

# The Global Phenomenon of Multifaith Worship Spaces: A Guideline for Design and Development

Eric Salitsky

ESKW/Architects, New York City, New York

[eric.salitsky@gmail.com](mailto:eric.salitsky@gmail.com)

## Abstract

The development and interest around purpose-built multifaith worship spaces has grown at a steady pace over the last 70 years but there are still no commonly agreed upon requirements for their program. As a fairly new typology, many built projects suffer from a lack of understanding of how complex their programs can be and therefore resources are not sufficiently allocated to make those spaces successful. Multifaith worship space design would benefit from a set of guidelines detailing the necessary steps that must be taken to improve these conditions, culling from research that learns lessons from the most successful spaces and understands what is problematic in the unsuccessful spaces, which I present here after visiting and documenting many such examples. Typologies of multifaith space can be divided into two broad categories: The Chamber i.e. shared worship space, and the Complex i.e. separate worship space, or a hybrid of the two. Identifying the typology helps to establish awareness of the benefits and drawbacks of each model, ultimately sharpening the goals of the project. The design process must also take into account three principles that define a successful multifaith worship space: Programmatic robustness, the capacity for dialogue and encounter, and spiritual aesthetics.

Though sites of worship shared by people of different religions have existed since antiquity<sup>1</sup>, the last century has seen a blossoming of purpose-built examples of this architectural typology. The multifaith worship space is a new type of sacred environment designed so that people of all faiths, or no faith in particular, can spend time in contemplation or prayer.<sup>2</sup> There is no precise definition, evidenced by the incongruity of wayfinding and exterior signage for these places. Spaces with comparable programs are described as diverse as a “multifaith space”, “interfaith chapel”, “nondenominational chapel”, “prayer room”, “meditation space”, “quiet room”, and many more variations, most of which are not interchangeable terms.

They are typically found in large public infrastructures such as airports, hospitals, and university campuses, though they also exist in military bases, prisons, malls, stadiums, museums, and as stand-alone institutions. In many cases, there is no designer involved, and they are typically furnished by the facility administrator usually as an afterthought. They tend to be hidden in the service area near the bathrooms, and rarely treated with the reverence that one would give to the design of a church or mosque. But if this typology is truly considered, they have a level of complexity that’s rarely understood. How does architecture encourage people of different faiths, some in direct opposition to each other, to respectfully share a moment of prayer?

This was the guiding question that led me to apply for and receive a travel grant from the New York Center for Architecture to research the global phenomenon of multifaith worship spaces. I traveled to over 50 of these spaces in New York, Boston, London, Manchester, Zurich and Berlin

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Biddington, *Multifaith Spaces* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2021), 24-36.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Crompton. “The Architecture of Multifaith Spaces: God Leaves the Building.” *The Journal of Architecture* 18, no. 4 (2013): 474.

to document the various ways that both architects and laypeople have attempted to solve the inherent issues involved in accommodating the prayer needs of various religions in a single space.

Multifaith worship spaces not only serve an important spiritual role in post-secular society by serving a practical need (a place to worship in a public setting) but often promote, by design, interreligious encounters and multiculturalism, showcasing how diversity in religious inclusion helps encourage the acceptance of religious and ethnic minorities within a multicultural landscape.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, many spaces fail to reach the fullest expression of these principles due to a lack of financial investment, design consideration, and awareness of successful precedents.

Because this is a new building typology, there are few well-known precedents and sparse guidelines to follow, so each multifaith worship space varies greatly from one to the next. While there is much scholarship on the history and sociological background of these spaces, the fact that so many of them suffer from similar design mistakes shows how designers of multifaith worship spaces could benefit from a set of guidelines and best practices compiled from the lessons learned from previously built examples. After visiting a significant amount of these places, patterns began to emerge around the most thoughtful solutions, and the following essay serves as a suggestion of best practices based on my observations.

While contemporary multifaith worship spaces are a global phenomenon, with most of the examples appearing in North America and Europe, the six cities chosen for my field research were selected based on the density of examples in a specific city or region, or if there were exceptional examples within a given city. I will confess that my scholarship in published explorations of this typology is limited and therefore my assessments are based mostly on my investigations in the field and my observations about their usage. This also included meeting with scholars who study these spaces, architects who designed them, and chaplains and administrators who manage them, in order to understand how multifaith spaces come to be and how they are occupied. It was also important to me to experience the spaces myself as a user when possible by sitting and spending time in contemplation while also observing the coming and going of other users, as well as photographing the spaces when it was respectful to do so. Therefore, since my research is weighted more on field observations than published references, I see this essay as a hypothesis rather than a finished work, and intend to examine how these guidelines hold up to other academic resources as I continue this research in the future.

Though some of my prescriptions for successful multifaith space design are admittedly subjective, as “sacredness” is not an easily definable architectural concept, the principles I have gathered are generally common sense: Evaluations on whether the final product fulfilled the initial goals of the design committee and historically accepted aesthetic moves for sacred architecture (light, scale, texture, etc.). Gathering these observations into a set of guidelines led to a categorization of three general principles of a successful multifaith worship space. Each individual space I visited was judged based on whether the project in question achieved the following:

### **Principle 1: Programmatic Robustness**

Are all religious spatial requirements represented to the fullest extent with all ritual needs accounted for? It is not enough to just remove religious symbols to neutralize the space of iconography, there are many other elements to consider: multiple orientations of prayer; posture of the worshipers and respective movable furniture to accommodate standing, sitting, kneeling, or

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<sup>3</sup> Marian Burchardt and Maria Chiara Giorda. “Geographies of Encounter: The Making and Unmaking of Multi-Religious Spaces—an Introduction,” in *Geographies of Encounter*, ed. Marian Burchardt and Maria Chiara Giorda (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 3.

prostration; storage and accessibility of ritual items, prayer and study books, prayer rugs, meditation cushions, etc.; and methods for accommodating multiple faith worshipers at once through sound and visual barriers and sufficient space. This principle can only be accomplished through extensive demographic research and clear understanding of who the end-users will be both in the short and long term.

