

Article

The Meeting: Ideas for an Architecture of Interreligious Civic Collaboration

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Abstract: Interreligious engagement (IE) has been experienced and theorized mainly as the pursuit of a shared respectful awareness of the beliefs, practices, and social experiences of multiple religious communities. In rare instances, it has been possible to create architecture specifically to foster IE, as in the “tri-faith” Abrahamic campus in Omaha and the Berlin House of One. The theme is: Here *we* are, accepting that we share the world. Another form of IE that deserves to attract more interest is multireligious collaboration in civic work (addressing homelessness, urban blight, illiteracy, etc.). Some adherents of the intrinsically cosmopolitan “world” religions are actively cosmopolitan to the extent of seeking this engagement. The theme is: Let us share the work of the world, including sharing our religiously inflected processing of what the practical issues facing us are. There is a new initiative of this sort in my city, Jackson, Mississippi, named (from M. L. King) the “Beloved Community”. An architectural thought experiment may prove helpful in articulating the ideals for such an endeavor. What would be the physical desiderata for its headquarters? Let us imagine a new downtown building, The Meeting, dedicated to housing meetings where mixed religious groups learn about civic issues and coordinate efforts to address them. Full interreligious sharing of a space seems to require a neutral design lacking any definite religious inspiration. But there are nonsectarian ways to create an appreciably *special*, non-ordinary space, as in courtrooms and classrooms. Could a civic IE headquarters be special, expressive of practical optimism, and contain a sufficient religious allusion to qualify as a “next-to-sacred space” in which religious actors felt supported in the civic extension of their religious lives? I offer suggestions for discussion, including (1) a pavilion-style building suggestive of being set up for a special purpose—not soaringly grandiose but with a vertical feature such as a central roof lantern; (2) at least one major porch, with benches and tables; (3) an outside water fountain with public water supply (a historical allusion to the Islamic *sabil*); (4) inside, right-sized meeting rooms around the glass-walled periphery; (5) a big “living room” lounge in the center, usable for larger meetings, with access to a kitchen, and with a big project board for tracking work completed and work in hand next to a large map of the city; (6) a moderate descent of several steps into each meeting room so that there is a feeling of commitment in attending a meeting and a sense of challenge in going forth from one; (7) otherwise a main floor levelness and openness facilitating movement in and out, as in a train station; and (8) upstairs small offices for religious and other qualifying organizations. Answering the aesthetic and practical questions these suggestions raise takes us into imagining civic IE more concretely.

Keywords: interreligious collaboration; world religion; religious architecture; next-to-sacred space; *sabil*; *sebil*; International Museum of Muslim Cultures



Citation: Smith, Steven G. 2024. The Meeting: Ideas for an Architecture of Interreligious Civic Collaboration. *Religions* 15: 360. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15030360>

Academic Editor: Timothy Parker

Received: 31 January 2024

Revised: 29 February 2024

Accepted: 14 March 2024

Published: 18 March 2024



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1. A Call for Interreligious Collaboration

Like many other cities, Jackson, Mississippi has now for decades been a site of orchestrated interreligious engagement. There have been prayer breakfasts for local religious leaders and scholarly programs, meals, and trips planned especially for Jewish, Christian, and Muslim participants by the Dialogue Institute and the International Museum of Muslim Cultures. The stated goal of these interreligious encounters has been raising awareness of the shared heritage and values of the constituent communities. But a new interreligious

initiative in Jackson called “the Beloved Community” (launched in 2022) has a different tilt. It is defined by conditions in Jackson that threaten human dignity and stipulates that the Christian-supported Civil Rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. and the African-American Islamic movement led first by Elijah Muhammad and then by W. Deen Mohammed have the common goal of securing the dignity of all persons—also a goal endorsed by Jackson’s mayor, who has called for building a “dignity economy” in the city (Jackson City Council 2022). The initiative intends to stage interreligious encounter as interreligious civic collaboration. It looks back to the ecumenism and concern for human rights in Muhammad’s Constitution of Medina for a classical precedent that is both religious and impartially civic.¹

Anyone who hears only this much will wonder what such an initiative will actually look like and how practically it will relate to other civic initiatives. The question could be considered without thinking at all about how the activity will be housed. One might simply imagine the religiously motivated participants going forth into their civic work from their various religious home bases (mosques, churches, temples), engaging in philanthropy by their own religious lights. But that is to rest in an assumption about religious action that the idea of interreligious civic collaboration challenges. If we think of interreligious *collaboration* as a religiously motivated activity, then the physical setting of that activity is not a matter of indifference. I want to ask: How would a religiously sensitive architecture best contribute to the concrete realization of an enterprise like the Beloved Community? How would the relevant principles for this architecture differ from those applicable to houses of worship, on the one hand, and to purely secular facilities for civic functions, on the other?

