SILT 2006: Participant Reflections

In preparation for the Spring Institute, we asked participants to reflect on the following: How do you understand the construction of space–"the built environment"–as participation in the work of reconciliation and redemption? Please draw upon your own valuable experience as activist/practitioner or theologian/religious scholar. Feel free to comment more generally on the following paragraph:

A theology of the built environment, according to Timothy Gorringe, is–to put it as simply as possible–a theology of place, be it urban, suburban, or rural. Such a theology will raise questions about the goals of our building and planning, about housing and infrastructure, about land ownership and our responsibility towards creation. It will look to the image of the New Jerusalem for guidance as it tries to discern new ways of building and planning that manifest justice, peace, and beauty.

Below are the responses we received to these questions:

Craig Wong, Grace Urban Ministries, San Francisco, CA "Ecclesial Witness & the Built Environment"

How was "life together" intended to be? Pursuing the answer to this question sits at the heart of the Church's earthly vocation. In other words, the fruit of repentance (i.e. joyful submission to the gospel) is the restoration of human relationships to that which *was* (before the Fall) and what ultimately *will be* (the Christ-triumphant eschaton). This is the essence of Christian witness: that we live together in such a way that humanity can recognize its own captivity and turn to the One who ultimately delivers creation from the fallen powers and principalities that divide and destroy. Therefore, how the Church views and engages the built environment should simply reflect her redemptive and embodied eschatological presence in the world.

This vocation of ecclesial witness in the "built environment" seems a particularly poignant matter in *San Francisco* where we as a congregation struggle to be faithful. Our city is one deeply shaped and dictated by a twisted consort of autonomous individualism, liberal arrogance, and intoxicating wealth. We revel in our "cutting edge" socially-progressive policies while enjoying the spoils of American capitalism in a metropolitan city that leads the nation in per-capita millionaires. Our love of recycling and all-things-organic is overshadowed by our conspicuous consumption and self-indulgent lifestyles. We celebrate cultural diversity while pricing out our ethnic poor. We have become a community of contentiousness: dog-owners are pitted against parents in skirmishes over public parks, residents vandalize SUVs, loft developers supplant nonprofit space, tourism lobbyists clash with anti-war proponents over waterfront military exhibits, and fair-trade activists sever the phone lines of telecom corporations. Each convinced of one's own righteousness, city supervisors, grassroots militants, and a pampered citizenry gridlock in endless dispute, paralyzed in our ability to move from particularistic self-interest to the greater, common good. In our city, the irresponsible use of space is far more attributable to arrogance than ignorance.

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It is in this puffed-up and fractious urban environment that the congregation is called to discern and inculcate, in contrast with the prevailing order, an entirely foreign social ethic. It is not enough to champion renewable energy technology, co-operative housing strategies, or other trendy forms of urbanism, for "even the pagans do this." Christian discipleship, or life lived under Christ's authority, is inherently corporate and subversive, manifest in mutually-practiced submission, accountability, servanthood, hospitality, grace and forgiveness that confounds and threatens the watching world. Such gospel practice has myriad implications: our relationship with material wealth, the distribution of resources, how we raise our children, the dismantling of societally-defined categories of prestige or status, and the repudiation of American-centric values (e.g. notions of individualism and personal freedom). Integrity, therefore, would require that wherever the Church lives (whether as gathered parishioners in the sanctuary, co-laborers in external ministries, or scattered saints in the agora), the "concrete" implications of a gospel ethic are creatively, and joyfully, pursued.

Eric Jacobsen, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA I think that it is most helpful to introduce my perspective on the built environment with a retelling of a familiar biblical story about Jesus in suburbia:

Jesus is in a private home in a subdivision, where he gets a call from an elder of the megachurch, twelve miles away, whose daughter is sick. He and his disciples hop into their Suburban and drive twenty miles across town to another subdivision and heal the elder's daughter. The other parts of town they encounter at forty mph through shatterproof glass. The hemorrhaging woman is in one of these other parts of town, perhaps in a seedy motel, alone in her pain and convinced that she is not important enough for someone like Jesus. (Sidewalks in the Kingdom)

The story of the hemorrhaging woman is supposed to teach us something about incarnational ministry, but if we place this story in the context of post-war American suburbia, what are we supposed to learn from it? How do we recover Jesus' interuptibility when our dominant mode of transportation works against it? Do we look for technological fixes–such as some kind of radar that will allow us to perceive human pain through shatterproof glass? Do we create programmatic solutions–divide up the city into 'care zones' and assign special deacons to scope out human pathos on the ground? Or, do we change the built environment so that people live near where they worship, work, play, (as well as experience pain and joy); so that ministry happens incidentally and interpersonally? Obviously, I prefer this last strategy, but the question of how we get there is an open and rather difficult one.

This is the kind of thing that I am interested in talking about as we gather together.

Eddie Howard, Charlottesville Abundant Life Ministries, Charlottesville, VA
I believe the built environment should be a place of wholeness, a place where the seeds of justice, reconciliation, and peace are sown by us, and a place that signifies who we are as children of God. I believe the built environment is that place we have been given to live as bearers of His image, amidst life's changing situations and circumstances.

I believe when God's people come together in the harmony of who we are as oaks of righteousness, we become the model of the holy city, New Jerusalem. We are then aware of our duties to build in harmony with creation, the buildings are in harmony with the skies and the land is in harmony with other creatures. That environment consists of many things from the people to the animals, from the land to the trash that is out of place. That environment can be the quiet of night to the outburst (from pain) that breaks that quietness, a place that we carry the justice that flows like a river in our hearts every day.

