Diocese of Dunedin

Strategic Property Consultation 2020

Extra Reading:

1. In favour of preserving Sacred Spaces

Church Buildings aren't just buildings - from the Christian Century. Talks about the ambivalence many feel about buildings, but how the fact they are more than buildings, they are places of worship and "home" for families of faith.

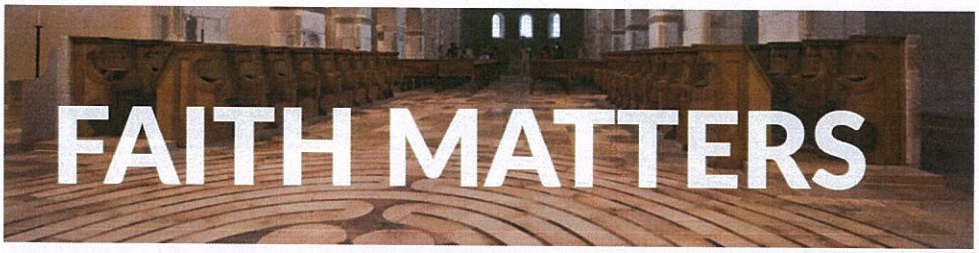
A Biblical Theology of Architecture - a (lengthy) from an evangelical perspective, arguing there are biblical imperatives for creating sacred spaces. *"The two components that are always in tension in religious architecture are the immanence and transcendence of God. As the church, as new community distinct from Israel emerges, it is concerned with idolatry and the misuse of such spaces due to the idolatry, legalism, and misuse of the temple in Israel's history. There is a great danger in over-emphasizing either the architecture of immanence in the tabernacle or the architecture of transcendence in the temple, posing a difficult question of how to wed the two together. The Lord will answer this question of material faithfulness in the most physical way: the Incarnation."*

The Underrated Strategic Value of Church Buildings - from a USA context reflecting on the pressure to re-purpose under or unused church buildings into other developments such as housing, arguing that there is a mandate for preserving church buildings.

Everywhere Present: Christianity in a One-Story universe (link to Good Reads reviews of book). In this book, Stephen Freeman (currently an Orthodox Priest in North America) argues among other things the value of sacred spaces. This is in the context of not buying into a two-tier system where we have ordinary things on earth with God "upstairs" i.e. remote, absent and unreachable. In Chapter 4 (The God Who is Not There) he talks about how in the Orthodox tradition church buildings themselves are seen as holy, but within it there is a Holy Place – the space surrounding the Altar. Many people see holy places as being everywhere and anywhere, but there is something about having a defined holy space that is able to communicate the presence of God in a profound and unique way.

Church buildings aren't just buildings

christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/church-buildings-aren-t-just-buildings



In all three of the congregations I served as a pastor, there was never a task I approached with more ambivalence than attending a meeting of the property committee. To put it charitably, the people who are drawn to serve on this committee like their faith to be material, earthy, and as sturdy as stones and mortar. They're the least Gnostic members of the congregation. To put it less charitably, their devotion may be more to the building than to the mission of the church.

Whatever questions I had about their priorities, I appreciated the work of the property committee. There is a spirituality about the place where the church repeatedly gathers. Every time we enter it we remember that this is where our children were baptized or married, where our spouses were given back to God at funerals, and where we came Sunday after Sunday in search of a word from God. When I needed a lonely place to pray during the week, I would always sit in the empty sanctuary. I was encouraged just to be in the place where so many had prayed before me.

Craig Barnes

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Nov 7, 2018 issue

But I knew the budget well, and I was overwhelmed at how much of the church's money went toward the maintenance of this house of prayer. The constant upkeep and escalating utilities were always considered fixed costs, while programming and missional initiatives had to make do with what was left over. Was this really what Jesus had in mind?

Most pastors I know have this same ambivalent relationship with their church buildings, even if they raised the money to build them. We love having our particular place to worship and engage in all of the activities of being a family of faith, and we cherish the sacred memories created there. But we always feel like passing out when we see how much it costs.

The cost isn't just financial. Congregations of all types spend an enormous amount of time talking, and often arguing, about how they'll use their facilities. That's because they're not just buildings but holy altars where people are most attentive to the presence of God. So a lot is at stake in the place of worship, no matter how humble.

