

THE CALL TO BE CULTURAL ARCHITECTS

A brief exploration of a topic that sounds totally pretentious...

The bird at the window – the desire to fly and glass barriers
→ have we lost imagination?

The dialogue between client and architect is about as intimate as any conversation you can have, because when you're talking about building a house, you're talking about dreams.

Robert A. M. Stern

Architecture aims at Eternity.

Christopher Wren

Drinking siphoned coffee with David in Wellington

1. Culture

Literary critic Raymond Williams said that "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language". The word means a lot of different things, so we'll do a bit of a summary:

- In the fifteenth century it was always associated with agriculture – about cultivation of plants
- In the sixteenth century it started to refer to people and societies (all cultures equal).
- By the mid-eighteenth century many key thinkers saw "culture" as synonymous with "civilisation" – and Western society was regarded as the height of civilisation. Those outside the Western clique were "uncultured".
- At this time culture related to how humans adapted to their natural environment (eg Inuits to a cold climate, Fijians to the islands).
- As the industrial revolution kicked in culture was what stood between men and machines. With an uglier world emerging culture was something out of the ordinary (high and low culture, every day life was not culture (Bach is but a folk song isn't). The church got infected by this – culture is a higher thing in a sea of chaos (the liberal view of culture).

We will assume that culture is "the totality of socially transmitted behaviour patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought... (It is) the predominating attitudes and behaviour that characterise the functioning of a group or organisation." (Answers.com)

Culture therefore involves:

- The shaping of a person's behaviour by spoken and unspoken mechanisms.

- The passing on of attitudes and values.
- The ability to fit in, communicate, connect, based on commonality (or the inability to fit in!).
- A sense of belonging (gangs or sub-cultures etc.)
- An atmosphere, a vibe, a "spirit"
- Goods and bads

The shift from:



The car – impact diagram

And church has a culture! It is a culture that shapes us, channels our thoughts and how we do things. And it is a complicated mixture of traditions (pre-modern), modernistic methodology and postmodern expectations (the least important variable).

Architecture should speak of its time and place, but yearn for timelessness.

Frank Gehry

2. Architects

Conversations with Malcolm, Rob and Rodney

→ solving spatial problems (but not any old way!)

And I confess to be being spatially challenged (I contributed to one decision in the design of our home – I just can't 'see' that way).

Church leadership is a form of architecting. It involves creating sacred space – to build a shared spirituality for a community of human beings. But a lot of church leadership ends up feeling like getting the job done, making progress, wrestling with people. And a service is shaped by tradition or functionality (what needs to happen).

→ so how do we make church more human?

Much of church leadership is about imitation of what others have built – there is a profound lack of originality and artistry.

No person who is not a great sculptor or painter can be an architect. If he

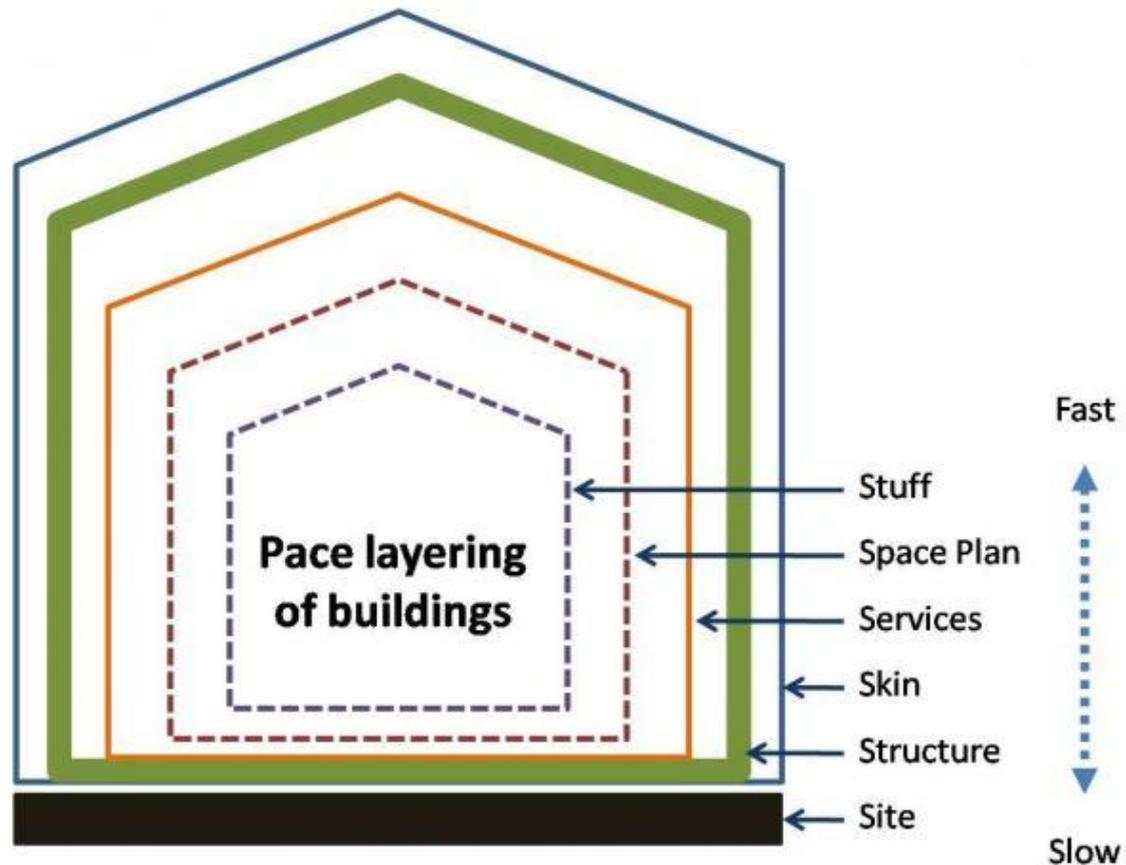
is not a sculptor or painter, he can only be a builder.

