

# THE END OF ARCHITECTURE

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Wherever there are humans, there is architecture. From the ancient civilizations of the past to the present day we have built. Each year we build larger, taller and more sophisticated structures. The world's tallest building soon to be completed in Dubai is over 800 metres tall and there are plans to build another one twice that height. It makes you wonder where it will end. Economists say that the health of our economy is in part dependent on the growth of the building industry. Others see architecture as a vital remedy to our societal ills – we build as if our life depends on it. We could almost say that the day we stop building is the day we stop living. But one day we will live without architecture. One day, architecture will end.

This is probably not something you would expect to be written by a former architect, let alone someone who is a Christian. What about all the Christian churches and cathedrals that were built for the glory of God? More importantly, what about heaven? So much of our hope as Christians is bound up with the promise of heaven, a place that is often spoken of in architectural terms. So for example, in Revelation 21:10-21 John sees a vision of a city coming down out of heaven. It is a city with walls, gates and streets. What's more, we are told that all the glory and honour of the nations will be brought into this eternal city of heaven (Revelation 21:24), which some have suggested will be the best products of

human art and culture,<sup>1</sup> including architecture. How then can I say that architecture will come to an end? It seems to go against our very experience of life today and the promise of eternal life in the future. And yet I believe, on the basis of the biblical evidence, that one day we will no longer need architecture to live and that all building works as we know it will cease to exist ... forever. How is this possible? Before answering this question it is important to understand what architecture is.

## What is Architecture?

The word *architecture* is a cognate of the Ancient Greek word *architekton* that literally means 'master' or 'chief builder'. This suggests that architecture is more than just 'building'. In the first century B.C. the Roman architect and engineer Vitruvius wrote an influential treatise on architecture now commonly known as *The 10 Books on Architecture*. Vitruvius stated that architecture must exhibit *firmness, commodity and delight*. In more contemporary terms these would be *stability, functionality and aesthetics*. In other words, architecture was to have the strength and durability to remain stable and upright; it was to be useful, fulfilling the function for which it was made; and it was to be beautiful. These three architectural 'virtues' are a useful starting point for understanding what architecture is.

It goes without saying that architecture must remain stable and upright. But the functionality and

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aesthetics of architecture require a bit more explanation. A building's function will depend on its purpose. But there is at least one universal and essential function of architecture—protection. We all need physical protection from the weather and from other creatures in the world like wild animals and other humans. In certain situations, this protection may also include our psychological need for privacy from the prying eyes of outsiders. If we don't feel safe in a building, we are unlikely to remain there for long.

The importance of aesthetics to architecture suggests that it is about more than pure function. Traditionally, historians and architects have defined architecture (as opposed to mere building) as 'high art, a conscious creation of aesthetic form that transcends the practical requirements of function and structure.'<sup>2</sup> The Ancient Greeks first referred to architecture as art. In fact they regarded architecture as the 'mother of the arts'. It is not that they thought that architecture gave birth to the arts, but that unlike any other discipline, architecture engages the mind, the body and the eye.<sup>3</sup> The aesthetics of architecture is a much-debated topic that I don't have space to explore, except to make the observation that a beautiful building is meant to enhance the quality of life for those inhabiting it, to make us want to remain there to enjoy it.

There is more to architecture than stability, functionality and aesthetics. These days we don't just build to live comfortably, we build in order to prosper materially. In other words, the building of architecture is an important means for creating wealth. A piece of land is worth more money if it is developed, and more so if that development is

And when people become part of such places, they start to see them as their 'home', as places where they belong.

In short, it is through architecture that we establish community. When buildings function well and are beautiful, when they provide for us materially and give us this sense of place, then people want to be there, want to stay there and want to raise their families there. And this is when communities are formed. If this is true about architecture, then surely its end would signal the end of human civilization as we know it. But this is not so when we consider architecture in light of God's revealed word in the Bible.