To bring to light the criteria of satisfactoriness in this context, I will start by reflecting on the preconditions for interreligious collaboration in a modern city. My line of thinking needs to overcome the assumption that the essential religious commitment in each community keeps its members strictly in their own religious lanes while engaging in philanthropy.

2. Religious Premises: “World” Religion and “Civic” Religion

Why would followers of a religious teaching have any interest in interreligious engagement? A short answer is that, given the prevalent general form of religion in our world, it is foreseeable that *some* members of any historic religious community will be motivated to live an intentionally *cosmopolitan* kind of religious life. The cosmopolitan qualification of religion has important practical implications.

To live religiously is, among other things, to accept the especially deep and broad claim of an ultimate life guidance and to share with others in a great heightening of life (or conserving of *precious* life) enabled by that guidance. Until a few thousand years ago, religious belief systems must always have been strictly ethnic, circumscribed by the survival needs and memory of a particular human group, culturally monopolistic and largely immune to deliberate revision. With the spread of literacy in the classical civilization centers, however, a new cosmopolitan kind of religion became possible and eventually dominant on the human scene. This “world religion” form of religion appealed for voluntary subscription on the basis of publicly disseminated and debated teachings and generated a voluntary community of believers no longer confined to a certain territory and set of traditional customs. Having “bought” a portable religious teaching in a marketplace of competing teachings of that sort, individuals can use and “sell” its highly evolved guidance anywhere in the world—it is well suited to mobility and social mixing. But believers are also ideally obliged to keep up with the doctrinal and practical debates that will endlessly roil that voluntary community and that marketplace.²

Obviously, many members of world religions live their religious lives much in the fashion of ethnic religion, without free thought or choice about religion. They may prefer that the question of ultimate guidance be settled for them, perhaps because they place a high priority on group cohesion or on a personal resonance with tradition. They may be purposely deprived of religious options by their religious leaders, their literacy being

restricted to what is required for awareness of prescribed beliefs and morals. Or they may be taught about other worldview options only to learn reasons for rejecting them. *Some* members, however, will, like the classic followers of the Founders, experience religious life less as settled and more as launched into the world, less as a consolidation of codified guidance and more as vigorous experimentation, less as an actual group identity and more as an ideal of sharing. The intellectual and spiritual movement by which they embrace their convincing religious position leads them on to new forms of interhuman engagement—potentially with anyone, anywhere—for the sake of further development and fuller implementation of their ideals. Their sense of having been freed from the smaller world of a strictly ethnic identity or personal bias is also a sense of being freed for missions of beneficence in the large world. These people make up the cosmopolitan wing of their communities. They will strike varying balances between enthusiasm for sharing their guidance, intellectual curiosity about other guidances, and pragmatic curiosity about possibilities of collaboration with others. In counterpoint to the separatist thrust of normal religious teaching that focuses on “what we believe,” the cosmopolitans will play a leading role in bringing about interreligious accommodations involving whole communities, as in the deliberate hybridizations of traditions fashioned by some missionary programs or the de facto cosmopolitanism of shared group celebrations of festivals originating in different traditions.

The cosmopolitan style of religion is a good adaptation to mission work, to scholarship, and (for more people) to life in a city, where one frequently runs into members of other religious communities, sometimes as colleagues, and where one’s children may well form attachments across group lines. Even in a modern city, we can still expect that many religious people will prefer to live in their neighborhood as though in a culturally homogenous village, guarding a religious heritage understood as ethnic or quasi-ethnic. But the cosmopolitan wing of an urban religious community will be more responsive to the urban opportunity to develop one’s religious life in broad cognizance of cultural diversity.