### **Principle 2: Capacity for Encounter and Dialogue**

How does the multifaith worship space encourage people of different backgrounds to share space and create mutual respect? Even if diverse religious needs are accommodated for, it's also essential that users feel comfortable in the space, and should be encouraged to acknowledge the religious "other" that shares the space with them in order to dissipate tension and cultivate camaraderie.

Though there are many ways this can be accomplished, two general approaches emerged that divide multifaith worship spaces into two spatial categories, which I have designated as the Complex and the Chamber. The Complex allocates separate prayer rooms for each faith that they do not need to share with other groups. This can be multiple rooms off of an anteroom or it could also be a courtyard or multiple sites on a campus. This decreases tension but also limits interfaith exposure. The Chamber is a single room that is shared by all different faith groups. It is more common, generally due to budget constraints, a lack of priority from the larger facility, or the conditions of renovating an existing space. They tend to need much more chaplaincy or administrative support as there may occasionally be moments of tension, but the capacity for encounter is greater since users are forced to share space and recognize others who use the space differently from them.

### **Principle 3: Spiritual Aesthetics**

While a feeling of spirituality in a space is subjective to each individual, it is clear when not even the slightest attempt has been made to induce a spiritual environment, something frustratingly common in multifaith worship spaces. Many are set up with limited funding, so first and foremost a space for multifaith worship must be created, and then aesthetics are considered if there are leftover funds. This is understandable in certain situations, though when aesthetics are considered from the outset, the spaces are not only more enjoyable to use but also function more harmoniously. But there is also a phenomenon where even well-funded spaces are left intentionally bland in order to maintain denominational neutrality.<sup>4</sup> The reasoning behind this is that a shared worship environment can only be functional if there is "unity by exclusion"<sup>5</sup>, meaning that it must be stripped of not just religious iconography, but anything that could result in meaning-making that could be interpreted as denominational and therefore exclusionary. This is a position that should be challenged, evidenced by many successful precedents that achieve necessary iconographic neutrality while also evoking a spiritual ambiance through design creativity.

### **Demographic Research**

The first of the three principles that result in a successful multifaith worship space is the necessity of that space to have programmatic robustness. This is the consideration of the complexity of needs that end-users require in order to use this space. A multifaith worship space cannot just be an empty unprogrammed room, it has to be thoughtfully designed and furnished with its potential end-users in mind. For people who intend to use this space for prayer, all religious spatial requirements should be represented to the fullest extent feasible with all ritual needs accounted for. But the program of a multifaith worship space cannot only be limited to prayer, it must also consider how secular and spiritual people will use the space and what other activities beyond

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<sup>4</sup> Crompton, 487.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 479.

prayer should be included such as interfaith dialogue, lectures, workshops, etc. This will require a level of negotiation on the planning side to account for these varying activities by both understanding what those activities will be and how they will coexist together in a shared space. Therefore, the space in question cannot be simply a church layout with iconography removed because there are many modes of prayer and reflection that are not compatible with a traditional church layout. Some of these elements that must be considered when planning out a multifaith worship space are: different seating orientations, different postures of worship and meditation (standing, sitting on furniture, sitting on the ground, kneeling, and prostrating), the availability of ritual items, prayer and study books (and therefore the need for storage), and how to accommodate multiple people at once who are using the space for different reasons (this could be through sound barriers, visual barriers, or simply having sufficient space).

In order to account for all these activities and requirements, it is necessary to conduct thorough demographic research in the initial planning stages of a multifaith worship space. While the intention of the space is to provide a location for people of multiple faiths to be able to pray, reflect, participate in spiritual activities such as guided meditation, or have small group gatherings, choosing which traditions and practices to accommodate will vary greatly depending on geography, population, and demand. It would be impractical to attempt to accommodate every existing religion, but a multifaith worship space cannot only accommodate the largest religious groups in the catchment area because multifaith worship spaces should also provide prayer space for minority groups, especially when the dominant religion already has sufficient prayer spaces in the area. Therefore it is important to find a balance between realistic demand for worship space and the aspiration to provide hospitality for all religious and non-religious worldviews.

Researching what program needs to be included in the multifaith worship space, which groups will be represented, and what those groups require spatially, is typically the responsibility of the designer or architect. But even in a scenario where there is a committed designer who is providing this research (which is not always the case) it is also the responsibility of the facility manager or administrator to provide that information. While investigating demographics and statistics is an important part of the process, it is also essential to approach the religious communities themselves and give them opportunities to contribute. No religion is monolithic and there will be variations in practice and preference in any community. Personalities and relationships matter and communities need to be made to feel welcome. It is not enough to provide a space for them, they need to be part of the process as it's a space that they are meant to use and they need to be given a forum to express their needs. In fact, some communities may need to be given permission to share their needs and made to feel safe before doing so. Local religious, spiritual, and secular community groups will have insight into their needs that the designer may not have foreseen, as the intricacies of ritual and social taboos are unique to them and their community members.

Another consideration during the research phase is long-term changing demographics. It is important to consider what the multifaith worship space might look like in 10 years, 20 years, and even 50 years, and how it will be able to adapt to changing demographic shifts over time. The Brandeis University Chapels in Waltham, Massachusetts, designed by Max Abramowitz, serve as a useful case study for considering how multifaith spaces require the ability to adapt to changing demographics since they have been around long enough to see the effect of demographic shifts and the consequences of a rigid design.

Built in 1955, three chapels were built on a landscaped site surrounding a pond, representing the three recognized faiths on campus: Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish. These chapels were built bespoke to the three specific faiths, each curved brick sanctuary responding to a specific denominational program, and therefore never designed to be adaptable to change. While the

Catholic and Jewish chapels still see frequent usage, the Protestant chapel remains mostly unused since there isn't a mainline Protestant group on campus to continue its usage and there is internal tension on who should be the inheritors of that space.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, student groups representing other religions have been established over the last 70 years, but they have yet to be represented on that site. In fact, the wayfinding signage on the site of the three chapels orients the visitor to a fourth location: a Muslim worship space found in the basement of the student center next to the cafeteria. Hindus and Buddhists have also been provided with a "Dharmic Prayer Space", a shared worship room in the student center. While it is clear that space and funds are limited for this type of program, the fact that these newer prayer rooms are separate and less grandiose could create an impression of a lack of priority for Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu students.

