

Design for Life

by *John Lee*



Our awareness of space is a basic human characteristic as much as language or moral sense. It is part of the biblical treatment of our humanity, including the Fall and the Redemption. A good design of architectural space affects how we relate to one another and so glorify God by reflecting his image.

An appreciation of love of beauty, our moral judgement, the will to communicate - all are imperatives we interpret as arising from our created state. We assume that the last of those - words and language - hold a particular affection for God, since it is through words that he has selected to communicate his purposes reliably to his people, Spirit-directed, through the Bible.

But there is a complementary created trait which humankind possesses, and which is often overlooked: spatial awareness. It does not have the same standing as language, but it is undoubtedly used by God to order and govern the world, and in particular relationships with and within his chosen people.

What I will argue in this short article is that spatial awareness is a key facet of our created human character. I will say secondly that God uses this awareness of space to communicate key theological truths to us in a powerful way. And finally I will suggest that there are lessons for us to be found in the uses and abuses of space in society which could offer clues to the way we organise our workplace and consider design as a whole.

Who taught Adam to hide?

Adam was made in the image of God. This truth about humankind from Genesis 1 is a

truth that continues to have the widest implications for us. We are used to applying the phrase to all of the good that we see in human nature. This good is evidence of God's imprint on us, even if it is fading or obscured in ourselves and in the people close to us. It is the reason for the dignity that we accord people, distinct from the animals and other created life.

Soon, in Genesis 3, we read of the Fall. Eve succumbed to the lies of the serpent about who God was and what he had said. Adam colluded in the lie, and did not contradict his wife. The freewill that they had both been given, a freewill that enabled them to walk with God and to enjoy unmediated communion with their Creator, was instead directed towards selfish ends. The knowledge of good and evil, and with it an awareness of their own nakedness, followed. Finally, there was guilt. It was an objective guilt, in that they had contradicted God's express wishes. But it was also a feeling of guilt, a guilty conscience, a deep knowledge that they had indeed sinned.

It was this feeling that led Adam to engage in a revealing act. It is an act whose significance is frequently overlooked: hiding.

'And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day,



- ▶▶ and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.’ (Genesis 3:8)

Now hiding is primitive behaviour. By a certain age a child playing with parents will



Hiding

begin to understand the concept. Initially, comically, they will think that hiding is a matter of hiding their seeker from view, covering their eyes, or curling into a ball on the ground. Young children fail to understand the required spatial aspects of ‘hiding’. For hiding involves positioning one’s body in such a way as to conceal it from view, whilst ideally maintaining a view of the seeker. Successful spatial positioning will be asymmetric such that the hider will preserve an advantage over the seeker.

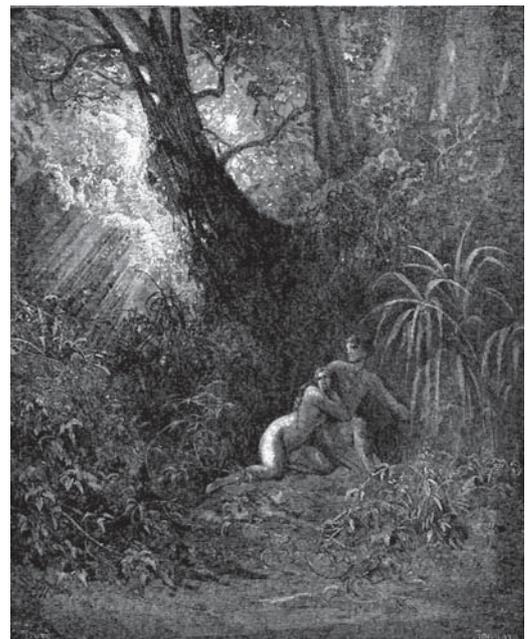
The Genesis account shows that like children Adam and Eve partially understood this, as their hiding seems a pathetic, futile act of naivety, thinking they could conceal themselves from the Living God, the Creator of the Universe. But their partial understanding had Godly origins. We read that before the Fall, Adam was ‘placed’ in the garden, and pre-Eve the idea of ‘aleness’ was apparent. Both are spatial ideas. After the Fall, Adam and Eve’s guilt led to a perception of nakedness. And awareness of their own bodies additionally led to an understanding that they could locate themselves in such a way as to manipulate and shape their relationship with God - to hide.

So, scripture encourages us to see spatial awareness as a created characteristic of humankind, albeit subverted and polluted by the presence of sin until Christ’s return to redeem and restore all things. No-one taught Adam to hide.

The Masterplan

The sweep of the Bible narrative contains everything that we need to know about how we might be saved from the sin to which Adam gave birth. This dreadful nature has been reliably inherited by successive generations such that we cannot save ourselves. We are lost to God because he is holy and we are not. But God’s salvation plan begins with God’s curse of the woman, who we read will give birth to one who will crush the serpent’s head. Satan is defeated by one born of a woman, Jesus Christ, and the chosen people of God will be called to become men and women of faith in Christ, and dwell with God for eternity.

