

“Trading Spaces,” Changing Lives: The Importance of Context in Religious Education

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Abstract: This paper presentation will explore what is change or transformation in people's lives, focusing primarily on the importance of the context or the environment, the place, of a religious community in that change, by considering the pattern of change that occurs on the popular television show, “Trading Spaces.”

In recent years, a “Do It Yourself”--also known as DIY--phenomenon has swept across the television landscape and middle-class American society, as well as helped the commerce of home improvement stores, like Lowe's and Home Depot, let alone all the fix-it stores who specialize in cleaning up problems amateur repair persons may have encountered in their zeal to refashion their homes. People have preset their TIVOs and other video recording devices for these “Do It Yourself” shows, broadcast primarily on cable networks like Home and Garden T.V. (HGTV) and their “Design on a Dime,” the Discovery Channel's “Monster House” and “Surprise by Design,” and “Trading Spaces,” on “TLC” (The Learning Channel), along with the first do-it-yourself show, the British cohort “Changing Places,” let alone other major networks who are riding on the coattails of such high profile fix-it shows, e.g., “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy” on Bravo network. All of these are “reality t.v.” in which the promise is that the shows are not scripted per se, but filmed in real time and unfolding on-camera and live, so that viewers see the reaction of the owners as their rooms are changing “right before their very eyes.”

The premise and structure of these shows are all fairly the same. The pre-show crew of professional designers and builders come to a house in suburban, rural, or urban America, perhaps to a house or apartment near the reader of this essay. The location of these places changes show to show, but primarily tend to be middle to upper-middle class

abodes. Within a pre-set time and strict financial limit (typically paid for by the networks producing these shows), these designers and builders are going to change a room or set of rooms, or perhaps the outdoor environment, with the premise that the resident of the home is not there. The climax of the show is reached when the owner of the home comes back for the last five minutes climax and unveiling of the finished project.

One of the most popular shows is “Trading Spaces,” which starts off with the premise that two couples or families switch houses, without the advantage of seeing what is going on in their rooms at home for two days. Each couple is told that they have two days to redecorate a room in the other couple’s or family’s home, with limited input into what goes on in their home. Along with the couples or the family who are redecorating a room, each couple or family are guided by a professional interior designer who is assigned by the show’s producers to the couples or families, though the families do not get to choose which designer they get. There is also one carpenter assigned per show, who works with both households and designers in each home. A financial limit is set: \$1000.00 per home. If the designer goes over the \$1000 limit, then the designer must pay for the extra out of his or her pocket, with great guilt piled on by the host for going over budget. The show’s producers create a minute-by-minute sense of time and motion as the camera crew records as many of those moments possible. When each couple or family is given the keys to the other couple’s or family’s home, with suitcase or duffle bag in hand, they go—or typically run—to the other person’s home and meet the designer they will work with in the other person’s home, thus the name “Trading Spaces.”

Paige Davis, the bright and perky emcee and host of the show, is the one constant presence in all of the shows. She starts the show by telling everyone on the show and in

the television audience the rules of the show. Throughout the shows she is constantly visiting the homes, helping out where she can, dancing if need be, running errands, and acting as either advisor to the couples and designer, coaches them to hurry-up as she encourages each team to move on, or the parent-figure telling each group how much money and time they have for their respective projects. The climax begins when she chimes in with “Time’s Up!” in a sing-song merry voice, leaving the audience with questions about whether or not each couple or family will like and appreciate, or dislike and be ready to paint over, the changes made in their respective homes. The final product and the reaction of the couple or family members come at the very end of the show, and it is often well worth the wait, for there is nothing scripted about the reaction of the couple or the family members.

According to Trading Spaces: Behind the Scenes,¹ after Paige tells each family what the rules are, the homeowners describe what they would *like* to see happen in their neighbor’s room, and then the designers tell the homeowners what they’re planning to do. This is where the first signs of tension may, and often does, occur. Within thirty seconds, the rooms are cleared of all furniture and small items, and the physical preparation begins for painting a room: tape around windows and molding, washing down the walls, and spreading out a tarp for paint spills. By noon, the rooms on the show are painted, and the main carpentry work and the sewing projects have started. There are running jokes throughout, with an occasional conflict and crisis between either the designer and the couples, or the couples and families themselves, all on film. It appears that there is a back-up video camera in each room, spanning the entire room and catching all the action for two days. Each episode includes “Homework,” in which the couple or family are

¹ Trading Spaces: Behind the Scenes, Brian Kramer, Editor, (DeMoines: Meredith Books, 2003).

given a project that is to be completed the next morning. Usually the cast and crew work together to help the family or couple finish the assigned task, though this is not the impression that the viewer of the show knows. Sometimes there is good fun between the couples or family members and the designers, with a sense of a partying and good-natured teasing going around for one and all. Other times there are dramatic moments in which the couple or family members out and out disagree with one of the designers, telling the designers what they think of their designs, or relaying to the designer how much the couple or family who owns the home they are redecorating will not like the changes.

