Introduction to the Book

Thus upon crutches does my philosophy advance.
It does not have all the time in the world to arrive
Like the wisdom of God.
But it knows that there where it sits down it will be as well as elsewhere blindfolded,
Seeing before and behind it a very long path, and lamenting over its tomb at the threshold of Canaan.
Jean Wahl, Towards the Concrete

As pastoral theology moves into the digital age, it has to become sensitive again for the spaces, buildings, things, and the materiality that surrounds us. We are not immaterial creatures. This became especially apparent in times like the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 and 2021 when we were spending most of our time in our flats, sitting on chairs and sofas, touching electronic devices on which we had become so dependent for communication but which failed to provide us with the full sensory experience of being able to be outside and with people. The fact that the sensory experience matters in a digital age and that we are influenced by the space in which we live and the devices we interact with is nothing new. But in theology there seems to be a trend to evade the concrete, to focus on abstract concepts rather than hard material realities. Yet the church as an organisation is rooted in these hard realities, with its newly build community centres and the smartphones it buys for its pastoral workers.

But the terminology is problematic right from the start. There is, as we will see, no clear differentiation between what a thing, an object, a material artefact, or even an assemblage, a hybrid, etc. is. Neither is there a clear definition of materiality that unifies all authors referenced here. The same applies to the theological terms presented throughout the text, especially the terms church and community, which suggest a closed group housed in a closed building. It has become common knowledge that church transcends the narrow organisational structures. But what does that mean both in the German and the U.S. context?

As the readers progress thought the text, I hope that they will arrive at their own definition of what a materially sensitive church is, inspired by the philosophical, sociological, architectural, and artistic positions on the topic presented here.

At the same time, I am concerned with the concrete materiality of spaces, buildings, and things. I am also concerned with the way this is presented to the reader. Throughout the book I advocate for open forms in architecture and design, and with that comes the need to write a text that is open as well. Both the content and the design of this book thus are intended to encourage the reader to participate with his or her own ideas. After all, this is what differentiates the technology laboratories I present in the second part of this book from the social laboratories in the third part: Instead of unquestionable expert solutions, developed in walled-off laboratories, social laboratories believe in the cooperative production of knowledge by everyone concerned.

The Structure of This Book

But before I begin to talk about space and materiality, I want to introduce the discipline within which I situate myself and this book. I understand pastoral theology as a science of workplaces, i.e. the workplaces of practitioners within the church and the world.[1] I therefore begin the book with a look at the his-

1 As *Gaudium et Spes* (esp. No. 4) makes us aware, church and world are closely related to one another. I am not only concerned with practitioners who work for religious organisations, but with architects, engineers, designers, etc. Thus, I do not want to draw a line between sacred and "secular" – whatever the term might denote – and certainly not between practice for the church and for the world. Both belong together as shall become apparent over the course of this book.

tory and the recent developments in pastoral theology through the lens of the building sites where such developments took place. The first part of this book is therefore devoted to two milestone projects within pastoral theology, the *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie* edited by Karl Rahner in Germany in the 1960s and Bonnie Miller-McLemore's *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* from the United States in 2011. Presenting these two handbooks is not only a way to situate my own work within pastoral theology but it is also a first and preliminary foray into the general concept that becomes important for the later chapters as well, namely that the spaces within which we live and work and the theology we practice there are closely interrelated.

Along with society, these spaces have radically changed over the last few years. The mentality of *New Work* is beginning to emerge outside the Silicon Valley, in startup incubators as well as in existing companies, which therein translates into flattened hierarchies and agile, iterative product development. As Florian Sobetzko and Matthias Sellmann demonstrate, such approaches can be applied in the field of pastoral theology as well (cf. Sobetzko and Sellmann 2017). In this book I want to take a step back and look at the material basis of this New Work revolution, located in the laboratories of high-tech companies. As buildings they are housing both humans – and thus provide one of the fundamentals of human existence as Martin Heidegger notes – *and* a particular mentality. This becomes especially apparent during the era of the communication industry in the last quarter of the 20th century, when corporations like IBM and AT&T dominated the market in the U.S. and overseas before the developments from the Silicon Valley disrupted their businesses.

