Temporary Buildings: Steel *vs* Fabric

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President, Ministry Business Services, Inc.

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Our church just finished phase one of a four-phase site development. I was foolish enough to say that I'd help manage the programming, design, and construction by providing owner's representative oversight. Phase one includes building four structures, of which only one will survive the entire four-phase buildout. "So," we said, "let's go with fabric since these are only temporary buildings!"

Programming Challenge

Each phase of construction needed to allow us to double in size. The challenge was to accomplish this in such a way as to facilitate the building and increasing of programs while not sacrificing any programs because of a subsequent building phase's limitation. Phase one was, simply, to get us on the site as inexpensively— yet as nicely— as possible.

The Truth About Fabric Structures

We were surprised to learn that there is more to buying a fabric structure than just driving tent stakes into the ground to hold it up! Fabric structures require a foundation, electrical and fire control systems, and HVAC, which sounds a lot like building a permanent structure! The engineering and construction costs surprised us… we just thought it was going to be as easy as putting up a tent, similar to when you go camping.

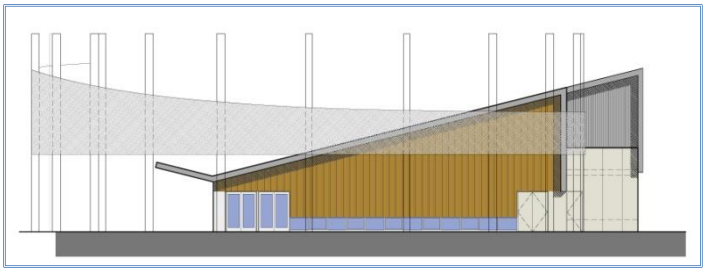
So we began talking the options through with our architect. He made a statement that surprised us, and that we were hesitant to believe. "Why don't you consider steel structures instead! The supporting costs are the same, they cost less than fabric, and you can make an architectural statement with them!" Our response: "Right!"

So we began a bidding process that confirmed his recommendation. We were able to buy steel structures for a little more than half the cost of fabric! And they looked cool too!

Steel's Advantages

In addition to costing less than fabric structures, there are additional advantages:

- Steele structures don't have to be a flat "typical" structure. With an eye for design, you can take the basic "kit" of parts and put them together any way you'd like!
- Some like to cover the steel siding of the structure with brick or stucco, etc. There's no doubt that doing so often adds to the look, but it also adds to the cost. Consider using more than one or two panel styles to add some nice effects. By using three panels and glass, we built buildings that looked pretty nice!
- Control of sound and ambient light are more easily accomplished with steel.



Our church auditorium, or sanctuary.

Steel's Disadvantages

The biggest drawback we anticipate with our steel structures is that they feel so permanent, some in our congregation may struggle a bit when we remove them for future phases! They certainly are not *temporary* buildings, so we've begun referring to them as *interim* buildings to try to soften what we hope will be necessary in just a few years.

Well, there you have our surprising odyssey… learning that for our purposes steel was about half the cost for the actual structure as fabric! It's an alternative that's certainly worth considering!

Nick Nicholaou is President of MBS, a consulting firm specializing in ministry computer networks, operational policies, and CPA services. Since 1986 Nick and his team have served many churches and ministries in the U.S. and beyond, and he speaks often at conferences. You can reach Nick via email (nick@mbsinc.com) or phone (714/840-5900). You may want to check out his firm's web site (www.mbsinc.com) and his unofficial blogs!

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