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Space, Religion, and Bodies: Aspects of Concrete Emplacements of Religious Practice

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Abstract

This article takes up implications of the spatial turn in the wider context of a material turn (Manuel A. Vásquez) and deals with concrete emplacements of religion. The paper argues that the concrete, material space of religious practice is not just a passive stage, but itself has an 'agency,' i.e., it shapes and facilitates discourse and embodiment of human actors in space. The materiality of space influences sensory perception, communication and embodiment, and also relates to imaginations about space as well as and social norms. The emplacement of religious practice is illustrated by the examples of rooms of silence and rooms of Christian fitness classes in the United States. The article opens a research area at the interface of architec-

ture, spatial studies, embodiment studies, and the psychology of perception – and intends to make this encounter productive for the study of religions.

Keywords: space; embodiment; atmosphere; perception; rooms of silence; devotional fitness

1. Introduction

Following the material and spatial turns, scholars studying cultures and religions have, in the last two decades, increasingly focused on the material and spatial aspects of religious practice. Situated in this area of research, the overarching question of this article is: How does the concrete spatiality of built environments shape religious practice?

The matter that facilitates the connection between built environments and religious practice, the 'interface,' so to speak, is the human body. Therefore, one cannot unfold this question without digging into the relations between the body (including its movement and sensory perception) and the built environment. Moreover, the concrete spatiality of built environments is virtually always symbolically charged, i.e., it relates to religious imagination.

At this point, it is necessary to anticipate a valid objection: that emplaced behaviour is primarily shaped *not* by the materiality of space but is the result of socialization alone. To make no mistake: What I refer to as the imaginative or symbolic dimension of space includes social norms and learned behaviour. But this factor alone does not exhaustively explain why people act the way they do in a given spatial surrounding. Social norms have no means to become effective if they are not materialized in space and perceived by the body. Thus, I do not intend to delete the factor "sociality" out of the equation but to emphasize that material space and the body play a crucial role too. It is the *interplay* between these three elements (built environment, bodies, imagination) that frames the approach of this paper.

In order to answer the primary question within the framework just sketched, the following steps will be taken: I will embed the research question in the wider material turn with its focus on the agency of space (part 2), including considerations on the perceptual experience of emplaced bodies (part 3). I will then introduce two examples (rooms of silence and rooms of devotional fitness) in order to roughly illustrate how architectonic space enables and restricts embodiment, perception and practice (part 4). By way of a conclusion, I will summarize the suggestions made in this paper and draft further steps to be taken.

The *spaces* of which I am speaking here are the concrete, built rooms and buildings, inhabited by physically present human beings. These rooms are neither given nor static but constituted through bodily movement, sensory perception, symbolic overlay, and intentional practice; they always connect in one way or another to imaginations of space and social norms of behaviour.[1] They are not passive stages on which actors perform, but have an agency of their own, i.e., they facilitate and restrict sensory perception, bodily posture, and social interaction.[2]

The intention of this paper is not to present a completed study, but to propose an interdisciplinary research focus, firmly anchored in religious studies. It includes an array of questions, concepts and approaches from the study of religions, from the psychology of perception, from the study of bodies and movement, and from architecture. Thus, the goal of this paper is to single out desiderata of research and illustrate them with preliminary examples. These stem from some first observations on rooms of silence and from extensive research on devotional fitness in the US carried out as part of my doctoral project. The main result of this paper will therefore not consist of an answer to the above question but, instead, of a few hypotheses on how further research in this direction could proceed.

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[1] Gertrud Lehnert, "Raum und Gefühl," in Gertrud Lehnert (ed.), *Raum und Gefühl: Der Spatial Turn und die neue Emotionsforschung* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010), 9–25.

[2] Manuel A. Vásquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 261.

2. The material turn and its implications on spatiality and emplacement

The study of religions, just as every academic discipline, carries the baggage of its own past, here: a Protestant and enlightenment bias that resulted, as Manuel A. Vásquez contends, in a largely "somatophobic" study of religions.[3] Mainly focusing on the great sacred texts, inner experience, symbolic systems and theologies, religious studies have long ignored not just the bodily but also the material and practical dimensions of religions.[4]

Opposing this approach, Vásquez presents the sources of a material turn and suggests a non-reductive materialism which is meant to avoid idealistic, subjectivist and essentialist tendencies, and to focus instead on the embodiment, emplacement, and practice of religion. Vásquez' materialism is "non-reductive," because it recognizes the "material constraints and possibilities entailed by our being-in-the-world through our physical bodies," but "does not reduce all experiences and cultural productions to the dynamics of the brain, genes, or evolutionary biology."[5]

While Vásquez concentrates on three branches of the material turn and their epistemological predecessors – embodiment, practice, emplacement –, there are more 'turns'[6] with a related interest, e.g., the visual and iconic turn,[7] performance studies,[8] and aesthetics of religion.[9] In

[3] Vásquez, *More Than Belief*, 32.