My father was a church planter. My childhood congregation met in the large unfinished basement of a house before it was able to buy an old church building. But even in the relatively short time we spent as "the church in the basement" we quickly developed traditions and a sense of order. One Sunday, not long after the church started, my father tried to rearrange the chairs for worship. He met with opposition from those who said, "but we've always set them up the same way." In other words, *this is how we approach God.*

Early Christians must have tried to sacralize their house churches with some sense of order, the same way my childhood congregation did in a basement. Even when the church huddled in catacombs, it put permanent art on the walls that reveals its yearning to turn a burial place into a holy place of worship. After the church was legalized and adopted the old Roman basilicas for its buildings, we never got over our love of a faith written in stone.

The seminary I serve has several buildings that were built in the 19th century. They were expensive to build and are very expensive to maintain. But when I walk past them I can feel the gravitas of our mission to train the next generation of pastors and scholars. If the stones of these buildings could talk, they could describe so many late nights they saw our students poring over their theology books and parsing ancient verbs in order to

learn how to handle the word of God faithfully. The chapel has heard students' worship of God for 180 years. It has welcomed countless seminarians who wandered into it alone to prayerfully discern a call for how they'll spend the rest of their lives.

God certainly doesn't need a cherished old building to unfold our calling. As the psalmists repeatedly remind us, "all the earth belongs to the Lord." A long walk in the wilderness or the crowded, smelly platform of a subway station can also become a holy place of sacred encounter. But to make sense of those encounters we gather with others in some place of worship "to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple," which the psalmist David calls his greatest desire.

That temple can be a Gothic cathedral, a storefront church, or a coffeehouse that doubles as the sanctuary of a new church plant. But we need the familiarity of our place to worship. That can involve the way the chairs are set up, the screen displaying the songs we sing, and the large thermos in the back that drips lemonade on the floor. Or it can mean uncomfortable pews, the creak of the stairs to the balcony, the cross up front we behold every week, and the small memorial plaques on the windows that whisper of someone who was here before us, someone who was also trying to behold God's beauty and inquire about calling.

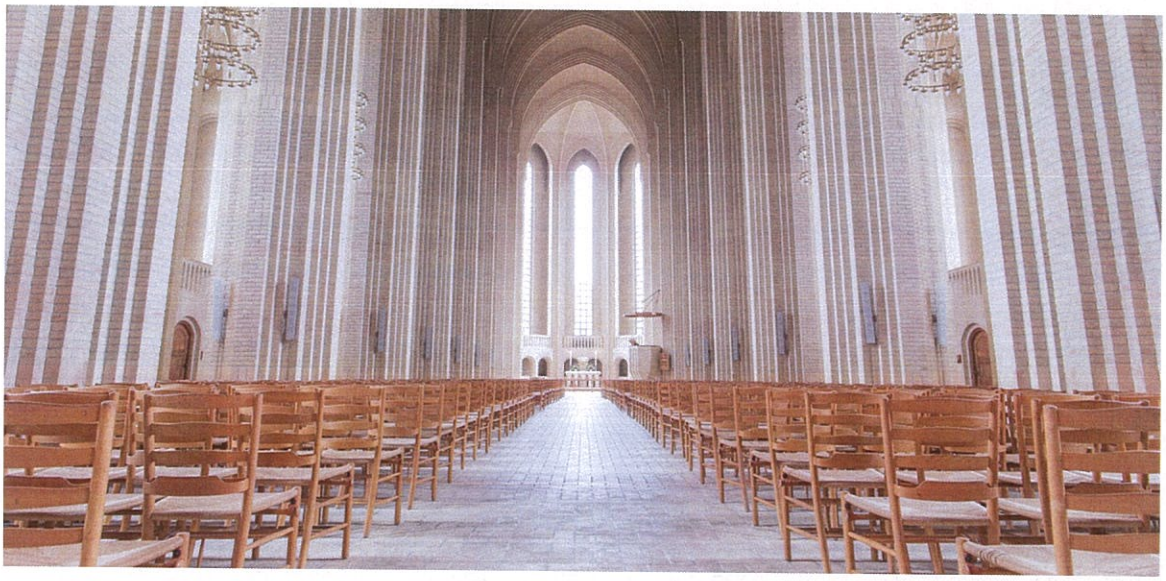
Everyone who graduated from Sunday school got the lesson that the real church is a family of Christian faith and not the building where they meet. Right. But every family needs a home.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Built for faith."

A Biblical Theology of Architecture?

