DESIGNING BUILDINGS WITHIN A SOCIAL IMAGINARY OF JOINING

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THREE PAIRS OF SPACES

Two streets

One Sunday afternoon in 2017 I was winding down my day and preparing for the upcoming week at school. At the time I was working as a high school teacher in the suburbs of Austin, Texas and living in East Austin, in a house I had purchased for myself and my two teenage daughters a few years earlier. They were not home but would be soon. All was quiet and calm.

Then I heard the sound of steel hitting steel outside. It had been a clear, sunny day but I found myself hoping a storm had blown in and the sound had been thunder. At least that would not put any demands on my time and energy. I looked through the blinds and saw that the day was still clear. Along the street next to my house, though, two cars were smashed together and were partially on the sidewalk.

I ran out and was grateful to find both drivers standing safely outside their cars. I called 911 and then proceeded to let each of them in turn vent their anger about the situation with me rather than with each other. They were each convinced the other was at fault. One accused the other driver of turning left across oncoming traffic without looking. The other driver was convinced that the first had been speeding. My assumption was that they were both right. I listened and nodded empathetically until people who could really help arrived.

Everyone in the neighborhood knew that this residential street was plagued with drivers using it as a quick shortcut to their destinations. It is a broad street without stop signs or traffic lights, and the geometry of the major streets around it force drivers into circuitous paths to popular areas. The neighborhood group had repeatedly asked the city for traffic calming interventions on the street — speed bumps, medians, etc. — to improve neighborhood safety. The studies the city performed only looked at the quantity of traffic, not the velocity, and determined that traffic calming was not needed.

A similar street in the neighborhood just to the west had extensive traffic calming interventions. We were aware of what could be done, and we were aware of the demographic differences between the neighborhood to the east and the neighborhood to the west. As it is in most of Austin, western areas are populated predominantly by wealthy white people and areas east are populated predominantly by Black and Latino people who have fewer financial resources. When I moved to the eastern neighborhood its neglect by the city was palpable in many ways beyond the traffic calming inequities. The physical forms of the neighborhood were integrally linked to the imaginations of the people who shared life on these patches of land. The residents had an abiding sense that they did not get the care and resources that other neighborhoods got.

Two Meeting Places

I knew about the efforts to mobilize the city towards traffic calming because a few years earlier I had attended several meetings of the neighborhood group in the fellowship hall of the Missionary Baptist Church just a quarter of a mile from my house along the same street where the wreck had happened. The fellowship hall had worn VCT flooring and water-stained acoustic ceiling tiles and was lit by exposed fluorescent tube lighting. The coldness of the space ran counterpoint to the warmth of the small, faithful group of neighborhood residents who met there month after month, year after year, trying to make the land they inhabited a little more hospitable for themselves and their neighbors.

I had watched as the group met repeatedly with a developer putatively seeking the group’s input and support for an enormous apartment complex they planned to develop nearby. The neighborhood group asked the developer to set aside a small amount of retail space that would serve the needs of the neighborhood and for a traffic light that would allow children in the complex to get to the local elementary school safely. The developer nodded and smiled then built the complex with no concessions to the neighbors.

Around the same time a group of newer neighborhood residents used the Next Door app to schedule a Saturday morning hangout at a beloved local doughnut shop to discuss ways to improve the neighborhood. They discussed wanting coffee shops and restaurants with play areas for children. It was a friendly and positive meeting in a grassy area outside the doughnut shop, interrupted frequently with the antics of the children and dogs many had brought along.

As a middle-aged man I was a bit older than the median age of the meeting participants and as a white man I was in the majority in the meeting. At the church fellowship hall I was one of the younger attendees and was in the minority racially.

After the doughnut shop meeting had been going for a while I spoke up and mentioned that the long-running neighborhood group had similar concerns to theirs and that we might consider joining their work. I don’t remember if I used the word “gentrifiers” but I did mention that a group of white people coming into a neighborhood and working to make changes on their own behalf over and against their neighbors of color was problematic.

I thought I had worded my comments in a gentle way that would invite further conversation, but it had the opposite effect. No one openly protested, but the meeting ended almost immediately afterwards and the group never met again. I saw none of the participants at future meetings of the official neighborhood group.