I think about the mornings I am on my way to work and see the trash that is without life but yet disturbs the peace because it is out of place and does not line up with the creation of the garden.

I believe that when we interact in a positive way with the environment and the people around us, we give ourselves a better chance of understanding the triumph of reconciliation and the peace of the Beloved Community.

Laura Sugg, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA
When I enter a human-made space–a shopping mall, a barn, a dirt-floored hut, an office cubicle, or a two hundred year-old meetinghouse–I am influenced by that space. The mind is guided to consumption, labor, technology, people, or simplicity. I live in Charlottesville, where UVA is ranked in the top five architecture and landscape architecture programs in the United States. Jefferson's "academical village" (Rotunda and Lawn) at the University models a very intentional approach to the built environment. But there doesn't seem to be much discussion in the public arena or in religious communities about a theology of space.

The construction of space is one of many ways human beings are called to be co-creators with God. Our sinful nature is on view in the physical and metaphorical barriers we build to keep out, to keep "safe," and to quarantine. Even if people of faith cannot change an environment quickly, a discussion of the ways in which it welcomes or alienates, liberates or oppresses, is a great beginning. Most healing comes about only after recognition of the ailment. A theology of the built environment will invite honest self-examination. The discussion will move beyond what *others*need to do and be, and become about what *I* need to do and be.

Too often I have seen gentrification that brings new life and beauty to communities but at the cost of saying to long-time residents: "This space is too nice for you now." In Edinburgh, Scotland halfway houses became posh condos. In Alexandria, Virginia blocks of townhouses were refurbished, forcing out low-income African-American families. In Atlanta, Georgia whole neighborhoods evolved over two years, and former residents could no longer afford the property taxes. In Charlottesville, I am seeing the same tragic process. Why should well-made houses with beautiful green spaces be something that only the wealthy can afford?
A theology of built space would take seriously Jesus' call to love our neighbor as ourselves. How can we love someone who we keep out by building a gated community? How can our children learn about the dignity of all human beings if they enjoy sports on the green grass of well-appointed private schools while seeing other children have recess on tiny asphalt playgrounds

at dark, asbestos-filled, public schools? How can employers tout that their employees are "family" and give them only fluorescent-lit cages in which to work? How can Christians preach about being one in Christ when we return from church to our insulated neighborhoods while others live in substandard housing?

There are no easy answers, but the beginning is to reflect together on what kind of space the radically inclusive, welcoming God of Jesus calls us to co-create. This conversation promises to light a fire in me, and perhaps can broaden the dialog. My hope is that eventually religious leaders can inspire/encourage/push policy makers in the U.S. and in elsewhere to build spaces that promote the beloved community and the dignity of all God's children.

Julie Polter, *Sojourners* magazine, Washington, DC
My primary place, for the past 15 years or so, has been a neighborhood called Columbia Heights, in Washington, D.C. It is on top of a ridge, overlooking other residential neighborhoods rolling out on the lower plain to the south, with the Capitol and Washington Monument visible on the horizon.

I moved here in 1990, to work with *Sojourners*, a Christian magazine, and its affiliated intentional community and ministries. Columbia Heights then was packed with post-Victorian row houses, 100-year-old apartment buildings, and late 20th-century housing projects, spaced with weedy lots once burned bare by the riots following Martin Luther King's assassination more than 20 years before. I lived then, and continue to live, about two blocks east of 14th Street NW, one of the main 1968 riot corridors.

Those April '68 riots were a dramatic example of the destruction of the built environment, the chaotic power of communal rage and mob mentality. But only a simplistic analysis limits the destruction to the two or so days and nights when crowds looted and burned their own neighborhood, or attributes the cataclysm solely to hysteria and individuals who chose to do wrong (although both were surely part of the equation). History's slow, steady tide set the stage with slavery, segregation, systemic racism, economic migration, white flight, urban renewal policies, and red-lining. Developers with schemes–noble or greedy–played their part, as did absentee landlords. So did white business owners in the neighborhood who refused to hire blacks, but gladly took black money.

The creation of 14th Street NW involved a thick and tangled web of relationships, business plans, crime, local and national legislation, chance, and inevitable social shifts, and therefore so did its destruction. Principalities and powers come to mind. A handful of individual people lit the match or flicked the lighter, an act that can't be defended, but the fuel that exploded had been stockpiled by neglect and worse, the layered residue of deliberate wrongs, good intentions gone bad, and subconscious bias.

The inner-city neighborhood that I moved to more than 15 years ago is now a gentrifying hot spot; the empty lots bloom with condo towers and chain stores. Low-income people are being pushed out, higher income people of all races (but considerably many more whites than would

have been here 10 years ago) are clamoring to get in, to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for a little cube to call home.

I have a curbside view of the reconstruction of Columbia Heights, but no certain answers to how it might manifest God's redemptive and reconciling presence in the world. Whatever the manifestations, they will not be a function only of space, but of how space surrounds and welcomes–or rejects and excludes–memory, history, and God's broken and yearning people.

Rhonda Miska, Church of the Incarnation, Charlottesville, VA
Developing a theology of the built environment is the natural result of a belief in the mystery of the Incarnation. If we believe that "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us," then our theology cannot be focused on a distant, future heaven or solely on the inner spiritual journey, but must take into consideration the world into which God has chosen to enter. Furthermore, Scripture is filled with images from "the promised land" to "God's holy mountain" to "the new Jerusalem" which squarely sets the Judeo-Christian experience in physical, geographical space, not in some esoteric, disembodied dimension.

