

Campus Multifaith Centers as Settings for Multicultural Dialogue

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Introduction

The nature of multifaith space is changing, particularly in multifaith centers on campus. This paper argues that these changes are best seen in the context of places of higher learning, which have been the settings of the evolution in religious space for more than a century. Today there are new ways of considering space that is shared among religious faiths, the goals of such spaces, the way they support inter-religious and multicultural dialogue, and how they foster the education of globally aware students.

Multifaith Space on Campus

Architectural historian Margaret Grubiack notes that the nature of sacred space on college campuses has changed dramatically in the past century. In North America, the role of the college chapel was pivotal at schools that were faith-based or affiliated with an organized religion. Many of these schools required daily chapel attendance, and these facilities were central to the campus life of students, faculty, and alumni alike. Grubiack notes, however, that several factors conspired to transform the centrality of sacred space on campus beginning approximately a century ago. In her recently published history of the transformation of university chapels, Grubiack observes: “The rise of science, the German research model of higher education, and the end of a centuries-long tradition of compulsory chapel signaled an era of secularization.”¹ Ironically, this very period of transition signaled the “last gasp” of great chapel building on several campuses, as some universities struggled against the tide of secularization.

The years following World War II saw the construction of nondenominational chapels primarily at institutions that were not or no longer affiliated with a faith tradition. The nondenominational campus chapel is more a token space that belongs to no faith and is far less a “center” of campus life. She notes that the decline of religion on campuses and a move away from the idea of college as educating the whole person—intellectually, socially, and spiritually—resulted in a reduced role for religion on campus, and with it less architectural expression of this dimension.² Post-war chapels such as the U.S. Air Force Academy by Walter Netsch of SOM, Eero Saarinen’s diminutive Kresge Chapel at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s “god box” at the Illinois Institute of Technology all communicate a shift to smaller, nondenominational space and restraint in religious symbolism. Grubiack notes that this trend continues to the present day, with nondenominational facilities pushed to the edge of campuses.³

The Rise of the ‘Nones’

While the decline of the importance of religious space on today’s campuses cannot be denied, it appears that new ideas about spirituality and its place in contemporary life, along with a generous and sincere interest in alternative modes of spirituality, are now being reflected in new multifaith centers on campus. It is not surprising that such multifaith centers might signal a paradigmatic shift in concepts of contemporary sacred space, as these new centers respond to changing

¹ Grubiack, Margaret M., *White Elephants on Campus*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), p. 119.

² Grubiack, Margaret M., “The Campus Chapel: A Brief History,” *Faith & Form* (Vol. 45, No. 1, 2012), pp. 6-7.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

attitudes about the role of the religion and spirituality in the lives of college students--a demographic that is part of the "Nones." Nones were identified in a 2012 study by the Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Project as those who do not identify with any religion. In 2012, Nones accounted for 20 percent of the U.S. population, up from 15 percent just five years earlier. Demographically, Nones account for 32 percent of people aged 18-29, the largest share of any of the five age brackets in the study.⁴ It is important to note that Nones are not necessarily atheists or agnostics. The Pew Center notes: 68 percent of Nones say they believe in God, 58 percent say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth, 37 percent describe themselves as "spiritual" but not "religious," while 21 percent say they pray every day.⁵

Multifaith Center at Wellesley College

New directions in campus multifaith centers appear to be a response to the growing number of "Nones" in the culture at large and on college campuses in particular. A landmark project is the Multifaith Center at Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, by Kieran Timberlake, in collaboration with Victor Kazanjian, who was dean of religious and spiritual life at Wellesley College at the time the Center was conceived, designed, and constructed.⁶ The transformation of the basement of the late-19th century Houghton Chapel on the Wellesley campus into the Multifaith Center grew from a radical reconsideration of how to accommodate and welcome a wide variety of faiths on campus. In the late 1990s Wellesley started the "Beyond Tolerance" program. Beyond Tolerance not only recognizes and celebrates the diversity of religious traditions that the student body represents (including those who considered themselves "spiritual" outside of any tradition), it has an educational component as well. According to Kazanjian, the focus is on "...interreligious understanding and dialogue intended to equip students with the intellectual and practical skills necessary to be citizens of a religiously diverse world."⁷

Kieran Timberlake transformed this program into architecture by completely transforming the dark and dank basement of Houghton Chapel into the Multifaith Center for Religious and Spiritual Life. The literal and spiritual heart of the Center is a flexible, multifaith worship space that can accommodate different faith traditions and programs. Surrounding this are smaller spaces dedicated to the disciplines of prayer, meditation, and study, which are common to all religious traditions. The doors of these smaller spaces are aligned to the central space, and they are arranged in an ambulatory way—another common element of sacred space around the world. Along with these small areas is a larger communal space for sharing meals, music, art, and inter-cultural encounters. According to Kazanjian, the Multifaith Center has achieved a special place in the hearts of students, who told him: "The space is so beautiful, it feels sacred for all of us..."⁸

