

# Multilingual Space in Shaker Design and Practice

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Space is never inert and meaning and connection to space *flow*, always in a process of becoming. As Tim Ingold poignantly states, “to observe the clouds is not to view the furniture of the sky, but to catch a fleeting glimpse of a sky *in formation*, never the same from one moment to the next.”<sup>1</sup> Like clouds, sacred space is a study in/of motion calling for a probe into *how* it means, how it is situated and interrelated, *how it looks forward to* a potential kinetic experience<sup>2</sup> with those who imagine it. While a phenomenological experience of awe may be a universal that even crosses species under certain circumstances,<sup>3</sup> without doubt, learning informs the connection to the sacred and affords it its deepest meaning.<sup>4</sup> This paper examines the significance of learning in the experience of the sacred, the process behind the creation of a “prepared mind.”<sup>5</sup> Through study and analysis of a Shaker meetinghouse, specific qualities become more critical to the recreation of this space for a college class than structural plans for the building.

## Shaker Meetinghouse *in situ*

Moses Johnson constructed the first Shaker meetinghouse at Mount Lebanon, NY in 1785, likely based on a plan drawn by Shaker leader Joseph Meacham.<sup>6</sup> It reflected Anglo-Dutch vernacular style and utilized local materials. With its successful installation, Johnson proceeded to build additional meetinghouses throughout New England, all variations on that design. These first meetinghouses became the prototypes for all Shaker Societies. The essential characteristics were standard: each required a strong truss system to support a wide, open central room without load-bearing columns and with a reinforced floor (for communal worship and dance); multiple entrances for gender separation and religious hierarchy; lightweight, movable furnishings for dance; stationary or fixed seating (along walls or as stadium seating) for visitors; maximization of natural light; and a color scheme of white exterior and a blue interior trim.

## Shaker Meetinghouse *ex situ*

In 2011, I developed a hands-on, experiential anthropology class focused on the social, historical, and religious life of the Shakers, integrating readings, communal singing, and the practice of manual arts. One of the significant challenges, however, was the recreation of Shaker sacred space in an institutional setting. I wanted students to learn about religion by handling and approximating an embodied religious experience within a sacred space.

In the two years of preparation for the class, I traveled to Shaker historical sites to understand and *feel* the preserved spaces with their original intended uses. For some areas, I had to “look beyond” the way they were re-purposed to intuit the space. The place I observed most was the Pleasant Hill Shaker

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Ingold. “Tim Ingold.” (*Cultures of Energy*, 169. Accessed at: <http://cenhs.libsyn.com/169-tim-ingold>, 2019). Emphasis by author.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas A. Tweed. “Space.” (In *Material Religion* 7(1):116-123, 2011); *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2006). P. 57.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Goodall’s study of the rain dance among chimpanzees is an excellent example in addition to the works of Barbara J. King.

<sup>4</sup> Sung, Benjamin. 2014. “Listen This Way - Music, Mystery, and Meditation.” TEDx Talks (Fargo). Accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDolfEMshEE>

<sup>5</sup> Louis Pasteur. “Discours prononcé à Douai, le 7 décembre 1854, à l’occasion de l’installation solennelle de la Faculté des lettres de Douai et de la Faculté des sciences de Lille.” (Reprinted in *Oeuvres de Pasteur*. Pasteur Vallery-Radot, ed. Paris: Masson and Co., 1922).

<sup>6</sup> Julie Nicoletta. “The Gendering of Order and Disorder: Mother Ann Lee and Shaker Architecture.” (*The New England Quarterly* 74(2):303-316, 2001). P. 304.

Meetinghouse in Harrodsburg, KY. My challenge was to identify the most critical elements to install in an institutional multi-purpose college classroom. To meet these needs, I chose a classroom that shared qualities more than appearance<sup>7</sup> - strong natural light, rectangular shape, furniture I could arrange for gendered classroom seating in the shape of U, resulting in a large, open center area. The classroom was on the first floor and had direct access to a greenspace where we practiced dancing and singing publicly, much as the Shakers themselves did during certain historical epochs. This space was a continuation of the classroom, even on the coldest days, and extended our sense of sacred space.<sup>8</sup>

The authenticity of the class culminates at Pleasant Hill during Spring Break. There, surrounded by historical Shaker buildings, each of the classes has had an unstructured “hierophanous” experience. But it is the meetinghouse that is most *re-cognized* in the deepest sense of knowing it by heart, knowing it “again.” Surrounded by tourists who appreciate the beauty of the architecture and site workers/employees who often love Pleasant Hill as their own, it is my students who suddenly experience a unique sacredness.<sup>9</sup> Although students will tour buildings in small groups during their free time, we reserve a time to perform alone as a class community inside the meetinghouse. On that day we enter gendered doors as one community, arrange ourselves in the configurations we learned in our classroom, and begin the routine we know by heart, singing and dancing in unity. When we have completed what we came to do/re-enact, deep unstructured emotions spill out – a few words whispered, tears, hugs, some students sinking onto the floor where they finished singing or walking away from the center to be alone - everyone profoundly moved in both an individual and collective way.

## Conclusion

While awe can be inspired potentially by any space, the more you know, the more engaged and receptive you can be to the meaning and spirit of place. Did the original Shaker meetinghouse contain more sacredness than our common college classroom? Inevitably, I missed many components and failed to be able to recreate a faithful copy, but I did translate the sense of the sacred – and because of that, my students brought with them into the historic meetinghouse a provocative and profound ability to imagine realness.

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<sup>7</sup> On campus we have a 19<sup>th</sup> century, all wood chapel that I could have requested for use. I had considered and compared spaces including considering this symbolic sacred space; it did not, however, have as many shared qualities as the classroom.

<sup>8</sup> H.M. Cauley. 2015. “Making the Grade: Class Goes Beyond Books to Take on Shaker Lifestyle.” (*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. March 17, 2015. Accessed at: <https://www.ajc.com/news/local/making-the-grade-class-goes-beyond-books-take-shaker-lifestyle/ZbaJCBUE4hqlWp3MoZ2cPP/>, March 17, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> My Shaker classes/students are protected by an IRB (Institutional Review Board) for which the students have given informed consent for pedagogical research.