Looking at the built environment through a theological lens means not only viewing it from our religious traditions' perspectives but also take sociological, cultural, historic, and economic realities into consideration. This became clear to me during my time in Nicaragua as a Jesuit Volunteer. The government there is trying to revitalize a certain area of Managua, the capital city, to attract tourists and has built a large fountain at the center of a roundabout that borders a Western-style shopping mall, a Pizza Hut and banks. Just off the roundabout, the *Carreterra a Masaya*is built up with upscale restaurants, casinos and gated communities for Nicaragua's elite. Meanwhile in other areas of Managua and in the countryside, the majority of the population lives in abject poverty and there are rarely government funds for building and maintaining roads or implementing other programs to improve the quality of life for the majority of Nicaraguans. After reading Neumark's book, Jonathan Kozol's*Amazing Grace*, and Mark Kramer's *Dispossed*, I am afraid that this is a pattern that repeats itself in urban areas around the world. How cities are built and developed are a reflection of the values and vision of the Powers that be, Powers that (as Walter Wink reminds us) do not live up to their divine vocation.

During my years at university I visited Northern Ireland as part of an ecumenical group of students learning about the conflict there and saw very clearly how the conflict between Catholics and Protestants is manifested in the built environment. From graffiti to murals to walls with razor wire, centuries of distrust and pain are made visible in the very stuff of the cities of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry.

However, as Gorringe makes clear, a built environment can also image the kingdom. I have visited the ecumenical community of Taizé in eastern France. Taizé was founded to be a place of reconciliation and ecumenical dialogue after World War II. Germans built the chapel as a symbol of good will and healing of the wounds of war, a powerful representation of Taizé's vision of peace and reconciliation. Ecumenical monks and visitors from around the world live

simply, share common meals and gather for chanted prayer in a variety of languages. I was struck by the simple, spacious buildings and spaces that have been built for Taizé community and how they are a reflection of its values and of God's kingdom.

Matthew Whelan, recent graduate of the Sustainable Agriculture Program, Costa Rica
Agriculture is an intrinsically theological activity, intimately bound up with how land is used and with the livelihoods of some of our world's most vulnerable members. For the last several years I have considered the ecological and social damage done by predominant agricultural uses of space in the tropics and the kind of work necessary to reconcile and heal that damage. Consider Talamanca, among the first settlements of the Spanish *conquistadors* in the Americas . The Bribri and Cabécar peoples were two of the few indigenous groups not annihilated or assimilated by the Spaniards. The memories of that historical catastrophe, and subsequent ones at the hands of the Costa Rican government, mining companies, and the United Fruit Company, still smolder in their stories and lives.

It is the built environment created and perpetuated by this last, the United Fruit Company (now known as Chiquita), which most merits our reflection. In contrast to the diverse and complex tropical forest ecosystem "the company" cleared, the endless sea of bananas it planted is genetically uniform, ideal conditions for pest epidemics. Maintaining bananas in production necessitates large and constant applications of chemical "cocktails" to counteract pest buildup. Only a small fraction of the chemicals applied reach their intended targets. Beyond the resultant ecological damage, for example, to soil and groundwater, the ubiquity of human exposure is evidenced in a recent study which found toxic chemicals in the dust of local schools. Today, most of arable land is in the hands of few and dedicated to export production, rather than in the hands of many and contributing to a more local and diversified agricultural economy. Working with the company is for many the only possible employment short of migration.

The story of Talamanca and bananas has much in common with other parts of the world and the items exported to the U.S. and Europe from those places. These built environments, though distant, merit our attention because of their closeness to us. Even those of us who live far away from Talamanca participate in the life of places like it when we eat bananas. The reconciliation of the distorted relationships that have calcified around the commercialization of bananas necessarily has something to do with us. Christianity calls its adherents to treat all nourishment as sacrament and communion–as gifts of the earth and work of human hands. In so doing, we are called to participate in a eucharistic life–to return the gifts given through our good use of them. In the case of bananas, this entails something much more than a boycott; it necessitates attentiveness to the theological and reconciliatory impulse of fair trade and other efforts to manifest the ecological and social communities in which we are involved when we eat. The triune God we worship clarifies, defines, and reveals the deepest nature of our relationships–not only with each other but with the world. Learning that there is nothing external or distant about these relationships–that they are as internal and intimate as the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe–is an initial step toward reconciliation and redemption.

Tim Clayton, Eleuthero Community, Maine

The construction of space is the arena in which a culture's values are inescapably shown out, revealed. Because we are embodied creatures there is no hiding: our lives are lived in the context of the created world and that means, of course, the construction of space. And constructed–and hence inhabited–space sets trajectories and has impacts well beyond itself and today. We claim racism is largely of our culture's history; but our built environment betrays us that, at best, there is no blank slate and there is no reality of justice without some kind of righteous redress. We claim individual innocence because of the power of larger forces ("suburbia is where they're building–it's what was available"), and yet choosing the path of least resistance is tacit reinforcement of the consumerist vortex through which our culture takes well more than its fair share. The only hope for redemption and reconciliation lies along the way of realizing the implicit link between justice and the construction of space at all levels. Particularly in the culture of the USA this raises a sharp challenge to the hyper and visceral commitment to private property, and suspicion towards common ownership/common space/communal rights ideas that have, perhaps, been more the purview of cultures old enough to have a mediaeval heritage (perhaps as seen in the past few years in Scotland?). This challenge needs to be developed along at least three frontiers:

1) The manner in which this visceral commitment is embedded in both the founding myths of US culture and the present renewals of that mythological sense of the destiny and role of the U.S. A sub-question here is the manner in which the white middle-class has been led to identify themselves 'up' with the wealthy white, instead of across or 'down' with others, to whom the middle class is arguably actually closer in terms of power.