On the second day there are more tasks to be completed, along with the cue of “Time’s Up,” given by Paige Davis, who then shuts down the carpentry work and the sewing projects as the rooms are vacuumed and brought together. Candles are lit, flowers and pillows are fluffed, any last minute vacuuming takes place, and wiping off the dust or sawdust commences, and everyone is out of the rooms for the camera to pan the finished creation. Finally, there is the “chat” with each designer, in which the designers and the host Paige talk about the highlights in the room, along with the budget, with Paige informing the designer whether they went below or over the \$1000 limit. The forty-eight hours that are spent filming the re-decoration must then be edited into less than one hour of television.

As stated earlier, the climax of the show takes place at the very end, and it is well-worth waiting for, as the couple or family returns to the room in their respective home that has been redesigned and redecorated. This is the “stuff” of reality television, as the scene cannot be captured a second time. According to the book on “Trading Spaces,” the

lighting, sound, and camera angles are all well-placed as you cannot re-film the first reaction.² If the people who make up the couple or the family approve, there are either squeals or screams of delight, tears of happiness, an expletive deleted or beeped out of the show, and uncontrollable laughter, accompanied by the words, “Oh-My-Goodness,” or something like that. If the people do not like or approve of the design, again, there is the shock reaction: the gasps of fear, the tears of sadness, an expletive deleted or beeped out of the show, the gesture of shaking the head back and forth in disbelief, and promises by the owner that this will be painted over the minute the cast and crew leave the home. Some people are so upset they simply walk out of camera range. The delight of some who are pleased, along with the disgust on some of those who are dissatisfied is palpable for the television viewer. At the very end, the two families gather in one of the houses, and either there are hugs and a loud commotion of joy for one and all, or there is open questioning by one family to another, with one person asking “Why didn’t you stop them from doing it?” with the “it” being what the couple who own the home dislike.

In reflecting upon the emotional, artistic, intellectual, physical roller coaster that these shows provide both the participants directly, and in large part the television viewer indirectly, what is striking about these shows in general, and “Trading Spaces” in particular, is this: the transformation of these rooms and these homes often initiates a transformation in the very lives of those who are involved in the show themselves. Likewise, the transformation and change in the lives of these people on the show, as well as the change in the room itself may spur a change in the very life of the viewer as well. There may be a connection between the power of changing the design or architecture of a

² Ibid., p. 9.

place like a home that is directly related to the change of the design or “architecture” of one’s very life. There have been films, movies, and books that have followed this close correlation between a person’s life and the structures a person may choose to build or rebuild, e.g., Under the Tuscan Sun. Many people have spoken of the therapeutic, healing power that takes place in their broken lives, as they start to rebuild an old house, or build a new house, that is in direct correlation to the life of a person. The metaphor of life as a house to be built or lived in can even be carried to the Christian church itself: Christ Jesus himself is the once-rejected “cornerstone” of a now-holy structure: “In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God” (Eph. 2:21, 22). Christians are called to understand themselves as part of a living temple, a building, a structure made holy by the love of God.

In his books of sociology, sociologist Anthony Giddens refers to such a phenomenon in which life imitates such a building and design project, and the design and building project imitates life as a kind of double involvement. For an example of such a change in the lives of people, consider the many viewers of such shows who get the “urge” to start making changes in their own rooms and gardens when they see and hear the effect upon the people in a show. Such a range of emotions, and display of feelings, thoughts, and physical reactions are real and not pretend or an act per se and the viewer senses it. From anecdotal evidence, it is apparent that one’s place, one’s physical environment, the ecology of a room, a space, does matter to us and can affect a person’s life.