Along the way are events and ideas which depend on God’s people encountering and understanding what we might characterise as ▶▶



*Illustration for John Milton’s Paradise Lost
 “And from his presence hid themselves among
 The thickest Trees, both Man and Wife...” (Bk X, L 100)
 Gustave Doré, c.1866.*

▶▶ elemental spatial ideas - 'holiness', 'exodus', 'promised land', 'gathering', 'identity', 'refuge' and so on. Consider one of those - holiness, for example - and we quickly see that integral to it is the idea of separation, and that this depends on understanding space. It is an idea which is readily understood from everyday human experience, but which carries within it deep, rich theological truth. Appreciating relationships in space becomes key to understanding God's purposes as communicated in the Bible.

In time, God relates how Moses is to build his dwelling place with Israel through the minutely detailed specification of the latter chapters of Exodus. The instructions for the tabernacle literally enshrine a series of relationships between spaces, the sacred objects set within them, and the people associated with those spaces and objects. God prescribes to Moses the way that his chosen people are to relate to him. And it is arguably



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communicated in a way more powerful even than language, since it makes eternal truths concrete, dictating the places that the physical bodies of the people may or may not go.

The tabernacle, then, is the physical, tangible means by which an unutterably holy God was able to dwell among His chosen but sinful people. And the way this is engineered is through space, organised like the syntax of a sentence to communicate a highly specific meaning.



Coventry Cathedral

"a series of spaces or identifiable volumes arranged along a clear axis."

So it is perhaps unsurprising to observe that the layout of the English parish church follows a similar formal model. Traditionally you will recall, it has a series of spaces or identifiable volumes arranged along a clear axis. This organisation builds formality by increasing the apparent distance from the start of movement along the axis to its termination. It does this by 'threading' a series of spaces like beads onto the axis, whilst maintaining a continuous line of sight from one end to its termination. The altar or communion table is set at the end of this axis, and approached on a straight line from the street. On the way we might encounter any or all of the following in order: lychgate, path, steps, porch, west door, vestibule, narthex, nave, chancel, apse. By the end of this walk we are left in no doubt as to where the focus of the building lies, and for some, our role within the events within. Alternatives to this plan type in Hagia Sophia, the Greek Cross plan, and latterly Liverpool's Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King have challenged this, but they remain exceptions to the general rule.

So whilst the origins of the parish church layout can be traced back to the tabernacle and sacrificial ceremonies, the writer to the Hebrews warns against clinging to them too tightly, reminding us that 'they serve as a copy and a shadow of the heavenly things'. The layout and arrangement is indicative of a



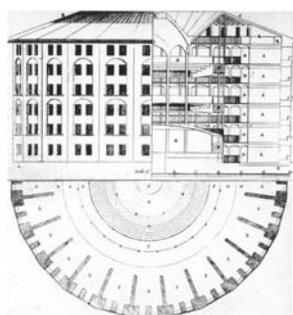
►► higher, eternal truth where Christ is our one Mediator, the Great High Priest, and God dwelling inwardly with his people the church. In the dense symbolism of Revelation we repeatedly see God communicating truths in spatial terms about His sovereignty and majesty and something of the nature of our eternal relationship with Christ. There is hardly a passage of the book which does not show heavenly participants arranged and arrayed to achieve this purpose.

Reordering our sacred spaces for modern purposes can balance out inappropriate messages about the faith that we hold by relocating people and ministers to positions which support the liturgy and style of worship. We should be left in no doubt that they will continue to be 'read' by people in a predictable syntactic manner which needs to be carefully designed. But the great news for Christians is that we need no longer copy a heavenly model to have God dwell among us.

Grand Designs

Today our innate understanding of space is now more frequently encountered when we are in a secular setting. Adapting this trait, an awareness of our physical bodies in space has led to its application for all kinds of other spaces.

In architecture it is possible to discern the re-purposing of this universal human recognition of the organisation of space for modern means. In the 19th century the social reformer Jeremy Bentham evolved the idea of the 'panopticon'. This was an arrangement of space within a building which allowed one person - a prison guard - to survey visually many hundreds of people from a single



Panopticon

vantage point. It was an extreme example of an asymmetric relationship between 'surveyed' and 'surveyor' for the purpose of order and security. A similar intent lay behind the 'cannon shot' boulevards driven through Paris by Haussmann as an instrument of dictatorship and civil oppression. Walking these grand thoroughfares simultaneously put the people on show, and allowed troops to move quickly through the city to quell disturbance.



'Cannon shot' boulevard in Paris

It is possible to see how we encounter these spatial universals even at the most mundane level. When we arrive early to meet someone for coffee, we sit ourselves where we can see the entrances to the cafe, so that we don't inadvertently miss our guest. Alternatively, arriving at a beach or a park, where there is little 'structure' to the space, we nevertheless try to tune into minute perturbations in the space set up by people already there, or the physical features of trees and benches. Thus optimised with respect to the other occupants of the open space, we sit ourselves a 'comfortable' or 'polite' distance from them. Or when we leave our children while they play, we settle in an optimum location where we can balance watching them against what we are engaged in.

