
CONVERSATION GROUPS

Small Theological Libraries as Place

Susan Ebertz, Wartburg Theological Seminary

Vance Thomas, Central Seminary

Kris Veldheer, Catholic Theological Union

ABSTRACT The idea of “library as place” has become challenged/ problematized because of two concurrent realities—the pandemic and the growing popularity of online instructional delivery. These two realities have aggravated longstanding questions about the status of small theological libraries already struggling with limited personnel and resources. How can we envision the “theological library as place” in such a way that we can revalue physical space while also orienting and guiding development of virtual spaces? After speakers have shared concepts and resources, participants will be broken up into small groups to discuss experiences including challenges and successes and may focus on either physical place or virtual place.

VANCE

As the title of the session indicates, we will be exploring the idea of the theological library as place. The topic has been put into sharp relief for several of us and our institutions this past year because of the pandemic. Questions like “What does the library mean as a space and as a place with the closure of the physical facility?” Or “How do I help contribute to the community and its formation if the only access available to users is mediated by the Internet?” Such questions are beyond the capacity of a session like this, but our hope is that the presentation will provide a few ideas to consider as well

as an opportunity to connect with colleagues at other institutions addressing similar challenges.

Here's a quick overview of how we structured our presentation. Following some brief introductory comments, we looked at the transformation of "space" into a "place." We started by considering how we frame and talk of library space and place. Next, we attended to the library as a physical place and then the library as a virtual place. Having provided a common framework for discussion, we divided into small groups and asked participants to reflect on two questions (provided below with the collected responses). The session concluded with an opportunity for the small groups to share with one another some of their responses to the questions.

I want to start by providing a simple distinction between "space" and "place." From the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "space" is defined as follows: an extent set apart or available (e.g., parking space, floor space); physical space independent of what occupies it (called 'absolute space'); a blank area separating words or lines. From the same dictionary, "place" is defined this way: a building or locality used for a special purpose; a particular region, center of population, or location; a particular part of a surface or body; a proper or designated niche or setting. As you can see from these two sets of definitions, there is a difference between "space" and "place" conceptually. The definitions for "space" provided here highlight that "space" refers to a region or area that is undefined, indefinite, or empty. "Place," on the other hand, is defined, specific, or set apart because of its particularity. It will be helpful to keep this in mind as we move forward because it is this transition from space to place that is essential.

If you have had the privilege of participating in a building project, whether new construction or a renovation of whatever scale, you may have come across some of works as resources to help you consider how to manage the process of transforming indefinite space into something that works and feels like a library. (See resources at the end.)

In my own experience with a building project, the thing that proved particularly engaging as I first began my reflections on what and how to craft a library place was the idea of "active learning spaces." This has been a topic within education research for at least the past three decades, but my first introduction was about ten years ago as we were in the process of renovating space at our campus for a new library. As the presenter talked about "active learning" she encouraged us to avoid focusing on the furnishings first; rather, she encouraged us to pay attention to what the "students" were doing. As we toured

a particular high school facility, there were spaces for architecture, health sciences, culinary arts, engineering, and more. Each of these spaces was designed to emulate the workspace for a professional in that field. This is when my moment of re-framing the idea of theological library space and place occurred: What would it look like if we created a space that emulated the work environment for practicing clergy? Incidentally, our faculty was reading the book *Educating Clergy* at about the same time, and the idea of designing the library as a space to foster pastoral imagination reinforced this notion for me.

I also had the good fortune of encountering a book that provided a very helpful template for addressing this and similar space/place questions: Doorley and Witthoft's *Make Space: How to Set the Stage for Creative Collaboration* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2012).

On page 38 of the book, the author states "Space is the 'body language' of an organization." It approaches the space design process using four categories: places, properties, actions, and attitudes. The book presents these four categories in this order since this is often the order in which we address them; however, it encourages the reader to address these in the reverse order during the design process, starting with attitudes and actions and finishing with properties and place. I should also note that this book is written for a design community, and the details of the template reflect that community. Nevertheless, the template categories can be adapted and contextualized for theological education.

Another book that impacted our presentation is John Inge's *A Christian Theology of Place: Explorations in Practical, Pastoral, and Empirical Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2016). In it, the author says on page 5, "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value."

SUSAN

I met with a friend who is an architect and asked him about how he designs. He talked about four principles he tries to keep in mind as he designs: 1) comfortable knowing where, 2) fenceable area, 3) respect the form of the context, and 4) design follows needs.

The first is "comfortable knowing where." The designer wants to make sure that the user is comfortable knowing where to find things, knowing where they are, and does not need to be dependent on signage. Too many signs is an indication that the design is not comfortable. The user will feel lost and unsure. Also, the user needs to be able to quickly learn the directions to get to where they want to go.

The second deals with "fenceable area."



As you can see from the picture, we and our neighbors know where our property line is. We don't have a fence, but you can see the fenceable area by the difference in mowing. We cut our grass higher than the neighbors. We have control of our space and know where the boundaries are. This also builds a responsibility on our part for that space. The designer wants to make sure that the user knows where their space is and feels responsible for it.