Peter Marshall Mason Follow

Nov 25, 2016 · 18 min read



While policeman and emergency responders crawl over the bricks and wreckage in the Dubar square in the city of Patan Nepal, sweeping the raw materials that once were ancient monuments, there sits a man, Ratna Muni Brahmacharya, gathering up his fallen city. After collecting handfuls of debris, he moves into his workshop where he sits with a knife in one hand as he begins to carve a statue of Buddha out of the ruin. In recent weeks, Nepal has been devastated with the aftereffects of a whopping 7.8 Mw earthquake killing more than 7,000 people leaving entire cities toppled to the ground, homes laid to waste. While the majority of Nepal's community scrambles to find water, food, and medical aid, Ratna Muni Brahmacharya, whose life's work has been the restoration of Nepal's unique architecture, weeps over the fallen buildings that date back four centuries. He knows that this rubble is more than just bricks, and these buildings

were more than the sum of their parts. As Ratna explains, "This is our identity, our pride" as he continues to carve and break down the materials, "We have to rebuild. We have to bring back the square in the same condition. We have lost a part of our heritage, but our culture is still intact," he concludes, "We can revive our heritage."[1]

Architecture is more than just bricks laid in pattern, more than raw material, more than sets of walls or stylized ornamentation. Ratna understands this; architecture is the means by which humanity experiences some of the most sacred realities. Architecture is built into the very fiber of humanity's need to create and "make a place for themselves." Humanity creates and inhabits and in the process creates categories as radical as the home, sanctuary, town, village, and city. Humans, as embodied creatures, cannot be divorced from their surroundings and their surroundings cannot be divorced from their perception of reality. It therefore follows that architecture gives weight to how one relates to and perceives the world.

As humans we are deeply affected by the spaces we occupy and how we experience them through our senses and our unconscious thought. Take the reader of this paper for example: as one reads these lines he/she is most directly related to the room they occupy whether it be a classroom, office, living room, bedroom, hospital, church, or auditorium which *directly affects* the manner in which they read (comfortable, closed-in, academic, stressful, tired, etc.). Created spaces have the power to change psychological and sociological moods that affect our perception of reality. Inversely, humans are the creators of architecture. In this way, we both shape architecture and *are shaped* by architecture. Man's creation and material cultivation of space is interactive and cyclical which echoes the God who is affected by His own creation.

Therefore, it is necessary and pertinent to attune our senses to a faithful approach to our freedom in building structures and creating architecture. There is poorly planned architecture that may have damaging effects. For example, an

architect trained in amusement and entertainment auditoriums should not bring his methods and styles to bear on the construction of a new hospital. Architecture can either have a profound conductive influence that channels healthy realities, or manipulative effects that leave inhabitants untethered or manipulated by their spatial surroundings.

Moreover, architecture is not only a means by which humans communicate and relate to one another; architecture is the avenue by which God and His creation relate to one another. Let us not forget that humanity reflects the image of the Great Architect who set the earth on its foundation (Ps 104:5). There is then, a heightened sensitivity for faithful architecture in what one might call "sacred space"; the physical localization wherein God's presence is guaranteed. In recent decades, the modern architecture movement has moved into ecclesiological architecture, creating the "wal-mart-ization"/consumerism/warehouse effect that is muddling the church's witness and purpose: invoking the presence of God through real concrete manifestation. The church itself needs to recalibrate its drafting board by rethinking the biblical theology of architecture to once again radiate theological imagination in her visual theology. Far too often the ear has been given primacy over the eye.

The First Architect

The first words of Genesis speak of a Maker, a Builder, a Creator (Gen 1). Most think of this as creating *things* from apparent *ex nihilo,* from nothingness, and therefore giving these *things* a material existence. This is in glaring contrast to an ancient cosmology that believed that something existed when it had a role and function in an ordered system.[2] This is central to the original Hebrew, "In the beginning, God (*bara'* or created)." In the beginning refers not to a point in time when there was not matter and then suddenly God created matter. In the beginning refers to a period wherein God *bara'* (gives functions) to all of the universe. It follows that the narrative in Gen 1:2 starts "with no function (not with no matter) and assigns functions by separating and naming."[3] On day

one, the Lord separates a *period* of light from a *period* of darkness, on day two, the Lord sets up the basis for weather, on day three the Lord sets up basis for growing food. After this, God assigns functions to each of these spheres intended to give life to humanity.