2) The manner in which this visceral commitment is a product of fear, both in terms of the founding myth and in terms of present perceptions of threat both without but also within US culture.

3) The roles of a theology of dominion and of a theology of eschatology.

But deconstruction will not be enough; even if right on target, it will not bring transformation if we only break down poor and shallow and harmful ideas and values. The deep need is for alternative communities embodying God's redemption now and demonstrating in their collective and individual lives a spirituality adequate to a more just and sustainable way–a way of redemption and reconciliation. A spirituality that can realize this newness will have, it seems to us in our little nascent community, at least these seven elements:

- Listening prayer, individually and collectively, with faith that the Trinitarian God will show up.
- Sacramental practices lived out in community worship and community relationships, events and moments of meaning/transition–in both sacred space and profane space.
- Structuring our lives for simplicity and fairness, including both trying to avoid sins of commission and trying to be intentional about engaging with people-groups or cultural groups we would not know in the 'normal course of things.'

> Cultivating a sense of wonder and a commitment to experiences in the natural world (if possible, constructing spaces that blur the line between natural and constructed).
> Repentance and lament, and a recognition of our own slowness to have eyes to see and hearts to change–and with this a commitment to deal constructively and non-violently with those who do not agree with us.
> Hope and a commitment to act in hope; finding a reality of God beyond fear, and changing the question from "why?" to "how long, O Lord, how long?"

Embodying community ownership inasmuch as we are able/willing as yet, and keeping the conversation about this going forward.

Ashley Diaz, Graduate Student in Religious Studies, University of Virginia
Identical red brick housing developments are crowded, ten or twelve units, each housing a hundred or more residents, onto the city blocks that make up South Memphis. Apartment fires from faulty wiring and flooding from decaying pipelines are regular topics of conversation. Over 22% of housing units in the neighborhood stand vacant while many families are well acquainted with displacement and homelessness. Children walk to school in the streets because the city's slow construction has turned the soil beneath them with such frequency that the surrounding sidewalks have disintegrated into puzzle pieces of debris. This neighborhood was my community before beginning graduate school, and I have returned to work there on breaks and during the summer.

In the soul of this neighborhood and throughout the city, a creative movement has been stirring. Born of a new shared vision of the Spirit, the results have begun to rewrite community boundaries and illuminate God's future for the city. College Park, a new section-8 housing development, is built on the grave of one of South Memphis' most notorious housing projects. Multi-family houses painted in shades of yellow and green have replaced five and six story apartment buildings that once housed these same residents. Front doors open out onto large front lawns, and houses face one another rather than the street. Residents have begun gardening projects that are scattered amongst the homes. Like many other inner city neighborhoods, over 40% of the neighborhood is under the age of 18. Seeking to speak inclusion and hope to neighborhood kids, a neighborhood ministry is constructing a new recreation building. Open in its design and staffed by workers with deep relationships in the community, it will house extensive educational programs and sports leagues, and will even have space for medical and legal workers to care for families.

A few streets over from College Park and the new recreation building, however, is Clayborn Temple, where King and others led the neighborhood in nonviolent protest during the 1968 Sanitation Worker's Strike. The once majestic church building weeps with years of neglect, and the story of the strike has been lost to textbooks and museums. In hopes of speaking truth to a difficult past, two of the city's most historically located churches have chosen to share the work of rebuilding of Clayborn Temple. These congregations bear enormous disparity in their stories, as one marched alongside King while the other shut its doors to African American students

seeking to worship there. Yet repentance brings one church to the project, and forgiveness the other. Meetings are places where the difficulty of reconciliation has pointed towards the long suffering of the cross.

I have learned much from my friends and neighbors in this South Memphis , as they have graciously counseled me towards a richly concrete description of God's hospitality. For a Christian, the bleakness of an overcrowded housing development is not a benign eyesore, but direct rejection of the reconciliation and welcome offered by the Gospel. This sort of reconciliation and welcome must reach into and out of the city's most neglected corners and will carry meaning for spaces of family life, spaces where youth are engaged, and perhaps most significantly, spaces of worship.

Liz Emrey, New Beginnings Christian Church, Charlottesville, VA "How Can the Poor Build a New Future?"

As a pastor of a church that does not own a building, whose congregation is composed of people who are mostly homeless or live in sub-standard rentals, it is a challenge to write about "the theology of the built environment." Our members are so concerned about getting enough to eat, finding jobs, staying out of jail, and keeping clean and sober that they have little time or energy to lift their heads up and look at where they live. Many of them are just grateful to have a roof over their heads.

This said, I see Timothy Gorringe's invitation for the poor to become co-creators in their community and with their own homes as particularly important for my congregation. If where we live is our "third skin," shaping who we are, everyone needs to be an active part of that creative process. We cannot simply let "the educated and powerful" define our society. An essential part of our members' liberation from the nothingness of drugs, alcohol and other addictions is to claim their God-given uniqueness and co-creative power. Thus, they also need to see their own values and sense of beauty in the walls of their homes and in the shape of their community.