Researching current demographics and allowing for flexibility in the case of changing demographics in the future is therefore an essential aspect of multifaith space planning. While a top-down approach is an effective way to represent the aspirations of the planning committee, and bottom-up dynamics occurs when members of local communities initiate the design process, a "meso-level" approach should also be considered, which engages with local community members and end-users, both religious and secular, to participate in the planning process. A meso-level approach is essential to the planning process because it creates a dialogue between the planners and the end users and can balance the desired goals of the project with existing demographic challenges that will determine the outcome of the space in the near and distant future.<sup>7</sup>

### **Typologies**

One of the issues with codifying multifaith worship spaces is that there is very little agreement about what they are and who they are meant to service. That's why there are so many different names attributed to them, and none of these names have any commonly understood definition; They could all be describing the same room. Since there are no well-known precedents and few established guidelines to follow, each multifaith worship space varies greatly from one to the next in substance as well as description and it is not always easy to know which spaces were designed as a quiet place for individual meditation, which spaces were meant to accommodate group worship, and which to do both.

Though there is no standardization in multifaith worship space design, by looking at the intended end-goals of the space, we can distinguish between two types of spaces: Universalist and multifaith. The main difference between the two is the universalist prayer room is nondenominational while the multifaith prayer room is interdenominational. Architecturally, nondenominational prayer spaces have little spatial standards beyond scrubbing the room of any iconography and are more conducive to meditation, quiet contemplation, wedding ceremonies or frontal worship that doesn't require ritual items. When the goal of the space is limited to these modes of activity, they are certainly acceptable and many are architecturally breathtaking but when the goal is religious inclusion, they are not ideal. This is because by removing program, they don't necessarily consider the variety of religious prayer requirements for people of different backgrounds or traditions, which often leads to unintentional Christian-centrism in their conception of prayer. By contrast, a multifaith prayer space is interdenominational because they intentionally affirm the depth of religious requirements for end-users of various backgrounds and

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<sup>6</sup> Professor Wendy Cadge of Brandeis University in discussion with the author, June 2019

<sup>7</sup> Luca Bossi and Maria Chiara Giorda. "The 'Casa delle religioni' of Turin: A Multi-Level Project Between Religious and Secular." in *Geographies of Encounter*, ed. Marian Burchardt and Maria Chiara Giorda (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 206

traditions from the earliest planning and research stages.<sup>8</sup>

Since the goal of this essay is to focus on spaces that are inclusive of various expressions of prayer, reflection, and meditation, analyzing universalist/nondenominational prayer spaces is outside of the scope. But nondenominational spaces are still of interest within a multifaith landscape because of their usefulness in creating a spiritual setting without relying on religious symbolism. Because of this shared position, universalist/nondenominational spaces are often mistakenly referred to as multifaith spaces in signage and description, which further complicates the lack of shared nomenclature when discussing multifaith worship spaces. Though removing program and iconography can create a suitable environment for some forms of worship, mediation, and contemplation, it is not sufficiently inclusive of modes of prayer that require different seating arrangement, ritual items, and other religious requirements often uncovered during demographic research. When described as “rooms of silence”, “quiet rooms”, or “meditation rooms”, there is no reference to religious practice and therefore these rooms have a secular connotation (though often rooms with these descriptions contain prayer books and prayer rugs, and may lean toward multifaith), whereas when these rooms are described as “chapels” or “prayer rooms” the religious connotation excludes any form of non-Christian worship and only considers a Christian-centric form of prayer. Both of these categories are problematic and therefore when designing multifaith worship spaces one should be careful to fully consider the demographics that serve to gain from it.

A case study of nondenominational space can be seen in the Class of 1959 Chapel at the Harvard Business School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, designed by Moshe Safdie and completed in 1992. When interpreted as a nondenominational space rather than multifaith, it is extremely successful, especially from an architectural and aesthetic perspective. It's use of poured concrete as a material palette, lightwells positioned with large prisms underneath that refract natural light as wallwashers below, and the introduction of nature in the attached water garden that includes a peaceful auditory element of running water, all create a feeling of tranquility and sacredness without relying on denominational symbolism. But when judged through the principles of multifaith worship spaces it is not sufficiently programmed. While its circular layout in principle could allow for multiple prayer orientations, a permanent stone altar on the east side of the sanctuary implies Christian or Jewish worship. When I visited the site in June of 2019, the sanctuary showed little sign of use except for one student practicing on the piano. I did not notice ritual items available for use such as prayer books or prayer rugs and there didn't seem to be any indication that student groups use this space for worship. This seems to be the intended goal of the project as it is described on the Harvard Business School website as “a place for quiet contemplation...used for non-denominational services, ceremonies, and concerts.”<sup>9</sup>

It is imperative that spiritual, secular, and non-religious people are included in multifaith space design and nondenominational spaces are excellent paradigms for this. But they are not sufficiently programmed and responsive to the diversity of spiritual needs to replace the role of a multifaith worship space.

After visiting a sufficient amount of multifaith worship spaces in various settings, it became apparent that they could be divided into two spatial categories, the Complex and the Chamber. A Complex is a grouping of separate religious spaces making up a multifaith network. In a Complex

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<sup>8</sup> Crosbie, Michael J. “Campus Multifaith Centers as Settings for Multicultural Dialogue.” 2014 Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality Symposium (ACS6). Accessed April 24, 2022. <http://www.acsforum.org/symposium2014/papers/CROSBIE.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> “A Campus Built on Philanthropy.” Class of 1959 Chapel - About - Harvard Business School. Accessed April 24, 2022. <https://www.hbs.edu/about/campus-and-culture/campus-built-on-philanthropy/Pages/class-of-1959-chapel>.

there are no shared worship spaces among different religions since each one is accommodated in its own space. Nondenominational spaces are an excellent inclusion into a Multifaith Complex because it designates a secular space for meditation or contemplation among the denominational spaces and recognizes the spiritual needs of the religiously unaffiliated, which is a rapidly growing population.<sup>10</sup> When there is only one shared space, a Multifaith Chamber, a nondenominational approach is a great starting point but accommodating the diversity of religious expression and providing for flexibility needs to be considered as well.