[4] Vásquez, *More Than Belief*, 1; Birgit Meyer, *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Towards a Material Approach to Religion* (Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht, 2012), 8, argues similarly.

[5] Vásquez, *More Than Belief*, 6; Sebastian Schüler argues in a similar direction when he suggests that neither biological determinism nor naïve constructivism do justice to the reality of lived religions (Sebastian Schüler, "Zwischen Naturalismus und Sozialkonstruktivismus: Kognitive, körperliche, emotionale und soziale Dimensionen von Religion," *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft*, 22/1 (2014), 5–36).

[6] For an overview on recent turns, see Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch, 2007).

[7] See, e.g., David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[8] See, e.g., Bruce D. Forbes & Jeffrey H. Mahan (eds.), *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[9] See, e.g., Annette Wilke, "Religion/en, Sinne und Medien: Forschungsfeld Religionsästhetik und das Museum of World Religions (Taipeh)," in Annette Wilke & Esther-Maria Guggenmos (eds.), *Im Netz des Indra: Das Museum of World Religions, sein buddhistisches Dialogkonzept und die neue Disziplin Religionsästhetik* (Münster: LIT, 2008), 206–294; and Birgit Meyer (ed.), *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

this article, I am focusing on the spatial turn, complementing it with concepts from the field of embodiment because spatiality becomes 'real,' i.e., tangible and sensory experience, only through and in the body of the emplaced individual.

Kim Knott is without doubt one of the most prominent scholars of the spatial turn. In her 2010 article "Religion, Space, and Place: The Spatial Turn in Research on Religion,"[10] she summarizes the epistemological sources of the spatial turn and distinguishes what she calls "poetics" and "politics" of space, i.e., an essentialist and a constructionist approach to space.[11] She stresses that the relationship of body and space is crucial and therefore considers the "body as the source of space" in the first step of her analytical procedure to locate religion.[12] As all experience, religious experience emerges from this bio-spatial foundation.[13] Knott highlights the fact that the category of space would remain without effect if it were not for the embodied individuals who inhabit space. But she does not specifically consider how this connection is established, just like most publications in research on space and religion, which disregard the role of the perceiving body.[14]

Trying to start from this gap, I suggest to think concepts of the psychology of perception, of embodiment, kinesiology and of the spatial turn together, and focus on concrete, physical space and its relation to religious practice. This approach breaks with the tradition of studying larger and often metaphorical or imagined spaces and territories, as is the case in studies on

[10] A German translation of this groundbreaking article will soon appear in Martin Radermacher, Judith Stander & Annette Wilke, *103 Jahre Religionswissenschaft in Münster: Verortungen in Raum und Zeit* (Münster: LIT, forthcoming).

[11] Kim Knott, "Religion, Space, and Place: The Spatial Turn in Research on Religion," *Religion and Society: Advances in Research*, 1 (2010), 29–43.

[12] Knott, "Religion, Space, and Place," 36.

[13] Kim Knott, "Spatial Theory and Method for the Study of Religion," *Temenos – Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 41/2 (2005), 158.

[14] One exception is, e.g., Feld who states: "[A]s place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place" (Steven Feld, "Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea," in Steven Feld & Keith H. Basso (eds.), *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), 91–136). Anttonen considers the body and space as categories which contribute to the notion of the sacred, but he does not deal with the perceptual faculties of the body (Veikko Anttonen, "Space, Body, and the Notion of Boundary: A Category-Theoretical Approach to Religion," *Temenos – Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 41/2 (2005), 185–201).

migration, globalization, and religious territorialisation.[15] Instead, the focus lies on the concrete (often in the double literal meaning of the word) spaces of religious practice.

To argue that space has an agency of its own may sound strangely similar to the essentialist notion of sacred space in Mircea Eliade's work on the manifestations of the sacred in homogenous space.[16] What is the conceptual difference, then, between an essentially sacred space, one that is supposed to house a "hierophany,"[17] and an agentic space, one that "acts upon individuals just as it is shaped by their practices"?[18] How may we understand the notion that space 'acts'? First, architectonic space is *meant* to act, i.e., an architect has designed a room or building with a specific intention: With an idea in mind how people should feel upon entering the building, how they should move, and what they should do.[19] There is an entire subdiscipline concerned with such questions, the psychology of architecture.[20] But this is only one aspect of the notion of 'acting' space. More important in the present context is that space acts by restricting and facilitating (religious) practices, bodily activity, and sensory perception. And it does not always act the way it was meant to act. I shall elaborate this idea in section three, introducing a few examples.

To get back to the broader frame of this article, the question about the influence of concrete spatiality on religious practice involves three main categories: built space, the body, and imagination (symbolic systems, ideologies). Building on existing approaches within the material and spatial turns sketched above, I intend to compensate for the gaps which appear in recent literature by shedding light on the dialectics of built space, body, and imagination. The following graphic (Fig. 1) illustrates the interconnectedness of these categories.

