Examples of a Material-Human-Sensitive Church

Religious actors still play an important role in the public space as we can see on our city maps and the prominence of sacred places therein. In these spaces pastoral theology can apply the insights of this book – from the electric to the social laboratory – and learn from the experiences of artists, philosophers, architects, and urban planners along the way. The practices I want to describe here exhibit traces of the material- and human-sensitive church I have proposed throughout this book. This chapter is mostly concerned with hands-on approaches. How they translate into a new theological appreciation of the role of churches in society will be the concern of the fourth and final part of the book.

Getting Hands-on in the North West Bronx: How a Church Fights for Spatial Justice from within the World of Things

Following the example of the community organiser, I want to refer to my personal experience with community organising in the United States. In the fall of 2018, during a research leave, I conducted a short field study and an interview at the *North West Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition* (NWBCCC). It is a good example of the Penta-style community organisation mentioned above. The NWBCCC grew out of the abandonment of the Bronx in the 1970s. With redlining, the effective exclusion of certain areas out of the banks' credit system, white flight, and de-investment by mostly white landlords, the Bronx was hit very hard both economically and socially. When landlords began to burn down their buildings in order to collect insurance money, citizens started to organise. What grew out of a discussion group at Catholic Fordham University, which is in the midst of the Bronx, became a stable organisation, which addresses the

issues of the North West Bronx, first and foremost housing, education, and security.

My interview with two community organisers – a male organiser who has worked in the area for a long time and a female organiser from the outside who became a leading figure in the organisation – revolved around the question of how space and technology can come together to create visions for a better living in the community. In the following passages I want to highlight some of the central themes which connect to the aspects of architecture, materiality, and space I have addressed so far.

a) The Negative and Positive Power of Space

The NWBCCC has experienced the destructive power of space ever since it started as a reaction to the neglect of the Bronx. The group set this negative power of commercialised space in contrast to the positive image of man as created by God. The religious imagery proved to be a powerful source to voice resistance.

> Landlords would literally burn their own buildings, the only option for them to get a return on their investment. […] So, community members, clergy, leaders and residents began to talk […] – "we have dignity, we are in light of God, we deserve more that this!" – and began to organise. […] And began to look for resources and built safe and affordable housing. And that became the basis of our organisation (NWBCCC 2018, pp. 42–47).[1]

But space can also be a positive asset. Spaces are rich in history and heritage, which is why my male interlocutor, an experienced organiser, mostly referred to the oral history of the people who live in the space. "If anyone took the time […], you would see that there is incredible historical knowledge, intellectual heritage […] other intelligences, other ways of knowing that could be leveraged to do things" (ibid., pp. 20–23).

With Karl Schlögel we might add that the space itself, the buildings and streets, bears a powerful remembrance of the past: the positive as well as the negative events that shaped the community. In addition, we might introduce

1 The numbers refer to my transcript of the interview, which is available upon request. I used a simplified transcription system based on Dresing and Pehl (Dresing and Pehl 2015).

the level of objects – derelict objects and even trash – that tell a story of the place and show its richness and the capabilities of its inhabitants.

b) Action Comes from Hands-on Experience

The roots of community organising lie in the engagement with the people living in the area and in their tangible experience of living conditions:

> It is essential for us in organising to talk about something that is tangible. So, it is about the leak in your apartment […] because that is survival mode […] in order to survive I need to address that. But when you address that you can look at systemic change (ibid., pp. 77–70).

This physical engagement is also present in the visioning process of the NWBCCC core staff. "What does the Bronx you want 20 years from now look like. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? […] That cycle of tapping into people's experiences […] is what organisers do daily" (ibid., pp. 80–82).

The basis for this approach is that engagement with and understanding of the world only comes from a tangible, physical, hands-on experience: "You understand the world by acting in it." (ibid., pp. 91–92) This resonates with the idea of being part of a network of human and material actors.