### **The Complex**

There are a couple different ways to approach the design of a Complex, mostly focused on different methods of circulation. By definition, every Complex will have multiple prayer, meditation, and contemplation rooms, each one representing a different tradition or practice. But how one gets from one space to the other results in different approaches to the Complex typology. Some Complexes exist within the confines of a single building footprint such as a multifaith center. Others may share a common exterior courtyard so the circulation is external rather than internal. They can even exist across an entire campus with various buildings separated by quite a distance, but there would have to be a unifying feature or organization to sustain the feeling that they are all connected within a single institution.

The main benefit of the Complex is the fact that there are different rooms that can be freely programmed as needed. Groups will not have to share a single space so there will be less conflict and concern about symbols, orientation, and ergonomics. From the inside of a prayer room in a Complex, a Muslim prayer room, for example, would look just like a Muslim prayer room in any other location. The Complex offers each group their own autonomy to furnish and personalize the space as they see fit, without having to compromise with the needs of other groups.

The drawbacks of a Complex is that if there is a greater organizational mission to encourage dialogue and interpersonal encounters, there has to be an intention on the designer and the management to facilitate that. This is because with each prayer room separated and possibly even distant from each other, there is a greater risk that they will be siloed from each other and will not have free communication among the participants. Therefore, making sure that there is a common area to interact is key to designing a Complex.

Designating spaces for religions also becomes a precarious task because it inherently limits the amount of religions that are represented. For example, if only Abrahamic religions are represented, members of other religions may feel disrespected for not being included, especially when the project is being implemented by a public institution. Therefore, a good Complex will require flexibility among the spaces to accommodate demographic changes over time so it is a good idea to not have them custom built for a specific religion unless it is clear they will occupy this space for a long time. This was the unfortunate situation of the Brandeis chapels discussed earlier, as the lack of flexibility did not allow the chapels to accommodate different religious groups as demographics changed.

One notable example of the Complex model is the House of Religions in Bern, Switzerland: A community-led project, funded by the municipal government, to establish a place for religious dialogue, immigrant absorption, community activities and to house sanctuaries for immigrant religious communities who did not have their own worship facilities. The building was initially designed with five empty sanctuaries, as the individual communities lease these sanctuaries and

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, Gregory A. "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. Pew Research Center, Accessed April 24, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

outfit them personally in order to encourage self-sufficiency and to avoid issues of changing demographics over time. Because of this, the sanctuaries are hyper-specific to their respective communities and are currently home to a Sri Lankan Hindu temple, an Ethiopian Coptic church, an Albanian Mosque, a Thai Buddhist temple, and an Alevi Dargah.<sup>11</sup> Each sanctuary has its own private entrance with the option of opening up a second entrance to the public areas, allowing each group to maintain their own autonomy within the building. In the public areas, there are classrooms, community facilities, a daycare center, and a cafeteria that is both kosher and ayurvedic. This unique financial model of renting out the sanctuaries to each group is an interesting solution to the problem of building bespoke sanctuaries within the Complex model. By focusing on new immigrant groups, these sanctuaries are likely to change as these groups establish themselves enough to build their own facilities elsewhere, therefore opening up the sanctuary space for a new immigrant group to join.

### **The Chamber**

The Chamber is the space more commonly associated with multifaith worship spaces as it is the more common example found in airports, hospitals, and other large public infrastructure spaces. This is because it is a budget-friendly approach; At a minimum, it only requires a single room. In most cases, the Chamber model is utilized because of a lack of allocated resources, or because the facility underestimated the level of effort that would be required to successfully run this type of prayer space, though there are some ways in which a Chamber is superior to a Complex.

In contrast to the Complex which may need additional support in order to facilitate dialogue and encounter, the Chamber produces it naturally, sometimes even too well. Since all users end up using the same space to worship, meditate, or just sit in silence, they are often immediately confronted with another person, using the space in a different way. For some people, that can be quite jarring if they have never had that experience before, and it may ruin the experience for them. But for other people, that shock of recognition may actually lead to better understanding of the other. Sharing space with groups of people one might not have encountered otherwise, during a moment of prayer which for many people is very intimate and vulnerable, can be an enlightening experience when it comes to tolerance and acceptance.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, sharing space between different groups of people who may have very different ways of praying might lead to tension and conflict. For this reason Chambers will require much greater administrative support to make sure everyone feels welcome, to make the room feel inviting, and to reset the space when furniture or equipment is used. There has to be constant mediation to make sure that everyone is equally represented and no group is favored, otherwise conflict may arise. Other solutions to this issue are to require booking the room for use so that only one service may be held at a time, having subdivisions through low walls or changes in flooring patterns, or offering auxiliary spaces so that different uses of the space can happen simultaneously without disturbing each other.

The Zurich airport chapel is a great example of a successful Chamber model. This is due to an active chaplaincy which has an office directly adjacent, as well as providing auxiliary spaces for multiple activities to happen simultaneously without disturbing each other. This chapel is simple and was constructed with a limited budget, but the design is effective through the use of soft materials and light. The main sanctuary is able to be used for scheduled services or for individual use and all of the furniture is easily moved in order to maintain flexibility. An auxiliary space is essential to the success of this project since it allows for multiple methods of worship to happen simultaneously and it creates a more intimate space for someone who may prefer that. It can also be subdivided further through the use of a curtain in case there is a desire for gender separation

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<sup>11</sup> Ursula Ecclesia of the House of Religions in discussion with the author, July 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Professor Terry Biddington in discussion with the author, June 2019.

or multiple people who wish to use the auxiliary room at the same time. The success of this example is due to its emphasis on flexibility and the proximity and commitment of its chaplaincy, two items that are encouraged to limit tension in the Chamber model.

**Hybrid**

Though I have represented the Complex and the Chamber as two opposing models to choose from when designing a multifaith worship space, in reality there is never really such a clear divide and it is possible to use lessons learned from both. Hybrid approaches allow for the flexibility necessary for a successful project, and recognize the benefits of both individually designated worship spaces and shared worship spaces.