### Architecture and the Beginning

We see architecture all around us today, but it was not meant to be that way. In the creation account of Genesis there was no architecture. The man and woman created in the image of God are given a mandate to be fruitful and to fill, rule and subdue the earth (Genesis 1:26-28). Now some might interpret our prolific building activity as one way of fulfilling this mandate,<sup>4</sup> but nowhere in the creation account does God command

the man and woman to build. Instead, God put the man in a garden he had planted in Eden to work and to keep it (Genesis 2:15). It would seem then that the way humanity was to fulfill their divine mandate was as gardeners and not builders.

When we look more closely at the garden of Eden we can see that there was in fact no need for architecture, because the garden provided all that architecture promises us. The garden provided protection. Why else would they feel free to walk around the garden naked (Genesis 2:25) if it was not safe and secure? Every tree in the garden that God caused to grow was 'pleasant to the

sight and good for food' (Genesis 2:9), thus providing for both the aesthetic and material needs of the man and woman. This garden is later described as a holy mountain (Ezekiel 28:14). In other words, it was a sacred place, set apart from the rest of the earth. All of this was for the purpose of establishing a community where God dwelt intimately with humanity.<sup>5</sup> You could say that the Garden of Eden was without architecture<sup>6</sup> because God and his garden were the architecture. So why do we build now?

### Architecture and the Curse

We build architecture because our world is now cursed. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were expelled from God's presence in the garden and the world was cursed (Genesis 3). From that moment of disobedience, humanity began to build. Adam and Eve 'built' a covering of fig leaves to protect themselves in their nakedness (Genesis 3:6-7); their son Cain, who was cursed to wander the earth after murdering his brother Abel, built a city (Genesis 4:17) as a place of protection.<sup>7</sup> The architects of the city Babel built to make a name for themselves and to stop the scattering of people over the earth (Genesis 11:4). This city was an attempt to establish their own community outside Eden, which was promptly thwarted by God. He confused the

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'architecturally designed'. Even public buildings that are not bought and sold in the private sector are a source of material benefit to society through such industries as hospitality and tourism. When buildings no longer provide for us economically, costing more to maintain than what they are worth, we demolish them.

Architecture is also a maker of place. I recently tested this important quality of architecture at my local church. I asked people what they first thought of when I mentioned the name of one of the great cities of the world like New York, London or Rome. Everyone responded by talking about the buildings. By their very nature, buildings identify places.



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people's language and dispersed them over the face of the earth (Genesis 11:7-8).

So is it wrong to build? Is God opposed to architecture?

Our world may be cursed but that does not mean that building is wrong. In fact, because of the curse it is right for us to build. In our exile from God and His garden we all need protection to survive in this world, a protection that God himself gives even to those he has cursed (Genesis 3:21, 4:15). God's judgement at Babel was not because of the buildings or the height of the tower, but because of the depth of human sin that sought to establish a community independent from Him.<sup>8</sup> It was the people he scattered in judgement, not the bricks.

So God is not actually opposed to architecture. In fact we could say that he is in favour of it, because He not only regulates buildings (for example in Deuteronomy 22:8), but later commissions and designs them. The prime examples of the latter are the Tabernacle and the Temple of Jerusalem. Both were designed according to the plan of God (Exodus 26:30; 1 Chronicles 28:19) as places where God would dwell with his people and where they could come to pray and offer sacrifices for sin (1 Kings 8). These buildings were a physical expression of God's commitment to redeem people from the curse and re-establish them into a community with Him. It is even said that their garden-like ornamentation and heavenly colours pointed to the future when God would once again dwell as He did with men and women in the garden, but this time in heaven.<sup>9</sup>

### Architecture and Redemption

Both the Tabernacle and the Temple of Jerusalem have had a profound influence on Western architecture.<sup>10</sup> This has no doubt contributed to the belief that architecture could redeem society. From the early medieval age right up until today people have held a belief that a beautiful building can be used to improve us morally and spiritually. This

desire to improve people and society through architecture comes ultimately from an innate longing for the innocence and goodness we once had in the garden of Eden. We are, after all, creatures made for the garden, and so it is not surprising that we would long to return there, a longing that finds its expression in our architecture. As architect Stanley Tigerman argues in his book *The Architecture of Exile*, creating a perfect paradise lies at the centre of architecture.<sup>11</sup> In other words, since we cannot return to our original state in the Garden of Eden, we try to re-create it through architecture.