In the city there is, of necessity, a continuing public discussion of intergroup relations—a standing opportunity for interreligious diplomacy—but also a discussion of how to meet the needs of all the city’s residents, which is a standing opportunity for general philanthropy. Thus, there is occasion for a *civic* mode of religiousness, distinct from the cosmopolitan mode but naturally partnering with it. Provided its own survival needs are met, a world-religious community in a city is poised to help other residents in accordance with its ambitiously humane ideals and is answerable to the civic community for making appropriate use of the material and human resources it commands. To share in the political and economic work of the city in a religiously guided way is a fulfillment of a mandate to live in the world realistically rather than in an in-group dream of a better world. Pointing in this direction, the cosmopolitan prophet Jeremiah wrote: “Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you . . . for in its prosperity you shall prosper” (29:7, JPS trans.)—an important charter statement for world Judaism, with a double prospect of the non-Jewish city helping the Jews and the Jews helping the city.

Religious communities’ philanthropic work is standardly performed under their respective brands and serves their propagation of belief. For example, the Christian soup kitchen serves the needy with the guiding thought of bringing them closer to Christ’s love. But the civic extension of philanthropy strips the philanthropic agent of any exclusive rights. In this context, the church that runs the soup kitchen bears the identity of One of the City’s Feeders of the Hungry. The mosque or charitable foundation that supports a public water dispensary is One of the City’s Providers of Water. The Buddhist temple that offers refuge is One of the City’s Places of Refuge. This civic subordination of religion does not cause dissonance for the religious cosmopolitans as it might for others; the cosmopolitans will not feel that sharing in the civic work performed by other groups is a deviation from their religious mandate. Of course, people within each community will disagree about this, as a matter of priorities if not as a matter of principle.

3. Building Out the Religious Life: The Architecture of Next-to-Sacred Spaces

A sacred space like a church, mosque, or temple is formed to serve and paradigmatically express the heightening of human life that is a tradition's Good Religious Idea. For example, the Western Christian adaptation of the Roman basilica for its churches is a spatial formation of a soul journey through a portal and up to the heavenly throne of the divine Savior of human life, providing for solemn encounters with fellow needy souls and helpful souls along the way (Davies 2005).

Other kinds of religious buildings reflect pragmatic requirements of community life: monasteries, lodges, and rectories for the religiously dedicated to live in, seminaries for religious specialists to study in, facilities for ablution or prayer outside the main worship spaces. Yet other kinds of buildings serve outreach to the world, notably guesthouses, hospitals, and schools. We tend to think of the spaces built in these categories purely as public utilities, but the very idea of a hospital ward patrolled by nurses or a classroom ruled by a teacher is historically much indebted to the ambitiously humane activities of world religions (along with similarly ambitious civil governments).

As a student and teacher, I have spent a lot of my most heightened time in classrooms and so am attuned to the *specialness* of the space framed by the classrooms I have known and by any room that looks like a classroom: that is, a well-separated *room*, well-lit and with decent acoustics, scaled not for personal conversations (a classroom discussion is not like an office visit) or for public assembly (a classroom discussion is not like a lecture with Q&A in an auditorium) but for richly communicating learning sessions for a group of learners who can get to know each other's thinking rather well; a roughly cubical space with at least one wall available for writing or other exhibits; and some sort of rostrum that is the default focus for taking direction. As a young student, for all that I strongly felt the set-apart specialness of classroom spaces, I would never have said that they are *sacred*, but as a teacher, with conscious humane ambition, I might indeed affirm, not literally but not lightly, that the classroom is sacred. It is a central axis of my professional world and a place of important revelations; it is an auspicious place for a general truing-up of sensitivity, sincerity, and reasonableness. Thinking of education as a religious philanthropy (which at my church-affiliated college does not require a great stretch of historical imagination), I can resolve my sense of the high specialness of the classroom by literally designating it a "next-to-sacred" space.³

As anyone who has worked in a school like mine knows, there are bad classrooms; one need not have thought about the ideal design specifications for a classroom to know that certain norms apply and certain rooms fall short. A room that looks to us like a classroom is appreciably trying to embody a special-space architecture. There are also larger-scale designs for schooling that register as highly special or next-to-sacred, like the quadrangle and bell tower that have an obvious religious filiation and like the gymnasium and playing fields that have different roots. We might say that the quadrangle and the bell tower clearly show the *building out* of religious life onto not-specifically-religious terrain. The architectural form of the classroom does not seem to be quite in the same category, and yet the world-religious push for literacy (in all literate cultures), involving a profound optimism about the activities and the communities that such rooms are built to house, has been a driving force in the creation of classroom-type spaces, a force beyond the everyday functional requirements of schooling. When we occupy the space as next-to-sacred, we feel this force.

