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The Sacred and the Suburban: Atmospheric, numinosity and 1930s interiors in Ealing, London.

David Gilbert, Laura Cuch, Claire Dwyer and Nazneen Ahmed

ABSTRACT

Near each other in Ealing, London, and both dating from the 1930s, the Ealing Christian Centre (ECC) and the Anglican Church of St Thomas the Apostle show contrasting relationships between interior design and Christian faith. Architect Edward Maufe's St Thomas's was a purposeful quest to create numinous sacred space in suburbia. The ECC, a branch of the Elim Pentecostal Church, took over the old Avenue cinema, one of the finest British examples of the 'atmospheric' style. At the ECC, the distinctiveness and theatricality of the building makes an important contribution to the nature of collective worship, but the Church resists on theological grounds any suggestions that the space itself has sacred qualities.

Keywords:

Sacred space; suburbs; theology; atmospheric cinemas; numinous space; 1930s architecture; London

The authors are all participants in the AHRC-funded "Making Suburban Faith" project, based in the Geography Department at University College London. The project explores the creativity of suburban faith communities from different religions and migration traditions, focusing on architecture, material culture, ritual, music and performance.

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The Cinema and the Church

In the early 1930s, within 18 months, two very different buildings were opened in the rapidly expanding West London suburb of Ealing. On 5th September 1932, the Avenue Cinema opened on Northfield Avenue with a bill that included live acrobatic dancers on stage, followed by various short films and the main bill of Edward G. Robinson in *The Honorable Mr Wong*. Less than a mile away, on 10th March 1934, the Bishop of London consecrated the new Anglican church of St Thomas the Apostle. Both buildings survive to the present day, and are listed as grade II* by English Heritage, particularly for the quality of their interiors. The buildings represent extremes of 1930s English style. The cinema, known locally as 'The Spanish City', was fantasy architecture in the service of commercial culture. In the main 1536-seat auditorium, the architect Cecil Masey had created a spectacular simulacrum of a Spanish open courtyard, with elaborate drapes mimicking a tented roof, and large plasterwork features on the internal walls. By contrast, Edward Maufe's interior for St. Thomas's Church was what he described in *The Architects' Journal* (15 March 1934: 383) as 'straightforward and direct' in the service of 'liturgical use'. The Church was a reworking of traditional church design using reinforced concrete and other modern materials to pare down gothic form to its most basic geometries of vaults and arches.

Despite their contrasting interiors and purposes, the two buildings are linked by more than their common location, and the fact that many residents of the new landscape of semi-detached housing attended both. St Thomas's was part of the Church of England's 'Forty-Five Churches' appeal and broader campaign that sought to challenge the supposedly godless culture of suburbia, and particularly a shift towards the pleasures and distractions of popular entertainment and consumerism. Ironically, in the complex religious geography of late-twentieth and early twenty-first century London, it is suburban cinemas rather than places of religion that have declined. The cinema closed in 1985, and after a brief period as a night-club, was taken over by the Elim Pentecostal Church, opening in 1996 as the Ealing Christian Centre (ECC). It is now a very different kind of faith space from purpose-built inter-war churches like St. Thomas's.

The two spaces represent not just very different 1930s aesthetics, but also very different spaces of faith. At St Thomas's there was a very deliberate plan to create 'sacred space'. Maufe's design was explicitly informed by theology, but also sought to create a space of numinosity provoking a very particular kind of affective spiritual response. As a version of the American style of 'atmospheric cinema', the Avenue was intended (albeit in rather different ways) to foster affective response and a sense of separation from the suburban world outside. In its new role as a space of faith, that sense of separation and theatrical atmosphere is important for the ways that worship works as a shared experience of the transcendent. However, the contrast between these spaces shows the significance of the relationship between space and sacred text, particularly if we take the beliefs and practices of these two Christian faith groups seriously (see Sterrett and Thomas 2011). In one, the sacredness of the space comes in part

from the way that the building refers to, and in some ways provides a material extension of biblical texts. In the other, despite the clear 'specialness' of the building, and its separateness from the world outside, there is a specific and powerful theological denial that the space itself is 'sacred'.