The spirit of these companies lives on in the corporate campuses of Google, Apple, and Facebook. It is a mindset that combines everything-is-possible with company-knows-best. Therein a small elite group of engineers models nature according to their will and a large corporation provides a secluded space where said engineers can pioneer solutions for the whole of society. Likewise, the architects who build these corporate campuses participate in the same dominating perspective on nature and society. Thus whoever introduces practices of agile development and New Work to pastoral work must be cognisant of what concepts lie underneath. Therefore, one part of this book is devoted to the Electric Laboratory as a space which begets a particular mindset both in the engineer's and the architect's understanding of the world. That such a can-do mindset is in crisis will be my conclusion.

As a contrast to the sealed-off spaces of large corporations I propose an unfinished architecture and open spaces where the course society will take in the future is not predetermined by a small elite. To introduce these spaces, I go back in time and look at the parliamentary buildings of the late Bonn republic, a time when the Federal Republic of Western Germany was re-defining its role in the world. A divided Germany that had to come to terms with the atrocities of the Third Reich wanted to reinvent itself as an open and participatory society, which also entailed a sense of un-finishedness as well as a procedural approach to democratic decision making. The buildings of the Bonn republic reflect that self-understanding, at least from the perspective of the architects and their political clients. Like the laboratories, these buildings house people as well as a particular mindset. We could characterise it along the lines of the Habermasian ideal of a power-free discourse.

Our understanding of open architecture however should neither stop with the buildings of the Bonn Republic nor with the history of great white male architects. Rather, it is the small details that demand attention, which is why architecture is viewed here under the perspective of its materiality. It is on that level that a distinction between the corporate laboratory and the social laboratory can be fruitfully made. The buildings of large corporations resemble material battlegrounds with their use of enormous quantities of steel, glass, and concrete which is bent into futuristic shapes. Likewise, the self-understanding of technology corporations is determined by a dominant attitude towards the world of things, an authority to dispose of the material at will – and a frustration if it does not behave as planned. In contrast to this, we witness a materially sensitive architecture that works with instead of against the material. Modern designs have gone as far as giving the material primacy in defining both the properties and the shape of the building. And some architects even propose that materially sensitive and socially sensitive form-finding processes go together. Thus sensibility for the material world becomes a catalyst for solidarity with the whole of humanity and nature through building and designing.

Such an approach is particularly useful in the digital world where the material world, through the architecture of buildings as well as the design of electronic devices, permeates the daily lives in societies, which is why, according to Bruno Latour, things must be represented as interdependent yet independent actors in order to come to terms with the fact that both on the social and on the political level human existence and the world of things has become intertwined.

Whoever becomes sensitive for that perspective will at some point also experience the "power of wonder" that such a realisation brings with it. And he or she will find countless examples of the independence of material actors both in the workplace and in his or her own house. The third and central part of this book is therefore devoted to such alternative spaces and alternative architectural, design, and also social work practices.

Church communities as well can become an example for good building in this regard. There are examples of churches which implemented open and participative approaches in both the process of designing and in the daily use of their buildings. We will look at two exemplary approaches, the rebuilding of the North West Bronx in New York and the church and community centre in Rif, Austria. They are both, to quote from a seminal film on the future of school buildings in Germany, *Incubators of the Future* (Kahl 2004).

This theme will be fully unfolded in the fourth and final part of the book, where I will go back to where I started, to the heart of practical theology, and ask how a materially sensitive approach in line with Latour and others can not only be preached but fruitfully practiced as well. While an investigation of current building practices that employ materially sensitive and people-empowering techniques must be the focus of another project, we will nonetheless take a brief look at church buildings and the link between the built environment and the worldview that is expressed therein. More concretely, we will look at the concept of an ecclesial community and its relation to the world around it that is expressed in church buildings and remodellings from the 1960s up to the present, taking these buildings seriously as pastoral actors – just like we take the people seriously that meet and worship in them.