School buildings (*madrasas*) abound in Islamic societies, with or without flavorings of religious architecture (Ettinghausen et al. 2001). To my eye, a more architecturally distinctive building-out of Islamic life in civic philanthropy is the water dispensary known as a *sabil* or *sebil*. Originally an adjunct to a mosque or larger religious complex, the Ottoman *sebil* could be a free-standing kiosk with large eaves and beautiful carved decoration (including Quranic calligraphy) and grillwork, convenient for travelers and the urban poor.⁴ A form popular with pious donors and reputation-building rulers in Mamluk Cairo was a *sabil* built with a *kuttab* (primary school) classroom above it.⁵

Sabil-kuttabs and *sebils* were created under Islamic auspices and sometimes serve the religious function of facilitating required ablutions before Muslim worship. They certainly count as “Islamic architecture”. But they suggest a type of religiously motivated building that can have a pragmatic civic rationale and nonsectarian profile.

4. An Architecture for Interreligious Collaboration

The concept of interreligious architecture has two recognized variants. One is the neutral “interfaith chapel” found in many universities, hospitals, airports, and other public buildings which serves its purpose by removing all distinct religious signatures. This approach is welcomed by many users but gives some the dismaying impression that “God has left the building” (Crompton 2013).⁶ Another challenge is that users of these spaces sometimes resent what other users do in and with them (Biddington 2021; Bobrowicz 2018). Nevertheless, in sites permitting a creative new construction, a nonsectarian building can support and express the spiritual heightening of human life (Grubiak and Parker 2017; Biddington 2021).

The second form of interreligious architecture explicitly composes distinct religious home bases into an ecumenical community. There are impressive examples in the Tri-Faith Commons in Omaha, the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi, and the Berlin House of One.⁷ In these complexes, Abrahamic believers take advantage of the profound historical and theological entwining of their traditions to create a built religious “neighborhood” that makes religious sense. The sense depends on an important limitation of the community, however. If other religions were to join an integrated ecumenical neighborhood, its architectural form would seemingly have to shift to something like a World’s Fair exposition or Epcot Center—a place to be visited, not lived in.⁸

The tri-faith spaces are designed to support a *work* of interreligious learning, a work that is of civic significance because it bears on citizenship. It is exemplary of attentive respect and projects a benign influence on the larger community. The theme is: Here *we* are in our historic communities, recognizing and accepting that we share the world in our different but related ways.

Another kind of interreligious work, however, would be directed to particular problems suffered by fellow citizens at large such as homelessness and hunger, urban decay, and illiteracy. It would be interreligious civic philanthropy, as contemplated by the Beloved Community initiative. Is there a third form of interreligious architecture that would specifically suit this work, supporting religiously diverse actors in a collaborative civic extension of their religious lives? The theme would be sharing the work of the world, including sharing religiously diverse processing of what the world’s practical issues are.

A massive 19-story structure built in New York in 1960 to support interreligious collaboration is the Interchurch Center at Columbia University. Under Christian “interdenominational” auspices, it houses more than 70 organizations, mostly but not exclusively Christian and philanthropic, for whom it provides conference rooms, a library, a cafeteria, and multiple event spaces as well as low-rent office space.⁹ In outward appearance, it is simply a big office building, but it is adjacent to the religiously imposing Riverside Church, which for some users would strengthen a next-to-sacred sense of some of its interior spaces.

I think we can imagine a Jackson-scaled, fully interreligious building that would be, in an appropriate way, a jewel of the city. The building would primarily serve as a place of meeting. That function is immediately called for by the Beloved Community plan, as I will explain, but also seems a perennial need for civic philanthropy.