Likewise, such double involvement also involves the person making changes in one's place and space: we make changes in our environments, our spaces, out of a feeling that something must change. The one who is divorced, or the widow/er changes a house or moves out of a house due to the feelings that continue to exist in the rooms and halls of a house that was once shared with another person. Some parents change the room where a child, who is "fled from the nest," used to live, not in hopes of forgetting the child, but with hopes of moving on in life. Or consider how often the media tells us that we live in an age, "post 9-11," in which more people are staying closer to home, spending more time in the home, redecorating the home, spending more money for the home, "nesting" in a way that was different "pre 9-11." The cultural analysts tell us we are spending more time and money on our homes because of a fear that what happened on September 11, 2001, could happen again and we do not want to miss an opportunity to enjoy our homes, or our homes become sanctuaries from those who are deemed "terrorists." In sum, as people overtly plan and make a change in their physical locale, their environment, their place, the lives of the people around them, around us, are affected by the changes in these very locales, places, and spaces. The late Winston Churchill, in speaking to Parliament in 1944, said "We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us."³

The power of these shows is, itself, worthy of study, both by educators of all kinds, along with anthropologists and archeologists. Scholars and essayists like Neil Postman in his Amusing Ourselves to Death, and Neal Gabler's Life: The Movie, are both quick to point out in what ways there has been a blend of life and entertainment. There is that blend, writes Gabler, in which life imitates art, and art imitates life, so that it

³ Leland M. Roth, "Character of and in American Architecture" in National Forum, Summer, 2003, Vol. 83, No. 3, , p. 10

is almost blended as a continuous stream of consciousness.⁴ Gabler rightly points out that we live in an entertainment-driven, celebrity oriented society, in which the primary value of society is entertainment, and defined by entertainment.⁵ Gabler continues, suggesting that all this focus on entertainment is Plato's worse nightmare, writ large, in which the rational is deposed and in its place the sensational is enthroned, and in so doing the intellectual minority is deposed, and the unrefined majority is enthroned.⁶

In reflecting upon the power of this modern phenomenon of design and architecture via the electronic media, for this paper/presentation I will focus on these shows that are calling our attention to the importance of our homes, the places where we live, no matter how large or small, rich or poor, rural or urban, that provides a way of educating, identifying, and nurturing who and whose we are. Whatever the reason may be for our interest and investment of the places where we live, I propose that the interest in places where we live is also present in our interest in where we worship, the structures we design, the buildings we construct, and the interiors that we decorate. They are more than mere visual representation. Rather, the design and the architecture become a non-verbal gesture that communicates to one and all, "this is what I or we believe in."

More precisely, in this paper I will explore the way that our contexts—be it a place as simple as a home, or a sacred space like a church, a synagogue, a mosque—educate us by shaping and nurturing, changing and defining us in conscious and unconscious ways. Every time I watch a reaction of the homeowner coming back into their transformed, re-designed room or home, I am reminded that something significant has occurred, in which a person is undergoing a change, a transformation if you will,

⁴ Neal Gabler, *Life: The Movie* (NYC: Vintage Press, 1998), p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

because the place that they have called home, where they have identified so much of their life with, has changed and been transformed, whether or not they were part of the changing force. The primary resources for discussing these changes will be primarily those architects, designers, and artists who focus primarily on designing and building spaces and places, from homes to religious buildings. The focus will not be so much on the landscape or the “great outdoors,” for that is an entirely different, but not unrelated paper.

Needless to say, there are many ways that design and architecture, both human enterprises that involve imagination and creativity, as well as a sense of the limits of materials and the forces of nature, can have an impact upon our lives in multitudes of ways. Likewise, being human and ever adventurous, we are interested in pushing the envelope in trying new ways of design and architecture, which have been influenced by not only the cultural fads and fantasies, but also by philosophical trends and theological controversies. In focusing on the intersection of design and architecture of homes and places of worship, with the interest of religious educators in how design and architecture educate us about whom and whose we are, I have chosen the following four characteristics in this paper/presentation:

First, a place, like a home or a sacred structure and space is the locus of our thoughts, our feelings, and our desires.

In her book, Lure of the Local, writer Lucy Lippard begins with this moving sentiment in the “Introduction” to the book: “Place for me is the locus of desire. Places

have influenced my life as much as, perhaps more than, people. I fall for (or into) places faster and less conditionally than I do for people.”⁷

The places where we live, the places where we worship, become and are a focal point, the primary locus of our lives. The art critic and writer Rudolf Arnheim wrote that architecturally, the church is not a mere image of a deity, or just a visual tale about ways of living a religious life. More importantly, our religious, sacred spaces are an indication of the presence of a God who is alive, and much more direct proof and manifestation of such varied existence.⁸

In the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, we read of the Ark of the Covenant, and the history of the building of a Temple. In the New Testament, we read of the reconstruction of the Temple after its destruction, yet we also read of a new building, with Christ as the cornerstone (see Ephesians above). For centuries the power of buildings in focusing worship of God, be it in a synagogue, a temple, or a church building itself, has been of great debate, yet important for one and all. Even as the Puritan separatists determined not to erect churches to house their worship, they instead created a straightforward, four-square unembellished barn-like structure to house their worship services, their town assemblies, and to provide shelter for the community in times of tumult. Though the Puritans, spurning the Church of England influence, rejected the term, “church,” adopting the term “meeting house,” nevertheless these austere, multifunctional structures had the same kind of power as a church in focusing a people on an activity that was of praise and worship of God.⁹

⁷ Lucy Lippard, Lure of the Local (NYC: W. W. Norton, 1997), p. 4.

