The ritual bath has been a part of human culture since earliest times. When John baptized Christ in the Jordan, *He Who Was Without Sin* articulated humility and unquestioning submission to God’s will. After Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, our ritual bath took on yet another symbolic layer: reliving the Paschal Mystery…our death and resurrection in Christ.

As we labor within the framework of the first rite of initiation, the factors affecting design of the baptismal font involve placement, shape, size, ambience, and access. We must also be mindful to integrate the other symbols of the rite: the Paschal Candle and the Sacred Oils. Special care must be taken for sound and integral construction, thereby avoiding the practical objections that have plagued contemporary fonts.

Most of us will never be blessed to be involved in the design and execution of a font as magnificent as that at St. Benedict the African in Chicago (see photo to right): a benchmark in design, integration and construction that is eloquent and facile in baptismal theology and praxis. The designs of contemporary baptisteries have often neglected the multivalence of the symbol in exchange for an “architectural feature”. The actions of the rite may be sacrificed when we settle for architectural coherence in exchange for provisions for the rituals and full expression of the symbol. Often overlooked is the connection of this ritual place to the whole Christian Journey: from initiation to resurrection. Placement and artistic expression can produce a rich symbolic expression of this journey. Pragmatically, the location, size, materials, accessibility, safety, construction and maintenance are significant considerations in design and execution of the symbol.

**Location**

The placement of the font at the threshold of the church is opulent in symbolism: a community welcoming a new member at the doors of the church; the beginning of the Christian journey; the beginning of the initiation journey to the Table. It is here that we return to bless ourselves in the Holy Waters of Baptism before worship. Pragmatically, a threshold placement replaces Holy Water stoops at the entrance. Placement in the center of the assembly enjoys the symbolism of an “embrace” by the faith community. The downside to a central location is that we often place additional Holy Water stoops at the doors for “convenience”. Doing so negates the symbolism of returning to the font in preparation for worship, and duplicates the symbol. This duplication puzzles me, since we would never consider a “secondary” symbol of the altar, ambo, paschal candle, etc. Optional locations are often dictated by architectural opportunity or convenience. For instance, an apse, which has no other use after liturgical renewal of the space, is transformed into a spacious baptistery, evocative of times in church history when baptism took place in a separate room. This historic connection has merit and the spaces are generally ample and visually accessible. The negatives are the remote location that necessitates Holy Water stoops at the threshold and the physical and theological disconnect with the Initiation Journey.

**Aesthetics**

The most used historic symbolic shapes for baptismal fonts are cruciform, octagonal (the 8th day/resurrection), round (womb/ancient tomb) and rectangular (burial box/tomb). Some of the earliest fonts were constructed below the floor level and featured steps into and out of the font, which symbolically expressed the Paschal Mystery…descending into death and rising into new life in Christ. These fonts were often in the shape of a crucifix, and sometimes incorporated additional symbolic elements such as the octagon and rounded, womb-like basins.

Contemporary designs are often expressed as an aboveground “wading pool”, with or without the raised or integral infant/blessing font. Some pools require the use of portable steps up the outside of the font for access into the water, but most often are accessible by stepping over the sides.
Symbolically and logistically, climbing up into a font is less desirable than if one descends into the water. Some fonts have the overall appearance of a stock tank or bathtub, sterile in design and materials and often insufficient for ritual movement, but find redemption as an architecturally integral element.

Another popular style is a shallow floor indentation that is sometimes flooded, where the elect kneel while urns of water are poured over them. Both of these styles depict the ritual bath but are somewhat impoverished in the symbolism of the baptismal journey.

Other contemporary fonts are combinations of above and below floor level elements. Some multi-level fonts hide the adult immersion pool below floor level with artistically rendered covers that allow for useable floor space when the font is not in use. The “upper” fonts, which serve for infant baptism and blessing have many artistic and practical forms: brimming pots, recycled fonts, bowls of various materials and other water features. These fonts have addressed the practical issues of space and safety with artistry and ingenuity without suffering the indignity of diminishing the symbolic nature of the rite.

Lighting is generally an afterthought…if even considered in the design. Lighting the pool from within may seem theatrical and contrived, but may be entirely appropriate for the design. Providing directed or ambient lighting should certainly be an element of the overall design. Work with a lighting consultant for a fully integrated design and the latest in lighting options.

Access and Safety

Today we have a heightened awareness of access and safety issues. How do we accommodate space enough for the actions of the rite and everyone involved in the rite? What about those who may not be able to climb over the sides or maneuver stairs? Provisions for wheelchair access has been the subject of much discussion, trial and failure. We have seen armature installed that looks similar to equipment used for loading cargo onto a ship and we have engaged in dialog regarding the community’s hospitality and their responsibility for carrying disabled persons into the water. Perhaps exploring a “beach entry” design, a gradual ramping of the floor, will one day result in a breakthrough design.