Jackson’s Beloved Community plans to create multicultural “teams with leadership, lived experience, compassion, capacity, creativity, and relationship” to address the city’s challenges in education, health care, housing, economic development, infrastructure (Jackson’s nationally reported water and sewer system problems), and criminal justice (International Museum of Muslim Cultures 2021). The teams will enroll younger and older influencers, policy makers, and stakeholders in existing social justice work. They can draw immediately on Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities that have long advocated for racial justice in Jackson and

on the political leaders and policy experts who play roles in city and state government. In principle, the teams are open to all religious communities and to anyone who can help in the work. *How* these teams will work together—studying problems, setting priorities and concrete objectives, recruiting allies, and exerting influence—remains to be determined. One must imagine these teams getting down to work by having meetings, and not just in one round; and one must imagine their success as involving a coherent program of interventions to improve quality of life in Jackson (measurable by generally accepted indices), especially for those whose dignity is threatened by Jackson’s current conditions.

Before we design a home for Beloved Community work, we may as well admit that, realistically, an interreligious project could have its headquarters or workrooms anywhere that space is available. And the available space might well be in a religious building (perhaps in the proverbial church basement) rather than on neutral ground. Moreover, any facility that is used in a meaningful way, regardless of its original design, will take on the meaning, for those involved, of the home of their activity. So it is not a condition of successful interreligious collaboration that a facility be specially designed for it. But then many forms of religion do not require that *worship* take place in a facility designed for worship, either, and still a great deal of thought has gone into designing worship facilities. The same is true for spiritual contemplation: people can engage in contemplation wherever they can manage to be effectively by themselves for a while, yet serious thought is given to the design of peaceful yet exalting spaces. It seems that interreligious collaboration deserves some measure of this kind of thought.

I offer the following suggestions to the leaders and participants in the Beloved Community initiative as a way of sharpening some of the issues they face in organizing their effort, and I offer them to a broader audience as a way of thinking with architectural concreteness about interreligious collaboration as a possibly sustainable activity both religious and civic.

1. There should be a distinct building with an inviting but ideologically open, nonsectarian name. I propose to call it The Meeting in honor of its main function.¹⁰ The capitalized word “Meeting” can be taken as a signal that the building is dedicated especially to a special kind of meeting in which people can candidly and respectfully discuss their ultimate ideals at the same time that they discuss the larger community’s needs, but its general meaning is that all meetings can be important.
2. It should be placed downtown, as near City Hall or the headquarters of city services as possible, befitting its dedication to civic work and its vital interest in building bridges to policy makers. It should look approachable, neither packed in among other buildings nor oddly isolated.¹¹
3. The building should not look at all like a resort and thus should not look like a “state-of-the-art conference center” despite the strong aesthetic appeal such facilities can have (this criterion seems to me to rule out for our purpose the design of the Tri-Faith Center at the Tri-Faith Commons, though I would be thrilled to have that charming building). It should have a more trafficked look. A large-eaved pavilion style would suggest accommodating diverse attendees for purposes of the day. The practical optimism it projects would be down-to-earth. Ideally, the building and grounds would lend themselves well to purely festive “get to know your (religiously diverse) neighbors” gatherings that would aid in recruiting participants in civic work.
4. The building would not be soaringly grandiose like a place of worship but would have a vertical feature such as a central roof lantern, an indication of and opening to higher inspirations.
5. The building would have at least one major porch, with benches and tables. Offering this outside venue for meeting shows friendliness to all comers and connects the building with a history of public meeting places that includes the classical Greek *stoa* in its close connection with the *agora*.¹²
6. A central feature of the building’s main façade would be an outside fountain providing water to the public, a historical allusion to the Islamic *sabil* and the metaphor of flowing water for philanthropy.¹³ This would acknowledge the Islamic inspiration and leading

Muslim role in formulating the Beloved Community initiative without implying a Muslim claim on the building.