John Ruskin

Human requirements are the inspiration for art.

Stephen Gardiner

"How Buildings Learn" by Stewart Brand explores how buildings start, adapt and last (or disappear). He develops an interesting model to explain the various elements that determine a buildings usefulness – as to whether it will be useful long term.



Brand, S. (1994). How Buildings Learn.

- SITE – the geographical setting, 'site is eternal'.
- STRUCTURE – the foundation and load bearing elements, perilous and expensive to change – so people don't. Structural life ranges from 30-300 years (few make it past 60 years).
- SKIN – exterior finishes now change every 20 years or so, with fashion and technology.
- SERVICES – the working guts of the building, communications, plumbing, wiring, heating, elevators etc. They wear or become obsolescent every 7-15 years. Many buildings are demolished as their systems are too expensive to replace.
- SPACE PLAN – where the interior layout, walls, ceilings, floors, doors go. Commercial space changes every 3 years or so, a quiet home might wait 30 years.

- STUFF – chairs, desks, pictures, appliances. Furniture is called *mobilia* in Italian for good reason.

Brand notes that of 261 buildings build in 1865, lower Broadway, only 33 survived by 1990. Of those most a radically refurbished, some remain fairly unchanged (the churches, a couple of hotels).

So how do we apply these ideas to the building of Christian community?

- Site = reason for being?
- The skin/structure = how the community impacts the eye of the community
- Services = the inner workings of the community
- Layout and stuff = how the church works to allow formation, community and worship to grow

I want to suggest that churches are incredibly people insensitive in their cultural architecture. The world has radically changed and yet, like our physical architecture, we adapt very slowly to people's changed situations.

All architecture is shelter, all great architecture is the design of space that contains, cuddles, exalts, or stimulates the persons in that space.

Philip Johnson

Architecture, of all the arts, is the one which acts the most slowly, but the most surely, on the soul.

Ernest Dimnet

The way something is built either creates a missional community or negates such a dream emerging.

And a building must be like a human being. It must have a wholeness about it, something that is very important.

Minoru Yamasaki

Good design doesn't date.

Harry Seidler

3. Reimagining

- The calling to be fully human

Genesis 2 describes the 'placing' of the human in the garden. This enclosure creates the context for our understanding of human vocation. Paul Stephens, in his book 'The other six days' suggests three essential ingredients:

- Communion with God
- Community building

- Co-creativity with God

To build a healthy community it involves a valuing of allowing of these qualities in the culture – and community – that share place.

- Communion with God
 - Worship and intimacy
 - Direct experience with God
 - Training/learning opportunities
- Community building
 - Think village not church
 - food, fun, festivals
 - hospitality and welcome
- Co-creativity with God
 - permission (without committees) – deal with control issues!
 - valuing risk/experiments
 - trusting the human heart

- Think theologically

We are always in danger of following the culture wherever it goes. We are also in danger of camping where the church culture has channeled us. So my question is:

‘What is the message that you live and die for?’
 ‘What is your theological bedrock?’

We are not called to say and do everything. We have been shaped by God for this calling, and so we live out of a message, our experiences, our heritage. A message should lead to a **way of being** not just a way of doing. A community must be something before it can do something. So, what is your **motif?**

→ villages without walls (my journey)

I think the future of architecture does not lie so much in continuing to fill up the landscape as in bringing back life and order to our cities and towns.

Gottfried Boehm

- Someone must create the conversation

This does not mean you have to come up with all the answers. There are plenty of people who think better about culture and change than we do. The church leader, after all, is the most enculturated of all (though we like to think we aren't!). So pull a think tank together – listen, think outwards in (not inwards out).

Architecture is not an inspirational business, it's a rational procedure to do sensible and hopefully beautiful things; that's all.

Harry Seidler

- Don't think structures (that is modernism), think relationality
We have overvalued the use of structures and systems as the way to build churches. The question is not 'how can we be more effective?' but 'how can we be more human?'. How can we be somewhere that allows people to be more intimate, more creative, more free.

We have space/place but we tend to think of church in organizational terms. This is about control – just how do we communicate permission and flexibility?

Liquid architecture. It's like jazz - you improvise, you work together, you play off each other, you make something, they make something. And I think it's a way of - for me, it's a way of trying to understand the city, and what might happen in the city.

Frank Gehry

- Trust the Spirit
John 3:1-16

We are meant to be mysterious wind blown people, not formula people.

→ do experiments (Alan Roxburgh)

→ find kindred spirits (journey with creative – jam with the giants!)

→ learn from anyone

You've got to bumble forward into the unknown.

Frank Gehry

We are called to be architects of the future, not its victims.

Richard Buckminster Fuller