Laura Cuch's photo-essay intertwined with this article contrasts these two suburban spaces of faith. Rather than simply illustrating the histories and analyses presented here, the photo-essay works in parallel, providing a visual response to the atmospherics and numinosity of these spaces.

Making sacred space at St Thomas the Apostle

Writing a few months before St Thomas's was consecrated, Reverend R. Webb-Odell, secretary of the Forty-Five Churches appeal lamented the state of suburban faith: 'Left alone with no man to care of their souls there is the Wireless, the Cinema, the Public House, everything that is for the body provided – huge districts without a soul'. (Webb-Odell 1933: 161) Underpinning the Forty-Five Churches appeal was a sense of a rising tide of secularism, the marginalization of religion in everyday life, and the role of suburban landscapes and lifestyles as a significant driving force in that change. Building new churches in the suburbs was intended to work not just through the mission work of priests, and the creation of an alternative religious focus to local life, but also through the creation of new sacred spaces, explicitly designed to be sites of sanctuary, contemplation and ritual apart from the mundane and profane world outside. (Walford 2007; Dwyer, Gilbert & Shah 2013)

Edward Maufe's best-known building is Guildford Cathedral, for which he won the architectural competition in 1932, and which was dedicated in 1962. Maufe had already designed two suburban churches at St Bede in Clapham and St Saviour's Acton (both commissions from the Royal Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb.) In his design for St Saviour's, Maufe was influenced by contemporary Swedish architecture, particularly Ivar Tengbom's Högalid Church in Stockholm, which influenced his commitment to simplicity of form and a modernism that openly referenced tradition (Richardson 2004). St Thomas's was a testing ground for Maufe's ideas for Guildford, and for many is seen as his most completely successful work, and perhaps the "finest church of its era in London" (Yelton and Salmon 2007: 78).

The exterior of the church is built in brick, echoing the materials of the suburban streets around. The outstanding exterior feature is Eric Gill's Calvary, whose cross forms the glazing pattern of the circular east window. It is, however, the interior of the church that is most distinctive and has a number of key characteristics. The first impression entering through either of the severely-pointed wooden doors on the northern side of the nave is of the scale, proportions and the luminosity of the space, particularly on a bright afternoon with sunlight streaming through the tall lancet west windows. The dominant colour is white, with a high groin vault in concrete overlaid with 'acoustic plaster' (which contained asbestos until the plasterwork was replaced in the late

1990s.) The roof is supported by white-rendered buttresses into which are cut seven lancet arches on each side. The same form of narrow pointed arches is used in long north and south side aisles, one leading to the Morning Chapel (or Lady Chapel) the other to the clergy vestry. The space is designed to emphasize distance and difference from world outside. There is here not just an evocation of the cultural meanings of older gothic traditions through lightness and verticality, but also the use of new materials as well as formal simplicity in the making of numinous space. In a lecture early in 1934, Maufe made a strong defence of modern architecture, arguing that that the essential aims for the architect of a church were “beauty” and creating “an eternal place.” (*West Middlesex Gazette* 27th Jan 1934: 14).

Maufe’s design for St Thomas’s also attempted to make sacred space through its coherence. For Maufe, such coherence required control over all details of the building, including decoration, carpets and furnishing. Writing to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, Maufe commented that “individual members of the church committee are inclined to choose undesirable objects from church furnishing firms. I am prepared to design such things for no fee rather than have the church spoiled ...” (Maufe 1934) In part, this tells of power and ego, and Maufe’s sense of his mission and gifts; he saw the architect as “equally as much an artist as the painter” (*West Middlesex Gazette* 27th Jan 1934:14). At the same time this was about the creation of a unified effect. St Thomas’s was in part paid for by the sale of St Thomas’s Church at Portman Square in the West End of London. This allowed Maufe to commission works from some of the key decorative artists of the 1930s, and crucially to design them into the structure of the building. As well as Gill’s Calvary, the interior features notable works by Vernon Hill, James Woodford, Moira Forsyth, Elizabeth Starling and Kathleen Roberts. Maufe worked most closely with Hill, specifying the use of Weldon stone for the font and other carvings in the Church.