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But no matter how good our architecture might be, it cannot redeem. The size, shape or texture of a wall will not improve anyone morally. Or to put it negatively, we must not blame buildings for our moral failures.<sup>12</sup> As Jeremy Till rightly states 'a brick has no morals'.<sup>13</sup> These might sound like quite self-evident, even trivial statements to make, but not when you consider the very lofty position that architecture holds within our society today. A number of the great modern architects of 20th century Europe and America such as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright believed that their architectural aesthetics had ethical power.<sup>14</sup> Implicit in this belief is that their buildings could improve society and so save it from moral decay. While we may dismiss such beliefs as giving architecture too much power, our own actions often say the opposite. Today's newspapers are filled with articles and advertisements about buildings and building renovation. Our obsession with building is about more than just making money; it is about making a better life for ourselves materially and personally.

It is not just the secular world that attributes redemptive qualities to architecture. The builders of the great cathedrals of Medieval Europe like

Chartres Cathedral in France thought that they were building a slice of eternity itself<sup>15</sup> under the mistaken belief that when you entered into such buildings you were entering into the presence of God. They were meant to be like arks that would carry the faithful into salvation. Again, we might dismiss such lofty views of architecture, but it is these same great cathedrals that have influenced the building of many of our modern churches, and with that influence comes the temptation to think that somehow our church buildings make us better people and that by being in them we might be saved.

The people of Israel faced the same temptation. They had the very temple of God in their midst and were deceived into thinking that they were safe because of it. But even it did not improve them morally or save them (Jeremiah 7:1-7). In fact, their continual moral failures lead to the destruction of the temple and their exile from the land. While in exile, the prophet Ezekiel saw a vision of a new temple where God would once again dwell with his people (Ezekiel 40-43), but not before he promised to make the change that was really needed in Israel—the renovation of human hearts (Ezekiel 36:22-38). It is people's hearts that need changing in order to improve society morally, not buildings.

That's not to say that architecture plays no role in God's plans for salvation. For example, God provided cities of refuge in the land to protect people from revenge killings (Numbers 35). He provided the temple as a place where people could draw closer to him. But despite such provisions, God himself always remained Israel's true protection, beauty and abundance (Psalm 46:1, 27:4, 103:5). God was the one around whom the people were to dwell – the centre of the community. And as he spoke to this community, through the prophets of the Old



Testament, he promised a time when he would bring about a complete salvation, a salvation that would overturn the curse that came about through sin, and bring eternal protection, beauty and abundance. God fulfilled this amazing promise in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and as he did so, the temple was made redundant. In John 4, Jesus pronounces that the time had come for God to be worshipped, not in a particular place (i.e. at the temple in Jerusalem), but in 'spirit and truth' (John 4:24). Now the place to enter into community with God and his people was not through a building but in the person Jesus. Any buildings God used in the past as vessels of salvation were but shadows that ultimately pointed to the real salvation found only in Christ.

tree of life, mentioned earlier, abundantly produces fruit for healing (Revelation 22:2). This eternal community is centred around God, not a building. John explicitly says that there is no temple in heaven because God and the Lamb are the temple (Revelation 21:22). There is no need for architecture in heaven because God is there, dwelling once more in community with his people. God is, once again, the architecture.