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[15] See, e.g., Appadurai's notion of "scapes" (Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33); or studies on migration and diaspora like, e.g., Waltraud Kokot, "Diaspora und transnationale Verflechtungen," in Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin & Ulrich Braunkämper (eds.), *Perspektiven kultureller Verflechtungen* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 2002), 95–110.

[16] Mircea Eliade, *Das Heilige und das Profane: Vom Wesen des Religiösen* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1990), 14–5.

[17] Eliade, *Das Heilige und das Profane*, 14–5.

[18] Vásquez, *More Than Belief*, 261.

[19] Lehnert, "Raum und Gefühl," 9.

[20] See, e.g., Peter G. Richter (ed.), *Architekturpsychologie: Eine Einführung* (Lengerich: Pabst Science Publishers, 2008).

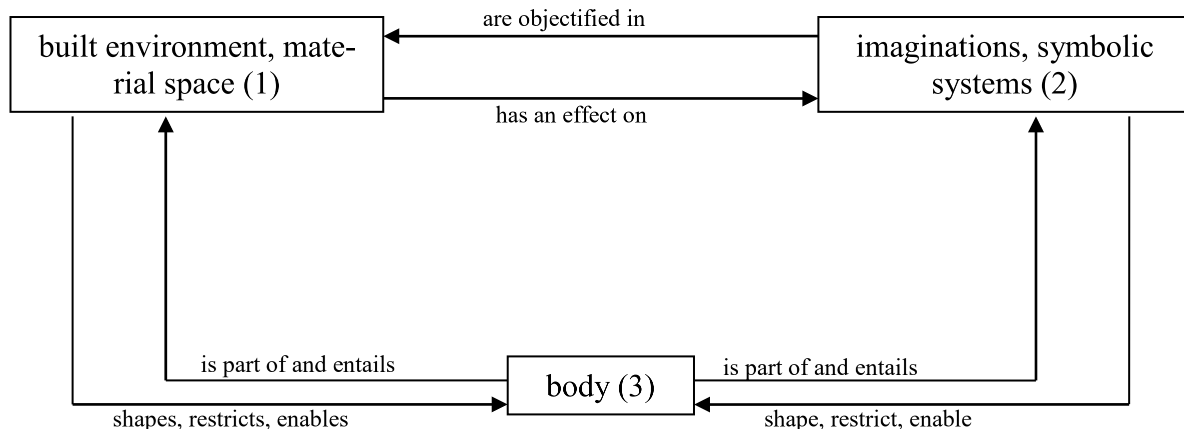

Fig. 1: Dialectics of space, imagination, and body (figure by the author, 2015)

The built environment (1), in which bodies move, may partly be understood as objectified imagination, i.e., an architect tries to materialize ideas.[21] Think, e.g., of theological assumptions influencing the architecture of churches. Conversely, material space itself has an effect on imaginations and ideologies, e.g. when it stimulates (re-)interpretations. Examples are the various modern understandings of archaic monuments such as Stonehenge or the Pyramids. This feedback from built space to the world of ideas is one aspect of the agency of space.

Symbolic systems (theologies, models of cosmic order, etc.), i.e., the 'imaginative layer' of material culture (2), shape the body in that they encourage certain forms and movements and restrict others. Rules on bodily comportment are just one of many examples. On the other hand, these symbolic systems are often shaped by the body. Mary Douglas, e.g., has demonstrated how the body serves as a model for systems of classification or models of societal or-

[21] Knott, "Spatial Theory and Method for the Study of Religion," 162, argues similarly.

ders.[22] Lakoff and Johnson have argued that the body is an orienting principle for metaphorical speech, which also points to the forming effect of bodies on the world of ideas.[23]

The body (3) is shaped, restricted and enabled by agentic built environments because they afford certain movements or direct the senses' attention. I will address this aspect later within the framework of James Gibson's concept of "affordance." The architecture of a temple or church often suggests a specific route and directs attention towards the main symbols, statues, or simply cardinal points.[24] At the same time, the body is part of built space and it entails the way these spaces are constructed. Built environments owe much of their form and function to the body and its physical and anatomic faculties. Doors, windows and furniture are based on the dimensions of the human body, even if they deliberately deviate from 'standard' size and distort proportions for different reasons. In short: human action (both discursive and bodily) constitutes space and space impacts human action.[25]

It is in the interplay of these three aspects (built space, imagination, body) that religious practice emerges. Therefore, to study religious practice from a perspective of the material and spatial turn challenges the researcher to consider all these elements equally. The relations between space, imagination, and body are highly dialectical.[26] The process of place-making is neither determined by human biology, nor by the material conditions of space, nor solely by socially and discursively construed imaginations and symbolic attributions. Quite the contrary, these entities entail each other.[27]

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[22] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966). Douglas' point has been illustrated, e.g., in Jean Comaroff 's *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), particularly 6–7, 217–18.