The whole community organising process at the NWBCCC is therefore a very physical job. Organisers walk the streets, they "are 'on the street' (ibid., p. 26) and 'knock on doors,' (ibid., p. 71)" in order to get people involved.

Both my male and my female interlocutor also talked at length about the organisation "creating" spaces for participation (cf. ibid., pp. 7, 83, 92, 100), "inviting" people into a physical space (cf. ibid., p. 92), giving people "the spaces to actualise" (cf. ibid., pp. 26–27). And finally, the organisation's goal is to transform spaces. All that is a physical activity which brings one in contact with the world – and also with the resistive potential of materiality to confound our plans.

c) Technology Must Become Part of the Landscape

The second part of the interview was concerned with the role of technology in community organising. One of the main issues with digital technology was

that while NWBCCC relies heavily on it for community organising – collecting different voices of people who cannot be present at meetings for instance (cf. NWBCCC 2018, pp. 132–136) – technology did not originate within the community:

> Thinking about how the tech industry originally developed, it was just a bunch of white kids in San Francisco or wherever, thinking about challenges from their lens. And not about a community being developed. […] It's no wonder that technology is just to replace their moms (ibid., pp. 113–116).

It became obvious throughout this interview that technology lacks a sense of place and a real connection to the city and the people living there. That is precisely the criticism that concluded the second part of this book on corporate campuses. To address this, my male interlocutor referred to the culture of hacking. "It is a no-brainer why Twitter has the features that it has, because social movements were using it and had to develop go-arounds and stuff like that" (ibid., pp. 150–152). The adaption of technology to the needs of a particular space is an important aspect to understand the dynamic and political potential of the human, material, and software network. This can even take on a very physical form:

> The good thing about advanced digital technologies and advanced manufacturing: Because of that scarcity thing it was that somebody designed something over here and then another person manufactures it. […] Now it is like most things could be together: 3d-printing. […] You could be your own director, actor, producer. […] What that means is that the community has more opportunity to take advantage of that and make sure that new technology develops through the lens of how we see problems. So that we could start making shit that matters (ibid., pp. 116–122).

The 3D printer here acts as a link between the immaterial software world – which through digital applications is a dominant factor in the lives of many people in the community – and the physical world. It helps to bring both worlds together and to overcome a bilateral speechlessness of people who live in the physical and those who mostly live in the digital world:

> People that are not into the digital world do not know how to operate. Whereas people who are not in the physical world do not know how to operate [there] (ibid., pp. 109–111).

The experiences of both interview partners show that community organising is a way for religious communities to deeply engage with the physical world of the people living in the city. While the interview shows a deep reflection of the value of space, as a space for personal and community growth, I think that the NWBCCC and other community organisations could profit from a deeper reflection on the materiality of the space around them. This is why my approach towards real-life laboratories focuses less on the space but more on the material qualities and the political consequences of engagement. My argument is that while we are already quite conscious of space and spatial justice, our efforts will potentially fall short if we do not recognise how much our daily lives are influenced by material experiences.

Gerhard Wegner, for instance, writes about the role of religious communities in the provision of space within the city. Understanding space as participative and inclusive he argues that we need to actively overcome the seemingly natural border between *we* and the others. *We* in this sense must become a shared identity (cf. Wegner 2015, p. 62) and the individual or the group's sense of what is normal and accepted must include other versions of normality as well. It is a rocky path towards that. "The practice of changing from a construction of normality to the acceptance of alterity usually goes hand in hand with narcissistic wounds"* (ibid., p. 63). This has consequences for churches and religious communities which are in essence a clearly defined *we* within a clearly defined space. And they are usually organised in concentric rings around a middle of a few active members and full-time professionals (cf. ibid., pp. 64–65), even if the claim of many church communities is that they are oriented towards the social sphere that surrounds them.