So how do we account for the use of architectural language of walls and streets to describe the city of heaven? We must firstly remember that the book of

## *Heaven signals the end of the curse that resulted in the necessity of architecture.*

### **Architecture and the End**

Even though architecture is vital for life now, to think of our future in heaven in similar terms is to misunderstand heaven. When you read John's description of the heavenly city you can't help but notice the similarities between it and the Garden of Eden. For example, just as the Garden of Eden had the tree of life in its midst (Genesis 2:9), so does the heavenly city (Revelation 22:2). Heaven is not merely a city but a *garden* city. The effects of the curse have been removed (Revelation 21:4). Now there is nothing in this garden city that we will need protection from, be it the weather, animals or sinful human beings. The prophet Isaiah prophesied that in this future city God's glory would spread out like a canopy over the people to create a refuge and a shelter from the weather (Isaiah 4:5-6); and no animal or man would harm or destroy (Isaiah 11:6-9). The heavenly city is unmistakably beautiful, prepared as a bride for her husband (Revelation 21:2). The city is beautiful because it is full of the glory of God, like the radiance of a rare jewel (Revelation 21:11). The

Revelation is full of symbolic language. This doesn't mean that heaven is non-existent, but that it may not exist exactly in the way John describes it. Take, for example, the city walls. This image symbolises safety and security, one that people in John's day could easily identify with. But if this city wall is a literal wall of gold for protection from outside threats, then why are the gates never shut (Revelation 21:25)? Surely that would defeat the purpose of having a wall in the first place. Unless, of course, the wall is merely symbolic of the protection we will have from being in the eternal community of God—protection so perfect that if we had a city wall we could leave the gates open day and night without fear of harm. So, if we are to take the city as being symbolic, then we should not see it as houses and skyscrapers, but as representing God's people in eternal fellowship with their God.<sup>16</sup>

What about the glory and honour that is brought into heaven by the nations (Revelation 21:24-26)? Does this mean there will be architecture brought into heaven? I cannot see how this could be so.



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For one, we see throughout the book of Revelation that 'glory and honour' are given to God alone (Revelation 4:9-11, 5:11-14, 7:12), and those who have sought glory for themselves are called to bring glory to God (Revelation 11:13, 14:7) or face the judgement of God (Revelation 18). This glory and honour that is due to God is given through lips that praise the Creator and the Lamb—the slain redeemer. In light of this context, the natural reading of Revelation 21:24-26 is that the glory and honour being brought into heaven is not inanimate architecture, but men and women of all nations who are members of God's true building—the church—giving praise to God.<sup>17</sup>

Besides this, if our buildings could bring glory to God, then why is the temple of God—a building designed by God himself—not in heaven (Revelation 21:22)? All architecture represents our separation from God and from each other. Heaven signals the end of the curse that resulted in the necessity of architecture. Architecture, as we know it, cannot be compatible with heaven. It is only people that go into eternity, not buildings.

### **Conclusion**

So, what does this all mean for the making of architecture today?

The end of architecture reminds us not to put our trust in building in this life. It is a challenge to our society's obsession with property and home renovation. Today we build as if everything depends

on it. But in the context of eternity, buildings do not really matter—only people. That is not to say that architecture is unimportant now. For as long as we are living in this cursed world we still need buildings. But the primary goal for architects and designers is not building for building's sake. Rather, it is the ethical obligation to love others by creating structures that function well, providing their clients with the necessary protection, as well as beauty and material benefit. In this way, they can help provide places for safe and loving communities to develop.

But such communities will only develop if the occupants of those spaces love others as they use them. We may create the most inviting spaces that have the potential to draw people together, but if the occupants of those spaces are not hospitable in their use of them then those spaces actually become barriers to the growth of community relationships. In the gospel of Christ, God has

removed the barriers that separate people and has welcomed us into an eternal community (Ephesians 2:11-22). God has loved us by opening the door to himself in heaven. Those who have gratefully accepted God's loving welcome reflect his treatment of us when we, in love, open our space to others in the name of Christ. It is in such communities that we see a glimpse of the day when we will no longer need our buildings, but will live securely in God, praising him along with the rest of his redeemed people, forever. ©

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Hoekema, A.A. (1994). *The Bible and the Future*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p286. See also Berkhof, H. (1966). *The Meaning of History*. London: SCM, pp188-193.
- 2 Kostof, S. (1985). *A History of Architecture*. Oxford: Oxford University, p13.
- 3 This is how architect Peter Eisenman described architecture in a recent lecture at Vanderbilt University. This lecture can be found at: <http://e-archiv.vanderbilt.edu/handle/1803/1378?show=full>.
- 4 This idea that our activity of shaping the material world is the way we show our dominion of it is

expressed by Abraham Kuyper as quoted in Op cit, Berkhof, p191.