Numen Lumen at Elon University

A new project that furthers the multifaith model as a setting for inter-religious and multicultural dialogue is the Numen Lumen Pavilion at Elon University in Elon, North Carolina. Elon was founded by the Christian Church (which later became the United Church of Christ) but it chose to build a multifaith center as part of its larger mission to create "...an academic community that transforms mind, body, and spirit...preparing students to be global citizens and informed leaders motivated by concern for the common good [with] respect for human differences."⁹

⁴ "Nones' on the Rise," Pew Research Center, October 2012, (<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>, accessed May 3, 2014).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kazanjian, Victor, and Stephen Kieran, "Design From Dialogue," *Faith & Form* (Vol. 42, No. 3, 2009), p. 6.

⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

⁹ Hebel, Howard, "Numen Lumen," Unpublished Manuscript, April 10, 2014.

Elon consulted Victor Kazanjian on the program to benefit from the lessons learned at Wellesley, and chose Newman Architects as the designer. The free-standing multifaith center is sited at the very heart of Elon's campus, not at its edge, yet it also reaches out to the town community in an effort to provide a place of dialogue; the Pavilion's sacred space is positioned near a road that is a town thoroughfare. At the entrance, the Pavilion welcomes the visitor with a sense of numinous light that appears to radiate from the materials themselves. Between the entrance and the circular sacred space is an elegantly detailed display area for portable icons used for different services. Typically, such icons are typically haphazardly and unceremoniously stored in broom closets. According to architect Howard Hebel, the showcase at Elon is a "...highly visible, honorific display celebrating the icons' importance and beauty. Its prominent location along the main pathway positions the icons to educate and inspire when not in liturgical use."¹⁰

A significant portion of the building is dedicated to spaces for the disciplines of prayer, meditation, and study (as seen at Wellesley), with additional facilities for staff (critical accommodations for the people who support and facilitate the Pavilion's programs). Throughout, the Pavilion's design incorporates the essences of spiritual spaces around the world—light, lasting materials with texture, water, images of nature—as a setting of multi-religious expression, dialogue, and sharing for believers, non-believers, and searchers alike.

Conclusion

The examples presented (along with other recently completed projects such as the Multifaith Centre at the University of Toronto, designed by Moriyama & Teshima Architects) indicate the evolving nature of the campus multifaith center as it reflects two critical developments: the growth of a demographic—particularly present on college campuses—that is unaffiliated with organized religious groups yet pursues a personal interest in the spiritual and searches for the common denominators across the world's faith traditions; and two, the growing acceptance and intellectual curiosity of people of different faiths (and even no faith) of those who come from a different cultural context. These two global developments (which, one might argue, threaten and thus fuel religious intolerance and conflict among small segments of fervent believers in all faiths) are transforming the nature of sacred space. Contemporary campus multifaith centers might be the harbingers of eventual changes in the conception of sacred space in every culture and every demographic.

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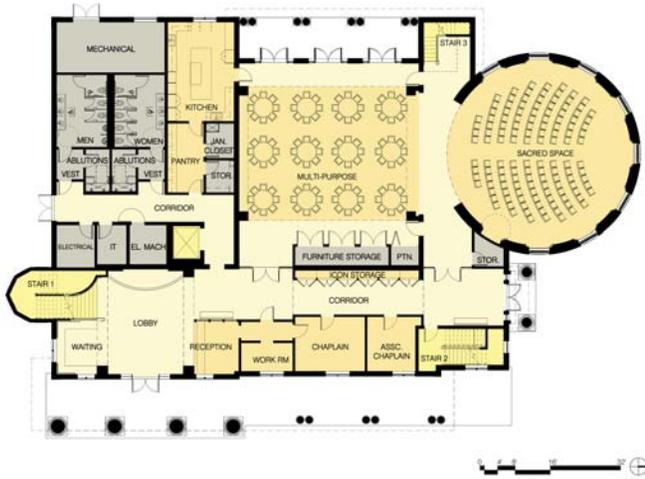
¹⁰ Ibid.



Multifaith Center, Wellesley College



Plan, Multifaith Center, Wellesley College



First floor plan, Numen Lumen Pavilion, Elon University



Numen Lumen Pavilion, Elon University



Sacred space, Numen Lumen Pavilion, Elon University