Two of our members have taken leadership in this area. Colleen, a single mother, worked with Habitat for Humanity to build a home for her three children, her granddaughter and herself. Her mother, Maureen, was unable to qualify for assistance, so she painstakingly constructed a one room house on a small lot in Nelson County. She has just recently strung up wires for electricity and is now waiting for help to install indoor plumbing. These homes may not be a middle class person's vision of "suitable accommodations," but to people living below the poverty level, owning their own homes is a miracle.

Because of Colleen and Maureen, our church has become an active partner with Habitat for Humanity. Recently, we helped build a duplex in Charlottesville. In cooperation with my former employer, the Charlottesville Redevelopment and Housing Authority, our church members painted and repaired public housing units for elderly and disabled residents. We also are continually assisting ex-offenders in finding safe and affordable apartments. But that is not enough. We are now working with the housing inspector to petition and sue landlords who

refuse to make repairs. We believe that providing a good place for all people to live is just as important as “feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and visiting the sick and imprisoned.”
I think that the Project on Lived Theology has made a wise choice in choosing the Theology of the Built Environment as the sequel to last year’s meeting with Jurgen Moltmann on the Theology of Hope. How can the poor have hope when they live in the midst of squalor and ugliness? Studies have shown that unattractive and inadequate housing greatly increases the amount of mental and physical illness suffered by the residents. If hope is ever going to be part of the gospel for the poor, we need to work together to provide safe, clean, affordable and beautiful homes that reflect the values of those who live in them.

Roy Hange, Charlottesville Mennonite Church, Charlottesville, VA “True Location As Dislocation”
My ministry experience has involved establishing a physical and relational space pastoring two different churches and working in three Middle Eastern countries. A unifying theme of my involvement in those five contexts has been creative dislocation.

I have come to see that where we place ourselves becomes who we are in a context. What we place around us sets the parameters for determining what is just, peaceful or beautiful in a faithful sense. How we shape our environment determines the construct of our character and the possibilities of our spiritual, social and political development.

I have come to feel at home in a theology of creative dislocation: living in a continual deconstruction of the structures that define normal. This is not an easy place to live.
I have come to see that Moses’ work was in part creating a place for a chosen people to be liberated in their monotheistic worship, kept dynamic through a social order defined by jubilee and rightly oriented by a politics accountable to a power greater than kingship and often suspicious of kingship. The creative dislocation Moses was working toward challenged the stasis of each of these constructs: the certitude of the cult, the seduction of wealth and the presumption of power.

I have come to see that the orientation of Jesus was toward the socially dislocated poor, the spiritually dislocated foreigner and sinner, and the politically dislocated little ones (*awaneen*). In his inaugural speech at Nazareth and the Beatitudes, Jesus declared that the location of grace was outside of normal constructs of power. In doing so, Jesus built a new construct of faith that was lived out by the early believers through their eradication of poverty through sharing, their breaking down walls of hostility through table fellowship with ‘enemies,’ and in their understanding that grace had no walls (Acts 10:34).

If classical orthodoxy was indicated by the affirmation of a set of beliefs maybe an orthodoxy for our age will be an acknowledgement of the need for a creative dislocation from our power structures paralleled by a faithful intentionality about where we place ourselves spiritually, socially and politically. This new orthodoxy can be summarized by two phrases from Jesus that represent creative dislocation: “My kingdom is not of this world” and “be in the world yet not of it.”

If such a posture of “practical orthodoxy” was taken by the Lutheran and Catholic churches in Germany before WWII, maybe they would have had enough discernment and corporate will to stand up to the Nazi’s who defamed the place called Germany with their “practical idolatry.”

Russell Jeung, San Francisco State University “Theologizing the Fences of Oak Park Apartments”

In the summer before Oak Park Apartments was named the worst slum of Oakland CA, the kids there made a heroic attempt to improve it themselves. When Dan Schmitz, the new manager and their longtime friend, asked them how they would fix up Oak Park, they got a symbolic cue that change was afoot. So while he was gone, they went ahead and tore down the chain link fences within the courtyard. The fences, which were erected to stop tree climbing, simply blocked the children’s flow of play. When he returned later in the afternoon, Schmitz was alarmed at the new hazards of torn fences strewn about, but also secretly pleased with the new feng-shui of the complex.

A decade later, Oak Park has been rebuilt after tenants initiated a landmark lawsuit. What once was a roach-infested shooting gallery for vagrants now was home to families in spacious townhouse units. The abandoned building in front of Oak Park, formerly burnt out by crack users, has become New Hope Covenant Church’s preschool and tutoring center run by the very same Dan Schmitz. Yet New Hope’s short fence and gates, built out of wood to be warm and inviting, are now broken down. Kids who deal drugs sit on the fences, drink there and loiter, causing other neighbors to complain. While New Hope’s tenant organizing efforts spurred changes so that the city began to heavily fine blighted properties, those same fines were now being threatened at New Hope. Sadly, these kids in front of New Hope are from the same families that initiated the lawsuit.

As the roommate of Dan Schmitz and one of the faith-based organizers of the Oak Park Tenants association, I thought our role was simply to be a light in the darkness. By helping my neighbors see what Jesus would want for them, we exposed the exploitation of immigrants by landlords. Just as TJ Gorringe writes in ch.4, Isaiah 65 served as our vision for our refugee neighbors, in which they would live in self-sufficiency and self-determination. The act of tearing down the chain link fences, our little Berlin wall, reflected the kids’ yearning for a home where they “would not be doomed to misfortune,” but a place “to be a delight.”