What is going on is more than simply creating something out of nothing. God is designing the cosmos in such away as to create/build/design a temple. The cosmos in ancient thought are portrayed as a temple. Inversely human-made temples are considered micro-models of the cosmos. As John Walton points out:

Temples are built in the ancient world for the gods to rest in, which does not refer to relaxing, but to enjoying and maintaining security and order. God is creating his dwelling place, putting people into it as his images (representatives), and taking up his place at the helm to maintain the order he has established.[4]

Traditionally after temples were constructed, there was a 7-day dedication where the functions of the temple were explained, the furniture was installed, the priests would attend their call, and the deity would rest and take up his presence in his temple. Therefore, it can be shown that Genesis is the dedication of the cosmos to the order and design of the Great Temple Architect who has designed reality in such a way that is faithful to maintaining order, functionality, and the flourishing of life. We, therefore, have a God who is committed to the design of materiality that produces order, functionality, doxology, life, etc. As God separates in the first three days, He declares that spatial realities are of the utmost importance for the ordering of His Temple.

Fallen Architecture

After the incredible act of ordering the Divine Temple, YHWH lends over his tools to His image bearers to create, rule, and have dominion (Gen 1:24). Often cited as the cultural mandate, man is given the order to "go and do likewise" (c.f. Luke 10:37), in other words: go out and learn how to paint, learn commerce,

exchange goods and services, plan cities, build skyscrapers, pave roads; go and cultivate. However, this does not give humanity complete freedom and autonomy to design and create whatever they think is best. It must align and adhere to the ordering of the cosmic Temple and the motivation of YHWH; this is precisely the standard that humans fail to accomplish.

The Tower of Babel (Gen 11) stands as humanity's fallen response to YHWH's architectural plan of integrity. Representing man's own achievement and autonomy, this tower made of clay and stone is reason enough to provoke the wrath of God. The tower itself does not provoke God's wrath, however architecture used for the purpose of self-exaltation ("come let us make a name for ourselves") is deemed unholy.

The architecture of Babel is the reversal of God's Divine Ordering. Through this real and concrete craft man plays creator: notice "Come" and four times: "Let us make, and let us; let us build a city and let us make a name for ourselves" (v.3 –4) echoing the original creation narrative. As Craig Bartholomew explains, "Imitating God's creation of man out of the dust of the ground, the human race begins its own project of creation by firing and transforming portions of the earth."[5]

Moreover, the tower was built in the distinctive style of a ziggurat, common in Babylonian architecture, the nation later found most opposed to God's people. [6] This type of tower would typically have six square stages built upon a platform. The base was 185 m square, and at the top of the last tower there was a cell in which a large couch was laid, and by it a golden table; the cell was reserved for the god, who came and rested on the couch. The total height of the tower was approx. 85 m.[7] Thus as Kass notes,

The house of the foundation of heaven and earth thus sought to link the city with the cosmos and to bring the city into line with the heavenly powers that be, or — *perhaps, conversely — to bring the powers that be into line with the goals of the city*. In more ways than one, the towered city, is in principal, 'cosmopolis.'[8]

YHWH's appointed representative/image bearers vie against the Divine in a mutiny of bricks laid in pattern that results in dispersion and confusion. God counters man's spatial concentration with a very real spatial scattering. YHWH will not have His temple turned on its head.

The Architect's Blueprints

As the cultural mandate unfolds, God's people find themselves in slavery to yet again another "cosmopolis" in Egypt. Under Pharaoh's tyranny, the people of God spend their days making bricks (Ex. 5:7) for the evil intentions of another human agent who intends to usurp YHWH's power through vast construction of an architectural empire. Through the plagues, YHWH calls His people out into the wilderness where He instructs them in detail about a new holy type of architecture, giving them the actual blueprints (Ex 25–31).

The redemption of man's previous building errors is the tabernacle where God Himself will descend and live amongst the people, the direct reversal of the Tower of Babel. This God does not use architecture to vie for power, but to vie for relationship.

As Moses *ascends* the mountain to receive the law and the requirements for the tabernacle, YHWH hands over the blueprints so that he can *descend* and dwell in the midst of His people. This tabernacle functioned as a primary symbol of God's presence in the world and among his people, who were "on the move," while they were in the wilderness. It was intended to be mobile, moving with the people as they wandered, and therefore was never considered to be a "permanent" house for God.[9] But as a dwelling place for YHWH, this tabernacle was specifically and intricately detailed so that it would function to provide a micro-cosmos model mentioned prior. The architectural plans stretch 7 entire chapters in the book of Exodus, the book of Israel's identity. These plans were not generalized or suggestions, but were specific in materials, measurements, and ornamentation, which suggests the staggering reality that the God of the cosmos is radically concerned with the materiality of man's