The Multifaith Center at Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, designed by KieranTimberlake and completed in 2008 is an excellent example of a hybrid approach toward multifaith space planning. Found in the basement of the historic Houghton Chapel, the Multifaith Center is organized around a central worship area that various groups can use or rent. Surrounding this Multifaith Chamber are smaller rooms, uniquely organized by mode of spiritual practice rather than denominational affiliation.<sup>13</sup> This results in a Multifaith Complex where one of the rooms within the Complex is a Multifaith Chamber. By allowing for both shared worship space as well as separate worship space, the hybrid model receives the best of both. In fact, most successful multifaith worship spaces have hybrid elements in order to accommodate flexibility in their program.

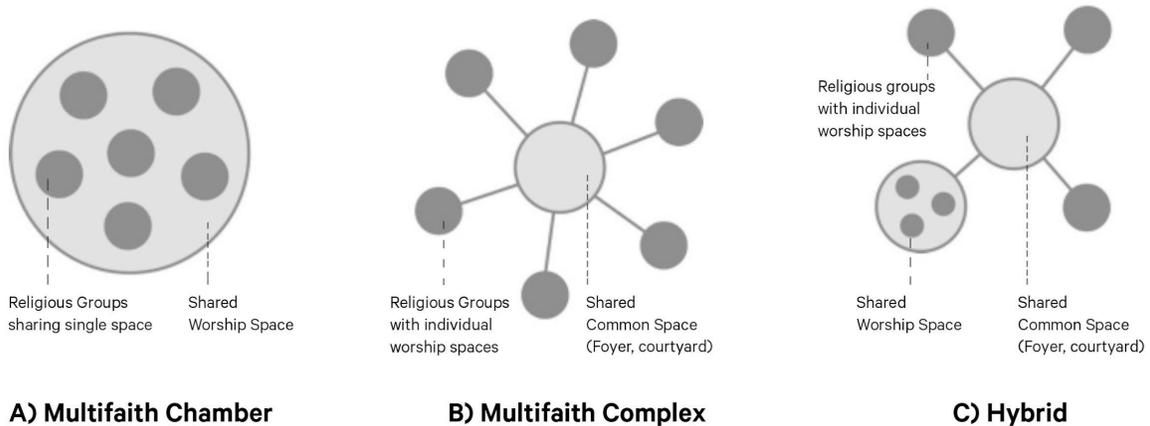


Diagram of the three categories of multifaith worship spaces. By the author.

**Iconography and Practice**

A commonly accepted aesthetic practice for Multifaith Chambers is to clear them of any religious symbols, iconography, or pictorial representations, so as not to offend any religious groups who cannot pray in a space with another religion’s iconography expressed. On the other hand, there are some religions for whom iconography is a necessary feature of their worship.

There are some religious practices which require material accommodations to aid in worship that, while not iconography itself, may be distracting or inappropriate to another group. For example, the burning of incense is an important ritual for some, while others may be put off by the smell and the smoke. Furthermore, methods of prayer differ greatly among religious traditions. While some groups prefer sensory “affective” worship through singing, chanting, and movement, other

<sup>13</sup> Kazanjian, Victor, and Stephen Kieran. “Design From Dialogue.” Faith & Form (Vol. 42, No. 3, 2009).

groups practice “apophatic” worship through silence and stillness.<sup>14</sup> These two modes of prayer cannot coexist simultaneously without one disturbing the other and must be considered when sharing space.

Therefore, an imperative in Multifaith Chamber space planning is to find a way to make all intended groups comfortable enough to share worship space. This is accomplished by finding equivalences among religious groups, i.e. ways of sharing space that accommodates everyone and offends no one. Generally, creating a multifaith worship space that is devoid of any religious symbolism tends to be the best solution but it requires compromise from groups who may feel that their form of worship is limited by this, ultimately excluding the most radical adherents who refuse to compromise their spiritual practices in the name of coexistence. The Multifaith Complex solves this tension but this is dependent on space and budget. When sharing space, a creative solution for icons and ritual items is to allocate sufficient and accessible storage. The MIT Chapel in Cambridge, Massachusetts, designed by Eero Saarinen and completed in 1955, employs this solution by providing each group their own storage closet, located in a basement underneath the chapel. The Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Toronto, designed by Moriyama and Teshima in 2007, also considers this issue by creating extensive storage at the front of the space. These storage spaces are cleverly hidden behind backlit onyx panels, allowing for the access of ritual items in the ideal location while also concealing them behind a rich material palette.

Another approach is to add symbols rather than remove them. This is dependent on the situation, as some religious groups may feel uncomfortable praying in spaces where symbols of other religions are openly displayed, so this is for unique situations. The Tillman Chapel at the Church Center of the United Nations, for example, designed by Harold Eugene Wagoner and dedicated in 1963, contains a permanent cross and four banners representing Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism on the front wall. In practice, this space is not a multifaith space but rather a Methodist chapel that holds interfaith ceremonies in addition to public memorials or commemorations but it is useful for understanding the complications that arise when positively affirming religious symbols.<sup>15</sup> By including the symbols of multiple religions, it inadvertently excludes other religious groups whose symbol is not represented. For example, a Sikh may not feel welcome in this space since the symbol of their religion is not included on the front wall.

Understanding that no religious community is monolithic and that each group will have its own needs and requirements, a space devoid of religious symbols and iconography is generally the best solution for a shared multifaith worship space. Making a space feel sacred without relying on familiar symbols becomes a difficult design challenge but it is the responsibility of the multifaith worship space to make each worshiper feel comfortable and welcome and this is best approached by creating a space whose design is abstract and unadorned with explicit religious symbolism.

### **Orientation and Ergonomics**

The ritual needs of each religious group are most relevant to spatial design when it comes to orientation and ergonomics. This includes the direction the worshipers face when they pray and the physical way in which they pray, whether they are standing, sitting, kneeling, or fully prostrating, and therefore what kind of furniture is relevant to that religion. This becomes more complicated in Chamber examples because the room will have to be able to simultaneously accommodate multiple prayer orientations and multiple worship positions so some extra creativity is necessary in that respect.

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<sup>14</sup> Biddington, 92.

<sup>15</sup> “United Nations Ministry.” Church & Society - The United Methodist Church. Accessed April 25, 2022. <https://www.umcjustice.org/who-we-are/united-nations-ministry>.