However, rehabbing Oak Park to meet HUD housing codes hasn’t maintained the tight community we once had. Because of income guidelines, the tenant organizers and I had to move out. Where kids once roamed in packs throughout the courtyard, they now retreat to their larger, privatized and sanitized rooms and play video games. Where mothers used to sell their ethnic soups to their neighbors, they now must comply with stricter management to keep their building clean. And the older kids defiantly continue to kick it at the New Hope fence, where the lack of lighting keeps their activities in the dark. Now our own youth terrorize the neighborhood, as in Ezekiel 22: “The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice.”

Despite the tearing down of old fences, we must continually repair the fences of our

neighborhood. As the Chinese proverb states, "Everyone pushes a falling fence," and it's easy to let decaying structures remain neglected. But Ezekiel continues, "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it…" Because we are all complicit in the sins of our nation, we must plead for mercy. Because the effects of poverty and racism continue to threaten our families, we stand in the gaps to defend our communities. And because we are concerned for all of creation, we pray on behalf of ourselves and the land.

Louis Nelson, Professor in the School of Architecture, University of Virginia
My work as a historian of architecture brings me into contact with a wide diversity of built environments and it is in that diversity of places that I see God's hand at work redeeming His creation. The Bible opens with a garden and closes with a city. One of humanity's contribution to that story is architecture. In the book of Revelation (21: 24 , 26), John describes the New Jerusalem as filled with the light that is the glory of God. He continues by noting that the Holy City is dense with the creative work of diverse peoples: "the nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it…the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it." The New Jerusalem will be enriched with the arts and architecture of His people, work initiated under the impress of sin but redeemed/perfected by His completion. Buildings are dense with stories of hope, despair, love and anger; in this way, God enlists the built environment in the process of redeeming His creation. I believe some manifestation of their physical form and the human narratives knitted into their fabric will be redeemed as part of God's plan to reclaim His creation. Furthermore, Christ's emphasis on humility ("the first shall be last and the last, first") implies, I hope, that He redeems not only Chartres Cathedral but also the two-room wooden chattle houses of the Caribbean. In this view, my work as a historian of architecture inverts the tendency to look to the New Jerusalem to find models for design and construction in the present. In my study of the built environment, I see glimpses of the holy city; my undergraduate survey of the history of architecture is a veiled preview of the New Jerusalem.

Lindsay Quinn, Charlottesville Abundant Life Ministries, VA
I come from a rural Virginia community in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The built environment I grew up with was constructed in response to the land – land (mostly undeveloped or used for farming/logging) was plentiful while man-made facilities were few in comparison. Public spaces were designed for community gatherings – churches, Ruritan Clubs, American Legion buildings, and even local gas stations/convenience stores. There are images from this rural setting that are redemptive and help people reconcile their role as part of God's creation in connection to the land and to community, while other images from my background do more to confuse this.
I moved to Charlottesville to study urban planning in 1998 and brought with me a growing interest in physical space and communities. I have since lived here, more recently in the Prospect Avenue community (home to a 200-unit HUD-subsidized housing complex and many attached town homes, low-income residents, a growing number of Hispanic immigrants, and a Christian ministry where I work). This experience/lifestyle has strengthened my belief that there exists a strong relationship between physical space and one's mindset and values

(theology, I suppose).

I understand the construction of space – both land and buildings – as a reflection of the constructor's values, especially whether or not s/he truly loves neighbor as self or really believes creation is to be stewarded. Unfortunately, I believe most people do not understand what their spacial constructions communicate. The way a person constructs his or her environment is an outworking of their mindset and innermost values, just as the words we speak reveal what's in our heart. However, I do not believe that everyone enjoys an equal luxury of shaping their built environment to fully reflect these interworkings of the mind and soul due to limitations such as financial constraints, lack of ownership, and the varying opinions of others. Certainly, a family in my community living in Blue Ridge Commons can hardly plant flowers in front of their apartment, let alone shape their built environment in more substantial ways. I believe that as an urban neighbor and ministry practicioner, I (along with others), have a great challenge to become a challenger of mindsets and values in order for physical space to manifest the justice, peace, and beauty of God's kingdom. I also know that the built environment has an effect on mindset and values as well. Unfortunately, our world has too many examples of physical space that negatively impact people and contribute to poor health, hopelessness, depression, and further degradation of creation. Therefore, we also have a great task to not only impact mindsets and values but also physical space itself. The inter-relationship is fascinating and pertinent to living a holistic, incarnate Gospel.

Rydell Payne, Charlottesville Abundant Life Ministries, VA "Between the Garden and the Future City"

All space is God's space. God creatively built the space in which we occupy, and as image bearers of Him, He empowered us to steward, serve, and nurture it such that our work reflects His splendor and beauty. Mankind's attempt to fulfill this responsibility has been significantly hindered by the tragic encounter with Satan in the garden where we were deceived and distracted from our responsibility. More importantly, we simultaneously violated the one rule God gave us to obey as we worked responsibly. This violation now taints our ability to work and therefore we have many barriers to overcome in order to build the environment rightly, justly and lovingly. Perhaps the primary barrier is the preoccupation with self versus God when seeking to work. Do we want space to honor God or honor ourselves? In what ways does our progress or regress today display environment building that reflects His splendor and beauty. In a fallen world where His image in us is held captive by sin, when is our construing of space really a reflection of Him or when is it a reflection of mankind or when is it both?

