, or to give a theatrical atmosphere for dramas, skits, watching movies, etc. Use table lamps to make the room feel more like a living room in lounge areas, or where that is desirable.

One of the most important things to keep in mind is that the primary goals are reaching students, teaching students the Bible, and helping them apply it to their lives.

There are some basic rules of thumb to use to plan teaching space for students that still hold true: You will generally need about 12 square feet of space per student in classroom areas for Bible study groups, etc. In addition to this you probably will want to provide some area for the large group sessions of each student department. Use 10 to 12 square feet per person for designing this space. 10 to 12 square feet also holds true if you are designing a room for students to have a worship service in. Additional area will need to be provided for the platform or stage, hallways, rest rooms, resource storage, etc.

**For more rules of thumb and planning helps check out Church Architecture's website at:**  
[www.lifeway.com/churcharchitecture](http://www.lifeway.com/churcharchitecture)  
**Or call at (615) 251-2466**

Small group rooms are still recommended, but churches that do not have break-out rooms, can use the large group room and then just huddle into buzz groups. These will require about 18 square feet per person.

There is a growing awareness that casual furniture like sofas have a place, but not in the teaching room. Experienced Student Ministry workers have learned the hard way that discipline problems, short attention spans, and even napping can be a problem when the environment communicates a lounge atmosphere. This is not the kind of behavior you want to promote in your teaching areas. There is nothing wrong with making the environment comfortable, but large sofas, overstuffed chairs, pool tables and other furniture limit the capacity of the Student Ministry space. These are best suited in a student lounge area, separated from the classroom areas. Some larger churches, or where the budget allows, you may be able to afford to commit enough area for a separate student lounge area in addition to the class rooms as a place for relaxing before and after sessions.



You may also want to include a foyer area with a welcome desk to record guest information and sign up for events, etc. This is a good place for games like ping pong, air hockey, table soccer, and pool if you are going to have them. Just

plan a way to control their use when the students are supposed to be doing something other than playing such as a check out system for the equipment.

Here are a few more tips to keep in mind as you approach such a project:

**1. Consider the purpose.** Bible study and Worship are the main functions that go on in this area. With this in mind, the break-out rooms for small groups should remain simple. You do not want there to be so much decoration on the walls, that there is no place to put up a unit poster, list of topics, or a sheet of butcher paper for a brainstorming session with your group. In other words, do not make it harder to teach the lesson. Instead, leave room for teaching materials to help focus on the topic at hand. Also, do not sacrifice small group ministry classrooms just so you can have a cool department room.

**2. Consider flexibility.** One thing that will never change is that... things change. Consider using movable walls to get more bang for your buck. You may decide to change your theme each year, or every few years, and the change-over may have to be done on a very limited budget. Try to create a basic palette first, then build-out your theme in such a way it can be changed when the time comes. Also consider that you may outgrow this space and need to move to another someday. If you might leave this room for another age group to use, make it adaptable to their use.



**3. More flexibility!** From day to day the space may be used for different functions, from worship, to discipleship, to recreation, and mission projects. Your space should adapt to all of these, and any other functions you may consider for your program. When the building is being used for recreation, you may want to be able to lock-off the small group rooms or other areas to keep the students out. Since part of the intent is to attract unchurched and lost students, design the building so that the staff in charge can easily supervise all areas. Remember, you can't supervise what you can't see.

**4. If space is a problem** get rid of any couches or other furnishings that might be robbing you of usable classroom space. This will help make more efficient use of the room you have. It is best to do Bible study in stackable chairs. Leave the

couches for the lounge, if you can afford to have one, not where you do Bible study.

**5. Don't design around an individual.** You may have a very gifted person leading your student ministry whose personality tends to lead you to design around a particular skill, trait, or method of ministry. Ask: "What will happen if another student leader comes into this environment?" If God should call your current minister to another place of service, will another person with different gifts be able to come in and pull off a successful transition, or are you building-in failure?

**6. Budget wisely.** Do not spend so much on the building, you can't afford to provide a good program. Sometimes money is better spent on additional staff, equipment, and materials than on decorations or elaborate rooms. Content is more important than the container. If you do not intend to use the facility multiple times weekly, be cautious about overspending. Consider the ongoing cost of staffing your facility. Plan hours of operation, how often the building will be available, and who will supervise it, maintain it, and program activities in it.



**7. Design for durability.** There will be lots of excited students (many non-Christian) having a good time in the building. Hopefully, it will be used very often, perhaps daily. All of this translates to wear and tear! Materials and finishes in public areas should be designed to endure heavy use. Providing low-maintenance, heavy-duty construction and furnishings will save the headaches of having to frequently replace and repair things, or allowing the facility to deteriorate into disuse.

**8. Allow for record-keeping.** Records need to be kept so that follow-up can occur. Guests should find it easy to register their visit at a welcome area. This can be a wide place in the hall, a desk, or a control center where games and other equipment are checked out as well.

**9. Don't forget the rest of the church body.** If this is the only facility your church owns that will contain recreational facilities, consider designing the recreation part of the building to be accessible and used by the general church

body, with other areas that are designed for exclusive Student Ministry use. Adults will be reluctant to use a Student Ministry building, but students can, and will enjoy a building designed for the whole church family.

**10. Don't sacrifice needed teaching space for recreation space.**

If funds are limited, be sure you have a clear set of priorities so that the primary ministry of Bible teaching and reaching through the Sunday school is well provided for. Building an oversized worship room or recreation facility without enough good student teaching space would be unwise. No matter how successful the recreation ministry was, growth would be limited by the capacity of the teaching rooms. Spending thousands of dollars for recreation space can be disappointing if the teaching space is not adequate for significant growth.



Photo courtesy of Neal-Prince Architects

Designing Student Ministry space can be exciting, even if you can't afford to spend a lot. Be creative and keep your purpose in mind. You can create a great environment to help you attract students, involve them in Christian fellowship, keep their attention, and focus them on the message of the Bible.

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