construction (bars of acacia wood; fine twined linen and blue and purple and scarlet yarns; curtains from goats' hair; rings of gold; clasps of bronze; rams' skins, etc.). YWHW does not stick up His nose at architectural style questions of scale, volume, design, lighting, texture, and articulation of décor, because the God of the Bible relates in present *concrete* manifestations. Moreover, the God of the Bible understands that architecture has a profound effect upon both humanity and their relationship to Him. This tabernacle's architecture functioned for the ritual cultus of Israel, giving liturgical priestly mandates for the way in which God relates to humanity. This *holy* architecture was an articulation of faith in material form.[10]

The architectural plan of the tabernacle highlighted a strong reference to God's *immanence*. Neither the scale nor volume of the tabernacle overwhelmed the worshippers; it appeared to be more inviting by virtue in comparison to the next piece of architecture made for YHWH. This is not to say that the tabernacle did not convey YWHW as a God of transcendence, for the tabernacle space was organized according to a hierarchical plan that permitted various people to some restricted areas. The emphasis of this kind of architecture was more intimate and immanent, rather than distanced and transcendent.

Solomon's Temple

As Israel is finally ushered into the Promised Land and the Davidic line is established, Solomon is given the privilege and opportunity to construct a permanent Temple in a permanent sanctioned geographical location: Jerusalem (1 Kings 5–8; 2 Chron 2–7). As this construction was presented to Solomon, YHWH also shared in guiding the construction and design of an elaborate, permanent place of worship in the capital of the land. There is significant difference between the tabernacle and Solomon's Temple. The scale and volume of the Temple far exceeded the tabernacle. Thus worshippers were welcomed with a sense of awe through an awareness and sense of the *transcendence* of God. As Torgerson explains, "this was achieved by virtue of the diminished

significance of the person in relation to the size of the temple."[11] The organizing principles and general layout were similar in scale to the much smaller tabernacle but with extraordinary ornamentation and sheer size, God was theologically communicated as "*holy other.*" In this way architecture is not simply the *container* for religious or theological discourse but the means by which faith, theology, and YHWH is communicated to the community.

There is then a great opportunity to design and construct a place of worship that is conducive to a healthy worship setting, and there is also a great danger that architecture may play too central of a role so that it either muddles the theological witness of the community or becomes the object of worship itself. From an early point of Israel's history, her architecture has served to provide a material articulation of her faith. The two components that are always in tension in religious architecture are the *immanence* and *transcendence* of God. As the church, as new community distinct from Israel emerges, it is concerned with idolatry and the misuse of such spaces due to the idolatry, legalism, and misuse of the temple in Israel's history. There is a great danger in over-emphasizing either the *architecture of immanence in the tabernacle* or the *architecture of transcendence in the temple,* posing a difficult question of how to wed the two together. The Lord will answer this question of material faithfulness in the most physical way: the Incarnation.

God and Flesh made Temple: The Wedding of Transcendence and Immanence

As the God-Man, Jesus Christ enters the scene, he makes the startling statement, "I will destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (Jn 2:19). Everything that Israel stood for, articulated in the rituals and cultus found in the temple, was being redefined by the person and work of Jesus Christ: the ultimate Immanence and Transcendence of God. This man sacramentally reinterprets the entire history of Israel's architecture through Himself. For Jesus Christ is the direct image of the Father (Col 1:15; Heb 1; Eph 1), previously

articulated by the Temple system where atonement was made for sin, worship occurred, and God and man communicated. But notice, this does not void the meanings and theological significance of the architectural function of the temple.

The majority of Jesus' ministry and work is articulated through architectural terms found in the temple. Take for example the mercy seat found on top of the Ark of the Covenant where atonement, propitiation, and expiation was centered on the day of atonement; Jesus Christ makes a final atonement, propitiation, and expiation through himself (Heb 9:5; c.f. Ezek 43). The entire functions of the priesthood found both in the tabernacle and temple are consummated in the High Priest Jesus (Heb 4:14–16). Moreover one of the most staggering examples of Jesus redefinition of *holy architecture* is found at the moment of his death: "At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split" (Matt 27:51). What many miss is the overwhelming truth that Jesus makes the *transcendent* God immediately *immanent* and present to believers through a *real tangible textured piece of torn architectural linen.* Far too often in the church age, believers have over-spiritualized, over-sentimentalized and figuratively read a very real and concrete way that God makes Himself known to the world: through architecture. Everything that the temple and its ceremonies represented and proclaimed had been accomplished in the person of Christ. As André Biéler says, "the communication of the living God unveiling Himself in the work and person of Jesus of Nazareth, does not occur in a vacuum."[12]