⁸ Rudolf Arnheim, To the Rescue of Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 30.

⁹ Roth, p. 11.

While there is a great theological discussion that has been going on for centuries regarding the place and presence of material items in guiding our worship, our education, our praise of God, nevertheless it is evident that our sacred places, like our homes, become filled with memories of dreams, hopes, adventures, dramas, sagas, sorrow, and intrigue and mystery. This, in part, explains why there is almost always a reaction among us, for good or ill, when there has been the slightest change in a sacred place like a sanctuary.

For example, on the home shows, I cited above that there is always the visible reaction to the changes in a home. The viewer sits glued to the television, watching and waiting to see the reaction at the end. Why the reaction? Because the place in which a person, a couple, or a family have called “home” has been changed. Not only has it been changed, but it has been changed by strangers, people who may not know the person, the couple, and the family all that well. Likewise, in congregations and parishes alike, when change has been made, even the smallest of changes, or hanging a new banner, placing sacramental elements in a different case, or even in the act of moving into a new or renovated space of worship, usually takes people by surprise. It calls for a people to “get comfortable,” to acquaint or reacquaint themselves to the space, the place, the fabric, the texture, the movement of space and place, which is the locus, the primary place in which we worship, know, are taught, and live out the faith of our forbearers.

Second: all architecture and design is collaborative, a community process, and a communal endeavor.

Architect Leland Roth writes that, in contrast to most of the other durable arts that come into being through one person, architecture and design comes into being only through the coordinated efforts of a community: client, architect, builder, and scores of workers.¹⁰ Design and architecture, which take imagination and creativity (also communal processes), involve the give and take, the fluid and dynamic reciprocal relationship of many people who will live and work, worship and learn, the contours of one's faith.

The power of a group to shape a design and architecture of a sacred building and space, as well as the theological convictions of a group that also help shape the design and architecture of a sacred place, are important for one and all to consider. For example, I have been told the story of the redesign and renovations of the Sacred Heart Chapel of St. Benedict's Monastery in St. Joseph, Minnesota. Oblate Frank Kazmarcek, who was good friends with the world-renown designer and architect Marcel Breuer, was contracted to work with the sisters of St. Benedict's. Mr. Kazmarcek, whose style includes many rigid right angles, straight lines, box like structures, with few if any curves (e.g., the Chapel at Mepkin Abbey outside of Charleston, SC; Church of Immaculate Conception, Durham, NC), had come up with a re-design of this century-old space that was essentially the same as the other buildings he has been commissioned to design and redesign around the country. The sisters, having studied church design and architecture, and having discussed in great length the kind of changes they wanted in their chapter meetings, were not impressed with Mr. Kazmarcek's designs. As one sister told me the story, they politely, but firmly, reminded Mr. Kazmarcek that what was missing in this space was simple: curves and circles. With tongue in cheek, the sister told me, "We told Frank, 'We

¹⁰ Roth, p. 10.

are women, Frank, we have curves, and so should our worship space.’” After this “discussion,” the space has curves, including the steps into Sacred Chapel; the altar is placed upon a large round, brick dais, right around the large round cupola.

The houses we build, and the sacred places that we design and build, are not to be the sole project of one person. All architecture is collaboration. It depends upon those involved in the project how many are involved in the give and take of design and building. However, it seems to me that the more voices that participate and are welcomed into the discussion, the more the very space and place is representative of the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, hopes, and dreams of a people.

Third: in architecture and design is our present day connection between the past we know so little about, and the future we are aimlessly concocting.