Many Christian denominations require an eastward orientation toward the altar or pulpit, though some groups face inward toward one another. The prayer positions require furniture for seating, and some church furniture has added hardware to support kneeling positions. Worshipers from Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox denominations have “positive” iconographic expectations and may require additional program for their services such as aumbries or tabernacles for consecrated hosts, a font for holy water, choir stalls or an organ for music, and partitions to separate clergy from laity. On the other hand, Quakers, Anabaptists, and Unitarians would prefer none of these things as their ritual space needs are “negative”.

Jewish worship spaces are typically oriented East towards Jerusalem where there is a cabinet that holds a written Torah (an aron). Chairs or pews for seating is customary, typically in a frontal orientation though some synagogues prefer a radial seating layout. Orthodox Jewish worship requires gendered separation, which is traditionally established with a partition that goes down the central aisle or by having women sit in an upper gallery while the men sit below. Progressive Jewish denominations prefer non-gendered seating arrangements.

Islam requires a strict prayer orientation toward Mecca, traditionally with a niche in the front wall signifying this direction (a mihrab), but seen more commonly in multifaith worship spaces as a demarcation on the ground or the wall. Traditionally, Muslim prayer is performed with people lined up in a row facing Mecca and involves standing, kneeling on the floor, fully prostrating, and sitting on the floor, therefore furniture is rarely found in a Mosque and the ground is either carpeted or covered in prayer rugs. Shoes are not allowed, so there are often shoe racks found at the entrance, and prayer is separated by gender, occasionally with a physical barrier or with a women’s gallery. Ritual washing before prayer is also a necessary component of Muslim worship so washing facilities catered specifically to this need are preferred.

Buddhists from some traditions, Tibetan for example, have “positive” ritual needs and expect to worship with a shrine containing a statue of the Buddha alongside candles, prayer wheels, and incense burners. Worship consists of sitting on the floor or on a cushion and reciting mantras and sacred texts, occasionally accompanied by musical instruments. On the other hand, Zen Buddhists prefer “negative” prayer space and prefer silent meditation and simple accommodations.

Broad divergences of prayer and ritual are found in Hinduism, Sikhism, and many other world faiths as well. Therefore, a successful shared space will be able to accommodate worship across multiple spectra: “individual-group; noise-silence; movement-stillness; permissible and non-permissible items; gendered-inclusive space; worship that is object dense-object sparse; as well as cater for doctrines or worldviews that are mutually inclusive-antagonistic.”<sup>16</sup>

Sitting is not a universal prayer position and therefore it is important when different groups share a common room that the furniture is easily moved to accommodate different room layouts. Having a fixed altar at the Eastern end, having heavy pews that cannot be easily moved, and not allowing for enough space for other modes of prayer and reflection make a space not sufficiently multifaith. Unfortunately, in areas where Christianity is dominant, many multifaith spaces have an unintentional Christian-centric spatial layout, especially when the space had been converted from a church to multifaith or when the steering committee is exclusively Christian and does not properly engage with end-users.

### **Dialogue and Encounter**

While providing publicly accessible prayer and reflection space is the main goal under discussion, it is not the only goal. Multifaith spaces also create opportunities for different communities to

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<sup>16</sup> Biddington, 93.

interact that might not usually encounter each other, resulting in shared acceptance and a stronger tapestry of multiculturalism. Further benefits of a successful multifaith space could be the integration of minority groups into society, immigrant absorption and language acquisition, the creation of a diverse social network and new friendships, and the softening of religious fundamentalism within certain communities, among many other benefits.

Therefore, the capacity for a multifaith worship space to encourage dialogue and encounter with the “other” is one of the main principles in creating a successful space. Not every multifaith space has the goal of making disparate peoples feel welcome, but rather simply furnishing a space due to demand for worship space in a public institution. Examples of this can occasionally be seen in airports, where the worship area is allocated simply to provide a service in the same way that a breast-pumping room or a pet relief area is an added amenity and nothing more. Without a programmatic goal of providing a safe space to encounter the “other”, multifaith spaces can feel stale and siloed, and when that encounter inevitably happens, it can be a flashpoint.

One of the unspoken assumptions of multifaith spaces is that it is a worthwhile endeavor to provide a space for people of different identities to meet and interact. It’s important to recognize that these assumptions exist within multicultural societies who encourage the coexistence and acceptance of a diversity of ethnicities and religions. Therefore, the motivations for establishing multifaith spaces should be examined in order to better provide for the end-users, especially when the funding is coming not from those individual communities but from the government or a larger institution. Is the creation of this space meant to serve an actual community need? For example, in a university setting, were students scrambling to find empty rooms to pray in between classes, causing them distress and depriving them of their religious needs? Or is the space more of a political statement, meant to attract more diverse enrollment or to make an architectural statement about the institution’s values? Often it is both, but these assumptions need to be examined in order to ensure success. If a space is created simply as a political stunt for an imagined or prospective community, it may result in a derelict space, wasted resources, and a sense of bad faith.

The most successful multifaith spaces are more than just public amenities for religious ritual, in their ideal form they are centers of dialogue where multicultural encounter is witnessed in its highest expression. Therefore, the initial design should take this capacity for encounter into consideration from the outset. They must encourage informal interactions as people pass each other in the hallway or find each other sitting at the same table to eat. An element of voyeurism and exhibitionism does well in places of religious encounter, with carefully placed windows or doorways, in order to encourage healthy curiosity about the rituals and practices of other groups, or for groups to showcase their unique customs to the rest of the community. But this should not come at the expense of a group’s autonomy, and their right to privacy should always be paramount. There is a fine line between encouraging curiosity and religious expression, and making religious services feel like performances without consent. Additionally, there is a limit to how much architecture alone can create these social situations. A creative design accompanied by an active chaplaincy or facility administrator is the best situation, as a committed staff has the ability to encourage warmth and welcomeness in a more direct fashion.

Returning to the two archetypes of Complex and Chamber, each has their own unique benefits and drawbacks when it comes to informal interactions. In the case of the Complex, where each group has their own prayer space, there can be a tendency for each space to be siloed from one another, limiting the capacity for encounter. Therefore, it is important for a design to be employed that encourages interaction, by having a shared anteroom that fosters socialization, by thoughtfully positioning entrances and hallways so that it is commonplace to rub shoulders with one another, or by sharing support facilities such as dining or ritual washrooms.

