

The Tate Modern multi-faith room: Where sacred space and art space converge and merge

*The Multi-faith Spaces project has visited over 600 multi-faith spaces in the past six years. Designed to accommodate religious diversity through the provision of multi-faith spaces, the project considers not just the architecture of these spaces but also their political aspect and their ability to encourage real social and religious encounters. **Andrew Crompton** finds that the multi-faith room in the new Tate Modern building is a typical example of a multi-faith space in a unique environment.*



The Tate Modern multi-faith room

The **Tate Modern extension** which opened in June 2016 includes a secret room. Designed by Swiss architects **Herzog & de Meuron** it is in the corner of a Level 8 gallery behind a frameless door on which is written: MULTI-FAITH AND CONTEMPLATION ROOM.

Is it art or is it what it says it is? Would you embarrass yourself by trying to open it? Perhaps it is like those **glasses that were mistaken for an exhibit in San Francisco**. What proves it is real are the green man signs and the chunky door closer. Be bold, it is worth it. You will discover that the galleries are nothing more than a stage set of white walls behind which is a backstage world of services, stairs, stores, and round a corner — a prayer room.





A sign asks you to take your shoes off. The priests and priestesses telling you to do this are named as: *The Human Resources Consultant and BAME Chair; the Senior Visitor Experiences Manager and BAME Chair; and the Diversity manager*. Don't let this troika put you off, they are there in name only. The Tate can be as busy as a railway station but here, quite suddenly, and a little uncannily, you can be alone.

MULTI-FAITH AND CONTEMPLATION ROOM

All are welcome to use this room.

This room is a designated space for worship and prayer, as well as peace, quiet and reflection.

Please register your attendance and provide comments in the comments book provided, which also offers space for prayer requests.

Please remove your shoes before entering and leave them outside the room.

Contact for any enquiries:
 Osman Yilmaz, Human Resources Consultant and BAME Chair
 Sandra McLean, Senior Visitor Experiences Manager and BAME Chair
 Emma Green, Diversity Manager

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Like many other Multifaith spaces it tries to be **universal by being minimal**. It is a white box with a suspended ceiling and a carpet. There are no windows, the only furniture is an Ikea drawer unit which will be empty if the prayer mat has been left out. Perfect emptiness is an unreachable ideal, one is conscious of a smoke alarm, a fire extinguisher, and escape signs. Even in spaces of contemplation Health and Safety is the ring to rule them all. The room is tight, only 2000 by 3600 mm in plan. A tall person could not lie down sideways. Fortunately an arrow on the ceiling shows that Mecca is at an angle.

Comedy is close at hand in places like this, as it is with a lot of modern art. In that respect this sacred space perfectly matches its environment. What is amazing about multifaith spaces is that through them art of our own time is entering the sacred precinct. But this is not painting, sculpture and music that is crossing over, instead it is dematerialised installations, found objects and interactive spaces.

Because they are arranged to not cause offence by being deliberately unspecific they can be very bland (a description of the architecture of multifaith spaces can be found [here](#)). Most architects strive to be interesting, that does not work with multifaith. Because of this few are designed by architects, mostly they are made by managers and chaplains by converting out of the way spaces. The drive to be acceptable leads to uber-bland blank rooms. The interesting thing is that it is impossible, architecturally speaking, to say nothing. Perfect silence is impossible. If architecture is frozen music this is the architectural equivalent of ambient noise, more like John Cage than Mozart.


Even so they are valued and used, mostly but not exclusively by Muslims. Many have the aura of prayer. You can read them like a tracker looking for signs of game. In the absence of explicit markers of faith you must turn detective and look how the furniture has been left, at litter and wear, graffiti and other signs to see what has been going on.

Multi faith spaces

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The Exhibition

Introduction



This Exhibition encapsulates the essence of the project: Multi-Faith Spaces: Symptoms and Agents of Religious and Social Change, a three year collaboration between the Universities of Manchester and Liverpool. It has been designed in partnership with the North West based creative agency Thoughtful, and is founded upon thirty two key themes that emerged from our study.

Funding was secured through the Religion & Society Research Programme, a £12million cluster of research projects funded by two UK research councils, the AHRC and ESRC.