The third design principle is to “respect the form of the context.”



The designer notes what the context is and its form. In the picture of downtown Dubuque, all the buildings are in line and the sidewalk goes up to the building. A new building would respect this form and would build the building up to the sidewalk. If the building doesn't go up to the sidewalk, it would need a clear reason why they would want to be different. For example, a church in the row of buildings like this may want a lawn to represent refreshment or peace from the concrete.

The final principle deals with “design follows need or not.”



This principle involves architectural philosophy. One school of thought is that the building is designed and then the need is fit into the design. The picture is of a Massachusetts Institute of Technology building. As you can see the building was designed as an artwork. The function of the building must fit into this design. You will notice that some of the offices would have a strange shape with a sloping wall. Furniture would have to fit the unique design. The other school of thought is that the needs are assessed then the space is designed to accommodate the needs. This philosophy puts the users first.

KRIS

Earlier in this presentation, there was a brief discussion of space and place. Drawing on definitions from the Merriam Webster Diction-

ary, space was defined as an extent set apart or available such as a parking space. Space could also be independent of what occupies it. Or in the case of writing, space designates the blank area separating words or lines on a page. On the other hand, place refers to a building or locality used for a special purpose. What is the purpose of digging into space vs. place? I think place is where we give space shape and where we put space to use in some way. Doorly and Witthoft in *Make Space* make the point, “Space matters. We read our physical environment like we read a human face” (2012, 4). A few pages further, the authors push this even further when they say, “Building a space is tough, but shaping culture is an absurd act of daring” (8). I am going to focus on physical space because despite all of our virtual efforts which my co-authors are highlighting, many theological libraries are still physical entities with some sort of print collection.


Physical Space

“Space matters. We read our physical environment like we read a human face.”

Make Space, p. 4

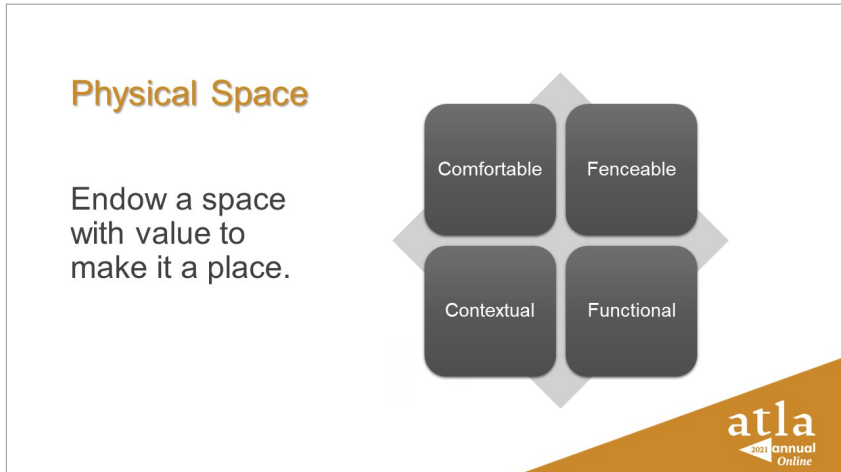
“Building a space is tough, but shaping culture is an absurd act of daring.”

Make Space, p. 8



What does this mean in practical terms? When we are dealing with physical space, anywhere works. CTU’s library where I work was located for almost 40 years on a single floor of a former hotel with books on shelves in each hotel room including the bathrooms. Imagine looking for a book on a set of shelves built into a bathtub! Because that was such a unique space to turn into a library, we keep a drawing of that space in the hotel on the wall in our current library. The drawing serves as a reminder of where we started, and some of the older faculty still talk about wandering from room to room look-

ing for books and how the circulation desk was in a stairwell. I think that use of a space brings Doorly and Witthoft's idea about shaping culture in a space as "an absurd act of daring" to life. Let us also remember my co-presenter Susan's previous remarks that "Space is the body language of an organization." To embrace that absurd act of daring, we need to watch both to how our communities use the library and listen for what language our space speaks to the users.



After we have watched and listened to our physical spaces, I think turning a physical space into a place means we have to empower it with value. Of course that value can come from us, the librarians, or I think more importantly, the value can come from library users. I like to watch how library users "use" the space and also get input from library staff who interact with users more frequently than I do. I use this method to try and understand what language my space is speaking to my users. Let's use the concepts Susan brought up earlier—namely comfortable, fenceable, functional, and contextual—to help us find value to empower a space to a place. Here are four ideas I implemented in my library to move from space to place. **Comfortable:** With suggestions from my front desk staff, we rearranged the soft furniture into seating areas. We put a living room like area in the middle of where we shelve the journals and another couple of overstuffed chairs in a private corner with a coffee table as a conversation place. The rearranged furniture was based on library staff talking with students and watching how library users pulled