The Structure of the Text

When we describe the building of a house as an open process, we have to apply that description to the research process as well. If buildings should allow as many people as possible to participate with their ideas, then texts should do the same.

In this context I want to introduce Umberto Eco's concept of the *open artwork* as a guiding principle – and since I refer to art, in particular architecture and photography, as condensation points for my thoughts, Eco's concept seems even more fitting. In *Das offene Kunstwerk* (Eco 1973), the open artwork, Eco pur-

sues the question how modern art can allow for a multitude of interpretations and enables the viewer to bring his or her own ideas into the process of perceiving a work of art. In modern music, that liberty of interpretation is even more important because the experience hinges on the performance.

> The interpreter has not only, like in traditional music, the possibility to interpret the instructions of the composer according to his own feelings, but he is asked to intervene in the form of the composition itself, often through determining the length or the sequence of notes in an act of creative improvisation.* (Eco 1973, p. 27)Quotations marked with an asterisk * have been translated by the author of this book.

This marks a break with the ideal of music as a closed artwork which relies on a "finished and definite message"* (ibid., pp. 28–29) transmitted from the composer, via the interpreter to the listener. Instead the interpreting musician becomes the "active centre of a network of inexhaustible relations"* (ibid., p. 31)[2], he or she becomes a co-author.

Yet at the same time, this openness presents a problem as the artist wants to give his or her interpreters as much creative freedom as possible without jeopardising the character of his or her work as a discernible original work by the artist "and not that of someone else"* (ibid., p. 55). This is why, according to Eco, there needs to be a guarantee that the communication between the artist and the interpreter does not descend into chaos. A "delicate balance that reconciles a minimum of order with a maximum of disorder"* (ibid., p. 175) is necessary for the artistic communication to work. Some artists have strained that balance between order and disorder to the maximum. The composer John Cage, for instance, emphasises openness and disorder. In his essay "Offenes Kunstwerk versus Kunst der Offenheit", open artwork versus the art of openness, Karl Baier (Baier 2003) notes that Cage questions Eco's concept of art with a radical openness that borders on the accidental. Baier shows that there is a conflict between Eco's Western perspective on the artist – one might detect traces of the original genius here – and Cage's Eastern spirituality where the concept of a discernible authorship is less important.

2 In this description Eco refers to the composer and theoretician Henri Pousseur.

That balance between order and chaos, which I would rather interpret as a balance between determining one's own position and providing a surface where others can attach their ideas, has to be guaranteed by the artist. Eco refers to poetry to give his readers an idea how such a balance could be achieved. Since poetry is a written art form, all written texts can benefit from Eco's ideas – this is true of the current book as well. Referring to the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, Eco writes:

> It has to be avoided that a single meaning imposes itself: the empty space around the world, the play with typography, the spatial composition of the text help to give the word an aura of indefiniteness and allow it to prefigure a thousand things.* (Eco 1973, p. 37)

What poetry does on the page, theatre can facilitate on stage. Eco mentions Bertold Brecht's drama theory and the importance for the audience to become involved, especially as the dramatic tension does not resolve itself in the same way as in classical drama:

> [A] solution is expected and hoped for but it must come from a conscious participation of the audience. The audience becomes a tool for revolutionary pedagogy.* (ibid., pp. 40–41)

The significance of this sentence, especially for pastoral theology and this book, becomes apparent if we place it in the historical context of a changing perception of the world. Eco takes the reader along a journey from the closed and definite art of the middle ages, where the artist places himself in a "cosmos as a hierarchy of clear and predetermined order"* (ibid., p. 46), through baroque, where the rise of empiricism changes people's focus from essence to appearance, and then on to the artwork in modernity. Here he refers to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, phenomenology of perception, (1945):

> How can I experience the world […], if none of the perspectives under which I view it is sufficient and the horizons are always open? […] A belief in the thing and the world must be based on the assumption of a closed system – and yet such a closure become impossible.* (ibid., p. 51)

Eco sees a new freedom on the horizon, not just in intangible music, poetry, and theatre, but also for something as concrete as architecture. He mentions the new faculty for architecture at the university of Caracas which he calls "a school that invents itself every day"* (Eco 1973, p. 42) as its classrooms have movable walls that allow to reconfigure the floor plan of the building each day according to the needs of teachers and students.