On the other end of the spectrum is the Chamber, where all religions share a single room, where the capacity for encounter is so high it could make some people uncomfortable. People may be jarred when they find themselves praying next to someone from another religion, and while for some people this may turn them away, for others, this could be an experience that opens their mind to acceptance. Many multifaith worship space administrators have spoken about people having transformative experiences in a multifaith worship room when the shock of encountering the “other” who they had been taught to be suspicious of, turns into a situation of unity and coexistence. Chambers will require greater staff support, as there will undoubtedly be moments of tension when worshipers sharing the same space cannot reach a compromise. For example, if enough people gather for a worship service that involves singing or chanting, this may disturb other people in the room who are attempting their own prayers or meditation. This is something the designer and administration should attempt to resolve ahead of time, through the use of visual barriers and sound barriers, or by staggering prayer times.

On the subject of tensions between worshipers in a multifaith worship space, a certain amount of it is to be expected as people learn to coexist and accept compromise in the public sphere, but there are other types of conflicts that are beyond what is permissible within a multicultural framework. Simply put, it is not required to be accepting of people or groups who do not accept others or who are opposed to the multicultural project. While ethnic tensions can hopefully be dissipated through dialogue and warm interactions, some theological stances cannot be accommodated. For instance, if one group is opposed to sharing prayer space with another group because their religious convictions will not allow them to share space and they are unwilling to compromise, they may be too fundamentalist for a multifaith situation. Similarly, proselytization is a practice that cannot be accepted in a multifaith framework, since each person should feel safe entering a multifaith worship space and should not be made to feel under attack. A group who cannot tolerate the religious expression of another group will undermine the whole idea of a multifaith space.

On the other hand, it is not the place of the designer or campus administration to be critical of a religious group’s theological requirements, and any group whose ritual needs contradict with greater cultural norms need to be carefully considered. For instance, some groups require their prayer spaces to be separated by gender, and they should be allowed to practice their customs as they see fit. But at the same time, some people may not feel comfortable worshipping in a gendered space or there may be a desire to provide accommodation for transgender and non-gender conforming individuals which could complicate the designation of gender separation. Therefore, it is up to the designer and administration to negotiate a balance between conflicting positions, especially when they are voiced by representatives of the target community, and to come up with a creative solution if possible.

### **The Importance of Spiritual Aesthetics**

It is necessary to consider the role of physical design in multifaith worship spaces in addition to layout and programming. This is an often overlooked aspect of multifaith worship spaces, which is understandable considering functionality is the most important feature and usually budgets are low, but it must not be forgotten that a multifaith worship space must feel like a sacred space. Too often, a multifaith worship space feels more like an office or a waiting room than a place of worship, creating a non-aesthetic of placelessness and profanity.

That is why spiritual aesthetics is one of the three principles that make a successful multifaith worship space. Even if the programmatic needs are fully accounted for and there is a thoughtful way of encouraging dialogue and limiting tension, if the space doesn’t feel sacred people will not treat it that way. There is no reason that a multifaith room should feel any less sanctified than a church or a mosque, but unfortunately many are not treated with that same level of reverence.

There are many design methods for creating a hallowed environment, but first and foremost there must be awareness and intention to create a sacred environment. Creating a spiritual environment is a very abstract and subjective concept and there is no single method to create a feeling of sacredness in a space, but most would agree when they are in one. What causes that feeling cannot be definitively said, and it is different for every person, but at the very minimum an intention must be set.

Spiritual aesthetics is generally a discussion more relevant to Chamber design, since it deals with the difficulty of creating a spiritual atmosphere in a neutral environment. In a Complex, each space has its own denominational affiliation and therefore they can rely on the traditions and history of that religion to establish the sacredness of that space. A Catholic space, for instance, can rely on the long history of Catholic churches to inform the interior design, through iconography, art, architecture, etc. A Chamber, on the other hand, does not have that luxury and therefore extra effort and thought needs to be put into its physical design so that it can come across as a spiritual space.

But a Complex should still feel like a multifaith center outside of the respective prayer areas. The public and shared space can be treated in a careful way to create a feeling of connectedness and sacredness throughout the entire complex. This should include the entrance, the corridors and circulation spaces, shared amenities such as dining halls, and especially overall massing and facade design.

Returning to the precedent of the chapels at Brandeis University, though it may have demographic complications due to its age, it boasts an impressive architectural aesthetic that gives each sanctuary its own unique identity but also molding each sanctuary in a unified language that represents them as a single project. The site gathers the three freestanding chapels to face each other surrounding a lilypond, and there is a continuity throughout all three chapels in massing and materiality, establishing them as variations on a theme. The grey brick facades, the window arrangements, and the positioning of the chapels themselves all speak to a harmoniousness and shared relationship to one another. This design methodology results in a statement not just about the relationship of the chapels to each other but to the relationship of the religions themselves, each different but in conversation with one another.

Taking a strong aesthetic position is a good way to designate the space as something special, in this case, a place of spirituality or contemplation. Some argue though that this could alienate certain people and that it is better to compromise aesthetics in the name of avoiding conflict. Ultimately this stems from a question about the purpose of a multifaith worship space and the role of prayer, meditation, or contemplation in that space. Is a multifaith worship space merely a service to be provided for or is it something more? Many airport prayer rooms, for instance, feel like amenities and nothing more. They exist so that a flight passenger can check prayer off their list of things to do before getting on an airplane, along with visiting the duty free, grabbing a snack, etc. This is of course better than not having any place at all set aside for prayer and reflection, but this establishes a mundanity that prayer strives to create a separation from.

Another reason that a multifaith worship space could lack a feeling of sacredness is an over-emphasis on flexibility on the part of the administration. While generally budget constraints are a main cause of a multifaith worship space that lacks aesthetics, in the case of the New York University Global Center for Academic and Spiritual Life, designed by Machado and Silvetti Associates and inaugurated in 2012, a sufficient budget was apportioned for this purpose built project. The programming shows the depth of research taken by the architects and planning committee to accommodate diverse religious needs as well as extensive flexibility which can be seen in the amount of breakout rooms and storage for moveable furniture. This building has

multiple worship areas, offices for religious, spiritual, and secular life, a meditation room, dining areas (with considerations for religious dietary laws), etc. Unfortunately, the interiors show an ambivalent approach toward spiritual aesthetics. The Muslim prayer room, for example, becomes de facto the largest mosque in southern Manhattan every Friday, but completely lacks the feeling of reverence one would expect when walking into a mosque of such magnitude. In fact it feels more like a conference room or a multipurpose room, which in fact it is because this room is also used as a yoga studio, a classroom, and a meeting room.