To this day I wonder if I could have navigated the interaction better, in a way that would have been effective at joining the two groups in a healthy and collaborative way. That was the hope that I had when I moved into the neighborhood, but it never materialized. The church fellowship hall and the grass outside the doughnut shop, though only two blocks from each other, remained miles apart.

Two Church Entrances

When I moved into the neighborhood I already had commitments at a church a few miles away. My experience with the neighborhood group, though, made me want to get to know the church community that hosted it. They had a service that was early enough that I could participate in the services of both churches on the same Sunday morning. So I got up and got ready early, packed up my bible and my sketchbook in my bookbag, and walked to the church.

As a pedestrian in a place designed for cars, I walked through the parking lot to the porte cochere where a black man was standing to greet people as they arrived. We exchanged warm good mornings and then I proceeded toward the entry door. He stopped me, apologetically telling me he needed to check my bookbag. My heart broke as he asked.

I was a white man entering a black church just months after a white man had entered a black church in South Carolina then shot and killed nine people. It made sense that this church had instituted bag checks. It made sense that my bag in particular needed to be checked. Yet it was also clear that this man wanted nothing more than to welcome me warmly as a guest and that he hated the ritual we needed to perform.

Over the following year I visited the church many times and was often the only white person there. Every time I went people greeted me warmly, welcoming me into their vibrant time of worship. I frequently wore my brown corduroy sports coat, the only one I had, to keep from feeling underdressed. With my attire, glasses, and graying beard, they began calling me “professor,” though I was not one at the time. I had also abandoned the bookbag and carried my bible and sketchbook openly, entering a side door to avoid the memory of my first entrance into the church.

In these narratives we have three pairs of spaces:

- A dangerous street in one neighborhood and a safe one in a nearby neighborhood with traffic calming devices.
- A church fellowship hall hosting an older and diverse long-abiding neighborhood group and a lawn outside a doughnut shop with a new and short-lived group of young, white newcomers to the same neighborhood.
- An entrance into a black church with bag searches and the entrance into any white church in the same city that Sunday morning where greetings were exchanged without precautions against deadly violence.

Each of the spaces has its own physicality, its own formal and spatial configuration and its own tectonics. Each has specific, defined uses and meets the needs of its inhabitants to varying degrees. None are exemplars of architecture or urban design that would warrant close analysis here. These are ordinary spaces in a contemporary American city.

Each of the spaces is also connected to one or more groups of people, those who would call the space “our space.” Groups of people share the spaces as they live out their lives together. These spaces each have an important social dimension.

This essay will explore the connections between the social dimension and the physical configuration of the built environment from the perspective of design. In his essay “The Developed Surface: An Enquiry into the Brief Life of an Eighteenth Century Drawing Technique,” architectural theorist and historian Robin Evans wrote of his goal “. . . to treat the formal, spatial and visible on the one hand, and the social on the other, as involved in exchanges that *do not entail the destruction or domination of the one by the other*.”[1] (italics in the original)

The social realm and physical space can be a challenge to hold tightly together as we analyze buildings. They can be even more challenging to hold together in the process of designing new spaces. If we want to design buildings that are relevant to the daily lives of people lived out among others we need to find ways to think differently about the social realm and physical spaces, to conceptualize and articulate their relationship in ways that bridge the divide. Philosopher Hannah Arendt described her own goal in her writing as “. . . nothing more than to think what we are doing.”[2] Thinking as designers should function toward this same end.

This essay will posit that if we turn our attention to the shared images we use to conceptualize the relationships between ourselves and others we can begin to find links between the social realm and the physical spaces we inhabit. Then we can productively explore how architectural design decisions can affect our shared images for the better.

SOCIAL IMAGINARIES AND THE RACIALIZED IMAGINATION

Social Imaginaries in Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*

In this effort to link the social realm to physical space in architectural design, we will set buildings aside for the moment to explore the spatial dynamics of interpersonal life. The word “social” can migrate quickly from denoting small scale interactions between people to descriptions of large scale systems that characterize our life in common in complex groups. We may use it to describe our “social life” or our “social welfare,” a “church social” or “social justice.” In order to keep our purview at the scale of buildings, I will be using the first definition of the social as small scale interactions, and I will be using it interchangeably with words like “shared” and “interpersonal” to keep our focus at that scale.