NWBCCC has opened up that closed social space. But what I feel is lacking is to transcend their *we* towards what the *Commission on Urban Life and Faith* of the Church of England called an "interconnected" vision of space (Commission on Urban Life and Faith 2006). This goes beyond the concept of a "mixed economy", of church that sets up new "contextual churches"(Müller 2019, p. 132) besides the traditional parish church. It is a radical transcending of church as both a people and a place. One way to transcend itself is, as we have seen with Heidegger, to build, however small the structures might be. This is why I want

to turn my attention to the church community as a builder and the role of the architect therein.

Social Forming in Rif: A Church Rich in Material and Social Awareness

In 2009 the Catholic church of Rif-Taxach, a small village 18 kilometers south of Salzburg, commissioned the construction of a church. One of the challenges was that the building was also to include a community hall for the 4.000 citizens of Rif and connect to a nondescript neighbouring building that the church community had built in 1996 as its parish hall. Furthermore, the church would stand in the midst of an already built private residential area. It was thus a building well connected but also one surrounded by different interest groups. An approach that was both sensitive to its surroundings as well as independent was needed.

Walter Klasz won the commission and became involved in the planning process which led to the construction of the church in several steps from 2011 to 2014. In line with his interest in the self-formation of material, he describes the planning process similarly, namely as a socially self-forming process. The architect's role in it is

> reducing the direct form-giving as much as possible and focus on the boundary conditions. […] In a dialogue […] a solution forms itself out of the middle. The participants bring their experiences and even their individual inspirations, ideas, and convictions into the midst and trust in the interactive process out of which a form emerges. This form is at best then not a compromise but something new that could only arise by the involvement and at the same time the letting go of the participants* (Klasz 2016).

In 2020, eight years after the initial opening of the church in 2012, I revisited the site with Walter Klasz. Together we chose three photographic positions which show different views of the church. I want to describe two positions here with each position highlighting a different aspect of the building's materiality, the interactions with its surroundings, the way the planning process came together, and a particular view of church and world.

Figure 31: St. Albrecht in Rif, outside view from a neighbour's garden. Photo by the author.

Figure 31 shows the church from a neighbour's garden. While the roofline is clearly visible from behind the trees, the glass façade of the building makes it blend in with the sky, reducing the visual impact. This is important for the church as a part of the neighbourhood. During the planning process the architect and the planning committee held one of their meetings in a garden adjacent to the planned site to demonstrate their sensitiveness to the demands of the neighbours. The translucent material of the building and its specific shape – as well as its height which was kept well below the allowed dimensions – highlight the importance of architecture that respects its surroundings.

On the other hand, the specific form of the church, which does not mirror the architecture around it, and the contrast between the garden cluttered with objects of everyday (family) life and the clear structures of the church point to architecture's independence and the difference between sacred and secular space. But that difference is not marked by a clear demarcation. The façade

seems almost permeable and in this respect stands in contrast to the walled-off garden, enclosed not only by a row of trees but by a tall wooden fence as well. The building tells a different story than the private house, it is a public and accessible space – further aided by the ramp that makes the chapel not only wheelchair-accessible but highlights that accessibility.