While flexibility is an essential element of a successful multifaith worship space, when it is mistaken for a multipurpose space, the flexibility has gone too far. One is sacred and the other is mundane. The difference between the two is partly programming but the deeper reason for that difference is intention and aesthetic direction. There are many specific reasons that the Muslim prayer room at the Global Center for Academic and Spiritual Life does not feel like a space for worship: the generic acoustic ceiling tile and off the shelf room divider for instance, but it is the overall impact of the space that makes the case that a clearer aesthetic design philosophy could have added a lot to this project.

The Multifaith Center at Wellesley College, on the other hand, is not just successful in its programming and capacity for dialogue, it also has a very powerful aesthetic with its extremely clean design and emphasis on materiality. Constructed inside the crypt of a historic chapel, the decision to expose the stone and brick foundations and celebrate the patina rather than covering it in drywall and paint creates a powerful atmosphere in the space. This project establishes itself as a place of spirituality and reflection through its aesthetics and though it does allow for flexibility, it avoids any sense of mundanity through its strong sense of design and materiality.

### **Minimalism and Blandness**

As argued earlier, most successful multifaith worship spaces remove all traditional symbols of religion in common areas in order to favor neutrality in the space. Without statues, figural paintings, and religious ornamentation, many of the most iconic religious buildings would also feel empty, and this is why a minimalist design aesthetic that celebrates that void works so well for multifaith worship spaces. But minimalist architecture is quite difficult to design and can also be expensive. By contrast, the majority of multifaith worship spaces in the world are not minimalist but just bland. Generally, the most budget-friendly way to construct a space ends up having lots of artifacts and recognizable features that take away from its separateness and cause it to feel like any other office space or multipurpose room. But there is also a trend in multifaith architecture for there to be a preference for blandness, stemming from a misguided understanding of the difference between blandness and minimalism.

Some have argued<sup>17</sup> that the banality of most multifaith worship spaces stems from the inherent limits of their design. Aiming for neutrality results in removing not just iconography but all meaning-making from the space so that no aspect of the design can be seen as offensive to any group. This, coupled with small budgets, often results in extremely mundane spaces that by design, do not reflect the religious experience they are meant to encourage. This banality is often by accident though some chaplains and administrators state a preference for blandness.<sup>18</sup> They aim to strip the space of any possible meaning that could lead to feelings of inappropriateness or religious bias. This is often taken to such an extreme that any aesthetic position at all is suspect and design decisions are avoided, for fear of offense. But “saying nothing” inevitably leads to meaning-making happening in unintended and comical ways, such as interpreting Christian

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<sup>17</sup> Crompton, 474.

<sup>18</sup> Author's discussion with the chaplain of the Oasis Faith and Spirituality Centre at the University of Central Lancashire, June 2019.

symbolism in the crossing of exposed beams.<sup>19</sup> The resulting boring empty white room is the logical outcome of the desire for neutrality taken to its logical conclusion and this leads to the idea that architecture may depend upon a particular culture for its existence, otherwise one is left with these anti-architectural banal spaces.

While it may be true that mundaneness is the best approach if the ultimate goal is not to offend, it too often results in spaces utterly lacking in inspiration which is such an important part of prayer and meditation. By contrast, the best multifaith worship spaces take strong aesthetic positions, accepting that they will not please everybody. Minimalism is a worthy approach since it not only fulfills the aesthetic guideline of neutrality, it creates a clean slate that preps a space for possibility. Minimalist spaces do not look like any other spaces, making them a perfect canvas for prayer or contemplation, separating the spiritual endeavor from the profanity of everyday life, whereas bland spaces resemble the epitome of mundane spaces like waiting rooms and offices. Minimalist spaces are difficult to design and require creative architects, which also makes them more expensive. Ceiling design can be used as an example to explain the difference in cost between minimalist design and budget-friendly design: The reason that acoustic ceiling tiles are so ubiquitous is because they serve so many purposes: They are inexpensive, they absorb sound, they are modular so a segment can easily be replaced if it is damaged, they can easily be removed if plenum access is needed, and they efficiently accommodate all the ceiling systems required in a building i.e. lighting, sprinkler systems, smoke detectors, alarm systems, etc. In a minimalist ceiling, all of those systems are thoughtfully considered by the designer and often hidden or solved in a creative way, which will take time and resources to figure out. But the resulting space is worth the investment, as it successfully creates a spiritual atmosphere without relying on symbols.

It should also be noted that while minimalism works well for multifaith spaces, it is not the only option. One of the most successful examples of multifaith architecture is the Sacred Space at Northeastern University, designed by Office dA in 1998. Rather than using a color palette of neutral tones, this design favors vibrancy and color to create its environment, while still avoiding any aesthetic position that could alienate a user of the space. It is also an extremely flexible space, with a robust scheduling calendar and a very active staff who go in and reset the room after each use. There are auxiliary spaces for individual Muslim prayer, for worshipers who require the ability to come and go throughout the day. This flexibility and control limits any tension about shared usage and encourages interaction with the executive staff who can then support these communities. But while the technical design choices allow it to function seamlessly, the power of the space comes from its aesthetics, which are unparalleled.

## **Conclusion**

Though many multifaith worship spaces developed in the last half century lack the complex considerations necessary to create successful projects, the precedents mentioned show how this typology has many shining examples, and with the proper foundation this trend may continue. By providing this set of guidelines to designers and planners of multifaith spaces, there can be greater knowledge of what options there are for these spaces, which typologies to choose from, and what steps must be taken to ensure a final project that serves its goals. By learning from precedents and deriving principles and guidelines from them, future multifaith spaces can avoid the pitfalls of unsuccessful examples and gain inspiration from successful ones, resulting in beautiful spaces that provide for practical spiritual needs while creating a location that aspires for acceptance and coexistence of all people.

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<sup>19</sup> Crompton, 490-491.