It is in this sense that Charles Taylor uses the term when he describes “social imaginaries” in his two books, *Modern Social Imaginaries* from 2003 and *A Secular Age* from 2007. Taylor pairs “social” with “imaginaries” to describe the mental pictures we hold of the relationships between ourselves and others.

In Taylor’s usage of the phrase, “social imaginaries” are common understandings of groups of people through which they conceptualize their life with one another. Built up in images, stories, and legends rather than carefully articulated concepts, social imaginaries set the normal expectations we have of one another and form the background of our interactions.

Our social imaginaries are not exclusively mental. Our everyday practices are informed by our images of ourselves in relation to one another and, in turn, our practices shape these images. Our thinking and our performance of our social imaginaries are reciprocal. One modern social imaginary Taylor discusses, for instance, is our view of ourselves as capable of self-governing without reference to anything transcendent outside ourselves. This idea and the practice of voting collaborate to build and develop this shared imagination of ourselves. We can easily forget the historical novelty of this idea as we narrate and practice it among one another.

Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith discusses Taylor's concept of social imaginaries in *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Smith finds the concept useful as a challenge to "worldview" thinking. The concept of worldview, common in Western Christian discussions of the relationship between ideas and faith, lacks an embodied dimension. It accepts the Cartesian image of humans as disembodied thinkers, removing from view the way our lives lived out in bodies among one another forms who we are and how we think, both for ill and for good.

Because social imaginaries are so deeply embedded in our thoughts and practices it can be difficult to step outside of them. Cognitively challenging them is insufficient if we want to interact through alternative imaginaries. But it is an important starting point.

The Racialized Imagination in Willie James Jennings' *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*

As we edge closer to architecture I want to explore a particular modern social imaginary that has worked to keep our images of ourselves and others far away from the spaces we inhabit together.

Christian theologian Willie James Jennings describes a modern social imaginary unmentioned by Charles Taylor. In *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, Jennings argues ". . . that Christianity in the Western world lives and moves within a diseased social imagination." and that ". . . Christian theology now operates inside this diseased social imagination without the ability to discern how its intellectual and pedagogical performances reflect and fuel the problem, further crippling the communities it serves."[3]

Before I go on to describe the diseased social imagination Jennings alerts us to, I want to comment on the word "imagination." Jennings typically uses the word "imagination" whereas Taylor uses the word "imaginary," but both of them describe a complex network of mental images and practices through which we operate in our lives together. These are distinct from a version of "imagination" that we often use to describe forward-looking inventiveness.

As designers we create complex pictures in our minds of spaces and objects that do not yet exist. An aptitude for and love of this process often leads us into the field. In our education and practice we constantly hone our ability to create these mental pictures with greater depth and complexity and with a closer approximation of the final product of our designs. We build things in our own *imagination* before they are physically built in our shared world.

We need to discuss both of these types of imagination. For the sake of clarity, I will use Taylor's word "imaginary" to describe the first and "imagination" to describe the second. This will, at times, lead me to alter Jennings' language, which I regret.

Taylor and Jennings both historicize social imaginaries. Their works are archaeologies for how things arrived at their current state. Both include changes in Christian thought and practice over the last half millennium in their historical narratives. When Taylor describes practices, he tends to do so by describing typical activities which characterize different eras. Jennings, however, hones in on specific historical moments when Christian theologians altered the substance of their theology to respond to and in turn feed a new social imaginary, what Jennings calls a "racialized imagination."[4] He describes the way European and American Christians have imagined themselves and their place in the world through the centuries of colonialism and the development of a racialized view of the world.

Jennings' narration includes, for example, a moment in 1444 as 235 enslaved Africans arrived at a port in Lagos to be shipped to Portugal. He describes a time in 1572 as a Spanish missionary priest theologically justified the colonial extraction of resources from Lima, Peru. He takes us to the southern tip of Africa in 1854 when an Anglican bishop arrived to translate the Bible into local languages. During these and other moments, theological minds were present and active, subtly modifying their articulation of the content of the Christian faith to make unjust actions seem reasonable and proper.

