

Grounded: in the Body in Time & Place, in Scripture

# Grounded yet Wandering: Church Architecture, Space, and Place

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## Meet the author

Elizabeth Culhane is a tutor at Ridley College and a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Queensland. Her dissertation pioneers a fresh approach to challenges to Christian notions of eternity. Her prizewinning research has been sought out in Australia and internationally in high-quality refereed journal articles and book chapters.

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## Chapter overview

Imagine if church buildings suddenly ceased to exist. Apart from the loss of a venue for meeting and hospitality, would anything else of value be lost? The answer, according to much contemporary protestant thought, is a resolute “no.”

In this chapter, Elizabeth Culhane extends existing understandings of the church as a wandering, boundless, invisible community that is performed. She invites readers to envisage the church as equally an entity grounded in material reality and time. The church is part of a long historical trajectory of God realizing God’s objectives in this: gathering together a people and grounding them in a place. In this elaboration of an argument of William Dyrness, Culhane furnishes a springboard to launch her investigation of church architecture and its impact on believers and unbelievers. This illustrates that church architecture conveys theological meaning and can orientate human beings toward their maker..

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## General Study Questions

### Question 1

Have you ever had an experience of the presence of God similar to that described at the beginning of the chapter?

### Question 2

When considering a theological investigation of the friends’ experiences of encountering God in a church building, not much help is found in recent western Protestant discourse. What do you think has contributed to this lack of investigation?

### Question 3

The chapter refers to a notion articulated by Graham Ward that “practicing belief” generates the space of the church (p. 236). What does this mean? Is this a vision of the church that you are familiar with? You may like to consider Matthew 18:20; Hebrews 10:24–25.

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#### Question 4

Commenting on the practices of Christians meeting together in worship, William Dyrness says that “God’s Trinitarian purposes necessarily involve a social shape and a historical engagement” (p. 236). Culhane extends his argument to God’s work across salvation history in particular material, visible, and public ways. What are some examples from the Old Testament of God’s objectives being expressed in a) particular communities, b) particular places, and c) particular forms; i.e., material objects?

#### Question 5

Despite the perceived neutrality of secular forms of architecture, what are some of the worldly values that they may cultivate or reinforce (for example, in a shopping center or a church complex that resembles a shopping center)?

#### Question 6

Why might the seeming neutrality of secular forms be attractive to church architects? What might they be hoping to achieve by avoiding any distinctive religious or political imagery?

#### Question 7

The chapter gives an example of someone who knows a lot about God yet desires to constantly shop. How might a powerful encounter with symbols of theological truths (see p. 242) and with God (e.g., p. 235) be part of bringing about transformation?

#### Question 8

The chapter examines the potential for architecture to convey theological meaning in ways that go beyond normal human reason. Frank Burch Brown says that such meaning is unique to aesthetic experience. If not, we would simply discard Bach or Mozart once their theological meaning was known. Consider your experiences with music, visual art, performance, taste, or any other sensory experiences. Can you describe a profound aesthetic experience that you have had that shaped your understanding of things or made you more aware of truths about God?

#### Question 9

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The chapter explores aesthetics in relation to experiences of beauty. There is also much art created without an intention of beauty that explores other often confronting themes. Can such art be a site for Christian aesthetic experience? Why or why not?

### **Question 10**

Given the multiplicity of theological symbols, what should be taken into account when making decisions about church design?

### **Question 11**

Symbols of created realities can *impact* human beings of any or no theological understanding. There are also many symbols arising from scripture and church history that have come to be associated with *specific* theological meanings such as the eight-pointed star at St Paul's Cathedral. What opportunities could churches take up to explain the rich history and meaning of symbols throughout scripture and church history?

## **Academic Questions**

### **Question 1**

How have you previously theorized an experience of the presence of God like that described at the beginning of the chapter?

### **Question 2**

When considering a theological investigation of the experiences of encountering God in a church building, little assistance is offered by recent western Protestant discourse. To what extent is this the specter of reformation iconoclasm? What other influences might be at play?

### **Question 3**

Why might the perceived neutrality of secular forms be attractive to church architects? What might they be hoping to achieve by avoiding any distinctive religious or political imagery?

### **Question 4**

The chapter explores theoretical perspectives on architecture as conveying theological meaning that exceeds normal human reason. Frank Burch Brown says that such meaning is unique to aesthetic experience. If not, we would simply discard Bach or Mozart once their theological meaning was

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known. Consider experiences with music, visual art, performance, taste, or any other sensory experiences. What scriptural texts (e.g., Psalm 19) and perspectives elaborate profound aesthetic experience that shapes theological understanding or awareness of truths about God?

### **Question 5**

The chapter investigates aesthetics in relation to experiences of beauty. There is also much art created without an intention of beauty that explores other often confronting themes. Can such art be a locus for Christian aesthetic experience? Why or why not?

### **Question 6**

Symbols of created realities carry a universal affective potential independent of theological understanding. There are also many symbols and material forms arising from scripture and church history that have come to be associated with specific theological meanings such as the eight-pointed star at St Paul's Cathedral. Given the multiplicity of theological symbols and material forms, what principles might guide decisions about church architecture and fittings? And, regardless of decisions made, what opportunities could churches take up to explain the rich history and meaning of symbols throughout scripture and church history?