

A God Above, A God Within

Finding the balance between transcendence and immanence in contemporary churches.

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Research Question:

How have the expressions of sacred space and transcendence in UK contemporary churches changed since the nineteenth-century?

Definitions:

Sacred Space:
noun

A place connected with God or dedicated to a religious purpose.

Transcendence:
noun

An experience beyond the normal and physical level, in response to architectural articulation and expression of The Transcendent – the representation of God as one who is beyond the normal or physical level

Introduction:

Whilst traditional churches are commonly known for their awe-inspiring sense of height and beautifully ornamented walls and ceilings, contemporary churches have controversially been labelled the 'ugliest' and 'emptiest' church buildings. (Doorly, 2007, p.1) Contemporary churches seem to insufficiently express or even deny the transcendence of God. In response, this research seeks to explore the architectural, socio-political and liturgical factors that have influenced this change in transcendental expression, since the nineteenth century. Secondly, this research reviews how people perceive and respond to these articulations of transcendence. It is important to understand this effect on people, in order to design spaces that effectively reflect God's transcendence, express Christian doctrine, and facilitate an encounter with the divine.

Research Findings:

History:

After the Gothic spirit of 'moral architects', modernism took a turn towards immanent expression (Heathcote and Moffatt). Societal philosophies alongside scientific and technological developments began to attack the Christian faith. A secularised society is reflected in architecture, and liturgical reform turns the Church towards the community.

Contemporary Case Studies:

- Churches moved from ornamentation to simple buildings with little to no ornamentation.
- Architectural focus of the church shifted from height to light; God to the community; Transcendence to Immanence
- Many contemporary churches use circular forms, symbolic of looking inward to themselves and the community.
- Flexibility and non-hierarchical space became key in the engagement of the community.



Figure 1: Bishop Edward King Chapel in Context (2019)



Figure 2: Headington Baptist Church Exterior, (2018)



Figure 3: St Barnabas Church (2018)

People's Response to Church Spaces:

The experience of transcendence is personal and varies with each individual. Most people said the spaces felt 'spacious, 'light', 'peaceful' and 'made it easier to connect with God' (personal communications, 2019). The key theme was that the church building facilitated the appropriation of space and worship experience for the individual and community.

Rome

0 AD

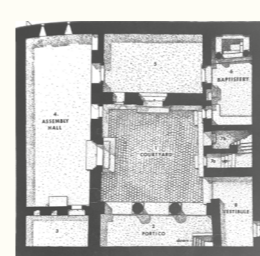


Figure 4: Isometric drawing of the Christian building at Dura-Europas (2008)

400 AD

England

1100 AD

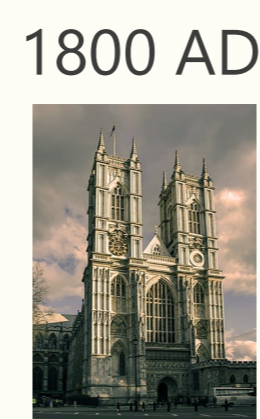


Figure 5: Westminster Abbey West (2019)

1860 AD



Figure 6: St Andrew's Church Roker, south west view (1996)

1900 AD

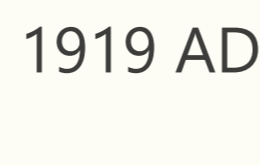


Figure 7: St Paul's Bow Common Exterior, 1960 (2018)

1919 AD

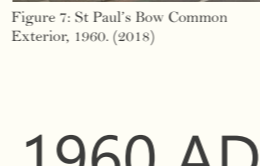


Figure 8: All Saints' Church Guildford Surrey, 1960 (2019)

1960 AD



Figure 9: St Paul's Bow Common Exterior, 1960 (2018)

1962 AD

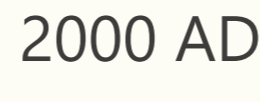


Figure 10: All Saints' Church Guildford Surrey, 1960 (2019)

2000 AD

'Tituli' (House Church)
Home meetings

'Domus Ecclesiae'
(House of Assembly)
Renovated homes to serve religious purpose.

First Churches built during reign of Constantine.

'Domus Dei'
(House of God)

Gothic Period

Gothic Revival

Arts and Crafts
Movement

Modernism
- Secularisation of society

Einstein's Theory of Relativity
Technological Developments
Relativism
Theosophy
Psychoanalysis
Darwin's Theory of Evolution
Introduction of Architectural Space

Post modernism

II Vatican Council Liturgical Reform

Contemporary

Methodology:

- Comprehensive history of church architecture, using various literature.
- Analysis of 3 contemporary churches, in comparison to churches since the 19th century, using five features of Gothic churches: geometry, height, symbolism, light, space.
- Interviews with attendees of church to understand people's perception of sacred space and transcendence. Philosophical literature to aid analysis.

Conclusion:

Observations, interviews and various literature led the study to conclude that contemporary church buildings lack the balance between transcendence and immanence. Whilst society became more secularised, Christian liturgy changed its emphasis from a transcendent God to an immanent one. Focus shifted from A God above to a God within. Focus shifted to the people.

References:

Doorly, M. (2007). No place for God. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Figures:

Figure 1: Stewart, B. (2019). 'Bishop Edward King Chapel in Context'. [image]

Figure 2: Stewart, B. (2018). 'Headington Baptist Church exterior'. [image]

Figure 3: 'St Barnabas Church'. (2018). [image] Available at: http://www.bhbarchitects.co.uk/images/st_barnabas_church_1.jpg [Accessed 25 Oct. 2018].

Figure 4: Kilde, J. (2008) 'Isometric drawing of the Christian building at Dura-Europas.' New York: Oxford University Press, p.25, image.

Figure 5: 'Westminster Abbey West'. (2019). [image] Available at: https://jennymerr.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/410px-westminster_abbey_west.jpg [Accessed 22 Jan. 2019].

Figure 6: Garnham, T. (1996) 'St Andrew's Church Roker, south west view'. London: Phaidon Press Limited, p.26, image.

Figure 7: Mark, L. 'St Paul's Bow Common Exterior, 1960'. (2018). [image] Available at: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/1/19/St_Paul%27s_Bow_Common.jpg/1200px-St_Paul%27s_Bow_Common.jpg [Accessed 26 Oct. 2018].

Figure 8: All Saints' Church Guildford Surrey, 1960. (2019). [image] Available at: https://surreylaneweddingphotography.co.uk/images/surrey-wedding-photographs/all-saints-guildford/Modern_glass_and_brick_1960s_all_saints_church_guildford_surrey.jpg [Accessed 23 Jan. 2019].