This modern social imaginary of race that Jennings describes is different from Taylor's three modern social imaginaries: the economy as objectified reality, the public sphere, and the sovereign people. I will not be articulating here any position on how the four relate, but I will posit that Jennings' account brings into question why Taylor's narration of the rise of secularism in modernity does not include a robust accounting of the modern invention of race.[5]

Critically for our purposes, the social imaginary of race that Jennings describes is intrinsically spatial. As our mental images are built up through our thoughts and practices, they interact with the spaces we occupy. As Jennings writes:

> The spatial dimension [of segregationist mentalities] must be seen not primarily as a product of behavior (that is, peoples isolate themselves along cultural difference), but as the dual operation of the way the world is imagined and the way social worlds constitute the imagination.[6]

It is this spatial imaginary that provided the mental infrastructure for Western Christians to displace themselves from their own land and move into the lands of others, oppressing the inhabitants and extracting their resources for economic gain.

It is an imaginary that was alive and well at a smaller scale in the neighborhood I inhabited in Austin. As the city devised testing structures to justify an inequitable distribution of resources between neighborhoods, as white people moved into a neighborhood historically occupied by people of color and attempted to bend the goods and services to their interests over those of their neighbors, as black congregations lived within the specter of a white man entering their space and killing them, people interacted in real physical spaces through a racialized imaginary.

Jennings describes an important theological move that the theologians of colonialism made. As Gentile Christians, they extracted Christianity from Israel. They rejected their position as those who had been grafted into God's work of blessing all the nations through God's people, expanding outward from the land where God's work began. As Jennings describes their theology:

> God's history is missing — no Israel, no Jesus, no apostles, no material struggle, no divine walking through time and indeed space, real space. Such a walking, such an entrance would be messy, carrying forward Israel's election and carrying forward many peoples, places, voices, ways of life bound to the Jewish Jesus, always announcing that God is with us.[7]

Consequently, their theologies were alternately fed by and supported spatial injustices:

> Rather than a way of life that illumines the God of Israel as the reality between land and peoples, colonialism established ways of life that drove an abiding wedge between the land and peoples.[8]

This social imaginary of race, which we inhabit as modern people and in which our theology has been built as Western Christians, drives a wedge between ourselves and our neighbors here and now. It is the social imaginary in which the contemporary practice of architecture has been built.

DESIGNING TOWARD A SOCIAL IMAGINARY OF JOINING

An Alternative Social Imaginary

Like any social imaginary, stepping outside of it is difficult. We cannot just change our thinking, we need to change our practices, the performances in our lives that continually construct and maintain our mental images.

If we find the social imaginaries we inhabit problematic, modern social imaginaries themselves would lead us to seek a neutral space outside imaginaries, freed from our own situated and embodied selves. We could imagine ourselves outside of the particular histories, places, and interactions that form us and inside an objective or scientific impersonal mental space.

As we have seen, the idea that this placeless position exists and is available to us is itself among the most problematic aspects of modern social imaginaries. If we want to live differently among one another we need to begin the challenging work of rebuilding the shared mental images we have of our relationships to one another in both thought and practice. We can begin by describing the alternative social imaginary that Christian faithfulness has to offer.

Both Charles Taylor and Willie James Jennings describe a significant gap between the social imaginary of Christianity as such and the social imaginary of Christianity in the modern age, which has both succumbed to and supported modern social imaginaries. Though they speak from different Christian traditions – Taylor is a practicing Roman Catholic and Jennings is an ordained Baptist minister – their articulation of what they see as an orthodox Christian social imaginary is remarkably similar.

Taylor writes:

> At the heart of orthodox Christianity, seen in terms of communion, is the coming of God through Christ into a personal relation with disciples, and beyond them others, eventually ramifying through the church to humanity as a whole. . . . The lifeblood of this new relation is agape, which can't ever be understood simply in terms of a set of rules, but rather as the extension of a certain kind of relation, spreading out in a network.[9]

Jennings also expresses Christianity as communion, tying it more directly to place:

> The space of communion is always ready to appear where the people of God reach down to join the land and reach out to join those around them, their near and distant neighbors. This joining involves first a radical remembering of the place, a discerning of the histories and stories of those for whom that land was the facilitator of their identity. . .
>
> This joining also involves entering into the lives of peoples to build actual life together, lives enfolded and kinship networks established through the worship of and service to the God of Israel in Jesus Christ. Such kinship networks would, of necessity, come into contention with the permeation of class and economic stratification of land into private property. The space of communion draws into itself the social divisions enacted by and facilitated through that stratification in order to overcome them.[10]

In both descriptions we get a sense of communion, an intense relationality between God's people, that breaks down existing divisions. Unlike people join together in love and care for one another in the specific places and contexts in which they find themselves. As they build this alternative kind of life together this new network spreads into new places, often coming into conflict with existing ways of relating across difference. As God reaches down to join with us God leads us toward a radically alternative way of joining with one another.