Our Aim is to exhibit research findings in an approachable, reflective and stimulating manner. It is hoped that the exhibition will appeal to those with little prior knowledge of multifaith spaces (MFS), as well as those with an interest in, and understanding of


What are MFS?

Models

Multifaith Spaces (MFS) have no precise definition; existing only in the eye of the beholder. They are places where a range of faith-based or spiritual activities can be undertaken, wherein each user should find something of appeal.


MFS are designed spaces, constructed at many sizes and scales. MFS are not fixed, so at different times the same space could resemble a single faith building, a consecrated space or a secular facility. Consequently, whilst often appearing sacred and certainly capable of housing sacred acts, MFS should not ordinarily be understood as holy sites. This ambiguity is a positive attribute, recognising differing viewpoints regarding the constitution of sacred space.

MFS are spaces within places, always located within a larger context. They are commonly, but not exclusively, found within airports, hospitals or universities. Similarly, many modern towns and cities will contain distinct zones of multifaith activity, a feature also apparent at historically significant sites such as Jerusalem or Gloucesterbury.



Architecture

Parameters



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The purpose built MFS often mimics other architectural forms, whether contained within a larger institution, or constructed as a stand-alone building. Many multifaith centres, particularly within universities and hospitals, demonstrate economies of scale, bringing all users into a unified space, be it divided, divisible or single, making oversight a more straightforward proposition.

More common than the purpose built space is the retrofit. These range from the complete re-modelling of existing building frames, to the simple vernacular space, where an empty floor plate is 'fitted out' in an appropriate manner, usually by non-professional designers. In some ways, the increasing ubiquity of MFS has appeared in tandem with an associated move towards

Style

MFS should avoid the style paradox; how can we design every known way of creating primitive unity: is evident, yet together by assuming cases there is an avoidance

The development of an own protection from clutter, and insistence, the imposition of a purge too varied a colour or simple division between de

Two cross-cutting themes in and stimulation versus ban can result in uniformity, and Furthermore, effective places can counter the unimaginative MFS less special or insufficient stimulating yet empty style appropriate model. This style, unity or kitsch aesthetic, a as a cost-effective and low-

The Multi-Faith Spaces project website

While we live in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic world, it is not always clear how different groups are to co-exist in physical spaces. An interesting example is the attempt to accommodate religious diversity through the provision of multi-faith spaces. These first emerged as single-function rooms

in airports, universities, hospitals, shopping malls and even football stadia. More recently, this ideal has been extended to buildings where different religious traditions have their own sacred space, alongside secular facilities. All this has happened without any multifaith body overseeing the process.

I have visited about 300 multifaith spaces in the last six years as part of the [project I'm conducting](#) and estimate that there are about 2000 in the UK. To date, we have amassed over 14,000 photographs, and we have undertaken nearly 200 interviews. Our project considers whether these spaces might encourage real social and religious encounters or merely 'house difference'. Our research emphasises the relationship between the spatial and the social, and more specifically, assesses how the materiality and architecture of multi-faith spaces meshes with the practices of the varied users of these spaces.

The creation of multi-faith spaces also has a political aspect, with the Department for Communities and Local Government acknowledging the importance of 'shared spaces for interaction' and emphasising the role of faith in defining communities and influencing community relations. This highlights the importance of understanding what goes on in multi-faith spaces, and how they both reflect and are implicated within wider social and political dynamics around them.

Our research to date suggests that multifaith spaces may not encourage interactions between different members of the laity, but they do allow for the clergy of different faiths to understand each other and it is here where the results will be seen.

The Tate example is the first multi-faith space I have seen in an art environment. Since Art Galleries offer a sort of quasi-sacred experience the idea of embedding another sort of sacred space inside them is rather striking, however, much the same can be said about football grounds and shopping-centres and many of those already have multifaith spaces. The history of multifaith is interesting, and for another post, but one of its forerunners is the non-denominational [Rothko Chapel in Houston](#). Rothko is such an extreme artist that you might wonder what could follow him. As of this summer you will not have to go far to find the answer: it is behind that door on Level 8.

About the author



Andrew Crompton is currently Head of Liverpool School of Architecture

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