Thus Jesus Christ does not "cancel" out the temple but rather soaks up like a sponge all the theological significance that the material building communicates, and assumes it in Himself. Jesus's work is a reinterpretation of the dwelling of God in Creation, from a concrete edifice to living physical flesh and blood. If this is the case, and believers are now also considered a "living temple"(1 Cor 3:16; 1 Peter 1:25; Matt 18:10), what role does architecture play in the church age that believers now find themselves in?

Toward a New Church Architecture of Ancient-Future

From the time of Pentecost, the beginning of the distinct Christian community, the need of a *place/building* has been present. The physical building of the church however, does not fulfill rituals and religious cultus, as in the tabernacle and temple sacrificial systems prior. Still, the church building is necessary for the gathering of believers. Over the centuries, the history of church architecture has grown and developed from house-churches, to Martyrions, to Constantinian basilicas, to modern architecture. Throughout this development the same need for a balanced view of *immanence* and *transcendence* has been particularly difficult to accommodate.

Martyrions (church buildings built upon the graves of martyrs — believed to have a particularly potent presence of God) countered the intimacy of house-churches that emphasized the brotherhood of believers and the "God in our midst." The Modern church architecture of *immanence* countered the "High-Church" Constantinian Basilicas that emphasize hierarchy and *transcendence.* Church architecture throughout history has had the difficult task, similar to Israel, of holding these two aspects *in tension:* the next generation swings the pendulum back, and the next the other way. Therefore, church architects, planners, and pastors must consider carefully visual forms, as contextual internalized realities, because their color, shape, line, size, texture, weight, and other formal elements carry important theological potential.[13] It is not so much one aspect of church architecture as the grand picture the church architect paints that bears witness to particular theological distinctives. As Christy Newton explains, "The power of these spaces, the richness of their theological allusion, depends not nearly as much on the voice of any individual element in them as in the dialogue and polyphone they create as an ensemble."[14]

Presently, the pendulum has swung drastically far on the spectrum in favor of a God of *immanence.* Following the theological convictions of Schleiermacher and cultural concerns of Dietrich Bonheoffer, the church of the 20th century has

constructed buildings that communicate the God who is present and accessible anytime anywhere, a response to the great horrors of the 20th century. As André Biéler states,

The lingering question for Bonhoeffer was, "How can we be 'church' in a meaningful way in the modern world?" Bonhoeffer's fragmentary thoughts on a religionless Christianity would influence modern church architecture, even provoking what Lutheran architect Edwared A. Sovik would call "nonchurch" architecture for Christian communities.[15]

This influence on modern church architecture has developed and led to the rise of the "warehouse/wal-mart" church that refuses iconographic language and ornamentation in building design. Western utilitarianism has valued functionality well above any concern for beauty or iconographic language; thus the creation of what Schloeder frustratingly calls "white-washed barns" of modernity.[16] It continues that with the emphasis of rationality, art/liturgy/visual theology has been exchanged in favor of auditory knowledge of the ear.

William Dyrness also voices his frustration:

Visits to a variety of our contemporary evangelical worship spaces led me to wonder if our worship spaces, filled as they are with words– preaching, announcements, even our singing– can fix and hold our faith for us? Can words ultimately, by themselves, fix our minds and hearts in a way that shapes us theologically? Like the ever-changing images on the omnipresent screen, lacking any fixed spatial reference point, do words too slip and slide around?[17]

This modern architecture movement has led to the rise of the multi-purpose sanctuary transforming worship spaces into gyms, auditoriums and theaters.

I propose that this movement has unfaithfully swung the pendulum too far and at its extreme *flattens* the presence of God rather than communicating the "God

in our midst." Thankfully, church architecture is slowly beginning to move towards a postmodern architecture movement, lifting the strict ban on ornamentation, allowing for a richer iconographic language in building design. No longer do churches need to accommodate to transform empty boxes into their areas of worship.