Architecture and design is not an act of *creation ex nihilo*, creation out of nothingness. Instead, architecture is that art, that science, that reaches into the past, learning lessons from the past, a memory, known or unknown histories, which have left a mark on us, in order to look at the world today, and the project before a group of people, and imagine, “What if?”¹¹

All design and all architecture, of home and sacred places, are inherently narrative or story, or a sign or symbol of a person’s life or a people’s life together. Lippard continues: “Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person’s life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. (It is) a layered location replete with human

¹¹ Lippard, p. 7.

histories and memories; place has width as well as depth. It's about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there."¹²

Like a story, like life, like our faiths, design and architecture comes out of a past, a "once-upon-a-time," in which our context, much like our language and culture, have a profound influence over everything we say and do. This is what theorists and educators like Lev Vygotsky, A.R. Luria, and Jerome Bruner discovered and wrote about in depth: they all alike looked at and considered the cultural situatedness of all mental or cognitive activities, which includes not only what we read and hear, but what we see, hear, sense, move to, and experience as in design and architecture. As Bruner is quick to remind us, "education doesn't occur in classrooms, but around dinner tables," and education, shaping, and nurturing takes place around the altar, the baptismal font, the reading of Torah, and the prayers at the mosque.¹³ It is in these places that we are born and initiated into, nurtured by the design of the banners and windows, the columns and the mosaic labyrinth on the floor, the position of pews to altar, that we inherit a story and make our mark upon these places as they make a mark upon us.

In the southeastern portion of this county, the power of a sacred place to tell a story is found in the Homecoming events, which usually occurs in the autumn season, a.k.a., harvest season. In preaching at many churches during Homecoming, the emphasis is usually on recognizing the people who meant much in the history, the past, of a church's life. Former pastor's and their spouses come back, as do family members who have a small family reunion during these times. People stroke the wood of the pew where they used to plays as a child. I remember one pastor holding onto the pulpit for

¹² Ibid., p. 7.

¹³ Jerome Bruner, The Culture of Education (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. xi.

dear life, remembering fondly the sermons preached over many years. A comment is made by those returning regarding something new or different in the church building, from the color of the carpet, to a new door hinge, or a walk way now made accessible for people with disabilities. The former members interact with the present members, stories are shared, and the future of the church is open before both those of the past and those of the present membership. A story is still to be told for another generation.

Fourth: architecture and design are non-verbal gestures, forms of communication that speaks volumes.

According to Leland Roth, the nineteenth-century critic John Ruskin observed in his preface to St. Mark's Rest (1877), that nations “write their autobiographies in three manuscripts—the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the other two; but of the three, the only quite trustworthy one is the last.” Roth continues: “Architecture is the most accurate, the most truly revealing cultural artifact.”¹⁴

In the 1960s, the German architect of the Bauhaus School Marcel Breuer designed and built the large concrete structure now known as the Chapel of St. John's University and Abbey in Collegeville, MN. It sits high on a hill in central Minnesota. The Chapel is situated next door to the brick structure of what was once the Chapel of the Abbey and University, but now is a performance and reception place. The large twin towers that used to soar from the brick structure were removed soon after the building of the new concrete and glass structure of Breuer's Chapel. I was told more than once by some

¹⁴ Roth, p. 10.

brothers of St. John's that the towers were taken down so that Breuer's Chapel and the larger concrete bell banner would be the highest on the hill in Collegeville, MN.

At Duke University, the faux-Gothic Chapel is the central focus on the western campus. Though the eastern campus of Duke University is all Georgian brick in design, the western campus is all field stone and Cambridge/Princeton University in style. The Chapel was meant to be the main focus of the next University when it was built in the 1930s. It is a striking building, feeling medieval in all its Gothic structure, from the beautiful stained glass windows, to the soaring ceiling and polished wood sculptures in the front of the Chapel. And just like many Gothic cathedrals of European origin, the sound effect is lousy.

While on sabbatical at St. John's Abbey and University in spring 2000, people would ask me about the similarities and the differences of Duke University with St. John's: the Chapel, was my reply. For the Chapels are both central figures in the life of these schools. They tell much about the people's vision for the respective Universities. They house in them saints' and benefactors' bodies laid to rest. And both of these places draw people's reactions, of wonder, of beauty, of delight, of pride, of memories. But their differences are also important, for both schools use the image of the towers that house the bells of the church as a design by which the schools will be known to others, be it the Buddhist-like bell banner of St. John's, or the Gothic bell tower of Duke.

In sum, like houses that we design and build, redesign, swap with others to decorate, and are moved by, the places where we worship God and learn of the ways of the Holy come to us from the people, the culture, where they are placed, and no where

different. And that place cannot be isolated from a network of other places, meanings, people, theological and philosophical beliefs, the hopes and dreams of others long gone. What we have in common with those who preceded us to these places, and follow us into these sacred spaces, is a spirit/Spirit, which infuses our human creativity to use the land, history, culture, place and people to do something new from something old. Doing so, we broaden our horizons by reading Holy Scriptures, tell stories, and live in the folklore we read and sing about. And the walls of our sacred spaces and places will reverberate with the sound of our voices, sway with the movement of our feet, and be enlivened by the colors we bring, changing the way we live, in the Holy of Holies.