[23] George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, *Leben in Metaphern: Konstruktion und Gebrauch von Sprachbildern* (Heidelberg: Carl-Auer-Systeme, 2004).

[24] Hubert Mohr, "Religion in Bewegung: Religionsästhetische Überlegungen zur Aktivierung und Nutzung menschlicher Motorik," *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift*, 55/4 (2004), 310–324.

[25] Lehnert, "Raum und Gefühl," 11.

[26] Illustrative examples are the prayer rooms in the 24/7 movement which make possible this movement's practice but are, on the other hand, in continuous transformation through this same practice taking place in these rooms (Sebastian Schüler, "Kreativität, Moral und Metapher: Gebetsräume als Orte imaginativer Praxis," in Lucia Traut & Annette Wilke (eds.), *Religion – Imagination – Ästhetik: Vorstellungs- und Sinneswelten in Religion und Kultur* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 213–234.

[27] Vásquez, *More Than Belief*, 317.

3. Perceiving space, emplacing bodies

The connection between two of these elements, body and space, requires a little more explication because it has not been considered enough in existing studies. First, bodies move in rooms. Observing moving bodies in spatial settings requires a minute description, one that uses specific vocabulary. Hubert Mohr offers one set of descriptive terms in his 2004 article "Religion in Bewegung" ("Religion in Movement") although he does not specifically focus on the connection of bodies and built environments.[28] The basic distinctions in bodily movement are, according to Mohr, kinesis vs. static, changing position vs. changing place,[29] controlled vs. uncontrolled movements, and active vs. passive movements.[30] The quality of these movements can further be specified in terms of their structure (continuous, discrete, repetitive) and in terms of their direction and intensity (slow, fast).[31]

Second, the body perceives a room. The psychology of perception has developed descriptive terms trying to trace the biological and neurological processes that lie at the bottom of our (spatial) perception. A few of these concepts invite for creative application in the context of our present question.

There is, e.g., the concept that *posture* can, to a certain extent, influence feelings. Taking a straight and upward faced position usually stimulates positive emotions.[32] Architecture (consciously or unconsciously) makes use of this mechanism when it encourages individuals to look up or stretch their bodies in an upward direction. Vice versa, low and narrow doors may

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[28] Among others, he bases his analysis on Göhner's sports scientific study on the body in movement (Ulrich Göhner, *Einführung in die Bewegungslehre des Sports: Teil 1: Die sportlichen Bewegungen* (Schorndorf: Hofmann, 1992); and Ulrich Göhner, *Einführung in die Bewegungslehre des Sports: Teil 2: Bewegerlehre des Sports* (Schorndorf: Hofmann, 1999)). For an approach to movement in the context of religion and dance, see also Sam D. Gill's *Dancing Culture Religion* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), where he portrays movement/dance as the fundamental category of both religion and the study of religion.

[29] "lageverändernde" vs. "ortsverändernde" Bewegung

[30] Mohr, "Religion in Bewegung," 313–5.

[31] Mohr, "Religion in Bewegung," 317–8.

[32] Rainer Schönhammer, *Einführung in die Wahrnehmungspsychologie: Sinne, Körper, Bewegung* (Wien: Facultas, 2013), 33.

trigger the opposite feeling in a person entering through them. Both cases are illustrative examples of the direct agentic effect of built architecture on the body.

The concept of *peripersonal space* describes the space around our bodies which we perceive as personal space, i.e., an intrusion into this space provokes a reaction of some kind. The perimeters of this space are culturally variable, and usually people allow only intimate friends to enter this space (or strangers – under specific, culturally defined, conditions).[33] Architecture can have a direct influence on peripersonal space: Small rooms may lead to a reduction of distance between individuals; they suggest intimacy which may also be encouraged through the rituals held in these rooms.

The senses themselves have long been in the focus of the psychology of perception. Traditionally, there are five exteroceptive *sensory systems*: visual, auditory, haptic/tactile, olfactory, and gustatory.[34] Experiencing built environments usually activates most of them at the same time. Visual input is helpful to orient in a room, to locate entries and exits, other people, or different objects, etc. But visual perception is not just reflecting the physical reality of a room; it includes an active neurobiological process which may include the interpretation of patterns or the addition of contours. The eye 'sees' contours where in fact there are none, so-called subjective contours.[35] This may influence the perception of spatial settings, for instance in cathedrals which use the effect of spatial depth to induce the impression of greatness.