Once again, theological meaning, aesthetic dignity, material sustainability, and cultural distinctiveness are at the forefront of architect's minds in designing worship spaces. The church may once again have a visual witness to the surrounding community and stand tall against the backdrop of western functionalistic humanism. A postmodern architectural world may be a new avenue for faithful church architecture. The rich language of historical designs has once again been sanctioned as an appropriate source for architectural inspiration, a windfall for church architects.[18] In hopes of not swinging the pendulum back too far, both *immanence* and *transcendence, beauty* and *functionality* need to be held in tension as the church seeks to recapture its image and intuitively understand that ritual and ceremony are necessary for lives that are fully human. This *holy architecture* seeks to capture humanity's eyes *and* ears to realign our hearts and minds with the divine ordering of the Cosmic Temple of Creation.

Therefore: we might learn to say with John of Damascus, "I salute all remaining matter with reverence, because God has filled it with his grace and power." In short, evangelicals may come to see that the church is not at all like a garage; it is more like a richly furnished home into which we may gladly invite our friends and neighbors.[19]

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The Underrated Strategic Value of Church Buildings

APRIL 25, 2018 | Duke Kwon

MINISTRY

What hath bodily resurrection to do with church buildings?

This question is vividly on my mind because the building where our church formerly worshiped is being converted to luxury condos, and ground-breaking just began. For the first time in 100 years, that sanctuary was empty and silent on Easter Sunday.

There's an emerging trend (https://www.washingtonpost.com/realestate/2016/09/22/5764cb6c-2cac-11e6-9b37-42985f6a265c_story.html?utm_term=.059c07edeceb) of historic church buildings being bought by developers and converted to condos. In cities like Washington D.C, sacred spaces are quickly disappearing from the civic landscape. And as I recently explained elsewhere (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/03/28/the-tragedy-to-communities-when-church-buildings-are-demolished-to-make-condos/?utm_term=.75533af7dd9a), I believe this isn't only sad for the church but also bad for the neighborhood.

Buildings for the Common Good

Church buildings facilitate the mission of the church. They provide physical space not only for the worship of God (1 Pet. 2:9 (https://www.esv.org/1%20Pet.%202%3A9/)) and the nurture of the saints (Eph. 4:15–16 (https://www.esv.org/Eph.%204%3A15%E2%80%9316/)) but also for the witness of the church, which is called to be a "light" to the world (Matt. 5:14–16 (https://www.esv.org/Matt.%205%3A14%E2%80%9316/)). At their best, therefore, church buildings serve not only their worshiping members but also the common good. They are visible emblems of Jesus's neighborly proximity and public outposts of God's kingdom in the city's commons. Church buildings, when filled with the merciful people of God, are "sanctuaries" for downtrodden neighbors seeking refuge from the storms of life.

> "We embrace church buildings for the common good."

In her examination of the civic challenges faced by religious communities seeking to acquire or renovate houses of worship, *The Atlantic*'s Emma Green recently wrote (https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/11/rluipa/543504/) the following about the value that religious communities add to a neighborhood or town:

> Without an adequate place to gather, [religious groups] miss opportunities to assemble in study, service, and prayer. The stakes are high for towns, too. Churches, synagogues, and mosques influence life well outside their walls: People who belong to religious institutions are more civically engaged than their secular neighbors. They are more likely to serve on school boards, volunteer at charities, and join clubs. In the absence of these institutions, communities can become fractured and isolated. Neighborly infrastructure decays.

When the church has no home or no visible presence in the neighborhood, it's not just the church that loses. The neighborhood loses too.

Rebuilding Our Embrace of Buildings

There are steps that cities can take to ameliorate this problem. Economic incentives could be created for churches to sell their buildings to other churches or community-based nonprofits. Zoning regulations could be adjusted to protect historic church buildings from falling prey to fast-paced, unaccountable development.

But rather than laying all responsibility for solving this issue on our municipalities, we must also acknowledge that Christian communities are partly responsible for this church-to-condo conversion trend. Over the last several decades, after all, the American church has developed a preference for "non-traditional" spaces of worship

(https://www.barna.com/research/designing-worship-spaces-with-millennials-in-mind/), often to the neglect of existing "historic" spaces. My point here is not to assign value to one type of worship facility over another; it's simply to note that in some cases, church buildings have been sold to developers because there's no market among churches.

> "We must acknowledge that Christian communities are partly responsible for this church-to-condo conversion trend."

So what is our role in stopping the gradual erasure of historic church buildings from the civic landscape of our cities? What can churches do?

First, we must recommit ourselves to a biblical vision of service, neighbor, and the common good.