Maufe’s vision for St Thomas’s was strongly affected by his traditionalist Anglican faith, and by a particular view of the nature of a church as sacred space. He commented that there “were many today who would like to see churches built like a theatre. If that ever took place those who attended would cease to become worshippers, but would become mere spectators ... We should ever remember that the church was a sanctuary, and not an assembly room.” (*West Middlesex Gazette* 27th Jan 1934:14).

As well as form and coherence, the Church was designed as sanctuary through an intertextual relationship with scripture. Maufe followed earlier architects in drawing on biblical texts for the proportionality of the space, and particularly passages that specified the proportions of Solomon’s Temple. These scriptures were probable influences on the proportions of Wren and Hawksmoor’s churches, as Protestant architects looked to build scripture into the structure of buildings, and as such St Thomas’s works within a tradition of London church building (Du Prey 2000; Hart 2002). At St Thomas’s both the sanctuary and the chancel follow the cubic proportions of the inner sanctuary or ‘Holy of Holies’ in Solomon’s Temple set out in 1 Kings 6:20, while the main nave follows the description of ‘The Holy Place’ (2 Chronicles 3:3) in being as wide as

it is high and three times that in length. The church also works a kind of material palimpsest, its simple forms overwritten with decorative details that reference scripture. Hill carved a fish and anchor into the font as well as the Greek IXΘΥΣ cypher, all symbols of Christ; the font and kicking plates on the external doors also feature wave designs, references to baptism and spiritual renewal. Christ the Morning Star (drawing upon Revelation 22:17) was an important motif in Maufe's work, and is referenced in the small window of the Morning Chapel, and in Kathleen Roberts' ceiling design.

The design of St Thomas's has had a powerful effect on the form of worship that takes place in the building. It was designed to work with certain forms of ritual and performance. The Church is quite resistant to attempts to change this. Some of the congregation remember a short-lived experiment with 'worship in the round' in the 1980s that moved the altar into the nave, cutting against the grain of the building. The present incumbent, Fr Robert Chapman points to the way that even something as precise as having to face the altar rather than congregation during the Eucharist Prayer seems hard-coded into the logic of the building (Chapman 2013). More generally, Chapman situates the design of St Thomas's within a cluster of cultural and ecclesiastical influences from the early twentieth century, that included the legacy of the Arts and Crafts movement, the idealized notions of a distinctively English church-form and liturgy in Percy Dearmer's *The Parson's Notebook* (1899), and the publication of the *English Hymnal* in 1906. However, he also points to the overarching significance of the numinosity of the interior space: "It is communicating beauty, it is looking for the divine, it's that Platonic view of the world that by producing something beautiful it reveals the beautiful – that is to say it reveals God." (Chapman 2013)

From 'The Spanish City' to the Ealing Christian Centre

Two distinct lineages of interior design converged at the Avenue cinema. The architect Cecil Masey came out of a tradition of British theatre architects. He had trained with Bertie Crewe, who in turn had been influenced by Frank Matcham. (Walker 1980; MacIntosh 2004) Between them, Matcham, Crewe and his two contemporaries W.G.R. Sprague and Thomas Verity (also influenced by Matcham) designed most of the West End auditoriums of the late nineteenth-century and the great boom in theatre and variety hall building in the Edwardian period. In the 1920s and 1930s, Crewe turned to cinema design, influencing Masey's approach to his work for the Granada chain (Taylor 2003: 50). Masey's cinema interiors retained a strongly theatrical model; at The Avenue the curving arrangement of the seating in stalls and balcony, the size of the proscenium opening and the depth of stage contrasted with many contemporary modern-style cinemas that had adopted a rectilinear seating pattern, and with often only a residual narrow stage for announcements. The Avenue was built for spectacle and performance. Up until the Second World War, it was the venue for regular hybrid 'cine-variety' events, combining film with big bands, and even a visiting circus act complete with live elephant. The Avenue featured 'Holophane' lighting equipment which provided 'a stage with the appearance of wonderful depth, and

colour hues of a tone so beautiful and rich as to defy description.' (*Cinema, Theatre and General Construction* 1932: 15)

The Avenue was also built to create 'atmosphere.' The other line of influence on Masey originated in the USA, where John Eberson had developed the 'atmospheric style' of cinema design in the early 1920s. Eberson's cinemas attempted to immerse patrons in an exotic, fantasy setting, often mimicking a southern European or North African open courtyard or garden. At the start of the programme, lighting effects were used to create the effect of the setting sun, colours changing from yellow through red to mauve as darkness fell, while smoke machines reproduced evening mist. "Eberson made the theatre patron an active, comfortable resident of an imaginary time and place, not a passive, aloof occupant of an oppressive formal space." (Hofmann 2015: 54) In Eberson's cinemas the side walls often featured plaster architectural features, and even live trees, vines and taxidermied birds.