The issue of visual access will always be part of the dialog. We are a “seeing” culture and visualization of everything becomes a large part of decision-making. Contemporary culture is highly dependent upon visual imagery, and not providing visual imagery can be counter-cultural. I have been asked many times about video projection of Easter Vigil baptisms…and have explained that if the community is “watching television”; they are not actively participating in the ritual and they become observers. Technological advances can both help and hinder the spiritual experience.

Safety elements have been incorporated with relative success, both artistically and practically. We have devised many creative ways to invite yet protect: decorative gates, grates, and other creative barriers have been effectively employed to protect children and adults from injury when the fonts are not in use while preserving the dignity of the symbol.

Materials and Equipment

We have a large vocabulary of materials from which to select.

Natural stone is a primary material for font design. An organic look of a natural basin inspires awe and foreboding of what happens here: the death and life struggle. A pristine bathtub, while beautiful, speaks to ritual bathing but doesn’t evoke much mystery.

Mosaic is an art form used in ancient fonts and the splendor of integrated art enriches the expression of the space, particularly when the mosaic designs are incorporated into the overall concept of the space, visually tracing the Christian journey, and providing spatial continuity.

Volcanic stone, used for exterior applications and fountains, can be carved and shaped easier than marble, has an earthy quality and texture, and a diverse color palette.

Wood facades tend to say “hot tub”, but this natural element can and should be used integrally in organic design.

Concrete that is stained and patterned can also be used effectively and artistically, as can other man-made materials that combine natural materials with “high tech” bonding materials.

The equipment for maintaining the font is a critical piece of the solution, but the one detail that is often bypassed. Consulting with a pool professional will result in specifications for the latest in cleaning, heating and operational equipment. Today’s equipment is earth friendly, energy efficient and generally “goof proof”.

(Continued on page 4)
Here are a few “modern conveniences”:

Nature purification technology activates oxygen & releases trace amounts of natural non-toxic minerals to kill and prevent growth of bacteria, algae & viruses. It reduces or eliminates chlorine, is economical and environmentally friendly.

Compool™ is an automated computerized control system that has both remote and centralized control panels with a multitude of settings. Want to do an infant immersion baptism? Heat the upper font water in less than 15 minutes at the press of a button in the sacristy or remote location. This panel controls heating, circulation pump, cleaning, and lighting. It is programmable and energy efficient. Electronic heaters are energy efficient, highly proficient and offer more flexibility in remote installations. (Installations 50+ feet from the pool are possible.).

Construction: Employing a Pool Professional

The basic construction of fonts should be typical of in-ground pool construction. This will provide longevity and practicality. Whatever the cosmetic application, the core construction must be sound, water tight and provide all necessary plumbing components. A large percentage of contemporary font installations have been dismal failures that leak and don’t use modern equipment to keep the water clean and warm enough to comfortably immerse a human being. (I know the Jordan was not heated.) Most installations have been simply constructed as a bathtub or adjunct spa. At least the latter generally includes the appropriate plumbing and equipment for circulation, cleaning and heating, indicative of spa installations.
thoughts on baptism, fonts, & water . . .

Keeping the font filled with fresh or flowing water at all times, and not only when baptisms are scheduled, enables the faithful continually to affirm their baptism by sight, sound, and touch. A permanent baptismal place may enable the continuous flow of fresh water to the font.

Principles for Worship, Augsburg Press, 2002

The importance of baptism may be conveyed visually . . . What the eye sees is no less important in conveying theology and calling forth praise than what the ear hears. We face the challenge of facilitating experiences in sacramental worship that appeal to all the senses.

Laurence Hull Stookey  
Baptism: Christ’s Act in the Church  
Abingdom Press, 1982

Water is the key symbol and the focal point of the font.  
Built of Living Stones  
U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000

“... If you are asking how I know that this water is holy, I know because all water is holy.”  
A Greek Orthodox Grandmother

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.  
Galatians 3:27

Failures are often built in: late timing of design and lack of professional consultants. Font design should begin during the schematic design phase and continue into the design development phase. Too often, baptistery design is not integrated into the program until much later in the design development phase. A pool contractor should be included in the initial phases so the design and construction of the building will take into full consideration the structural implications. Additionally, the spectrum of design possibilities and options can be fully explored with a pool consultant who will walk you through all issues of support and construction, control panels, lighting, materials and mechanicals. He/she can turn your design concept into a full set of computerized construction documents and specification sheets, which can be integrated into the architect’s construction documents and will:

--work with engineering consultants for special circumstances (e.g., top floor pools in a two story construction)  
--establish the minimum/maximum runs for remote placement of equipment  
--work with an acoustical consultant for noise reduction of mechanicals  
--Contract/oversee all aspects of the construction of the pool, in coordination with the general contractor. The pool contractor does all font plumbing, and the project electrician does the electrical.

Construction can take 4-8 weeks, depending upon the complexity and size of the project. There are inspections after every phase of construction, concomitant with a comprehensive and lengthy site inspection document.

Our challenge is the design and execution of a transcendent ritual symbol that includes a fullness of expression, accommodates the rite, provides accessibility and safety, symbolically and artistically is integral to the overall concept, is sound in its construction, and is practical in its usability. No small task.

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