The auditory system perceives objects or events by the sound they produce; it can be characterized by volume, pitch, and timbre.[36] Sound as an element of spatial settings is certainly important when we think of the musical and speech-related dimensions of religious place-making. One could even think of 'spaces of sound,' emanating, e.g., from minarets and thus exceeding the sheer walls of a mosque. The achievement of auditory perception is that com-

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[33] Schönhammer, *Einführung in die Wahrnehmungspsychologie*, 257.
[34] Paul Pauli (ed.), *Biopsychologie* (München: Pearson Studium, 2007), 202.
[35] Pauli, *Biopsychologie*, 209.
[36] Pauli, *Biopsychologie*, 216.

plex acoustic environments are still broken down into single, identified sources although the different sounds interfere with each other.[37]

The psychology of perception distinguishes between tactile (being touched) and haptic (touching) perception.[38] Both these sensory experiences are relevant in spatial settings when the quality of touching walls, floors, and furniture comes into play. There is, generally, no way of entering a room without touching its floor. And the quality of this haptic experience can have different effects. It may slow us down (thick carpets), it may encourage us to step silently (echoing hardwood floors), or it might stimulate the feeling of connectedness to the earth (clay and natural materials).

Finally, olfactory perception plays an underestimated role in the perception of built spatial settings. One might even speak of olfactory atmospheres which are specific of certain religious contexts (incense in Catholic settings, camphor in Tamil Hindu temples, etc.).

Taken together, the different perceptible properties of built (and natural) environments can fruitfully be merged in what James J. Gibson has termed the "affordance" of things.[39] The sum of properties of material objects and architecture 'communicates,' in a way, what human beings are to do with them. Anticipating the notion of the agency of things, Gibson stressed that these affordances are independent of whether they are actually made use of.[40] "Affordance," in this sense, may be an overarching concept pointing to the interconnectedness of a place's physical features, the perceiving human being, and its corporeal behaviour in this space.

In many settings of religious practice, there is an abundance of different sorts of stimuli, i.e., a great number of visual, auditory, haptic and other sensory information at a time. Nonetheless, and this is necessary for affordances to 'work,' psychological processes of perception manage

[37] Pauli, *Biopsychologie*, 219.

[38] Schönhammer, *Einführung in die Wahrnehmungspsychologie*, 38.

[39] James J. Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances," in Robert Shaw & John Bransford (eds.), *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing: Toward an Ecological Psychology* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977), 67–82.

[40] Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances," 69.

to filter the relevant pieces of information. This mechanism of *selective attention* improves the perception of stimuli which are in focus and diminishes the perception of those which are not in focus. It is an active, cognitive effort to focus attention on one set of stimuli.[41] The concept of selective attention is of use describing spatially mediated interaction. Often, architectonic measures influence the way we focus our attention, be it through acoustic architecture or visual markers, light and darkness, etc. On a neuronal level, the anticipation of a specific stimulus (e.g., waiting for a specific signal to occur) increases the activity of those neurons which are activated by the actual stimulus as well.[42]

These neurobiological concepts contribute to our understanding of interaction in spatial settings and they direct the researcher's attention towards biological and psychological mechanisms of perception in built environments. I have tried to introduce a few of these concepts from the biological and psychological study of perception to enlarge our toolbox for the study of religious practice in concrete spatial settings. In the next part, I briefly illustrate the potential of these concepts and the tripartite framework introduced above (built space, imagination, body) in two different contexts: that of rooms of silence and that of sports facilities in devotional fitness. These are examples on the connections of built architectonic space, the body (including its movement and perception), and religious imagination.

4. Empirical examples

Before I turn to the presentation of a few observations made in fieldwork, some notes on methodological issues are due. Being interested in the interplay of body, built space and imagination, the researcher basically relies on three sources of information: his or her own (bodily) perception and experience; material objects and spatial structures; statements by other people (informants). As with all research settings, the researcher's own experience and interpretation

[41] Pauli, *Biopsychologie*, 238.
[42] Pauli, *Biopsychologie*, 239.

of the field needs to be reflected as it is shaped by subjective (and implicit) expectations, background and socialization.

Consequently, my account is based on a description and analysis of the material aspects of space, ethnographic research (participant observation, interviews), and a research method André Droogers refers to as "the body as a research tool".[43] In brief, this means that the researcher should temporarily share the "concrete bodily experiences of the people being studied,"[44] thus hoping to gain a richer understanding of these experiences.[45] While there may be justifiable doubts as to what extent the methodologically guided bodily participation in the field can provide insights on how those observed perceive their own corporeal, mental, and spiritual experience, it is nonetheless useful to consider the researcher's own physical presence as a possible source of additional data. In visiting rooms of silence and participating in devotional fitness classes, I was able to gather concrete bodily experiences, even if I did not 'share' other individuals' experiences in the strict sense. While there is no room in this paper to dive into the methodological and epistemological issues at stake here, this brief note is meant to provide basic information on how the data presented below was collected and analyzed.

4.1 Spaces of silence

Rooms of silence have spread in hospitals, universities, and other public spaces ever since the United Nations in New York built such a room in 1957 under Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld.[46] In the special case of hospitals, this sort of rooms has been researched by Wendy

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[43] André Droogers, "As Close As a Scholar Can Get: Exploring a One-Field Approach to the Study of Religion," in Hent de Vries (ed.), *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 448–463, 456.
[44] Droogers, "As Close As a Scholar Can Get," 455.
[45] André Droogers' approach of the "body as a research tool" has been put into practice by sociologist Loïc Wacquant in *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) where he deploys "the body as tool of inquiry and vector of knowledge" as well (viii).
[46] On rooms of silence in general, see, e.g., Sabine Kraft, *Räume der Stille* (Marburg: Jonas, 2007).