In Britain, Eberson's ideas and style were picked up by the theatre director and designer, Theodore Komisarjevsky. Komisarjevsky had fled the Soviet Union in 1919, and had established himself in London as a theatre director and designer, who rapidly differentiated himself from the contemporary English fashion for realistic sets. Komisarjevsky's set designs instead strove to achieve mood and atmosphere, and made dramatic use of lighting technology to create highlights, shadows, and halftones on stage (Marshall 2004). In the late 1920s Komisarjevsky was employed by the Granada chain to design cinema interiors, and was inspired by Eberson's atmospheric approach. Komisarjevsky worked closely with Masey, most notably at the giant Art Deco Granada cinema in Tooting.

There is no evidence that Komisarjevsky was directly involved at the Avenue, but there Masey gave the fullest expression of the atmospheric style in a British cinema, directly referencing Eberson's work. *Cinema, Theatre and General Construction* explained the architect's intention to create "the courtyard of some large Spanish building, with roofed-in walls on either side and open in front," contrasting the effect with "so-called modern buildings, which are certainly both striking and original, but are devoid of all architectural form or dignity" (1932: 13). Arranged around the side walls were near-full sized plaster buildings, representing a Mediterranean village, the asymmetry of the design adding to the atmospheric effect; the bell-tower and tiled roof to the right of the stage/screen particularly striking. The effect was supplemented by artificial foliage, while above the courtyard hung a giant striped awning, decorated with the faux armorial shields also found in much of the plaster detailing. (Cinema Theatre Association 2002: 3). The Spanish theme and intensity of decorative work continued into the large foyer, and the outer vestibule with payboxes and ticket machines.

The decorative opulence that ran through "The Spanish City" contributed to a double or even triple fantasy for audiences escaping a mundane suburban high street. Audiences were, of course, taken out of their lives through imaginative absorption in the story-worlds on screen; the atmospheric cinema

also summoned an exotic Spanish other (drawing upon long-established tropes in British imaginative geographies), but perhaps most strongly connected the audiences with the experience and glamour of American and particularly Californian lifestyles and pleasurable consumption.

Like many suburban cinemas, 'the Spanish City' went into steady decline from the 1950s onwards. It closed 1985 (the final film was appropriately, *The Terminator*). It was converted to a night-club ('The Top Hat'), resulting in significant damage to the decorative work, and the loss of the original seats, stage fittings and carpets. In 1994, the building was acquired by the Elim Pentecostal Church, and it reopened as the Ealing Christian Centre in 1996.

Theology, atmosphere and the sacred in 1930s interiors

The Elim Church has its origins in the religious revival movements of the early part of the twentieth century. It was founded in 1915 by the Welsh preacher George Jeffreys in Ireland, before undertaking a series of revivalist "crusades" in England in the 1920s and 1930s (Boulton 1999). The name references Exodus (15:27), where Moses leading the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt through the desert came to an oasis called Elim. The name is appropriate for a Church of movement and mission, rather than one with a more settled parish geography. Elim reached Ealing in 1930, when Jeffreys preached in a large marquee, claiming around 800 converts. A church was set up in a local hall, before more permanent premises were found in 1934. In an echo of the fate of "The Spanish City", the church took over the old Elite Picture Palace, a redundant silent cinema being used as a dance hall.

The Elim Church's relationship with its home at "The Spanish City" is complex and mediated by its theology. The Church has a strong sense of its civic responsibilities, and has a generally successful partnership with English Heritage. Since the move to the building, there has been a major programme of restoration undertaken almost entirely by volunteers from the Church; this has included important decorative features that had been damaged or covered, such as the large inglenook fireplace in the foyer. The work is seen as prayerful and spiritually meaningful for volunteers, and a way of giving service to the Church.