Of course, as is clear from both texts and as Taylor articulates it, ". . . the church lamentably and spectacularly fails to live up to this model, but this is the kind of society it is meant to be."[11]

Inhabiting this alternative way of life together requires us to conceptualize and practice an image of ourselves as with and for others, living in self-giving care across and through our differences. As we love our neighbors we inhabit a *social imaginary of joining*.

Within a social imaginary of joining we always remember that we come from somewhere, from a network of people with a history tied to land. When we enter into the space of others we enter as guests, honoring their history, their story, their connection to the place they inhabit. For those of us who are Gentile Christians we remember that the first step of connecting to this new kind of kinship was being included: We were invited in as guests into the life and story of another people who were, in turn, invited in as guests into the presence and work of God.

Architecture and Social Practices

In her 1992 essay, “The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism,” architectural historian Beatriz Colomina describes the design of gendered spaces in the single family residences of Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier. Her discussion of the homes of Adolf Loos in particular provides clues for what designing from within a social imaginary of joining might look like.

In the homes Colomina analyzes, primarily the Müller House and the Moller House, Loos creates spaces designated as separate rooms for men and for women. Loos developed a spatial sensibility known as *raumplan*, an arrangement of interior spaces characterized by interlocking volumes. Each room has its own characteristics – floor levels, ceiling heights, views – yet rather than being divided by more conventional doors and hallways, the rooms are arranged in a three dimensional composition with each volume interacting with adjacent volumes.

The rooms for women and for men in these houses are arranged to carefully control views across interior spaces and to the outside. Built-in furniture and obscured windows add to the sense of control. In her analysis of these houses, Colomina takes advantage of the specificity in the design of the spaces to analyze the gendered power relations embedded in the design. Loos used the analogy of the theater box in his own description of his designs, and Colomina exploits this image to critique the way Loos manipulates how male and female bodies are able to see and be seen as they occupy the spaces. “Domestic voyeurism” as a concept vividly connects the spatial design of the homes with the imagined practices of daily life within them.

Colomina’s analysis is instructive in a number of ways. First, when people are together in built space, the building affects how people can see others and be seen by others. This is more than simply public and private spaces. Built space can create hierarchies and power dynamics by the way it reveals and conceals bodies.

Second, built spaces become connected to particular social relationships as they become designated and designed for different people. In each of the two Adolf Loos houses, the library is designed for men, connected in their articulations to the office and the club. They are set apart as quiet spaces, removed from the bustle of domestic life. As Colomina explains,

> The raised alcove of the Moller House and the *Zimmer der Dames* of the Müller house . . . not only overlook the social spaces, but are exactly positioned at the end of the sequence, on the threshold of the private, the secret, the upper rooms where sexuality is hidden away. At the intersection of the visible and the invisible, women are placed as guardians of the unspeakable.[12]

Third, Colomina’s analysis demonstrates that designing spaces to mark and provide meaning to social relationships is not ethically neutral. To the extent that this dimension is taken into account in a design, it will be built on a particular model for life together, a particular social imaginary. And that model may be unjust. In this case, the space is built for the practice of men looking at women not as fully human equals, but reduced to bodies as objects of desire.

Ignoring this dimension of architecture will not excuse us from responsibility for it. We need to bring it to our consciousness and think carefully about the relationships we are inscribing into built space. Living within a social imaginary that accepts and encourages the objectification of women's bodies should be resisted, especially if we choose to follow the one who has said that ". . . everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."[13]

Fourth and finally, the meaning of these spaces becomes activated as they are lived. In the way Colomina describes the spaces, we need to visualize people living in the spaces. They perform the interactions of their daily lives then the meaning they ascribe to those actions connects to the spaces they inhabit.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, in his book *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art*, refers to this as the "social practice meaning" of a work of art.[14] While much of art in modernity is meant to be engaged within the practice of disengaged aesthetic attention, architecture is rarely the object of this kind of attention. Instead it derives its meaning while people engage in other social practices – in the case of the Loos houses, the social practices that make up the domestic lives of the women and men who occupy them.