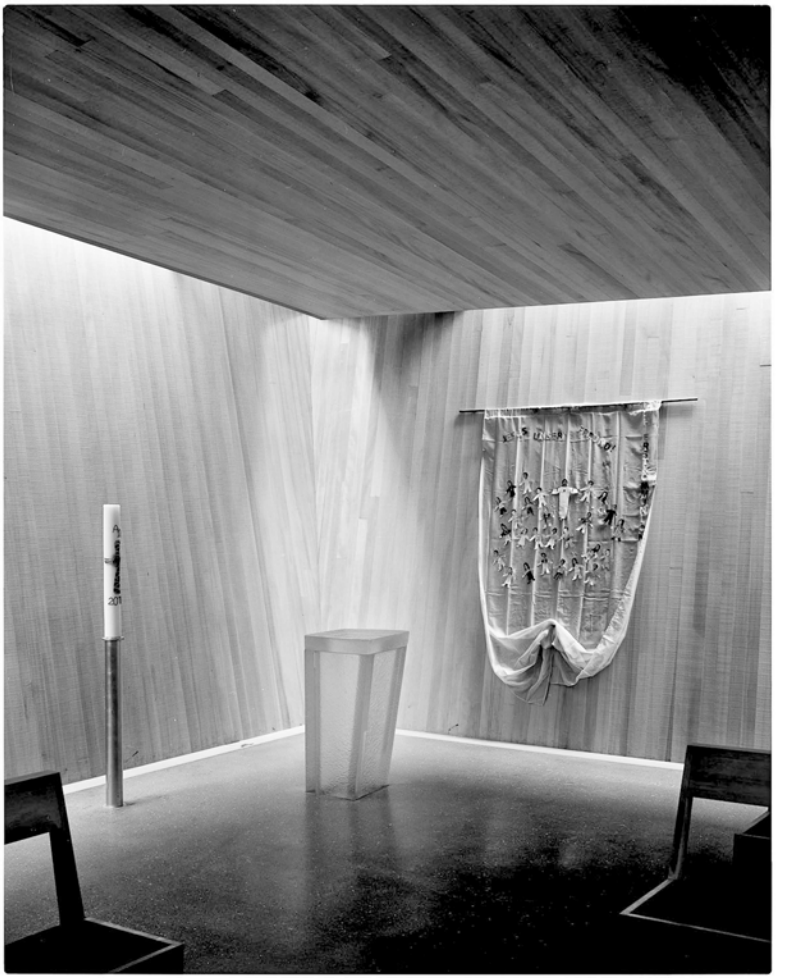
The architect himself writes about "a new openness of Catholicism without losing its identity" (Klasz 2020). In another project he worked on a concept to dedicate a wing of a monastery, the Stift Wilten in Innsbruck, to a non-profit café and co-working space. Having such an open space inside a monastery would allow us "to develop a new culture of open communication that shares one goal: improving the dialogue between different people looking for a meaning in their lives" (ibid.).

Figure 32 takes us inside the church to the back right corner. The most prominent feature on the inside is the walls made of glue laminated wooden planks. This focus on wood as a material is accentuated by the fact that there are no windows in the chapel's walls. The light filters in from an invisible line of windows in the ceiling shining directly onto the wood and by that bringing out the raw character of the material. In addition to the visual, wood has also a tangible and olfactory quality which becomes obvious as well. The visitor is immersed in the warm glow of the wood and the peaceful atmosphere devoid of any distractions. Even the Stations of the Cross are not hung on the wall but are embedded in the terrazzo floor.

This arrangement brings out the sculptural qualities of the building, which the architect explicitly mentioned in our dialogue. The church does not need to be adorned by artworks, it itself is a walk-in sculpture. But the wood also changes, during the day under the different lighting conditions, and over the years as it weathers and ages. When Klasz renovated the parochial church of St. Martin in the diocese of Graz, he inspired bishop Hermann Glettler to write about the church. His words can also apply to the structure in Rif:

> Whoever believes that he has structures and concepts for eternity is wrong. We are and we remain listeners to God's word. In it we hear the call of God for our time. […] We must remain permeable and responsive. The contemporary design is a hint that the church must not get trapped in tradition but must, inspired by the "signs of the times", live its mission in the midst of a unstrung society, driven by many demands* (Glettler n.d.).

Figure 32: St. Albrecht in Rif, inside view. Photo by the author.



From that perspective it is important to notice that despite the architect's intention the church's users have appropriated the building. Also visible in the picture is a small tapestry made by a group of children preparing for their First Communion.

While we see a strong relation to the building process in this example, what I felt lacking was a prolongation of the social processes that led to the building of the church. The aforementioned practice of the NWBCCC to *continually* listen to the community as well as to continually, ethnographically, experience the changing space could be beneficial here.