- 5 See, for example, Genesis 3:8 where God is described as walking in the garden in the cool of the evening.
- 6 Beale, G. K. (1994). *The Temple and the Church's Mission*. Downers Grove: IVP, p97.
- 7 Ellul, J. (1997). *The Meaning of the City*. Carlisle: Paternoster, pp5-6. See also Sailhamer, J.H. (1992). *The Pentateuch as Narrative*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, pp114-115.
- 8 Ibid, p16.
- 9 Op cit, Beale, pp36-38. See also Op cit, Sailhamer, p299.
- 10 Kollar, L.P. (1975). *Symbolism in Christian Architecture of the First Millenium*. PhD Thesis: UNSW, p142.
- 11 Tigerman, S. (1988). *The Architecture of Exile*. New York: Rizzoli, p23.
- 12 De Botton, A. (2006). *The Architecture of Happiness*. Camberwell: Penguin, pp20-21.
- 13 Till, Jeremy. (2009). *Architecture Depends*. Cambridge: MIT, p177.
- 14 Ibid, p174-75.
- 15 James, J. (1990). *The Master Masons of Chartres*. Sydney: West Grinstead, p85.
- 16 Beale, G.K. (1999). *The Book of Revelation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p1079
- 17 Ibid, p1095. See also Baukham, Richard (1993). *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, p315.

**CONTINUED FROM PAGE 18.** these scientific accounts to generate a real problem, (6) would have to be true:

(6) Human minds would exist and believe in God, even if there were no God.

Is it true? I don't think so. I don't think there would be a *universe* if there were no God. I don't think the universe would be *fine-tuned for life* if there were no God. And I don't think there would be *any actual life, believers, human beings, or religion* either if there were no God. Am I wrong? If I am, nothing about evolutionary or cognitive psychology leads me to conclude that I am. So, contrary to our initial conclusion, these psychological accounts of religious belief do not teach us that we would have religious beliefs whether or not they are true. What the atheist assumes, but has not by any means shown, is that the origin of religious belief arises from *purely natural causes alone*, with no divine involvement at all. But all the science shows us is that natural causes are involved in the origin of religious belief, not that those causes are the *only* ones involved.

As a result, these accounts do not undermine the justification for religious belief, and thus this argument fails.

Perhaps there are other reasons to think that these psychological accounts raise problems for religious belief, but it is not at all clear what those reasons would be. For the moment, it seems perfectly acceptable for the Christian to hold that God created the world, human beings and human minds in such a way that when they are functioning properly, they form beliefs in the existence of rocks, rainbows, human minds and ... God.

For now, what we should conclude is that contemporary psychology has shown us the (rather unsurprising) fact that, in the words of Oxford psychologist Justin Barrett, 'Belief in gods and God particularly arises through the natural, ordinary operation of human minds in natural ordinary environments.'<sup>11</sup> This discovery echoes the claim made 400 plus years earlier by John Calvin: 'There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity.'<sup>12</sup> ©

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Bloom, Paul (2004). *Descartes' Baby*. New York: Basic Books.
- 2 Boyer, Pascal (2003). 'Religious Thought and Behaviour as By-products of Brain Function'. In *Trends in Cognitive Science* 7/3: 119-24.
- 3 Boyer, Pascal (2001). *Religion Explained*. New York: Basic Books.
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- 6 Bering, Jesse M. (2004). 'The evolutionary history of an illusion: Religious causal beliefs in children and adults'. In Ellis, B. and Bjorklund, D. (eds). *Origins of the Social Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and Child Development*. New York: Guilford Press, pp411-37.
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