Which leads us back to the entrance of the church in East Austin, where I was both welcomed as a guest and had my bag checked to screen for weapons.

The greeter and I were inside a porte cochere designed to provide shelter from the rain or from the intense Texas summer sun. It created a space that was outdoors while being preliminarily inside the space of the church. The church entrance was undramatic: a curb cut from the drive to the sidewalk for accessibility, double glass doors leading to a hallway with offices then into a gymnasium that functioned as a temporary church sanctuary. No grand steps led up to it and it did not lead to a vaulted space with extraordinary light.

This entry became the space of our encounter. I entered as a newcomer, wondering what the experience would be like, with a heightened awareness of my differences from other congregants. The greeter saw me and my differences and made clear through verbal and nonverbal means that I was indeed welcome. Then the requisite bag check interrupted the process.

The modest design of this entrance provided the stage of our interpersonal encounter. This encounter became what philosopher Hannah Arendt called the "space of appearance," "the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly."[15] Our words and our actions created a new set of relationships. We operated in the roles our social settings placed us in, and we revealed new things about ourselves to one another. Those social settings inscribed meaning and value to our very bodies, which we could reinforce or counteract through our actions.

The spatial configuration marked this encounter as ordinary. The design of church entrances have available to them alternative spatial vocabularies that can mark the moment of entry as of special importance. The entrance to a church a block away from this church leads into a space with a two-story arched stained glass window. Many churches in downtown Austin have entry sequences that include a set of broad steps leading to ornately carved doors. These types of entries mark the difference between the space outside as profane and the space inside as sacred.

We can decide on a Sunday morning to traverse these entries and move ourselves from the profane realm to the sacred. As my entry into church that Sunday morning showed, however, the social imaginaries we inhabit can complicate that choice.

Entering a church is a social practice more than it is an individual experience. By entering for the first time we enter into a space occupied by a group, not knowing the history and practices of that group and not knowing how our presence will be received. On the Sunday morning I entered the East Austin church, our respective social locations meant that we were operating within two different shared images of ourselves at the same time. We were a guest and a greeter. We were also a potential threat and a guard against that threat.

We have at our disposal a spatial vocabulary for entrances that holds together this seemingly irreconcilable contrast. Big box stores usually have two layers of wide glass doors that open at our mere presence, providing us with carts for our shopping needs and displaying images of the bargains that are available to us within. Yet just past these doors, standing guard on either side, are electronic scanners designed to inconspicuously review the contents of our belongings as we leave to determine if we have shoplifted any items. Our entrance into the space marks our social location both as a consumer and as a potential thief.

A church that finds itself in a place where guests might become violent threats could adopt the entry configuration of a big box store. I would hope that all churches would balk at this dual messaging to outsiders.

At this point I could begin to propose how a building entrance might be designed to inscribe within itself alternative social imaginaries. Designing from within a social imaginary of joining would, I believe, provide fruitful ground as we imagine the physical configuration of new spaces. The kind of life together our faith envisions for us is rich and beautiful; seeing those relationships built and inhabited would be a wonder.

Designing physical spaces from within this alternative imaginary while leaving the way we practice architecture untouched, however, would leave our work hollow. We would be designing for the daily practices of people's life together without first entering into their life together. So thinking through the ramifications of a social imaginary of joining for the spatial configurations of buildings will be left for another day. Instead I will suggest ways the *process* of designing buildings might begin to be embedded within this imaginary and targeted toward new ways of joining.

An Architectural Practice of Joining

Architects often already think in terms of social interactions when they design. In determining room adjacencies, window placements, or programmatic arrangements in mixed use developments, we consider who will be near whom, what kinds of interactions we want to encourage, and what kinds of interactions we want to thwart. The social dynamics of spaces are already a significant factor in our design imaginations.

Yet we lack a conceptual language to talk and think about social interactions with respect to the meaning of built space. Architectural theorists debate about if architecture should be conceptualized as abstract formal manipulations or as the experience of isolated individuals.

Others counter that both of these ignore how large scale ideological systems are at work in architecture. Some seem to get close to interaction by thinking in terms of program, but their thinking remains at the level of large chunks of space, never reaching the scale of actual embodied humans with histories, concerns, and relations to others.