furniture around the library to suit their needs. After making these changes, students and researchers have commented on how much they like the arrangement and the spaces get a lot of use. Fenceable: I created zones with the noisier zone nearer the main desk and the front door and quieter study areas in the back of the library. This is the second library I have done this type of zoning in and it seems to work well. At CTU, we don't have dedicated study carrels, so I also let students leave work out overnight if they let us know they are coming back the next day. What I am trying to form here are spaces where students can "fence off" study spaces in the zone that matches their preferred style of studying. Functional: At CTU we have a collection of smallish rooms, one turned into an office and another as storage. But a third room which previously functioned as an A/V room wasn't used at all. Because I didn't have enough study rooms to meet the demands from students for "fenceable" space, I cleaned out the A/V room except for a table and a couple of chairs, to create a functional study space with a door for small groups to work together. It has turned out (before COVID) to be very popular. Finally, Contextual: Where I work, students are often assigned to work in small groups and usually prefer to work in the more public atrium which fills the center of the building. However, I learned in conversation with students that what the atrium lacked was access to library books. So to help facilitate moving small group study from the atrium into the library, I added small whiteboards on wheels that can be moved around the library. I also made sure the whiteboards were in the zone of the library for noisier study to encourage students to work collaboratively with library resources. As a whole all of these ideas have empowered my physical space into a living room like reading area, places for different types of study, private areas for study or conversation, and a place sensitive to the context in which students study and complete assignments.

Think about how you can endow your space to make it a place. Do you dare to shape a culture in your physical space? I don't think it really matters how big or small your physical library is if you can read your space and let your library users show and tell you how they want to use the space. At the end of the day, if your current physical arrangement doesn't work, rearrange the furniture and try something else.

SUSAN

We will now look at “virtual place.” Almost two-thirds of our students are distance students, so we have had to create a virtual library space for them.

Wartburg Seminary was built to look like the castle in Germany and so our LMS site is called Castle Commons. We use Brightspace as our LMS. The library has a “course” in Castle Commons. We have to fit into the regular course template and cannot change the design. The template is set up into Course Content sections. Names of the sections must be descriptive enough so that students know what to find there. We try to put what users need up at the top, so students do not need to scroll. We have bibliographies and links to our Writing Center. We are working on creating video tutorials to supplement the text instructions that are already there.

Our library webpage is another form of creating virtual library place for our students. This, too, follows the design that was given to us. We are not allowed to change anything except for the text. Even the pictures were chosen for us. We include many of the usual website elements. Castle Commons is aimed at our students. The website is open to outsiders, so we try to make sure to take that audience into consideration.

We have an active library Facebook page. We try to post daily using a schedule of what we post each day. We try to include a picture with each post so that students feel like they are here. We post news and pictures of our library physical displays and events. Since many of our alum follow us, we also try to include Throwback Thursday pictures.

We have a library Zoom pro account which is always open when the library is open. Students and faculty zoom us with questions or to talk. The Zoom link is only in Castle Commons and our library email signature. We know when a student has tried to Zoom us when we are closed. We follow up with them as soon as we can. When we are away from the library desk, we use phones to stay in contact with Zoom.

How then do we take the concepts of places, properties, actions, and attitudes and the principles of comfortable, fenceable, contextual, and functional and apply it to library virtual space? As we noted earlier, “What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.” How do we get our students and faculty to know the virtual space better and endow it with value? That is something I continue to wrestle with.

We try to do comparable things for our distance students. As we add new books to the new bookshelves, we take pictures of them and send it with e-book links to all of our students. When we change the new book display, we do a similar thing.

When I talked with my architect friend, he mentioned using something like Second Life to give the feel of being in a virtual library. After hearing of Remo for the Atla conference, I wondered whether that might be something we would consider. My architect friend and I also talked about having zoom stations in spots where students congregate to socialize, for example, at our puzzle table.

As I think about different ways to make space into place, I wonder what our goal is in making virtual space into virtual place. What do we want our distance students to think about when they think about the library? Does it make sense to desire to make our library a virtual place? Is our library a virtual place for some of them already?

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS:

QUESTION 1

What is your biggest challenge related to making your library a “place” (physical or virtual)?

- Budget
- People to do the work
- Size limitations
- Shifting from a temporary to permanent virtual space
- Shifting back to a physical space after being remote
- Lack of interdepartmental support
- Constant change due to circumstances outside of control
- Technical ability of staff and finding time to learn
- The technical abilities of the users
- Entirely virtual program with no physical space
- People to use the physical space
- Lack of physical space at all
- Crowded physical space
- Staff limitations
- Administration keen to divest themselves of real estate (physical facility)
- COVID made everything more challenging

QUESTION 2

How might you frame/reframe that challenge conceptually in order to envision new value for the space?

- Constant change creates a fresh slate; creates room for intentional growth
- Change creates flexibility
- Create a virtual or physical space which invites people in and which invites them to use the space in a variety of ways
- Place on campus one day a week? Spaces for women, child-friendly spaces. Place to eat
- Different communities have different needs, too noisy at home. Quiet spaces.

RESOURCE LIST:

- Bennet, Scott. 2003. *Libraries Designed for Learning*. CLIR Publication No. 122. Washington, D.C.: Council on Library and Information Resources. <https://www.clir.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/pub122web.pdf>.
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