Cadge who deals with hospital chapels.[47] In another article,[48] she reviews some of her material from *Paging God* and studies these rooms as indicators of the presence of religion in secular settings. She observes that these physical spaces, often called either chapels or meditation rooms, demarcate a specific space for religious and spiritual practice within 'secular' space. There is a tendency, Cadge demonstrates, that hospitals remove religious symbols and objects from these rooms to make them as open and inviting to a variety of people from different religious backgrounds as possible, in short, to allow for "multi-faith spaces" through creating "neutral" spaces. Implicitly, however, they still reveal Christian concepts.[49]

Concerning the topic of this article, rooms of silence may be considered as examples of how a specific ideology – here: to provide a 'neutral' space for spiritual practice in secular environments – becomes manifest in the concrete walls of rooms of silence. This space of 'multi-faith silence' becomes possible by realizing a sort of paradox: Space is architectonically *decontextualized* to create a new *context* which affords particular religious experiences. A random Google search[50] for "rooms of silence" (Fig. 2), for instance, reveals that the architectural equivalent to an ideology of 'neutral' spiritual space seems to lie in a reduction of stimuli, just as Cadge points out. In terms of colour and light, there is a tendency towards pale, monochromatic designs. The interior shows only a few pieces of furniture, sometimes completed by a picture or symbol.

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[47] Wendy Cadge, *Paging God: Religion in the Halls of Medicine* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 51 ff. For the German context, see Katharina Engelke, *Zwischen Sakralität und Stille: Eine empirische Untersuchung zum Raum der Stille im Hildesheimer Klinikum* (Berlin, Münster: LIT, 2013), 6. On multi-faith spaces in general, see the results of the project "Multi-Faith Spaces – Symptoms and Agents of Religious and Social Change" at the University of Manchester, e.g. Ralf Brand, "Multi-Faith Spaces in the 21st Century," in Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto (eds.), *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (London: Routledge, 2012), 219–224.

[48] Wendy Cadge, "Négocier les Différences Religieuses dans les Organisations Laïques. L'Exemple des Chapelles d'Hôpitaux," *Social Compass* 61/2 (2014), 178–194.

[49] Cadge, "Négocier les Différences Religieuses," 178.

[50] From a methodological perspective, the results of a Google search may have limited value, but as a point of entry, they deserve, to my mind, consideration.

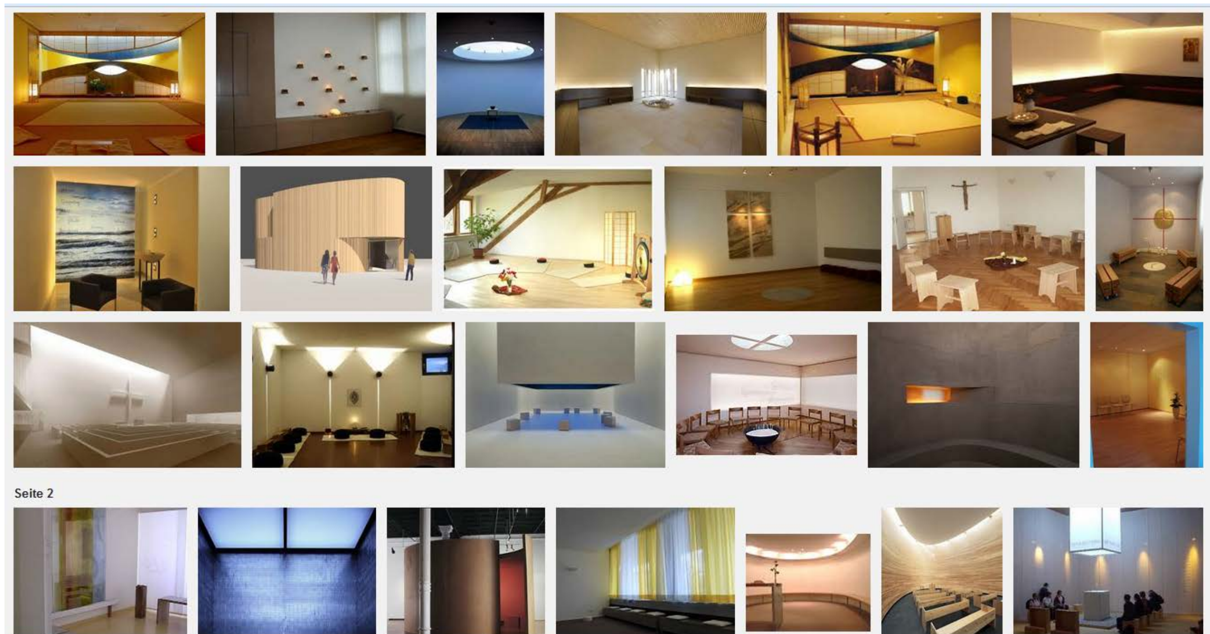

Fig. 2: Results of a Google search for “rooms of silence”