In conclusion, then, we can say that an open text is not a l'art pour l'art but a reaction to what Eco describes as the problem of modernity. The author, as well as the poet and the architect, must find a delicate balance between presenting a unique standpoint and leaving the text open for the readers to bring in their perspectives. This is a risky proposition, since the conclusions drawn this way are possible, probable, but not inevitable. As with other creative processes, such as the later mentioned concept of abduction, there is a multitude of permissible interpretations. Yet at the same time, probability instead of necessity seems fitting for a book on the laboratory situation.

The Design of the Book

What Umberto Eco has alluded to in poetry, namely that the design and typesetting of a text plays an important role in the way it is being perceived as an open artwork, has been thought through in information theory. One theoretical position is that of the American statistician, political, and computer scientist Edward Tufte, whose book *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint* (Tufte 2003) argues that information design reflects the bureaucracy and power structures of the organisation from which the text originated. This is often a hierarchical structure (cf. ibid., p. 10), further aided by the computer programs that are used to present information, hence the title of his book.

As an example, Tufte illustrates how the PowerPoint slides of a NASA briefing on the planned re-entry of the space shuttle Columbia into the earth orbit presented information to NASA officials in a way that they were likely to underestimate the dangers of the damaged heat shield. As the shuttle was lost during re-entry that faulty information design had dramatic consequences.[3]

3 Bruno Latour has also written on the many-parts-machine Columbia and its disintegration (cf. e.g. Latour 2005, pp. 20–24).

> The choice of headings, arrangement of information, and size of bullets on the key chart served to highlight what management already believed. The uncertainties and assumptions that signalled danger dropped out of the information chain. (ibid., p. 10)

Information can be presented in a way that lulls readers into a false sense of security. That problem is heightened when software supports a "cognitive style" (ibid., p. 26) that values the quick "sales pitch" (ibid., p. 13) over lengthy processes of thought and deliberation.

As a remedy, Tufte suggests a particular style of typesetting in his own books. Most strikingly, his texts feature a wide margin where additional information, provided either by the author or as pencil annotations by the reader, finds its space.[4] These texts are not just meant to be read but to be worked with and added to. In addition, Tufte flattens the hierarchical structure of headings and subheadings and condenses the text as much as possible.[5]

This book cannot emulate the different nuances of typesetting that Edward Tufte used in his books, especially *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, *Envisioning Information*, *Visual Explanations*, and *Beautiful Evidence*. However, the author hopes that within the constraints of this book with its rather small margins, readers can still become cognisant that a text is an open form, awaiting the readers' participation – and that might have been the most important aspect that Tufte wanted to make his readers aware of.

The Book Situated at the Margins of Practical Theology

As information design subtly confers world views, an open information design is also worthwhile to pursue as a theological endeavour. Instead of paving a straight way to the heart of the matter, the text as an open artwork evolves around its centre. That centre, however, remains beyond the author's grasp. To take an image from church architecture: In some modern churches the altar is

4 My colleague Erik Müller-Zähringer has made me aware that such additions to a main text have a rich tradition, e.g. in the rabbinic tradition where annotations to the unchangeable holy text gain an enormous prominence.

5 A prime example that Tufte cites for his approach is Richard Feynman, Robert Leighton und Matthew Sands *The Feynman Lectures on Physics* (1963).

set a few feet off-centre to show that there is no straight connection between God and the altar table. Rather, what is at the heart of the liturgy remains outside the control of the community who gathers around the altar.