Though we still work imperfectly, the eschatological vision of God's city, the new heaven and earth, informs the built environment today. The prophet Ezekiel (chapter 47) encouraged the Israelites with a picture of the future city after the devastation of the temple, and the apostle John gives Christians in the book of Revelation (chapter 22) a similar picture. This picture is the sanctuary of God with a river flowing from it that will provide healing to the nations, trees constantly bearing fruit, and space that God has perfectly constructed. The future city and the garden prior to the fall need to be reflected upon deeply to stir us today to build the environment such that it mimics this city. In between the garden and the future city we can

learn much from our successes and failures as we toil towards the New Jerusalem. The garden and the city exhort us to take them seriously and pursue them faithfully/intentionally today both locally and globally as we work together with God to bring heaven to earth.

God have mercy on us as we struggle to reflect your love/image in our environment building. Our souls are thirsty for the river that runs from your throne to lead us until we resemble that future city.

Scott Dimock, The Southeast White House, Washington, DC
Psalm 122:6-8: Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem. May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels. For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will say "Peace be within you."

The Southeast White House (SEWH) is the latest place where God has directed me to live into what He has me to be. Located in Southeast Washington, DC in the forgotten part of the city, this 1910 building, which resembles the big White House and is therefore called the Little White House by the community, stands 46 blocks from the "other" White House at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW. The Southeast White House at 2909 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE is a house on the hill for all people. The community, comprised of Wards 7 & 8, sits east of the Anacostia River and has 140,000 inhabitants with only one supermarket and no sit-down restaurant. The mayor closed the closest hospital 3 years ago. This area is very underserved.

Ten years ago, with a brother in Jesus and a former Deputy Chief of the Metropolitan Police Department, I went into the SEWH to be a presence for Jesus in this part of the city. With no specific plans or programs, we prayed for the "eyes to see" (2 Corinthians 4:18) what the needs of the community really are.

Many kid and adult tutoring and mentoring programs have been developed along with a database of 3500 agencies serving the poor in 27 human needs categories. Our "filling station" breakfasts and reconciliation lunches have joined together many people from the suburbs and the city. Lives not formerly in a relationship with Jesus have been empowered by Jesus and by a relationship with Him.

An encouraging event occurred a few years ago when a reporter from the Washington Post came to the front door. Armed with a scowl on her face and a memo pad in her hand, she entered the SEWH and with a very intimidating voice demanded, "Who owns this house?" The administrator standing next to me barked back, "Jesus does." My first thought was right answer, wrong timing. We proceeded on a tour of the building, explaining how God had so graced us with lives and furnishings. After 15 minutes of touring, she grabbed my elbow and said, "Scott, I owe you an apology. I came in with a real attitude and I am sorry." I told her I noticed and that she was forgiven. She then said, "I have not experienced peace in Washington, D.C. in the last 27 years as I am experiencing it in this place right now." She was experiencing Jesus' presence, for where Jesus is present, there will be peace (John 14:26).
Although the SEWH is just one building in the above-described community, it is serving as a

place of renewal and re-creation for the community. It reminds me of the parable of the grandfather and his grandson walking along the beach and returning one starfish at a time to the sea.

Nisha Botchwey, Professor, Department of Urban and Environmental Planning, University of Virginia

How do I understand the construction of space "the built environment" as participation in God's work of reconciliation and redemption? How do I think about the built environment and how does this relate to reconciliation and redemption?

For a planner concerned with local level community development and service provision to the poor, the built environment is composed of resident institutions that reach underserved populations. These institutions operate below the mainstream social service provider network and work with very few resources, the majority of which are donations from individuals and private groups. They are not tied into the government-by-proxy system, otherwise referred to as the shadow state, meaning a shadow of the government in their service to the people. Therefore, these institutions are "silent partners" in the built environment. Their contribution to local community development and service provision is unseen, yet critical. Without their participation, the severity of need in society would overload the already under-resourced shadow state.

I believe that a love for the poor is at the heart of God, and I work currently to give voice to the interests of low-income groups that have been historically marginalized in the development of public policies that significantly impact the "spaces" in which they live. The local religiously affiliated and secular nonprofits institutions in low-income communities, the silent partners, are well-positioned to reach this population. Silent partners provide services in a number of areas including housing, economic development, social services, adult education, health services, community organizing, youth development and senior citizen services. These daily acts of service foster relationship fueled by neighborhood and community transformation. On the institutional side, my advocacy for the inclusion of silent partners is again motivated by the desire to see social services provided by the hands of people who are in relationship with those being served. Often, it is the relationships created in performing this work that transform people's lives, and I view this as an expression of God's work of reconciliation and redemption.

Joe Szakos, Virginia Organizing Project, Charlottesville, VA

Joe reports that while he has worked for more than 27 years as a community organizer–organizing around a variety of housing and community development issues in Chicago, land/mineral ownership and environmental issues in Appalachia, environmental and community development issues in Hungary, and social and economic justice issues in Virginia–he is still very perplexed that the spirituality of those in power is so often disconnected from their "built environment." He is even more perplexed that the institutional church does very little to challenge the source of many of our social and economic ills–realtors, major employers, public officials and others in power who regularly attend a house of worship, yet seem to forget all about it when they go through their daily lives. Why are clergy and lay leaders afraid to challenge the "problem in the pews?"