The gospel alone constrains and empowers us to put the needs and interests of our neighbors above our own (Phil. 2:1–4 (https://www.esv.org/Phil.%202%3A1%E2%80%934/)). May we sacrificially devote our possessions and property, even our buildings, toward the benefit of our neighborhoods.

Will our church buildings serve as fortresses, meeting our own needs and protecting us from a hostile world? Or will they serve as kingdom outposts, through which we serve a hungry and hurting world?

A commitment to the latter—especially in densely populated, walkable neighborhoods like mine—may motivate us to pursue historic buildings as strategic opportunities for creative ministry.

Second, we must practice the catholicity of the church.

Churches need to foster friendships and partnerships with other churches in their immediate area, cultivating a deeper sense of ecclesial unity and interdependency (Eph. 4:4–5 (https://www.esv.org/Eph.%204%3A4%E2%80%935/)).

As a fruit of this partnership in the gospel, perhaps those who need to sell their property (for any number of legitimate reasons) will seek to pass on their property to others who will continue the ministry of the gospel. Indeed, I know of some ministries who have done just that.

How can we encourage churches to relate to each other not primarily on a financial basis but on a filial basis, even as they seek to steward their respective needs and assets?

Third, we should seek creative ways to raise capital for the purchase and preservation of historic church buildings.

The financial challenge in cities like Washington, D.C., is this: churches that can fit in these historic church buildings are too small to afford the asking price, and churches that have the resources to pay them can't fit in them.

Generally speaking, city churches can't purchase historic properties on their own. They will need kingdom-minded benefactors who embrace this vision of the gospel in the city and the church's role in promoting the common good. Who will help churches buy or remain in their kingdom outposts?

Fourth, and most importantly, we need to recover a robust theology of place and space that promotes the value of the built environment.

Books like Leonard Hjalmarson's *No Home Like Place: A Christian Theology of Place* (https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0692393617/?tag=thegospcoal-20) and Eric Jacobsen's *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith* (https://www.amazon.com/dp/1587430576/?tag=thegospcoal-20) and *The Space Between: A Christian Engagement with the Built Environment* (https://www.amazon.com/dp/0801039088/?tag=thegospcoal-20) have been particularly helpful in my own recovery of this vital theology.

Without such convictions, churches won't be convinced that buildings matter or are worth investing in. Too often, the church's final word on its physical facilities is summed up in the popular mantra: "the church is not a building." Certainly, it's true that the Christ's *ekklesia* is a *people*, a family of "living stones" being built into a "spiritual house" (1 Pet. 2:5 (https://www.esv.org/1%20Pet.%202%3A5/)) rather than, say, a house of brick and mortar.

> "The architecture and aesthetics of our houses of worship—what we see, hear, feel, and even smell—invariably shape our communion with Christ and one another week after week."

But the Bible also affirms that we are incarnate beings (e.g., Rom. 12:1 (https://www.esv.org/Rom.%2012%3A1/); 1 Cor. 6:19 (https://www.esv.org/1%20Cor.%206%3A19/); cf. Pss. 103:14; 139:13–16 (https://www.esv.org/Pss.%20103%3A14%3B%20139%3A13%E2%80%9316/)). Our faith in Christ and obedience to Christ is always embodied. We have never worshiped our Lord in

anything but physical bodies and anywhere but in a physical space. Thus, the architecture and aesthetics of our houses of worship—what we see, hear, feel, even smell—invariably shape our communion with Christ and one another week after week. Prior generations understood this (https://www.amazon.com/Architecture-Theology-Place-Murray-Rae/dp/1481307630) and invested an enormous amount of thought into the architecture and construction of their sanctuaries.

There's no greater affirmation of our embodied natures and the value of our physical environment than the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So declares the empty tomb: God cares about physical stuff, so much so that all of creation along with our bodies will be redeemed in Christ (Rom. 8:18–25 (https://www.esv.org/Rom.%208%3A18%E2%80%9325/); 1 Cor 6:14 (https://www.esv.org/1%20Cor%206%3A14/); Phil. 3:20–21 (https://www.esv.org/Phil.%203%3A20%E2%80%9321/)). Indeed, some of it—bodies and even buildings—will last forever (1 Cor. 15:58 (https://www.esv.org/1%20Cor.%2015%3A58/); Rev. 21:24–26 (https://www.esv.org/Rev.%2021%3A24%E2%80%9326/)).

If Christ has not been raised, our buildings are in vain, and we are of all mortgage-laden people most to be pitied. But he *is* raised. Let us, then, embrace church buildings for the common good.

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