NWBCCC and Rif As New Ways for Pastoral Planning

Both the NWBCCC and the church in Rif are good examples how a sensitive engagement with the world can happen in practice. While the NWBCCC focuses on the needs of the people in an already built environment, the process at Rif was much more focused on the material and architectural qualities of a new construction. But both processes emerged from the experiences people have with their material surroundings and their relation to the space where their daily lives happen.

Taking again a practical theological perspective, I would argue that churches and religious communities need to strive to change their surroundings. This starts not with the engagement of an architect but with a different type of architectural, city, but most importantly pastoral planning.[2] In the words of aforementioned Leonie Sandercock:

> I see planning as an always unfinished social project whose task is managing our coexistence in the shared spaces of cities and neighbourhoods in such a way as to enrich human life and to work for social, cultural, and environmental justice. This social project has an imperfect past and an uncertain future (Sandercock 2003, p. 134).

The optical, haptic, and olfactory qualities of an environment in particular are important for such an approach. In that way Sandercock continues:

> I propose a different sensibility from the regulatory planning that dominated 20th-century practice – a sensibility that is as alert to the emotional economies of cities as it is to the political economies; as alert to city senses

2 I use the term here very loosely for all planning activity that originates within church communities and that has at least an indirect impact on their surroundings.

> (sound, smell, taste, touch, sight) as it is to city censuses; as alert to the soft-wired desires of its citizens as it is to the hard-wired infrastructures; […] as curious about the spirit of place as it is critical of capitalist excesses; a sensibility that can help citizens wrest new possibilities from space and collectively forge new hybrid cultures and places (ibid., p. 134).[3]

In summary, Sandercock calls for a therapeutic approach to planning, which means that she focuses on the relationships between different stakeholders in the planning process. Many disputes, she argues, are not only due to resources, but, for instance, lack of recognition (cf. ibid., p. 139). To address that, a new language in planning is needed.

> What has been missing from most of the collaborative planning/communicative action literature is this recognition of the need for a language and a process of emotional involvement, of embodiment (ibid., p. 139).

If such a language can be found, then planning is not just a minimal compromise that leaves everyone unsatisfied, but it can be the vehicle for collective growth of a community (cf. ibid. 139). This language must also encompass the relations of persons to the objective world – the stored knowledge in the buildings and things that to which interview partners at the NWBCCC and in Rif referred.

What does this then mean for churches and religious communities? The first consequence would be for religious communities to take on the role as a facilitator for social change within a certain area on the basis of the material presence of the church through its built infrastructure. The richness of churches and religious community infrastructure, not merely Christian but also Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish, has been exemplarily well researched by Katie Day and her students in their study *Faith On the Avenue*, which illustrates the rich cultural and architectural past and present of churches and other religious buildings along Philadelphia's *Germantown Avenue* (Day 2014). Recognising one's own powerful presence that transcends the walls of the church and the community centre is a good starting point.

3 Sandercock refers to the work of the consultant Charles Landry in Helsinki who used a "'survey of the senses' to analyse the city through its sounds, smells, and panoramas" (Sandercock 2003, p. 138).

What follows from that is a recognition of all the other actors within that particular area. I hope that by now it has become apparent that this recognition is not just restricted to humans, or particular well-voiced exemplars among them, but to all actors. I therefore would encourage a theology that goes beyond popular theology – or *theologia popular*, as it is more aptly called in Latin American contexts – and more towards a networked or embedded theology. Recognising the potential of all these actors towards development and integrating that potentiality in a theology of growth could become the heart and soul of religious involvement in the city.

Schooled by the critical appreciation and a hands-on approach to the concrete world around us, I want to take us back to a topic nearer to the heart of practical theology in the fourth and last part of this book. From laboratories and parliaments I want to take us back to ecclesiological concerns and what we as theologians can say about the role of church communities in the 21st century.