At the same time, the theology of the Church means that there is a distancing from any sense that this is sacred space. Elim, as a church, has a belief in the centrality of the Word, and a direct, personal relationship between believer and God; following the text of Matthew's Gospel (18:20) there are no particularly holy sites, "for where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them". The relationship between faith and "building" is explicitly discussed by Senior Pastor Richard Buxton in a recent commentary, addressing the Church's quest for planning permission and the agreement of English Heritage to extend the Ealing Christian Centre. (This will not affect the historic core of the old cinema, but will provide extra space for offices, prayer rooms and a new 200-seater auditorium above the existing building). Buxton affirms that the physical building "is only there to serve our

primary purpose which is to build spiritually ... For us, we do not have a physical altar; we have the cross of Christ, where the sacrifice for our sins was accomplished. Our 'altar' is our time of personal devotions – prayer and reading God's Word, the Bible. ... We do not need a physical temple, since believers ourselves are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16)." (Buxton 2015: 2). This theology is reflected in the space of the auditorium; the only visible religious addition to the interior is a simple undecorated cross, placed central stage.

Other Pentecostal and evangelical Churches with this theological position have set up successfully in shabby, functional ex-industrial or office buildings, and, of course, suspicion of worldly decoration has been a strand of Protestantism since the Reformation. (Krause, 2007) There is an obvious contrast with the references to Solomon's Temple at St Thomas's. Nonetheless, there is a strong sense of the fit of the cinema to the Elim church in Ealing, that turns attention away from the sacred significance of decoration, proportion and iconography towards the role of space in the performative practices of collective worship. Worship at Elim combines intense prayer (one of the reasons for the planning application is to increase the space for prayer groups), with large assemblies for preaching and devotional praise through amplified musical performance. The theatrical structure of the main auditorium is focused on the stage, and particularly the space now occupied by the cross and the lectern. In the 1930s cinema, a nightly coup de théâtre saw the large illuminated Compton organ console rise up from below the stage on its hydraulic lift, before descending again during the opening credits of the film. The same space below the front of the stage now opens to reveal Elim's baptismal bath.

The modern religious revival movement began at about the same time as the cinema, and the two histories have been interwoven, and not just in Ealing. Large cinemas provided spaces for crowds to experience intensely focused events. George Jeffreys in his tours of the 1920s and 1930s regularly used such buildings. As one convert commented after Jeffreys' meetings at the Gaiety cinema in Grimsby, "we are sure that God can heal and bless without being in an elaborately decorated Cathedral." (Boulton 1999: 62)

Clearly the Ealing Christian Centre is a special place, an 'atmospheric space', which like St. Thomas's, was both designed and is now sustained as a place of separation from the suburban world outside its doors, and as a place capable of producing mood and focus, with decoration and spatial arrangement that actively contribute to the experience of worship. What it is not, in contrast with St. Thomas's Church, is sacred space. A recent debate between Ann Taves and Kim Knott concerns the terms "sacred" and "specialness" as alternative terminologies for the study of religion (Taves 2009; Knott 2010). Working in a neo-Durkheimian framework, both struggle to separate the etic from the emic, searching for a language of technical analysis apart from the everyday meanings and particularly theological authority bound into the term "sacred". Both are looking for approaches that in Knott's words "break open the secular", helping to understand the nature of spheres and places beyond the conventionally religious; in many ways recent work in the sociology and geography of religion

has explicitly looked outside formally religious space to extend the domain of the “sacred” (Knott 2010: 306; Holloway and Valins 2002) The study of these two 1930s interiors cannot do more than inform such discussions, but it does turn attention inwards, towards the significance of design, decoration, theology and performance in the microgeographies of religious spaces, and particularly the specific – and often very different – articulations of sacred, special and profane within buildings themselves.

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Captions

Caption 1

Taking photographs of the interior of St Thomas the Apostle church is a different experience depending on the time of the day and the time of the year. Here, at midday, as the sun moves from east to west, the light fills the nave through the south side windows, delineating the columns on both sides and throwing narrow fragmented beams of light onto the hundreds of wooden chairs. These were once dutifully restored by the members of the St Thomas' congregation (three chairs each). *Laura Cuch*

Caption 2

Originally a 1930s cinema, the interior of the main hall of the Ealing Christian Centre (ECC) of the Elim Pentecostal Church is set deep within the building and is unaffected by the direction of the sun. From the brightly lit stage and using my widest lens, I find the view of the hall almost overwhelming, both in term of its grand scale (the hall seats over 1000) and its specific design as a site for spectacle.

