# AAfiles

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anyone with an interest in architecture.

*A Note on the Display Initials*
The display font in this issue is an adaptation of a sans-serif
typeface created by the architect Gabriel Guevrekian for the
temporary shop-front he produced for the Simultané fashion
line of Sonia Delaunay and Jacques Heim, as part of the 1925
Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. Our own version of this
letter face, drawn by Adrien Vasquez from the John Morgan
studio and featured in the essay by Hamed Khosravi, is a set of
numbers assigned to each one of Guevrekian's 'lives'. The
original shop featured only letters – the Simultané brand and
the last names of its two designers – but we have used the weight
and profile of these letters to extrapolate an appropriate set
of numerals. These numbers are printed in the metallic bronze
used for this issue's first and last pages – a colour that is itself a
reference to the Cor-ten steel pioneered by another contributor
to this issue, Kevin Roche, whose John Deere World HQ and Ford
Foundation HQ ('complex, ominous and sultanic', according to
Vincent Scully) are equally metallic and equally bronze.

# How to Say Nothing with Sincerity

*Andrew Crompton*



Tomb of Richard Burton,
St Mary Magdalen Church, Mortlake, 1891
Recently restored by HOK
Photo Philip Vile

Few people seem to have noticed that we are living through a period of religious building to rival the great years after Waterloo, when 600 Commissioners' churches were built as a national thank-offering for the defeat of Napoleon. Since the millennium alone, more than 2,000 multifaith spaces have been built in the UK. That total includes 13 just at Heathrow, which in terms of density of religious sites has come to rival the pan-Hellenic sanctuary of Delphi.

This is quite an increase from Frederick Gibberd's lone airport chapel of 1969, but one reason why you may not have noticed them is that these are all interior spaces, often sited near the lavatories. If you are curious enough to go round a few corners and open a door you will find yourself in an irregular plasterboard cell with a suspended ceiling and no window. Usually there will be a few books, a Bible, Gita, Koran and so on, side by side on a shelf, along with some simple furniture or perhaps no furniture at all. You are in a new sort of sacred space, one that is timeshared by people of different faiths. Whether you stand, sit or kneel is up to you.

With no pressure group behind it and no legal requirement to provide for it, the spread of multifaith spaces is rather mysterious. None of them is architecturally notable. Even the prayer room at Heathrow Terminal 5 by Richard Rogers – a possible exception to the rule – is a blank plasterboard box like all the rest. Most multifaith spaces in this country are actually vernacular works created in an amateur fashion by managers and administrators, sometimes themselves religious, sometimes not. Architects seem unable to design them properly. This is a strange claim, but one that deserves to be taken seriously; like the eye that cannot see itself, whatever architects attempt is self-thwarting.

It is a hard thing to make a space that is acceptable to many faiths yet never inappropriately meaningful. Some sort of enclosure is needed, but how does one ensure that it does not privilege one culture over another? The answer, as will be seen, is to be the built equivalent of ambient noise, background rather than figure. This leads to an interesting question: what is the very least that architecture can say, semiologically speaking?

Being minimally meaningful is not the same as being minimal. A James Turrell light installation is both minimal and spiritual, but it would not work for a multifaith space because it projects certain ideas of purity and simplicity that are specific to, let us say, the US around 1990. Multifaith needs to be more general than this, but being unspecific does not come easily to architects who pride themselves on their ability to create meaningful concepts and write specifications. Utterly empty rooms seem sinister, yet whatever is added to them causes problems; any table can become an altar, every bowl of pebbles seems pagan. This is the trap in which the designer is caught.

When only two religions are involved some sort of compromise might still be possible. One example at the Christianity–Islam interface is the 1891 tomb of the adventurer Richard Burton. He was the translator of the *Kama Sutra* and a no-holds barred version of *The Arabian Nights*, as well as one of the very first Englishmen to see Mecca – and survive, by passing himself off as an Afghan dervish, his pasty face smeared with walnut juice and his penis newly circumcised. Possibly a difficult man to be married to, he now lies quietly beside his wife at St Mary Magdalen Church, Mortlake. Their tent-shaped mausoleum made from Forest of Dean stone merges her devout Catholicism with his Orientalist leanings. Nothing is hidden. There is a window through which their coffins can be seen side by side, in eternal Christian harmony, while the outside is inscribed with an Islamic frieze.