7. Inside, on the main level, there would be a big “living room” lounge in the center, usable for larger meetings, with access to a kitchen. A project board on the margin of the central space could track work completed and work in hand, next to a large map of the city. There might also be a large mural showing diverse city activities including religious gatherings, in the civic spirit of the old WPA murals in American public buildings; or wall space could be dedicated to new locally produced artworks that relate somehow to civic concerns.
8. Directly accessed from the central space, there would be meeting rooms around the building’s periphery, or at least on two of its sides. In each room, big windows would admit a maximum of light and visual information from the city.¹⁴ Otherwise, most of the rooms would be proportioned and equipped like a good university seminar room—more intimate and centered than a hotel meeting room. Such rooms are conducive to studious alertness, productive conversation, and group empowerment. A big table surrounded by solid chairs presents people to each other, continually fueling a sense of being in a special space and time. The meeting rooms should have names associated with Jackson. The religious sponsors will need to be involved in the scheduling of meetings in the rooms, but no one sponsor will rule any meeting room. In these rooms, as in the central space, there will not be the religious asymmetry of host and guest.
9. Although there is no obvious functional need for this, there would be a moderate descent of several steps into each meeting room to foster a feeling of commitment in attending a meeting and a sense of challenge in going forth from one. The spaces are marked as highly special; the steps to and from them present a level-changing challenge of passage and an emblem of doability in their encouraging (yet dramatizing) division of the descent or ascent into stages.¹⁵ There might be a relatively narrow point of entrance implicitly posing a What-is-your-intent? challenge preparatory to entering that space. I’m especially aware on this point that relevant architectural intuitions may differ—others might foresee a better signal of special space and activity in steps *up* to a meeting room, with a better sallying-forth effect in stepping down upon leaving, and indeed there is massive historical precedent for stepping up to special spaces. My intuition about getting *down to the work* swims against that current.¹⁶ On the other hand, it swims with the general pattern of smaller, more specific-use spaces “cascading” out and down from a central assembly space, which also rhymes with the fountain archetype of philanthropy (Alexander et al. 1977, pp. 566–68). In every other respect, the main floor should feel very level and open, facilitating movement in and out, as in a train station. The building should seem to participate in the city’s circulation.
10. On an upper level, perhaps in one or two mezzanines, small offices would be available for religious and other qualifying organizations, including a liaison with community-based needs assessment and mobilization, and for the building coordinator. This would be a way of both drawing in and holding at a respectful distance the sponsoring communities. The upstairs space allotted to the organizations would have different design elements (such as wall surfaces or window shapes) than the shared space on the lower level, expressing a concordat between proprietary religious spheres and immersion in civic collaboration. There could be symbols of the organizations on or near their office doors visible from the main central space, or discreetly placed within the main space, as points of identifying connection for members of those organizations coming into the building.¹⁷ I leave two important matters to be determined by the collaborating groups: whether some of the upstairs space could be used for religious activities (like a prayer room for Muslims or a neutral “interfaith chapel”), and whether some of the downstairs space could be used for providing public services (like a social worker or a food dispensary). Another large open question is how the city might use the facility. A significant amount of regular city use might need to be programmed to justify the city’s material support of the building.¹⁸ One congenial

use would be open large-group meetings or registration-controlled seminar meetings for discussion of civic issues with city leaders, experts, and service deliverers.

5. What Might Happen?

An actual building would surely come out differently than I've envisioned, due not only to local practical constraints but to the ideal desiderata being seen somewhat differently. In the best case, my ample consolation would be that the building embodied shareable values that were articulated and reaffirmed by a mobilized interreligious community interacting with a larger civic community (including prospective recipients of services) and with wise architectural experts.

An actual design process would involve a methodical clarification of users' desires and needs and case studies of relevant existing programs and buildings. There will be important things to learn from architects' and users' experiences with modestly scaled public services buildings. There are also important things to learn about interreligious behavior from experiences with multifaith spaces (Biddington 2021).

If a new building is out of reach, an alternative application of the relevant discernments might be a major space in an existing or new building serving a related function or set of functions—say, a Philanthropies Floor in a city building or a Civic Floor in a building owned by a religious organization.¹⁹ Such a floor could be laid out much like the main-level interior of The Meeting. Its architectural power would depend on feeling like a distinct world (as opposed to being bottled up as an “office”, “suite”, or “lounge”). I would urge that it be at ground level for the easiest accessibility and a sense of continuity with city activity, though some might look for inspiring views of the city from a higher floor—in which case I would say, make it the highest!²⁰