Caption 3

The stage is equipped with lights, music instruments and audio-visual technology that support the preaching and the music performances during the services that are held in different languages for its "one family of different nations".

Caption 4

Very different in style, music is also central to the spiritual life at St Thomas the Apostle church. This image I took on Palm Sunday 2015 shows a beautiful chair arrangement with the organ pipes and altar behind, in preparation for the evening performance of John's Rutter's Requiem.

Caption 5

The identifying symbols of St Thomas are the right-angled tool known as the builder's square and the spear, which are often shown in threes. There is an example of this symbol engraved on the golden candleholder (bottom picture). The symbol of the chevron as well as the significance of the number three appear all over the church, and we find them here on the carpet, the stone columns, and the three seats. Despite the richness of some decorative features, the overall style that the architect Edward Maufe gave to the church is austere. This is intensified in the picture taken during Passiontide (top), when the reredos is covered by a simple, rough unbleached sheet until Easter Sunday.

Caption 6

In contrast to the richness of Christian motifs in the decoration of St Thomas's church, the Ealing Christian Centre has a plain wooden cross as the only visible Christian element on its stage. All other elements on the stage might be characteristic of a theatre or a live music venue.

Caption 7

As depicted here, the interior of the Ealing Christian Centre preserves much of its original decoration as an 'atmospheric cinema' intended to create a fantasy world of Spanish exoticism for its 1930s audiences. While I initially thought I would focus the photo essay on detailed close-up shots of the decoration, the atmosphere and magnitude of the interior of the cinema impelled me towards wider shots.

Caption 8

This diptych contrasts Ealing Christian Centre's baptismal pool with the font in St Thomas's Church. In keeping with the church's strongly liturgical design the font was placed at the west end. It was carved in Weldon stone by Vernon Hill, its decoration referencing the spiritual power of water, a motif found elsewhere in the church. The baptismal pool built into the stage at the ECC is perhaps the only element of structural transformation realised in the process of adapting the space for worship.

Caption 9

Many of the fantasy motifs of the cinema have become iconic visual features of the Ealing Christian Centre. While the space for holding religious practices is not considered sacred by the Elim congregation, the specific aesthetics and performative nature of the cinema play an important emotional part in the celebrations of the ECC.

Caption 10

In both spaces of faith, I found myself looking up at the architectural structure and decorative features in search of patterns and shapes that would reveal things I could not see at first.

Caption 11

Here, we see contrasting styles of repetitive decorative features, such as the gothic arches in St Thomas the Apostle and the classic garland motifs on the door lintels in the Ealing Christian Centre. For me, as a native of Barcelona, St Thomas's style reminds me of some of Gaudi's architectural shapes and aisles of arched passages. Also to my Mediterranean eyes, the decorations from the original 1930's cinema seem eclectic, even chaotic in their fantasy inspiration.

Caption 12

The construction of St Thomas the Apostle involved the commission of various artists to produce different decorative elements of the church. Here, we see the ceiling in the Lady's Chapel, which was painted by Kathleen Roberts, and the stained glass by Moira Forsyth in the children's chapel.

Caption 13

The ticket office of the original cinema is now shut and the entrance to the Ealing Christian Church has a display of all the different flags for the national identities of its congregation. The Ealing Christian Centre has 1500 members from all over the world.

Caption 14

The interior of the foyer, which also preserves much of the original decoration, has been adapted to offer a space ideal for the church's regular, vibrant social events.

Caption 15

I want to end this photo essay with a picture from each faith space showing how their interiors reflect elements of the everyday lives of their communities. We can read the top image as depicting the contrast between the sacred and the vernacular, with palm leaves and holy water on a table in the Parish Hall, in preparation for the Palm Sunday service. The ordinary objects in the bottom image show the organisation and adaptation of the original cinema space for the community's daily routines and practices.