This is a simple love story, not even a *ménage à trois*. Multifaith is more of a *ménage à vingt* in which Christians and Muslims are joined by Sikhs, Baha'is, Jews, Hindus, Taoists, Buddhists, Rastafarians, followers of Shinto, Zoroastrians, Unitarians, First People, Neo-Pagans, Scientologists, Ahmadis, Jehovah's Witnesses, Humanists, Wiccans, Druids and people just needing a little peace and quiet. The deep problem here is that there is nothing they all share in common. At best there is only a family resemblance between what they believe, so to try to represent some common ground is to commit what the philosopher Gilbert Ryle called a category error, mistaking an abstract concept for something tangible. Ryle gives the example of the 'Average Taxpayer', who would seem a mysterious everywhere-and-nowhere sort of person if you actually went looking for them. The core of multifaith is nebulous in much the same way. All the same, this has not deterred architects from trying to build a home for it. Avid for essences, they assume they can get to the heart of the matter like a monkey cracking a nut. The results are usually self-indulgent or even ridiculous, for when, as with sex and snobbery, there are things of which one cannot speak, comedy will be close at hand.

In early multifaith spaces you can find shelves of artefacts like religious supermarkets with ludicrous juxtapositions such as statuettes of Christ next to witch's cauldrons, prayer rugs next to fire-worship equipment. Crosses, it turns out, are offensive to nearly every one and where they survive they are disguised, often by being bent into airplane shapes. At Brandeis University there is a crucifix from which Jesus appears to be leaning forward and waving, as if saying 'Hi'. Here the image of the bearded figure that has been familiar since Dürer's woodcuts reaches one of its many ends. There is much use of natural objects such as leaves, branches and pebbles. For example, the 'spiritual opportunities' offered to departing passengers at Munich airport include a prayer room with a big fat tree trunk at its centre, 'signifying the variety of benefits'. This is funny and peculiar at the same time. In straining not to be Christian, tree worship appears as an atavism.

When different religions share a room they settle in opposite corners. The remedy for this anti-social behaviour, an idea that many architects have lit on, is an oval room. Unfortunately every such room I have visited has been divided by Muslims screening off one end for themselves. Islam carries its own space around with it, in the form of a mat, and flourishes in multifaith spaces oblivious to whatever else is going on. It makes its presence felt in subtle ways, through bottles of scent or Korans being moved to a high place if a ledge or top shelf is available. At Hilton Park Services on the M6 motorway in Staffordshire the washroom has a high-level dryer for hands and a low-level dryer for feet. At Bolton University the gridded carpet is set out at a very slight angle to the wall. Perhaps this is just bad workmanship? But no, it points to Mecca. By and large, carpets seem Islamic and hard flooring seems Christian. But a floor has to be made of something, so here we are forced to decide: carpet or not. It is around these polarities that rooms can be classified. Saying nothing might actually be impossible.

To complicate matters Jews normally stand to pray, Christians sit and Muslims prostrate themselves. This leads to divisions in section as well as in plan, and because of this chairs, especially chunky wooden chairs, appear Christian. How can something to sit on be de-Christianised? One solution is to turn it into a cube of solid wood. At the 'open' church of St Jakob in Zurich you can sit on such a block in an underground chamber and contemplate a huge crystal. You leave by a concrete staircase that rises into the light, continuing

above ground into the air for seven steps, equally convenient for mounting a horse or beginning a journey to heaven.

Because they are generally located in out of the way interior spaces, multifaith rooms lack the elevations that would allow them to join the society of other buildings. Instead they are isolated, windowless monads. An exception is the prayer room at Liverpool Museum, which has a westward view of the Mersey. Muslims, however, turn away to face east and Mecca and one imagines most other prayerful people would do the same because the stirring view is a distraction. So often in multifaith spaces interesting ideas are irrelevant to their purpose. Having visited many of them I would say that, in general, the larger the budget the worse they turn out, and that the UK, through its amateur and parsimonious approach, is the accidental world leader in this field.