Reinhard Meßner (Meßner 2003) calls this the "ex-centric centre"[6] of the community. The community, according to Meßner, does not simply have God in their midst, but they orient they prayer towards God who then makes community happen (cf. ibid., p. 29).

> If the Christian community expects the final coming of God, his eschatological theophany, then the altar – the Christian altar, where the prayer for the parousia is voiced – is the ex-centric centre of the community, the place which leaves an open space for the outstanding coming of Christ, which is symbolically anticipated in the eucharistic liturgy.* (ibid., p. 35)

Meßner's text is a strong argument for a theology which leaves open spaces. The concept of openness of spaces within the church has also been brought forward, amongst others, by Thomas Erne when he writes about the church as a "hybrid" space (Erne 2017, p. 35) which could also include contemporary art installations that break up the traditional ways of "reading" sacred spaces. If theology does not leave open spaces, then both the Christian community and the theological text run the risk of becoming self-referential.

But can an open text still be taken as a theological contribution to the public discourse? This is particularly problematic at times where said discourse seems to demand not an ex-centric positionality but a bold stance.

There are good reasons to remain in a state of openness. One is the historic example that Catholic intellectuality gave during the interwar period, a time that resembles our own in its signs of insecurity and the search for institutions that would guarantee security, especially religious institutions.

> The "exploding" modernity of the prewar era, which came into its "crisis years" with the First World War and – in the words of Paul Valéry's famous diagnosis – has learnt that it was "mortal," did not just radically refuse an optimistic civil Christendom, which, together with the bourgeois era, was crushed on

6 Meßner here alludes to the concept of *ex-centric positionality*, which Helmuth Plessner has introduced and which, in brief, refers to the ability of humans to relate to themselves – in contrast to animals who live out of their midst.

> the battlefields of an industrialised mass warfare. It also […] began to search for the "objective", which it thought it could find in Catholicism.* (Gerber 2013, pp. 124–125)

One Catholic intellectual who rejected this return to the seemingly safe haven of Catholicism was August Messer, who is the protagonist of Stefan Gerber's historical study. Gerber cites exceedingly from Messer's own writings (Messer 1924) to portray a man of science and learning who was aware that some of his (Protestant) university peers saw Catholicity as a fallback into pre-enlightened ignorance and at the same time saw church leadership, Pius X. in particular, condemning modernity as a whole, the freedom of science included.

> "We as intellectuals" must fear "that by becoming Catholic we will lose too much of what we value as an indispensable intellectual good, that is the freedom of philosophical and scientific thought".* (Gerber 2013, p. 126)

This was not simply aimed at the official position of Pius X. and his decree *Lamentabili* (1907), which made Messer leave the church, but rather at the general concept of an all too simple and unambiguous harmony between the knowledge of God and of the world. That harmony was set in stone by the First Vatican Council in its dogmatic constitution, *Dei Filius*: "God […] can be known with certitude by the natural light of human reason from created things" (DH 1785).

Throughout his life, Messer suffered from this, in his perspective, irreconcilable difference. Even more so because for him the question of God always remained relevant. He wrote extensively about the problem that God and the world cannot be simply reconciled. Through his writings he gave a voice to many Catholic intellectuals of his time who did not want to be contented with a seemingly secure faith and its institution in the church at times of societal change (cf. Gerber 134). Messer's intellectual struggle adds to the concepts of ex-centricity and the open artwork in that he exposes the rifts and wounds that an engagement with the world necessarily leaves us with. Especially for practical theology, the question becomes virulent, as to what degree it is willing to leave behind its institutionalised safe haven of a specialist discipline with a proven system to classify anything it might encounter in the world. Messer's engagement with the signs of his time can thus become a primer for the engagement with the *things* of our time.

But before we come to the things and buildings in the second and third part of the book, we will, first of all, continue to explore the ground on which we stand. As the heading of this section suggests, it is practical theology. Thus the following first part introduces the disciplinary playing field, but it does so from a perspective that is materially sensitive and thus paves the way to the rest of the book. Some of the observations made seem to be marginal, but from these margins I hope to shed new light on the discipline.