It is worth highlighting that a failure to understand the relationship between people and space can lead to disastrous consequences. Twentieth century experiments in urban planning such as high rise system-built housing failed because the technocratic proponents lacked empathy for the social structures of those they were relocating from traditional street patterns. A high-rise block



- ▶▶ can and does work very well for more affluent members of society, but for those who lack mobility and money it can become a prison.



A high-rise block can become a prison

It is only through understanding the value of human lives, the nature of sin, and our identity and purpose under God that we can begin to make spaces which honour him. The failures of modern architecture were principally failures at the human level as alternative priorities relegated space to an incidental role. In other words, it was easy to see how adopting prefabricated building methods could make construction quicker and cheaper for the masses, but much harder to see how the organisation of space could have the power to ruin lives.

A key conclusion must be that the human being and the social relationships in family, community and beyond must be incorporated and accurately 'mapped onto' the spaces they will inhabit. Only in this way will everyday spaces properly honour God by giving honour to those made in His image.

Space at Work

It should be apparent that our innate appreciation of space will have an impact in a working setting. It could well be that the way people are organised in your workspace inadvertently communicates inappropriate messages to the people. Whilst not religious in content, these arrangements nevertheless say things important to God about the

individual and the collective whole. So how might we apply these observations on our created character to our own lives, to the people and their physical location within our working environment?

Spatial awareness informs our activity in all social spheres, and so it is indeed possible to look at our workplaces to see whether the arrangement of space is appropriate. In other words, we ought to be looking at what message the arrangement of people in rooms is giving to our employees and colleagues, or to visitors. Whilst the significance of this arrangement is less obvious than within a church, it nevertheless assumes an everyday importance, and can dramatically affect how we relate to one another and so glorify God by reflecting his image.

An example: in thinking about your boss or senior manager, it is highly likely that, if they do not have their own separate office, they are located 'deep' within an open plan space, furthest away from the entrance to the space. There may be practical reasons why this is the case, such as privacy and quiet. But in much the same way as the example of the church chancel, that 'depth' can send a message that the person is important, separate and elevated above their co-workers. In



A private office can send a message that the person is important, separate and elevated above their co-workers

addition, because the person is located away from the regular day-to-day activity of the business - the shop floor, as it were - they are out of touch with current work events, and so compensatory behaviour is needed. Calling



▶▶ a meeting is a way of finding out what is going on and directing operations periodically, but it can also inadvertently add further mystique and elevation to the position of the person directing organisation.

New ways of organising the workplace answer the practical needs of the boss or the manager, whilst making them a part of the organic life of the workplace. Investigations in the 1980s which looked at research laboratory layouts showed that the layout could be correlated with numbers of scientific breakthroughs. It is clear then that certain



An open plan office

“Shaping the office as a kind of urban environment where people are enabled to meet accidentally, exchange ideas, update one another, and move on”

types of creative outcome cannot be compensated by formal events such as meetings or seminars. Shaping the office as a kind of urban environment where people are enabled to meet accidentally, exchange ideas, update one another, and move on - a kind of ‘market square’ - is just one of a range of new ways of organising the workplace to generate creative interaction.

The root questions for any organisation are around ‘what kind of company do I want to create?’, ‘what kind of culture is best for us?’ and ‘how do I want our people to feel and behave?’. These are not questions answered by furniture, decoration or logos. They will be answered by understanding the vision and direction of the company, the roles within it, and the social structure which will be formed. Only then will the appropriate spatial configuration be derived.

In terms of style, older modes of expression can be inappropriately restricting, expensive, technically weak, or just old-fashioned. At the start of the last century, Modernism in architecture was only just taking shape, probing a new aesthetic through bold ideologies which explicitly severed links with the past. Modern architecture failed when it became formally indulgent and self-serving, forgetting the human being in the rush to create ‘Architecture’. Nevertheless new architectural design offers possibilities with a unrivalled expressive potential. One need only consider the liberating use of glass in modern architecture to appreciate the benefit of technical advances on our comfort and delight. And according to scientific orthodoxy, this century will see architecture facing unprecedented technical challenges associated with climate change. Some of the most compelling current aesthetic strands take a humane modernism and combine it with a love of old materials, locally-sourced and assembled, low energy and low impact. For Christians, the challenge is to remember the person, whether they be making, using or owning the building. So both aesthetics and space share this same imperative.

At its best, focusing on space should allow people implicitly to understand their roles and position, but also allow them freedom within a strong structure to express themselves and innovate. And that is because the spatial layout is tapping into a deep God-given knowledge of how space works. Attending to this at every level of design - whether professional or informal - will require us rigorously and consistently to remember our origins as being made in the image of God. A desire for dignity will flow from a theological conviction that people matter because they matter to God and share His characteristics.

We know that all things will be redeemed one day. And we know that the experience of dwelling on earth will serve us for eternity in differing ways. Until our walk with God in heaven’s spaces becomes a reality, organising our earthly spaces for the good of people is worth striving to achieve. ■

John Lee is an architect with his own practice, Arca, based in Central Manchester, as well as working as a part-time Lecturer in Architecture at Manchester School of Architecture at MMU. He is married with two grown-up children, and worships at St John’s Knutsford in Cheshire.