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ “Dr. King and Imam [W. Deen] Mohammed were aligned and anchored in the universal pluralistic prophetic model and historical peace movement established by Prophet Muhammad. At the foundation of this model is the cornerstone of faith—One God, one Humanity, universal brotherhood, and universal truth—called ‘Tawhid’ in Islam. Muhammad, under Tawhid, created the first constitution in history, the Constitution of Medina—establishing the first Islamic State and peace agreement with the Jewish community and later Christians and others. The Covenant replaced tribalism and race and set up Tawhid as the first principle uniting all people across differences of heredity, rank, or privilege”. From IMMC’S “Racial Equity 2030 Project Proposal,” shared by personal communication.
- ² On the communicative situation of literate religion see (Smith 2018). For a postcolonialist critique of Euro- and Christo-centric uses of the “world religion” category see (Masuzawa 2005).
- ³ “Next-to-sacred” can be regarded as a further articulation (if not a completely firm segmentation) of the Tavesian spectrum of “specialness” on which sacred items are most special (Taves 2009). We can think of “next-to-sacred” spaces generally as sites of union of high ideals with worldly practice—set apart enough to embody the ideals but not so much as to be disconnected from practical problem solving.
- ⁴ For example, the *sebil* of Sultan Ahmed III in Istanbul (1728) at the Topkapi palace front gate. For a well-illustrated overview of the *sebils* of Istanbul see (Urfalioğlu 2019). Two “Ottoman Fountains” were recently built on the campus of the Turkish-American Diyanet Center in Lanham, Maryland; see <https://diyanetamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/diyanetcenterofamerica.pdf> (accessed on 31 January 2024). On the Mamluk *sabil-kuttab*, with consideration of the religious significance of water, see (Shakhs and Ezzat 2018). The original meaning of *sabil*, “falling,” suggests the flowing down of water, physically; of charitable actions, spiritually; and the beneficence of God, ultimately.
- ⁵ For example, the *sabil-kuttab* of Sultan Qaytbay in Cairo (1479) on Saliba Street, said to be the first free-standing structure of that kind. The *kuttab* was a primary school for orphans.
- ⁶ The “negative” approach can also be read as encouraging individual spirituality more than organized religion (Bobrowicz 2018).

- 7 On the Tri-Faith Commons, see, in addition to their own website <https://www.trifaith.org/thecommons/> (accessed on 31 January 2024), the more architecturally specific (Ball 2019). On the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi, see <https://www.abrahamicfamilyhouse.ae/> (accessed on 31 January 2024) and (Katsikopoulou 2023). On the Berlin House of One, see <https://house-of-one.org/en> (accessed on 31 January 2024) and (Burchardt 2023); on religious controversy aroused by the project, see Burchardt and Haering (2023).
- 8 For a more expansive view of diverse religious presences being incorporated in an “interfaith landscape,” see (Grubiak and Parker 2017).
- 9 See <https://www.interchurch-center.org/about/> (accessed on 31 January 2024).
- 10 The similarly named Oakland Mills Meeting House, an interfaith structure built in 1975 as part of James Rouse’s visionary development of Columbia, Maryland, is governed by an interfaith consortium of Jewish and Christian congregations—see <http://themeetinghouse.org>. Although the primary religious purpose of the structure is to be a worship home for the space-sharing congregations, it has also supported a collaborative food distribution campaign (according to Board of Directors member Hal Kassoff, personal communication).
- 11 An instructive study of healthy urban spaces adjacent to religious buildings is Arboix-Alió et al. (2023).
- 12 A point made by Tim Parker (personal communication).
- 13 See note 4. A public source of drinkable water would also make a currently much-needed statement of confidence in Jackson’s water.
- 14 It would be impossible to replicate this situation perfectly inside an urban building, but I have found an ideal of communication between meeting space and space planned for in Norma Michael’s Sharing is Caring community garden on Powers Avenue in Jackson. At one end of the rectangular garden property, a slightly raised square deck has been built with benches around its inner perimeter. While meeting there in the auspicious square format, one can see any part of the garden with at most a slight turn of one’s head, and one is bathed in the site’s breezes. Perhaps a portable pavilion, a field extension of The Meeting, could be used at service sites.
- 15 I am adapting a point made about steps by Rudolf Arnheim (1977, p. 236).
- 16 A point made by Fletcher Cox (personal communication).
- 17 A good suggestion by James Bowley (personal communication).
- 18 On how the religious constituencies of the facility might position themselves as administratively “legible” to the secular authority, see (Bobrowicz 2022).
- 19 This alternative is actually under discussion in connection with the Beloved Community project in Jackson (Okolo Rashid, personal communication).
- 20 For valuable advice on this piece I am grateful to Ted Ammon, James Bowley, Fletcher Cox, Aslam Hussain, daniel johnson, Debra Kassoff, Tim Parker, and to several anonymous reviewers.

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