As I have been making a case for conceptualizing built space in terms of social imaginaries I have been attempting to construct a vocabulary to bring conceptual depth to the thinking we already do about people living lives together. By considering the social practice meaning of built spaces I am offering a way to consider the meaning of works of architecture connected to our embodied inhabitation of buildings. It is a way of reconceptualizing the *medium* we are working in as architects. It turns our focus to the tools we have at our disposal as we begin to imagine new built space.

Abstract form, individual experience, ideological critique, and programmatic relationships can all remain within our purview as we incorporate interpersonal interactions into our design imaginations. I am hoping that those of us with a commitment to a God who calls us to love our neighbor might choose to bring these interactions to the very heart of our design work as architects.

We might find, however, that the way the practice of architecture is currently structured makes this difficult. The social interactions we are obligated to consider are often exclusively those our clients deem relevant. The land on which we build has already been reduced to real estate and the communities whose lives are connected to the land are extracted from it, first conceptually then literally.

The process of imagining new things, which we cultivate as architects, could be targeted toward ways of structuring our practices differently. We could design architectural practices where we enter as guests into the lives and the land that will be affected by the buildings we design. Rather than considering first the interactions of those with the financial power to build the most, we can design with a preferential concern for those who have the least power.

Designing with an eye toward accessibility and sustainability already begins to expand our vision of the relevant stakeholders of our designs. They gesture at an architectural practice characterized by joining. We can go further. But it will be hard.

An architectural design practice that begins with listening and joining would be slow and complicated. We would need to surrender the efficiency and control that the current form of the profession pushes us towards. We would need to embrace the contingent, the provisional, and the temporary as we begin to realize that the brokenness of our lives together cannot be fixed through the spectacular cleverness of our building designs. The social and economic worlds we find ourselves in will place limits on our ability to join fully. And no matter how deeply we join in the lives of others, we will find any success in our design solutions fleeting, limited by the ongoing interactions of people in and around the spaces we create.

We can find solace, though, in remembering that the work of making all things new is not ours to do. It is the work that God is already doing. We are invited into this work as co-laborers. As we follow Jesus we get to participate in one brief phase of the grand renovation project of God, not knowing how our work fits into the whole design. That may be hard, but we can trust that God is a better designer than any of us.

We are then left with two challenges: (1) How to imagine alternative ways of practice that seem impossible within our existing frame, and (2) how to discern where God is already at work so that we might participate. These two challenges have the same solution. We need to lead lives characterized by the practice of joining, entering humbly into the lives of those very different from us with a shared commitment to practicing the self-giving love of our crucified Messiah. We need to practice being the church, the people of God, joining with those we would not otherwise share life with and remaining faithful to one another with the steadfast love God has shown us.

In his commentary on the book of Acts, Willie Jennings describes a discovery he made while studying this narration of the rise of the church. Jennings notes that among the early Christians, “almost no one is doing what they want to do. The Spirit of God is pressing every disciple to do precisely what God wants done and not what they might envision.” He was “surprised by the assertiveness of the Spirit. In Acts, the Spirit of God truly directs, speaks, guides.”[16]

The social practice of this kind of life together will seem strange, even impossible, to those living within modern social imaginaries. Remember, though, that social imaginaries are built through both thought and practices. Practicing life differently will begin to reconstruct our thoughts, feeding our design imaginations towards alternative ways of making our built environment. As we practice listening to one another across our differences we can, in turn, learn to discern the specific work God has for us to do.

The Spirit of God continues to direct, to speak, and to guide us as we listen to God and listen to one another. Let us join in this work together as we endeavor to design buildings while faithfully following the God who is with us.

NOTES

[1] Robin Evans, *Robin Evans: Translation from Drawing to Building and Other Essays* (London: Architectural Association, 1997), 198.
[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 5.
[3] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 6-7.
[4] Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 282.
[5] Willie James Jennings, "Binding Landscapes: Secularism, Race, And The Spatial Modern," in *Race and Secularism in America*, eds. Jonathon Samuel Kahn and Vincent W. Lloyd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 207.
[6] Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 248.
[7] Jennings, *Christian Imagination,* 167.
[8] Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 292.
[9] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 282.
[10] Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 286-87
[11] Taylor, *Secular Age*, 282.
[12] Beatriz Colomina, "The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism," in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 81-82.
[13] Mt 5:28 NRSVUE
[14] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 111-116.
[15] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 198-199.
[16] Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 254.

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