A body entering these rooms will typically slow down its movements, lower its voice, and probably stand still or sit down. The room has a disciplining quality that stems from the value-ideas connoted with ‘spiritual’ places. Just as people in a Christian Western context would not enter a church with vivid movement and loud laughter, they will not enter a room of silence to have a picnic or celebrate a party. This reveals the Christian bias in rooms of silence, which Cadge points out. In other cultural contexts, however, spiritual space may invite vividness, laughter, and a generally active comportment. But this is not what rooms of silence are meant for. There is often only one architectonic element which directs the attention of the senses, and it is usually solely a visual stimulus, e.g., a light (Fig. 3), a window, or an image, sometimes a cross. If there is sound, it is usually ‘meditative’ music in order to create an atmosphere of silence and contemplation.

Fig. 3: Room of silence in the Alexianer hospital in Krefeld (North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany) (© Reinhard Kirste, Creative Commons License CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

All in all, rooms of silence afford a reduction of bodily movement through the reduction of stimuli; thereby expressing the idea that a place of spiritual practice needs to be 'quiet' and 'contemplative.' The aspects of built environment, religious imagination, and bodily movement and perception play together to create an atmospheric setting for a specific spiritual practice: one which is characteristic of rooms of silence. Quite in contrast to these rooms, which materialize 'multi-faith silence,' the next example deals with rooms which stimulate 'mono-faith agitation.'

4.2 Spaces of devotional fitness

Before I turn to the elaboration of the connection between body, built environment, and religious imagination in devotional fitness, let me briefly introduce this fairly new field of research. The concept "devotional fitness" follows R. Marie Griffith's analysis of a "devotional fitness culture" in the United States[51] and refers to Christian fitness and diet plans which have been developed in North America since the 1950s in order to provide Christians with biblically grounded ways of shaping their bodies.[52] These programmes vary in size, application, and practice but they have in common that virtually all of them build on the notion of the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit. This idea, taken from 1 Cor. 6: 19–20, is understood in a specific, fitness-centred way: The physical body, the "temple," should be healthy, fit, and slim. Making this connection between "temple" and fitness or slimness rests upon the import of a commonly accepted imperative for health, slimness and fitness which has spread in Western societies since the beginning of the 20th century.[53] Some programmes focus on biblically grounded diets,[54] others – and these are of interest here – focus more on physical activity and sports.[55] Despite their continuous reference to biblical sources, these programmes provide everything the non-Christian fitness market offers: Walking, jogging, aerobics, Pilates, Zumba, yoga, strength training with weights, and stretching and relaxation classes. What distinguishes them, however, is that fitness exercises are combined with prayer and meditation on biblical scripture and that most classes are accompanied by contemporary Christian music.

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[51] R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 160 ff.

[52] On the relations between conservative Protestant groups and sports see also Simon Coleman, "Of Metaphors and Muscles: Protestant 'Play' in the Disciplining of the Self," in Simon Coleman & Tamara Kohn (eds.), *The Discipline of Leisure: Embodying Cultures of 'Recreation'* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 39–53; and Coleman's *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[53] For more on devotional fitness, see Martin Radermacher, *Devotional Fitness: An Analysis of Contemporary Christian Dieting and Fitness Programs in the United States* (Springer, forthcoming).

[54] E.g. "First Place 4 Health" (founded in 1981 by Carole Lewis); David L. Meinz, *Eating by the Book: What the Bible Says about Food, Fat, Fitness & Faith* (Virginia Beach, VA: Gilbert Press, 1999); or Don Colbert, *What Would Jesus Eat?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002).

[55] E.g. "Body & Soul Fitness" (founded in 1981 by Jeannie Blocher); Ben Lerner, *Body by God: The Owner's Manual for Maximized Living* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003); or "ActivPrayer" (founded in 2010 by Luke Burgis).

The facilities are as different as the programmes: There are meetings in private homes (usually for health related bible studies such as First Place 4 Health[56]), fitness classes in church buildings (either in the auditorium or in different rooms), regular fitness centres, and outdoor activities that do not require built structures. My focus here is on those built places where people engage in Christian fitness classes; the descriptions below stem from participant observations in fitness classes in Montvale, NJ (church basement) and Vienna, VA (gym in a church complex), visited in October and November 2011.

In their aesthetics, these facilities show features that are prevailing in the broader fitness culture. Mats, weights, bands, other training devices, a faint smell of sweat – these elements are analog to the non-religious fitness genre. Through their visual, haptic, and auditory stimuli, these settings afford physical movement. Bodies which are used to work out in fitness centres will almost be forced by the spatial atmosphere in these facilities to join other bodies in motion. It is virtually impossible to enter a fitness centre and *not* work out because both social expectations and spatial conditions activate the disposition to engage in physical exercise.