Marilyn Dimock, The Southeast White House, Washington, DC

A song written by our son-in-law, "The House on the Hill" says, "I've heard all about redemption, searched long and hard for peace of mind. Where is God in this country?" The song and the title of Heidi Neumark's book, "Breathing Spaces," epitomize my thoughts and experience regarding the built environment.

Rural, suburb, city–God IS in any of these locations if the hearts/spirits of the people move toward Micah 6:8, "He has showed you, oh man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." Yes, the green pastures of Psalm 23 and the New Jerusalem spoken about in Revelations and everything in between can welcome the spirit of redemption and reconciliation as manifested in creation and in Jesus, "the visible expression of the invisible God." The question is, are Micah 6:8's three "requirements" met in the present climate so that redemption and reconciliation can take place?

Personally, I experienced in formative years many possible structures of community. My family lived on a wheat ranch in New Mexico, were driven out by a draught, and lived in twelve different areas in the city of Denver, Colorado before I graduated high school. After college I made choices influenced both by "spirit" and tangible communities with increasing awareness of the emphasis in the Scriptures on caring for the poor and being "content" in whatever state one finds oneself.

Working with young people in the lower income high schools of Seattle, Harlem, the Lower East Side of New York, and the Southeast Wards of Washington, DC made me deeply aware of the frustration of providing an environment in which people could thrive. Having the privilege of being in several third world countries with the poorer populations for the last fifteen years increased this awareness. Having German theologians as guests in our home who were aghast that we would choose a worshipping community that requires a long drive, and living for the last ten years with another family in a home in the country which provides the "space" for not only ourselves, but countless others, to rejuvenate (breathe) so that they can return to the density and barrenness of much of the lower income areas of the contemporary city influences my questions and concerns about environment and about the believer's individual and corporate responsibility.

Is there a way to bring about consensus/agreement, mercy, justice, beauty, healthy survival through the way a community is built? I typed the town plan for the Reston community, Virginia thirty-seven years ago. I know many who have lived there and live there now. The theory was great; the result has not fulfilled the dream.

Do I think I know the answers? On a theoretical, spiritual plane, I believe it is Micah 6:8 lived out in policy and concrete action. On a practical level, I have some clues about how we make choices and influence policy, but I am still in a searching mode. I feel strongly that the increased polarization I experience in the United States between the haves and the have nots is leading us away from a built environment that fosters redemption, reconciliation and breathing space.

Therefore, one ingredient is shoring up the community of believers to understand what actions could change the polarization and be willing to sacrificially change lifestyle and focus/emphasis.

Jessie Straight, Habitat for Humanity of Greater Charlottesville, VA
If Habitat for Humanity had its way everyone would own their own home. But why should we pursue ownership? I did not think of that question till I had worked at Habitat for a couple months. Of course, it is good to help people out of housing that does not encourage human flourishing e.g. cold, leaky, moldy, around violent and inhospitable neighbors, distant from green spaces, social spaces, recreational spaces, work spaces, rest spaces, artistic places, churches, food places–but why is ownership so important? Couldn't we just help people out of bad rentals into good rentals? Here are my recent thoughts.

It is good for people to own their living space because human happiness directly corresponds to connectedness to all else that exists–God, humans, animals, soil, plants, tools (e.g. cars), and all built environment. Yesterday I was working with the plants of my rented cottage and it occurred to me how much more I would enjoy the work if I owned the place. The reason is that I knew I would benefit less from my work than if I owned it. If I owned it I might have the chance of enjoying that tree the rest of my life or a higher sale of the place were I to move. Now, a critic could say that I should be content to better the earth and the moment regardless of whether I get to see the full benefit of my work, either in a lifelong inhabitation of the place or a higher sale of the place were I to move. I'm not saying there isn't some truth to that, but come on. Sure, you should really love a girlfriend even though she might not be around next month, but it is a whole lot easier to love a wife who at least herself and the church said she would be around as long as she lives. The basic point is that we humans enjoy existing–working, playing, resting, worshiping–when we are confidently connected with the things we use and the people we are with and the God who is the source of all that being. We know this from experience and we can see this clearly in the story of creation. Intimacy and interconnectedness between God, humanity, and the rest of creation are the normative revealed in the act of creation and the life in the Garden. Adam is made by God in the image of God (importantly including the social aspect of the triune God) from the dirt to live in interaction with God, Eve, plants and animals.

So how does homeownership help form this connectedness? Home-ownership allows connectedness because the homeowner can reside permanently if she likes. The renter is at the mercy of the landlord and has less of a say about planning issues–e.g a road through the house. These impotencies ruin the renter's assurance of the ability to reside permanently. If one likes where one lives, and is not at the mercy of a landlord, one is more inclined to befriend and beautify. In addition, since the home-owner has a financial stake in the place (the renter has a stake only in the time) she is more interested in its beauty and goodness–for her present and future enjoyment, for those of hers who will receive it when she dies, and/or for the higher sale if she were to sell it. The fundamental issue is the assurance that one will receive the full benefit of one's work–it will be for us and those we know and love (i.e, ones with which we are connected)–and the full benefit of one's community life–"I can befriend these neighbors because I can be here for my whole life if I like."

Homeownership is a way towards connectedness. However, building one's home is an even greater step towards connectedness. To know one's house from its formation provides an even greater intimacy with it. Talk to anyone who has built their own home. This is one of the great parts of the Habitat program where Partner Families do "sweat equity" on the construction of their own home. By homeownership and self-construction Habitat is pursuing a connectedness of life as it was meant to be lived.