This brings us back to the anti-architectural box, which after many fruitless experiments has become the de facto answer to the multifaith problem. Normally there is a lack of symmetry, with plasterboard walls meeting an existing structure in an unordered way. There will be a 600mm ceiling grid with no suspension points (do not think about hanging yourself here), MDF skirtings, smoke alarms, fitted carpets, anodyne artworks and IKEA furniture. Such rooms would be hard to parody, for which feature could you exaggerate? A Lego multifaith room would be difficult to recognise: the white walls, a door, a shelf, are too generic to be identified and the rackety space-left-over-after-planning quality is perhaps impossible to represent in crisp plastic bricks. In any case, kneeling and prostration are not in the Lego figure's repertoire.

A room that was known to be the work of a famous architect, or was in some other way conspicuous, would be self-defeating, because it would say something unwanted. On the other hand it would be equally wrong for them all to be identical since that would raise the question, why this arrangement rather than some other? The compromise solution is to make multifaith rooms roughly the same while differing in unimportant ways. They might remind you of lobbies, or offices, or storerooms or bereavement counselling suites, but most of all they look like other multifaith rooms. After the first few they begin to feel familiar in the way that a McDonalds does. They are camouflaged like animals in a herd.

The problem of providing universal access to the divine is thus solved by something humble. Can something so nondescript truly be sacred? A standard theory of sacred space depicts it as a model of the cosmos connecting earth and sky. Clearly that does not apply here. A more modern view, however, is that sacred or profane are not substantive categories but rather situational ones. Sacrality is a category of emplacement, and what is being emplaced in multifaith spaces is being carried into the room on bodies and clothes rather than represented architecturally. It was not present until somebody walked in. A better question to ask is this: how can a multifaith room be profaned? The answer is by returning it to secular use, such as for sex, sleeping, eating or charging a phone while pretending to pray. In this case preserving a room's sacred character is simply a question of proper management.

It is surely a striking turn of events that religion in the public realm is today largely restricted to windowless boxes. Yet these places are not to be despised, people do care about them and do use them, indeed they are contested spaces. You can usually tell who used them last by how things are left, requiring them

to be reset by someone with an eye for the religious significance of how things are laid out; in short, they need to be ritually cleansed once a day. Proselytising is the unforgivable sin here, breaching an implicit contract: do as you will but tidy up afterwards and do not talk to anyone else. Even so, you can find evidence of trouble if you look for it – petty vandalism such as writing on the carpet, scratches on the table, things left, things stolen, litter dropped. These are spaces with attendant spirits. Furniture shifts as if a poltergeist has been at work and airports have cameras to catch it in the act. This is a very peculiar state of affairs: today the state is spying on people at worship, something unknown in England since the Civil War. I like to think it is polite to bless the policeman watching you as you finish your prayer.

At Malmo hospital a tray of sand is provided in which you can draw your own symbol with a finger. This is surely beautiful, a reminder that what is good in multifaith is often ephemeral and cheap. It is the destruction of the symbol in the sand by the next person to come along that is the clever thing here. How are we to understand this as architects? Perhaps we too much want to create a presence without considering its relation to absence. Once absence is accepted, odd things happen as the play of something and nothing leads to spaces that resemble conceptual art. In multifaith rooms sacred space is being dematerialised like art objects were in the 1960s and 1970s. But even this game can go too far. Severely empty spaces can come to resemble art installations such as Gregor Schneider's constructed rooms where things may or may not have happened. This leads to a new mode of multifaith failure, becoming macabre. In these extreme cases you can feel the chill of the cell or the sensory deprivation chamber where you can scream but nothing happens.

What we see in multifaith spaces is akin to, but not exactly, nothing. It is close to Sartre's memorable phrase, 'things are entirely what they appear to be – and behind them … there is nothing'. One way to understand this is by analogy. Mathematicians put the empty set $\{\}$ to creative use as the root from which the natural numbers can be defined recursively, starting $0 = \{\}$, $1 = \{0\}$ and so on. Although we can construct 'one' and 'zero' and then all the other integers, and can represent them with familiar glyphs, the closest approach we can make to the empty set is a curly bracket seen from the outside. Think of the plasterboard walls as being like that bracket, containing the un-thing at arm's length. As fleshy creatures like ourselves approach it, we encounter not the void itself but our own unconscious in the form of comedy, fear, boredom, alienation, crime, atavism and a lot of strange people. These boring spaces which entirely lack elevations are ironically very expressive. Quite possibly they are the building type which, above all others, best represents our own time.