Additionally, these spaces are often marked as 'Christian,' and be it only through the music playing there or the context of a Christian organization and evangelical theology. The multisensory setting in these rooms combines features from the culture of sports and features from the evangelical culture. Selective attention towards the trainer's appeal to pray during training sessions allows for an understanding of sports as prayer – this, in turn, translates to the evangelical value-idea that the whole of Christian life should be a prayer.

The facilities chosen for devotional fitness spatially indicate one of the formative features of devotional fitness: Sometimes we will find exercise classes in church rooms; sometimes we

[56] First Place 4 Health, founded in 1980 within Houston's First Baptist Church, is one of the largest Christian dieting organizations in the United States. They want to "provide a Biblical, health-oriented program that enables individuals to achieve wellness in mind, body, soul and spirit based on a relationship with Jesus Christ" (First Place 4 Health 2011). The programme owes its title to the claim that it "puts Christ first" in every area of life, particularly in the area of losing weight and becoming 'healthy.' Participants usually attend regular meetings in private homes and churches where they read the official bible studies and discuss their issues with overweight and weight-loss.

will find devotional fitness taking place in ‘secular’ gyms. In these places, it is what people *do*, their performative acts, which make these settings ‘religious.’ They pray together, recite or listen to biblical verses while exercising, synchronize their postures with Christian music and with each other. It is a spatial manifestation of the entangled status of devotional fitness when the fitness class occurs in a room whose primary use is ‘non-religious’ and, for the duration of the class, transforms this room into a setting which is Christian to the participants – and marked as such to the outsider who can identify the essential markers (references to biblical sources, Christian playlist, etc.). Here, we have an example of how religious imagination, spatial settings, and bodily kinesics generate a distinct Christian practice.

5. By way of a conclusion: What's next?

The intention of this paper was to think about the question how the concrete spatiality of built environments shapes religious practice, and how religious practice, in turn, leaves its imprints on built architecture. By drafting the analysis around the basic dialectics of built environments, religious imagination, and the body, my intention was to suggest an interdisciplinary approach to the study of making and sensing (religious) places. Illustrating this approach with two examples, I have tried to demonstrate its potential for further research. In the context of existing research on the agency of material space,[57] my point is that built environments afford and constrain bodily perception and behaviour and, thus, enable and disable religious practices. By and large, however, this paper is only a first tentative step towards a more systematic and empirically grounded analysis.

The further analysis should include observations on how concrete spatial practice contributes to the dedifferentiation of space formerly divided into 'religious' and 'secular' portions. In the discussion of devotional fitness, I have already pointed out that there occurs an entanglement of seemingly 'secular' space (fitness centres) which is used for religious practice which itself is an adoption of non-Christian fitness practice. Vice versa, seemingly 'religious' space (church buildings) becomes part of a fitness activity which is, for many observers, not religious (Pilates, Zumba, Aerobics, etc.). Settings like these make it increasingly difficult to hold up older distinctions of religious vs. secular place or practice. The approach sketched in this article invites rethinking this problem within the framework of space, imagination, and practice: This would allow for a detailed elaboration of each of these elements' role in 'making' religious/non-religious place and articulating this classification to participants and passers-by.

[57] Prominently, e.g., Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

In this context, the concrete spatial practice of religious groups may also be researched as a way of negotiating space and making claims about religious territory.[58]

What is needed is a concise vocabulary to observe and describe bodily movement, atmospheric settings, and their relations. Starting points have already been noted in this paper, but an overarching taxonomy is non-existent so far. With this toolbox of terms at hand, we might start comparative work based on historic and empirical research. Perhaps, one could identify 'styles' of atmospheres which correspond to certain perceptual stimuli and bodily action. It could also be possible to identify different types of rooms; as I have already begun to classify (multi-faith rooms of silence vs. mono-faith rooms of agitation). One could even think about experimental studies on the relationship between built environments and human behaviour which consider material space as an independent variable, i.e., as a causative factor for behaviour, and not merely as a neutral stage or container for the experiment.[59] Thus, the agentic quality of space could become measurable, e.g., when an experiment was conducted twice in two different rooms ceteris paribus.

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[58] See, e.g., Elisha on constructing evangelical space within 'secular' urban space (Omri Elisha, "The Time and Place for Prayer: Evangelical Urbanism and Citywide Prayer Movements," *Religion* 43/3 (2013), 312–330); or thousands of yoga practitioners populating Times Square, NYC, on summer solstice.

[59] As is already done by Anna Konstanze Schröder in her replication of an experiment by Dimitris Xygalatas who researches cooperative behaviour in religious settings (Dimitris Xygalatas, "Effects of Religious Setting on Cooperative Behavior: A Case Study from Mauritius," *Religion, Brain, and Behavior* 3/2 (2013), 91–102).

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