The next time you pass through Heathrow, instead of going shopping why not have a close encounter with $\{\}$. Look behind one of several doors marked with icons such as ✡☽✿☼☪☧☸☯. Surely if God is to be found anywhere, these are the places to look. Push the aluminium doorplate. What do you think you will find behind the curtain? Luminous aliens with long fingers or wizards pulling levers, perhaps? That's just in films, in reality there is not even a curtain. What you see is a bad copy of another boring room that undermines even its dignity of being unique. You are in a metaphorical dead end. That is the point of it. It is exactly what it seems to be. There is no next step to take. You have passed out of culture and reached measure zero. Whether you stand, sit or kneel is up to you. Now turn around and fly – if only to another airport.

# Contributors

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*Chris Blencowe* graduated from the AA in 1966 and *Judith Levine* graduated from Manchester University in 1961. They collaborated on schools competitions in Ticino with Livio Vacchini and Luigi Snozzi, and have subsequently worked together in a practice in Canada, Europe and the UK.

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*Andrew Crompton* is head of Liverpool School of Architecture. He is interested in the design of things that are easily overlooked or in other ways hard to describe or remember.

*Thomas Daniell* is head of the department of architecture and design at the University of St Joseph, Macau and a visiting associate professor at the University of Tokyo. Widely published, his books include *FOBA: Buildings* (2005), *After the Crash: Architecture in Post-Bubble Japan* (2008), *Houses and Gardens of Kyoto* (2010) and *Kiyoshi Sey Takeyama + Amorphe* (2011). His book *An Anatomy of Influence* is forthcoming from AA Publications.

*Tina Di Carlo*, a former curator at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, is completing her PhD on the 1988 'Deconstructivist Architecture' exhibition at MOMA, to be published through the MIT Press *Writing Architecture* series. A visiting lecturer at the Bartlett and course consultant at the AA, she writes and speaks internationally.

*William Firebrace* is the author of *Marseille Mix* (2010) and the forthcoming AA title, *Memo for Nemo*, on undersea living. He is currently working on *Hop Baltic*, on the culture and architecture of a number of Baltic cities.

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*Piers Gough* attended the AA from 1965–71, starting his first firm, WCG, in his AA studio space in 1968, which later reformed as his current office, CZWG. He has designed many celebrated buildings around London – including the recently completed inverted pyramid of Canada Water Library in Rotherhithe – and has taught at the AA, the Mackintosh School of Architecture and at Cardiff University. He was commissioner for English Heritage in 1995 and for the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment in 2007.

*Hiroshi Hara* is a Japanese architect and professor emeritus of the University of Tokyo. Born in 1936, he has been highly influential on subsequent generations of Japanese architects as a designer, teacher and theorist. With his students Hara has undertaken pioneering research on traditional village typologies throughout the world, and with his office, Atelier Phi, he has produced many significant buildings in Japan, including the Umeda Sky Building, Kyoto Station and Sapporo Dome.

*Niall Hobhouse* is a collector of architectural drawings.

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*Nicholas Olsberg* is a historian, archivist, curator and writer, and former director of the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal. His architectural publications include work on Marcel Breuer, Frank Lloyd Wright and Carlo Scarpa, with major exhibitions on Arthur Erickson (2006), John Lautner (2008) and the California Ranch House (2012). He has also lectured on the design of the American suburb, led analytical studios in the Cities Programme of the LSE and at Woodbury University, and is currently senior curator of the Drawing Matter Trust.

*Charles Rice* is professor of architecture at the University of Technology Sydney. He has previously taught in histories and theories at the AA, and was head of the school of art and design history at Kingston University London. He is editor of *The Journal of Architecture*, and his monograph *Interior Urbanism: Architecture, John Portman and Downtown America* is forthcoming from Bloomsbury in 2016.

*Kevin Roche* is an Irish-American architect who graduated in 1945 from University College Dublin. After brief stints working with Michael Scott in Dublin and Maxwell Fry in London he moved to the US to undertake a masters degree with Mies van der Rohe at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago. He broke off from his studies to work with the UN planning office in New York before joining the firm of Eero Saarinen and Associates, where he became principal design associate. After Saarinen's death in 1961 Roche and his future partner John Dinkeloo completed all of Saarinen's remaining projects and then relaunched the office in 1966 as Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates. Over the ensuing half century they have completed numerous groundbreaking buildings, including the Oakland Museum, Ford Foundation HQ, John Deere HQ and a series of commissions for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In 1982 he was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize.