




# Transformative light and thresholds: exploring metaphor in brutalist church architecture

Wanda Odendaal  
Central University of Technology, Free State, South Africa  
[wodendaal@cut.ac.za](mailto:wodendaal@cut.ac.za)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0065-0161>

 <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.105.43>

## Abstract

In this paper I consider the interaction between architectural space and embodied spiritual experience. In an example of a South African Dutch Reformed Church building designed by architect Roelof Uytenbogaardt in the town of Welkom, and the church of the light in Osaka Japan, by Tadao Ando, these aspects are highlighted and read through the lens of metaphor, phenomenological architectural interpretation, and image studies. These differing lines of inquiry are brought together, if we accept architectural theorist Juhani Pallasmaa's premise (1996, 2005) that architecture can direct our consciousness back to the world, to our own sense of self and embodied being; and we in turn base our analysis on art historian Ellen Esrock's (2010) concepts concerning emphatic bodily projection; it may be argued that new insight into the way architecture underscores embodied spiritual experiences could be gained. The selected church building is analysed from a phenomenological point of view, emphasising architectural features, the interpretation of the metaphors of light and threshold, and how architectural space may contribute to congregants' experience during a service.

**Keywords:** Threshold, light, church, architecture, phenomenology.

## Introduction

Threshold and light are metaphors that play significant roles in architectural design linked with religious spaces. These themes are of course significant in a theological sense and have been reinterpreted by artists, religious communities, and architects to create experiences in buildings that may be linked to biblical texts. Sacred architecture is thus a form of architecture which is designed to reflect on religious and spiritual, beliefs for adherents and it allows them to immerse themselves in worship.

To analyse and engage with the qualities of two specific church designs the methodology for this research included desktop research into available literature and the qualitative use of secondary sources to justify the arguments. Additionally, one of the buildings (DRC Welkom-West), was visited by the author as a primary artifact, while the second (Church of the Light, Japan) was analysed using secondary sources.

The use of metaphor in architecture has taken different forms as movements focused on different elements of the making of buildings, from mythological to the sacred, from direct ornamentation to the abstract and functional. It plays a similar role in image making and in the representation of various concepts. Metaphor is generally interpreted first in the linguistic sense but has also played

a significant role as a cognitive and creative tool in the making of images and architecture. Metaphors have in fact been described as a way of thinking. “They turn that which cannot be thought into something conceivable and prepare it for future ways of conceivableness” (Verrycken et al, 2013:22). From this statement, essentially, it may be said that metaphors are images that relate to the referred object in such a way as to explain the meaning of the object in a non-literal but in a derivative way. The metaphor is thus not the same as the object, but relays with other images the essential truth of the objects. Buildings as objects have acted as metaphors and have been created with metaphor as creative driving force. The Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens, for example, as a “monumental building, the house of a goddess and a symbol of the power of a great city” (Davies, 2011:20) had significant spiritual value. There is an established history of metaphor in architecture and other fields to be both acknowledged and criticized Verrycken et al, 2013:20). The church as building has served to describe communities of faith, served to communicate certain concepts and ideas about the Christian faith, but within the design of the church building, light, threshold, transformation, height, and other metaphors have been implemented to create designed spaces throughout the history of the church. The critique of metaphor lies in the lack of objectivity, especially in the hard sciences. Thus, metaphorical speech and images can be seen as only a necessary evil to be disregarded, as is seen in Konersmann’s (in Verrycken et al, 2013:24) description of Gaston Bachelard’s critique:

According to Bachelard, who is an avowed critic of metaphor, metaphor is not only an evil in the field of scientific language that should be eradicated but it is also an informative proof of not-knowing, and, moreover, an indication of the winding paths knowledge follows.

Although metaphor is seen as an indication of uncertainty in his critique, this is not where its value is most clear. The very critique Bachelard offers of metaphor, reveals its value in the architectural design process. A process that is largely a winding path and a process of ‘not-knowing’ that leads to the discovery of a spatial solution that may offer meaningful experiences. This is especially relevant in the design of spaces that have deep symbolic and sacred meaning. “A church is a place of mysterious presence, where communities assemble, and is distinct from other building types in its ephemeral quality. It is intentionally designed to enable the visitor to experience something more.” (Verster, 2013:17) Metaphor thus has significant implications in the design of these spaces. It refers to aspects beyond itself and offers an enlightening value to facilitate the experience required of these spaces, but not in a direct or contrived manner.

Buildings are not only limited constructions and not exempt from the reflective aspect metaphor provides, even within the modernist movement. There is meaning in the construction. Metaphors enlighten the architectural implications of the building. There is value in the metaphorical images and architecture itself may again provide value as metaphor in itself, as mentioned. Architecture (and visual art) may be seen as metaphors that inherently also depend on the communication of metaphorical ideas.

This idea of communication is emphasised by Karatani (1995): “Architecture is thus a form of communication conditioned to occur without common rules – it is a communication with the other, who, by definition, does not follow the same set of rules” (Karatani, 1995:xl). Again, here is an element of unknown, but through communication connections are made, as Camus (2017:168) describes how metaphors allow for drawing our attention to something about a subject, or building, that would not otherwise be apparent:

Metaphors in this way invite us to make inferences about how two different things could be alike. They engage us by having us guess the similarity construed by the source of the metaphor. On the other hand, metaphoric utterances are not mere statements of similarity. Their purpose is not to

state that two objects are alike but to call attention to something about the subject with the help of analogous features of a more familiar or accessible phenomenon (Camus, 2017:168).

Perhaps more clearly in visual art and more subtly in architecture, these inferences can be made, and have been especially relevant in Christianity to communicate messages. In the following example, light and threshold as metaphors can be read in the depiction of the raising of Lazarus by Duccio de Buoninsegna.



**Figure 1. Duccio de Buoninsegna. 1310-11. The raising of Lazarus. Tempera and gold on panel. 43.5 x 46.4cm. Kimbell Art Museum: Fort Worth Texas**

The raising of Lazarus originally formed part of the back predella of the Maestà altarpiece for the Cathedral of Siena. This altarpiece represents “a synthesis of the formal and thematic development of altarpiece painting as it unfolded during the thirteenth century” (Seiler, 2002:251). This Altarpiece is also argued to link specifically to the design of the cathedral, although this argument is criticized (Seiler, 2002:251) the way that art, the narrative of Christ’s life, and the architecture of the church are interlinked remains significant.

In this specific part of the larger altarpiece, Duccio depicts Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, forming part of the larger narrative of Jesus’ works. These visuals communicate and highlight the narrative and progression of these important events, and this image specifically reveals a highly

significant moment in the narrative of Jesus' works but also serves to prefigure Jesus' own resurrection. In this way, threshold and transformation, as metaphors, may be read in this work in a few ways. These metaphors may be read in other works as well, such as in the Annunciation at the Convent of San Marco by Fra Angelico (1440-1445 CE) where there is a distancing between the Angel Gabriel and Virgin Mary indicated by a central column, to emphasise the threshold of transformation.

The narrative in the specific image by Duccio, progresses from left to right, culminating in the figure of Lazarus, itself reworked, and re-imagined by the artist, as is evident by the pentimento in the lower right corner of the work. There is a separation between Lazarus toward the right of the image, and the group of brightly clothed people on the left. "Duccio's intent, . . . , was to achieve a sense of Lazarus's total separation from the living" (Sullivan, 1988:377). The threshold between life and death is implied with this separation between Lazarus and the group of onlookers, but also the ability of Christ to overcome this threshold. This is a theme that is often revisited in several works related to the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. In this case, Jesus' hand is outstretched, drawing the group on the left closer to the figure of Lazarus on the right. A further layer is seen with the use of contrast between light and dark: Lazarus is seemingly emerging from the darkness into the light.

Light, in line with threshold, is of course a significant metaphor in visual arts associated with churches, as well as with the building itself. Jesus as light of the world has formed a key motivator for the use of light in the design of churches, including in contemporary examples. John 8:12 as a connection to the use of light as metaphor is significant as directly links Jesus to light as metaphor of salvation. 5

John 8:12 NIV: "When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Furthermore, light features as metaphor linked to life and is positioned against darkness and death. The theological dimension is highlighted by Van der Merwe and Albalaa (2013) as it reveals the power of God and how life is given through him:

The Logos as the Life and the Light takes up a position over and against darkness as a symbol of the evil stubbornness of the world, which rejected him (1 John 1: 5, 8-9). According to this metaphor, light reveals the power of God. It emanates from the Logos, and manifests the life given to people through him. The Life referred to here is divine life, the primary source of all life, natural and supernatural. It has a theological dimension which is God's relationship to human beings, and a physical dimension since the Logos was the absolute creative power through which 'all things' came into being and nothing was created without him (1 John 1:3)." (Van der Merwe & Albalaa, 2013).

From this use of light and life as metaphor, threshold may also be included. Threshold, as mentioned, along with light, is proposed as a term that encompasses several levels of meaning and functions as a metaphor. Thresholds are essential physical architectural elements, defining interior and exterior spaces, but also experiences. Light and darkness are themes that are continuously present in Christianity, and the threshold between the two forms a similar important image. The use of light and darkness in buildings similarly become thresholds or edges. The frame, edges, and boundaries as metaphors are explored as elements that open imaginary worlds and define place. Edward Casey's (2002, 2009) phenomenological investigations of the embodied experience of borders and boundaries serve as a starting point for the architectural exploration of these borders, edges, boundaries, margins, brinks, and thresholds. These elements are needed

to define a concept, space, place, and thus a building. In a physical sense, a building is defined by edges or boundaries that cannot be crossed, such as walls, or thresholds that allow movement, such as doorways. Edges may be physical, or metaphorical, as explained by Casey (2017:xiii): “Edges, I contend here, are essential to being a thing or a thought, a place or an event—and, by extension, a person or an artwork. Without edges, none of these could be what they are.”

This statement by Casey aligns with several metaphors, light that reveals the power of God, by emphasising the difference between light and the darkness the transformation is also emphasised. The movement by crossing a threshold from a life before knowing Christ to after knowing and having been saved may also be linked to these metaphors. Light becomes an essential aspect of the transformation. The metaphor receives its own value and may be communicated through physical space in church buildings.

The problem of objectivity is of course related to any study concerned with experiential concepts. But as Dahlin contends, in order to fully understand any architectural design, one has to go beyond the physical conditions and meaning as found in: “the complexity of human life” (Dahlin, 2002:41). The involvement of the body then becomes a significant aspect of phenomenological interpretation in architecture. This entails the physical embodied experience, in some cases, of crossing from inside to outside through a door or entrance (Pallasmaa 2005; Harries, 1997). Thus, embodied *experiences* align with threshold in the physical sense. But along with the physical experience, the empathetic projection of the imagination through elements such as windows, as well as depictions thereof, also relate closely to experiences in spiritual spaces.

The body within space as necessary way to experience space may also be linked to the concept of mediation. I refer to metaphor as mediators in this paper. In the contemporary context, mediation is omnipresent, devices as mediating devices are ubiquitous, and embodiment remains specifically relevant in the experience of spaces with, or without an interceding device. In the same way that place may be understood as a spatial, embodied experience but also simultaneously as an image, a framed moment is relevant to both visual artists and architects, especially so when a highly symbolic or spiritual meaning needs to be conveyed. Stilgoe (2005:253) refers to images (photographs) as portals; this infers movement beyond a frame, it links with the concept of passage through and the involvement of the body.

The involvement of the body in ecclesiastical space has been important since the construction of the first cathedrals and has been included in contemporary designs by individual architects. An example in the protestant tradition, the DRC Welkom West by Roelof Uytendogaardt in South Africa and the Church of the Light by Tadao Ando in Ibaraki, Osaka, Japan (a member church of the United church of Christ in Japan) serve as relevant examples of contemporary buildings that involve the body and communicate ecclesiastical concepts using the metaphors of light and threshold. Even though the example selected for this paper is a building linked to a protestant denomination, similar examples linked to the orthodox and catholic traditions are also relevant. Spirituality in contemporary cathedrals is also closely linked to the embodied experience of the metaphors of light and transformation.

The design of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) Welkom-Wes (1963-1965) in the mining town of Welkom in the Free State by Roelof Uytendogaardt is one such significant example. This is a building where light, and the associated dichotomies of light and shadow and inside versus outside, are the driving forces behind the design, as is the concept of passage and movement through thresholds. This building ranks as one of the key South African brutalist (from the French *béton brut*, meaning raw concrete) buildings (Peters & Kotze, 2013:35), and serves as an example of how an architectural space can serve as transformational in reference to metaphors such as light, threshold and route. The mediating metaphors are present in this example and in the visual

works that informed the reading. The architecture provides the means through which a worshipper can bodily experience transformation and the understanding of God as light. In this instance light becomes the leading metaphor.

Metaphor and metaphorical awareness are closely related to the very definition and nature of images and image objects – hosted in buildings. This in turn relates to the experience of images and pictures, and of the architectural spaces created for their experience. As such, architectural objects may be read as image objects in themselves, or as one of the media in which images find a host, to become concrete pictures. But architecture also forms an important component of the experience of images hosted in paintings, sculpture, drawings, mixed media, performance art and digital media, as pictures or picture events (Boehm, 2009:226). The viewer of pictures and other image phenomena is constitutive of all images as events. Mindfulness of the viewer's movements, experiences in space, and ability to see in churches form key aspects of the architect's brief.

Fundamentally it is asked what the palpable experience of metaphors contribute to these interactions among inner images and concrete pictures: As Gottfried Boehm (2009:226) suggests: "So we are working with the premise that images add something important to our language, our concepts and our knowledge that can only be experienced through these images."

According to Rapoport, (1994:470) the built environment may be defined as 'the physical expression of the organization of space – spatial organization made visible.' Therefore, the analysis of the physical artefact, such as the DRC Welkom West, is a way of engaging with the way the physical expression of a design and conceptualization around Christ in a specific place and time, manifests the metaphors of light and threshold.

### **Architectural examples of threshold and light**

The meaningful bodily interaction with architecture could be compared with the interaction between viewer and painted artwork. In the same vein that a building could be seen as a composition built from given basic elements, striving to consciously to depict and articulate the sphere of our consciousness, the meanings of an artistic work are born of the whole and are in no way the sum of the elements. The analysis of the formal structure of an architectural work does not necessarily reveal the quality and meaning of the space. (Pallasmaa, in Nesbitt, 1996:448) Thus beyond the importance of their physical architectural elements, the value lies in the fact that by using these elements in certain ways, meaning is released. Pallasmaa (2005:11) sees the ultimate meaning of a building beyond architecture:

...it [a building] directs our consciousness back to the world and towards our own sense of self and being. Significant architecture makes us experience ourselves as complete embodied and spiritual beings. In fact, this is the function of all meaningful art.

Without a way of defining space architecture would not exist. Columns, arches, doorways, windows, and walls are at the disposal of the architect to create spaces with specific qualities, accommodating ritual and the movements associated therewith (Von Meiss, 1991; Casey, 2017). Especially in religious rituals, passage, the movement through thresholds, and light, are metaphors of salvation. Descriptions of light include light as truth, light in the sense of sunlight and shadow, light as the signifier of revelation, or light as it is used in architectural spaces as an element beyond simply scientifically lighting a space, but to create an atmosphere suited to spiritual enlightenment. Church buildings then serve as places where these various descriptions and conceptualisations of light converge. Additionally, Casey (2009:32) describes buildings as places that condense culture:

Buildings are among the perspicuous instances of the thorough acculturation of places. *A building condenses a culture in once place.* ...As itself a place, a building is a *focus locorum* – indeed, a *locus locorum*, a place for places. It exists between the bodies of those who inhabit or use it and the landscape arranged around it. (Casey, 2009:32).

A church can then be seen as a *locus locorum*, where ritual and a community of believers condense. DRC Welkom-Wes serves as an example of a building where this condensing takes place and is both a space rich in metaphor and an example of innovative brutalist architecture.

In the DRC Welkom West (1963-1965), the metaphor of passage and movement through thresholds and light as guiding force as depicted in Annunciation works, has become manifest. The building is situated within a suburb of Welkom. This town is situated to the Southwest of Johannesburg that developed in the late 1940s to 1950s around the goldfields and continues to be linked to mining industry. Soon after its construction the building was visible as a solid structure in the veldt on the then outskirts of the town (figure 4) but is now situated within a suburb (figure 3) and is no longer such a significant landmark in the landscape.



Figure 2. Welkom West Church satellite image. Google Maps. Accessed 2024/04/23

In its original form, when approaching the building, it appears as an impenetrable fortress that establishes a clear boundary between inside and outside, between spectator and building. In recent years, the addition of the typical devil's fork boundary fence (see Figure 3) further emphasises the boundary.



**Figure 3. Drone image of Welkom West. 2024. (Photo supplied by DRC Church Welkom West. Author's collection.)**

The ambiguity of an unapproachable, enclosed vessel which at the same time represents an open, undefined eternal Church, is established through the fort-like design that seems closed, but also invites and surrounds the congregation as protective space. From the drone photograph, the solidity and centrality of the building morphology can be seen.

The building is a contained cube, with a bridge extension toward the administration space and bell tower, even the roof structure is hidden behind parapets. Distance is established by the seemingly impenetrable walls, as is done using columns in the works of Botticelli or by Fra Angelico of the Annunciation. Paradoxically the fortress as a haven also has an inviting quality. Concrete and face brick are left as honest materials, unpainted and unplastered, on the one hand strengthening the exterior edge through the hard 'unfinished' material use, but also revealing the essence and honesty of the structure and connecting it to the mining context of Welkom.





Figure 4. Roelof Uytendogaardt. DRC Welkom West (1963-1965). Photo 1967 (Peters & Kotze, 2013:36)

The entrance to the foyer is shrouded in shadow and although defined by the *Porte cochère* does not reveal itself to be inviting and open as is expected. The threshold itself is a heavy panel that simultaneously establishes an impassable fort-like boundary but upon opening reveals a doorway that blurs the edge between inside and outside.

The visitor encounters the paradox of a heavily fortified building, but also a large foyer that invites entry. The closed door (Figure 6) of the church invites the body to open it, but also seals the space. To enter the space of transformation where religious rites take place, the body must first, through the effort of engaging with the door, cross this initial paradoxical boundary.

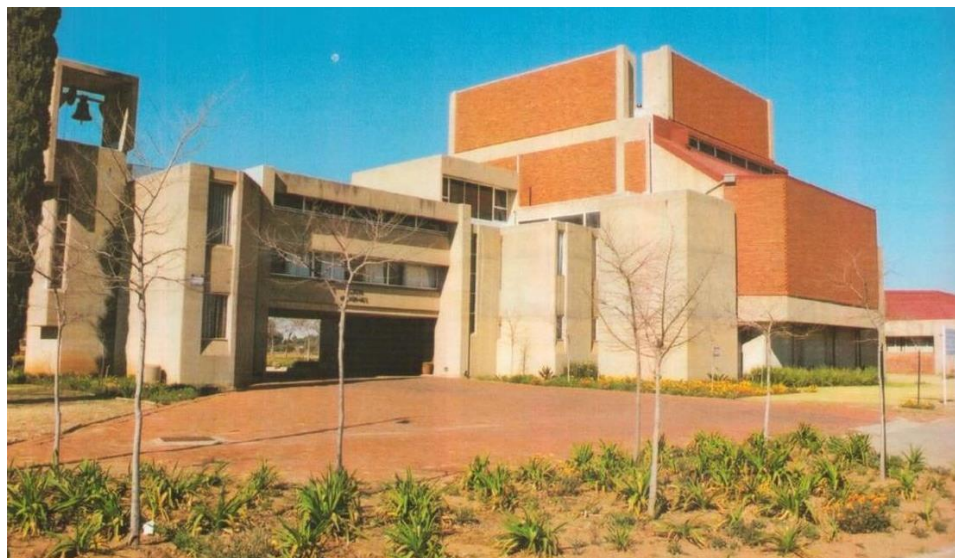


Figure 5. Roelof Uytendogaardt. 1963-1965. DRC Welkom-Wes. Photo 2005. The entrance is shrouded in shadow at the *Porte Cochère*. (Peters & Kotze, 2013:37)



**Figure 6. Dutch Reformed Church Welkom West entrance doors.2009. (Photo by author)**



**Figure 7. Roelof Uytendogaardt. 1963-1965. DRC Welkom West interior walkway. (Photo: Peters, W.H. 2013)**

Further thresholds are introduced using changes in floor level and ambient light. One enters the nave from below by stairs, rising into the main space from the walkways (Figure 7) surrounding it. The body follows a path through several boundaries, some subtle, such as passing from the darkness of the walkway to the light of the nave, others more direct, such as ascending to the surrounding galleries using stairs.

Light is the most significant element in this building, as it is in all churches. One passes through a dark foyer and walkway into the nave that is lit solely from above (Figure 9, Figure 10). Physical light gains the attributes of divine light, starkly contrasted with the hard edges of the material, and the light gains a soft ethereal quality. The space is pierced and enhanced by light thus gaining the transformative quality of God as light that emphasises a new life through salvation. In a 1999 Letter to Artists, Pope John Paul II stated that: "The Church needs architects, because she needs spaces to bring the Christian people together and celebrate the mysteries of salvation... In order to communicate the message entrusted to her by Christ, the Church needs art. Art must make perceptible, and as far as possible attractive, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God." The subtle use of light here serves to make the concept perceptible.

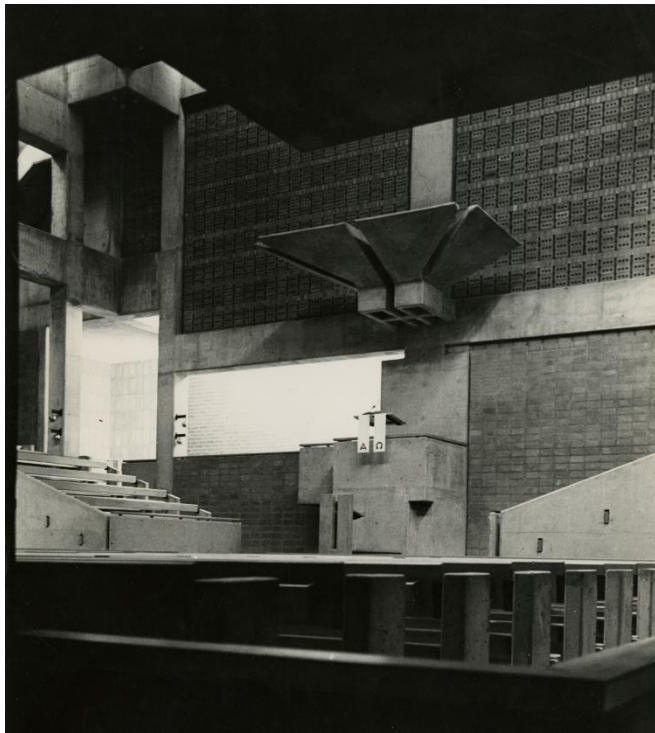


Figure 8. DRC Welkom West original interior 1965. (Photo: Peters & Kotze, 2013:36)



Figure 9. Roelof Uytenbogaardt. DRC Welkom West. 1964. View of ceiling 2009. (photo by author)



Figure 10. Roelof Uytenbogaardt. 1963-1965. DRC Welkom West interior in 2009. (Photo by author)

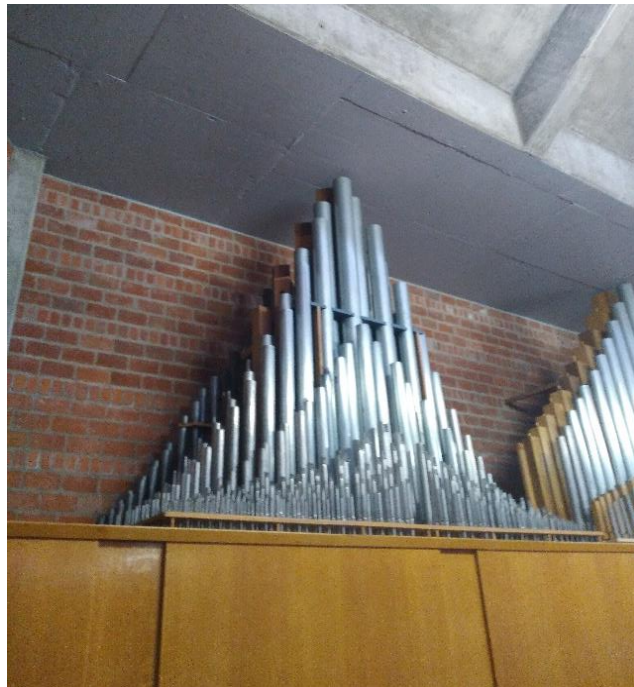
Once inside the space the edges are again enforced by the lack of connection to the exterior. No visible window openings are used, and the viewer is once again confronted with the impassable threshold. Rather, light is expertly manipulated through hidden openings, low windows at floor level, and detailed slits that allow for secondary light. Light is used subtly and never seen directly from an open window. The light enters without a clear indication of its source into the contained, stark interior of the church.

No visual connection to the exterior world is possible and the visitor can only focus internally in the space and within themselves (Figure 8, Figure 10). A drifting gaze during a service will only encounter the surfaces of the interior walls and will not escape to the world outside. Unlike the glimpses of exterior worlds awarded to the spectator in visual works, or in church buildings of the same era, here the architect does not allow the visitor a glimpse to the external world. He relies on the light entering from above to refer to the exterior world, but also to the divine world. The distinct envelopment provides a space for concentration and allows for the transformation that takes place within a visitor. The interior is focused inward and envelops the congregation, but paradoxically the hard use of off-shutter concrete and face brick distances the body from the building (Figure 10). Although an edge is created through the use of such hard materials, in contrast, timber or leather is used in cases where the body interacts with the building by touching balustrades or benches, thus separating structural elements which-are essentially enveloping the visitor. The brick texture also gains a softness in the subtle light entering through the hidden clerestory windows of the roof.

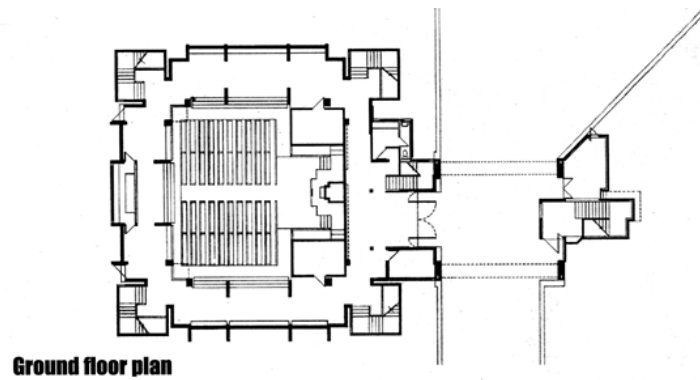


**Figure 11. Panoramic view of interior. Photo by Author. 2022**

The theme of honesty and clarity is extended to the organ (figure 12), where all the pipes are visible to the congregation, unlike in other churches of the denomination or era where the instrument is hidden or designed to be behind a screen or to the back of the congregation.

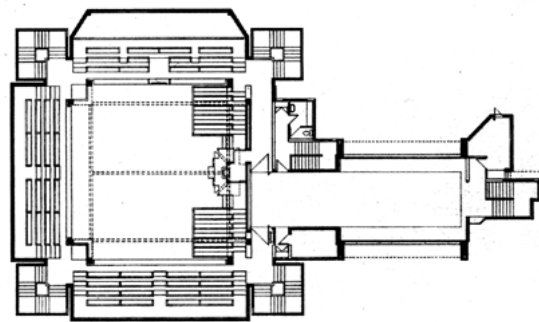


**Figure 12. Organ at the DRC Welkom-West. Photo by Author. 2022.**



**Ground floor plan**

**Figure 13. Ground floor plan of the Dutch Reformed Church. Note the scale of the entrance doors. (Peters & Kotze, 2013:38)**



**First floor plan**

**Figure 14. First floor plan of the Dutch Reformed Church Welkom West (Peters & Kotze, 2013:37).**

Moving between the different spaces the visitor crosses several thresholds from exterior to interior space, from the completely exposed environment of the bright central South Africa sun to the completely enveloped interior space. Through this process the visitor crosses the boundary from the exterior world to the interior of concentration and focus to be transformed by the event in the space.

The second example where the idea of transformation is made concrete is the Church of the Light (1989) in Osaka, Japan, by Tadao Ando. This off-shutter concrete building is modest and unassuming, a simple rectangular plan is adapted only through the introduction of a single diagonal element. The building is less a fort than DRC Welkom West, that is situated in a residential area on the periphery of the town. The urban context in this case integrates the building, but it also establishes an impenetrable exterior with no clear way of crossing the threshold to the interior, suggesting unapproachability. A definite threshold is defined by the distinct difference of the off-shutter concrete block and the surrounding environment. Vegetation is contrasted against the clean geometric edges of the building. Edges and the connections between them are used to define the approach and experience for the visitor. In reference to visual works that emphasise transformation, “the Annunciation, the biblical text that pronounces the birth of Jesus Christ through the Virgin Mary, had long stood as a key narrative in Catholicism’s visual culture” (Church 2020:15) and provides a way to interpret spaces (even if these spaces were designed for protestant congregations). The conscious distancing recalls the distance between the Angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary as seen in Annunciation paintings such as the work by Fra Angelico at San Marco, or the Annunciation by Botticelli (1490 CE), where

architectural elements such as columns are used to emphasise the separation between the figures and paradoxically attention is drawn to proximity exactly because of this distancing.

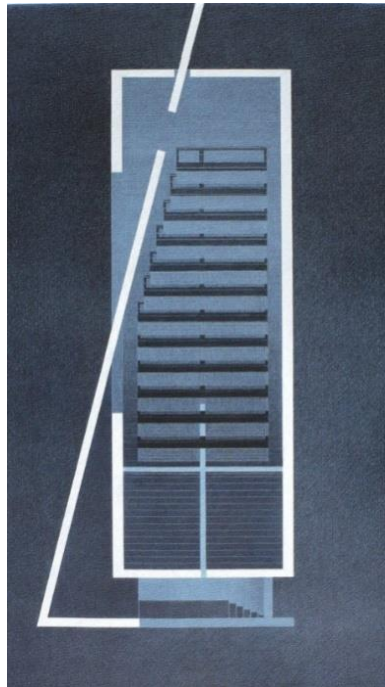
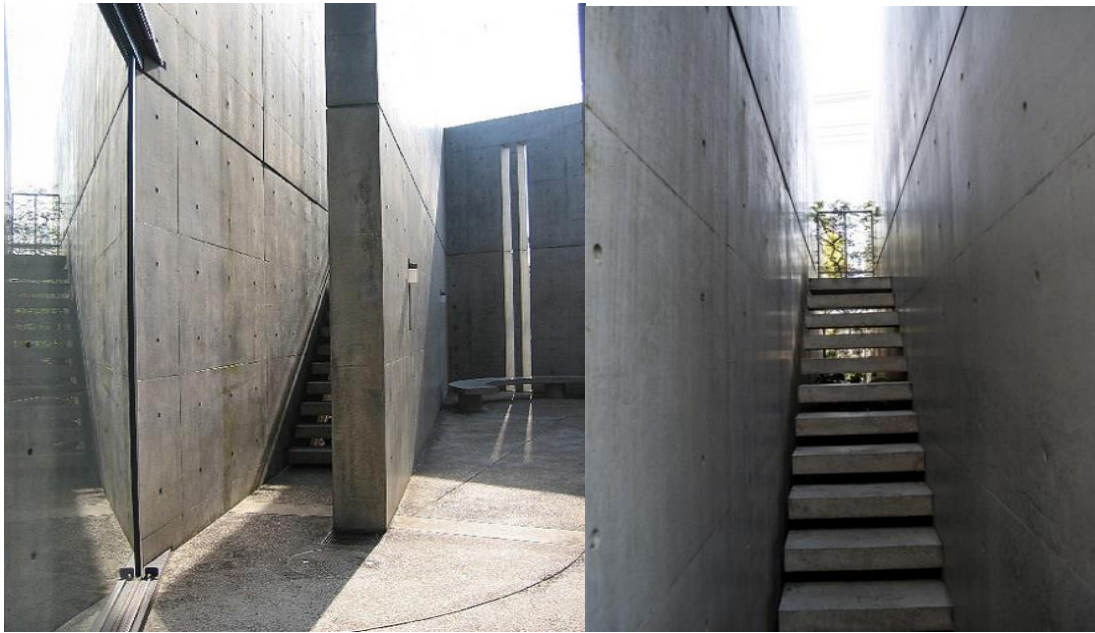


Figure 15. Tadao Ando.1989. Schematic plan church of the light Osaka, Japan. [online] Available from: [www-bcf.usc.edu/kcoleman/precedents/ando\\_churchofthelight/](http://www-bcf.usc.edu/kcoleman/precedents/ando_churchofthelight/)

The building directs the visitor's body along a very specific route: to descend an external stairway toward an unassuming entrance. The first threshold is crossed vertically. The second threshold within the church space forces the visitor to step aside to enter through the last doorway. By crossing this final threshold, the interior is revealed at last (Figure 18).

The diagonal wall element very specifically pierces the main space, creating a definitive break in the seemingly impenetrable space, by both changing the geometry and by articulating the foyer (Figure 15). Essentially the body passes from the darkness into the light through the element that first appears visually as a boundary but is then overcome and completely erased, the entrance paradoxically invites and discourages movement simultaneously



**Figure 16. Tadao Ando. Church of the Light. Osaka, Japan. Entrance stairway leading down toward the main entrance. [online] <http://pandras.cgsociety.org/gallery/943364>**

Passage, the movement through a series of thresholds, may be read as the conceptual driving force behind this building. The very way in which one enters the building is deliberately designed to make you follow a certain path. The staircase is narrow and descends sharply to a courtyard space where the entrance to the nave is still obscured (Figure 16). This act of moving through a 'channel' immerses the body in the experience. Pallasmaa (in Nesbitt, 1996:453) rightly states:

An impressive architectural experience sensitizes our whole physical and mental receptivity. ...In experience we find a combination of the biological and the culturally derived, the collective and the individual, the conscious and the unconscious, the analytical and the emotional, the mental and the physical.

Once the threshold to the main space has been crossed, the light and slight angle of the space invite movement to the liturgical space, toward the light, once again signifying the change from one state of being to another. Even though the design is within the brutalist tradition with a uniformity in mass, the use of polished concrete creates an interior of calm enclosure, like the carafe: it remains a mere vessel until touched by divine light.-The use of light here is also a direct representation of the cross. "...the understanding of the eucharist as representation, remembrance, and visualization of Chris's sacrificial death lead already in the Middle Ages to the decoration of the altar with a cross, and since the eleventh century with increasing frequency to the erection of a cross on or near the altar table." (Seiler, 2002:258). So even in an undecorated building, focused on light as metaphor, the cross is used to emphasise the metaphor and acts as direct communication as in centuries past in European cathedrals.



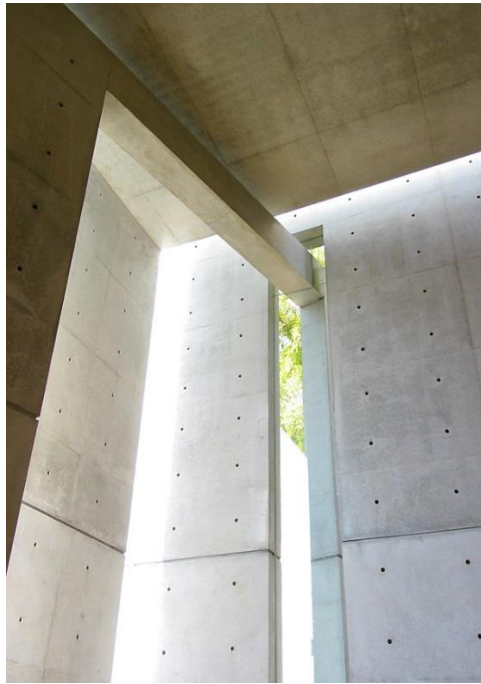


Figure 17. Tadao Ando.1989. Church of the Light. Threshold at main entrance. Osaka, Japan. [online] <http://pandras.cgsociety.org/gallery/943364>

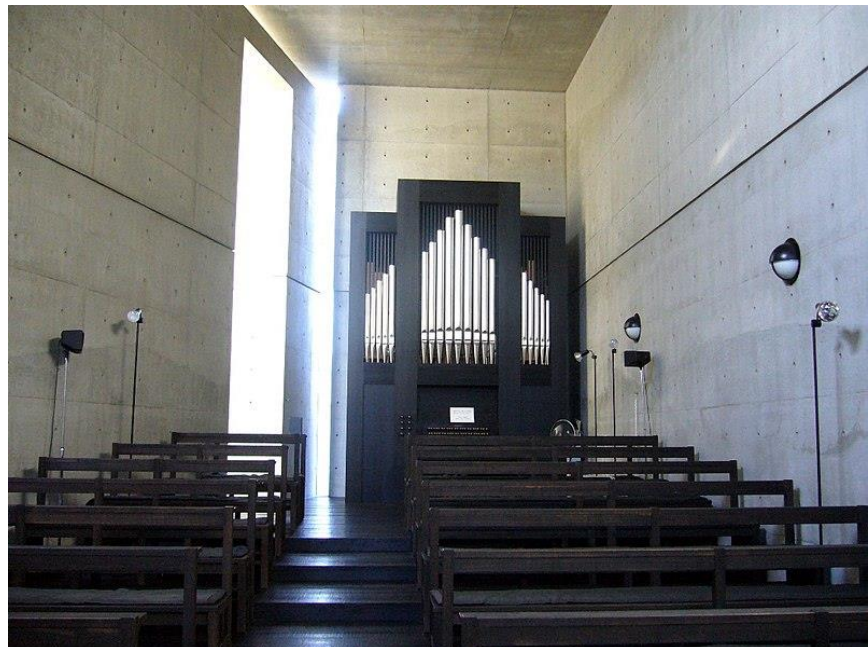


Figure 18. Tadao Ando.1989. Church of the light interior. Osaka, Japan [online] Available Photo by: Bergmann. 2006. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ibaraki\\_Kasugaoka\\_Church\\_pipe\\_organ.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ibaraki_Kasugaoka_Church_pipe_organ.JPG)



**Figure 19. Tadao Ando. 1989. Church of the Light, Osaka, Japan. Photo: Simon Schnyder. 2015. <https://aliveinkyoto.wordpress.com/2015/04/28/church-of-the-light-by-tadao-ando/>**

We may now ask how the experience and interpretation of the architectural spaces have been enhanced by reading it in reference to the metaphors of threshold and light. In the case of Welkom West light is used indirectly and it forms the key metaphor of the design. The same is true of the Tadao Ando design, but here light is used more directly. In both cases the honesty in the use of materials speak of the truth of the light in Christ and in both cases the use of thresholds is emphasised.

While Protestants are very careful to state that the church building is a total spiritual entity, Roman Catholics and the Orthodox Christians regard the church building as an expression of faith. This expression of faith has profound and intense meaning, namely that God is present in the church building. The church building is regarded as a temple. Therefore, Roman Catholicism regards the building as an entity to draw people to faith. The cathedral is an expression of the glory of the church and the presiding bishop is in relation to this expression.

Referring to the theologian Quick, Wells (2023:137) concludes that the outward form is important:

In Protestantism, origins are expressions of the relation between the visible and the invisible realms. Catholicism accentuates development in the context of the living church. Protestantism also accentuates inward experience over forms, whereas in Catholicism uniformity of outward form allows for greater inward variation.

In Roman Catholicism this expression was often used to draw people who were not yet converted to come to faith there and believe in Jesus Christ. In mission work, one of the first things that Roman missionaries did was to erect a church building. Church buildings were very important for the expression of faith in the communities. Therefore, the communities were called to the church building to understand that it is good to accept that God is present among them. One has to take that into consideration when regarding the meaning of church buildings for Roman Catholicism, and also to a certain degree for the Orthodox Church. It is very important that the church building in this sense is much more than just a building for a meeting as in Protestantism. They regard the church building as a meeting place where the word of God is proclaimed. This does not mean

that the church building of Protestant faith does not also have deep meaning for people attending the services. In this sense, the light and the metaphor of the DRC Welkom West Church and the Church of the Light in Japan explain in a certain sense the positive way in which Protestants can regard a church building. The church building leads to the proclamation of the word of God which takes place within. Therefore, a church building is more than just mortar and stone. It reflects a certain connection between the proclamation of the word and the people listening to it. In the Protestant churches the aspects of light and the aspects of metaphor are thus also very important.

Daelemans (2022:13) refers to the fact that emptiness can be beneficial and that when one views the architecture of a church building from a perspective of emptiness, both regarding Protestant and Roman Catholic views, a new movement towards emptiness and the sacred can be discerned. Paul Tillich and Rudolph Schwartz refer to the fact that emptiness in the church building can be a spiritual experience. Emptiness is thus not only a new way of regarding the church building but also a new way of regarding spirituality, regarding how emptiness is also spiritual.

Daelemans writes on this sacred emptiness (2022:13):

Sacred emptiness is a rich and complex term. It is only empty from an exterior, visual point of view. It is distinguished from mere emptiness because it is filled or inhabited by sacredness, which becomes palpable for who enters the space (and the mystery present in the space). Being filled, it is emptiness, nevertheless. However, this is emptiness as creative potential, pregnant with unexpected possibilities, waiting for living bodies to interact with the space and thus reveal its hidden potential.

Although emptiness is not obviously present in the DRC Church Welkom West and the Church of the Light in Japan, aspects thereof are reflected in the honest use of materials and the lack of additional symbols or architectural elements within both spaces.

What are the gains of comparing real and represented space and upon what grounds can this be done?

Empathy, described by Esrock (2010:219,224) as the highest level of projection of some aspect of one's body or self into objects, serves as the basis for a comparative analysis of architecture and of paintings. The role of the body in emphatic projection as the force that shapes our emotion, thought, concepts, and beliefs as well as experiences of both the physical and mental spheres, (Pallasmaa, 1996, 2005; Esrock, 2010) serves as the foundation of the interpretation.

In church architecture the articulation of the place of transition is significant. It is in the various contrasted aspects that the comparison between the painted work and architecture is drawn. The relationship between interior and exterior, the paradoxical distancing between the figures in the painted work, the specific placement of architectural elements in relation to the figures are compared to the composition of architecture and the ways wherein the same ambiguity is handled in physical spaces. I have also drawn on the comparisons of Mary to both the Invisible Church of all time and the church building, as well as other building types such as fortresses and the way wherein these brutalist buildings embody the physical church (or even fortress) as well as encompassing the intangible Church. The paradoxical distancing between the Angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, as well as the depicted and inferred thresholds are paralleled with physical thresholds in architecture as places of transition and transformation. The depicted and inferred thresholds are paralleled with physical thresholds in architecture as places of transition and transformation. Transformation in its various forms reinforces the foundation of the argument. The transformative event of the Incarnation taking place in the womb of the Virgin as a space of transition, the transformation of the Divine becoming flesh, the body of the spectator being

transformed through projection into the image, is enhanced by the inclusion of architectural elements. It is through the bodily involvement, based in physical reaction as well as projection, in artwork and architecture that the understanding of both can be enhanced.

## Conclusion

This paper underscores the connection and convergence between architectural design, metaphorical language, and embodied spirituality within selected examples of church architecture. By discussing the meaning embedded within threshold and light, a deeper appreciation for the transformative potential of architectural space can be established. A nuanced understanding is important in a context where architectural spaces are often seen as merely functional but may add significantly to the experience of congregants. Further interdisciplinary inquiry and critical reflection can contribute to the reading of the various qualities of religious architecture and enrich our understanding of the human experience within contemporary sacred spaces. The metaphors of light and threshold in the case of the DRC Welkom-West by Roelof Uytenbogaardt and the Church of the Light by Tadao Ando, were discussed, through a phenomenological lens in reference to the metaphors of light and threshold.

In both these brutalist buildings, the meaning of the transformative role of Jesus as the light is revealed through the design. Light as metaphor is manifest in the physical space and contributes to the experience of the congregation. It is extremely important to realize that metaphor and spiritual experience have a clear link. The way in which light and threshold are developed in the churches enhances the spiritual experience. The buildings become a space of enlightenment. The play of light in the buildings enhances new spiritual life. In that sense the metaphor leads to many implications.

Not only in paintings but also in architecture the value of signs beyond themselves is clear. Light in these buildings is employed to speak of more than what is apparent: Jesus as the light and the way in which the light is used as metaphor enhances the meaning of the value. Jesus essentially proclaimed in John 8:12 that he was indeed the “light of the world,” He also asserted that he was God—the source of all light and life. In addition, he also proclaimed how one can have light, by following him and living like him in this world (Matthew 5:14–16), rather than living in darkness/sin. This spiritual meaning is thus clearly used as a powerful metaphor and design tool in the development of the architecture.

## References

*Bible*. New International Version. (2011). <https://www.bible.com/versions/111-NIV-new-international-version>.

Boehm, G. (2009). Indeterminacy: On the logic of the image. In B. Huppau & C. Wulf. (Eds.), *Dynamics and performativity of imagination: The image between the visible and the invisible*. Routledge: New York.

Camus, R.M. (2017). Comparison by metaphor: Archery in Confucius and Aristotle. *Dao*, A Journal of Comparative Philosophy, 16(2), pp. 165-185. DOI: 10.1007/s11712-017-9545-y

Casey, E.S. (2009). *Getting back into place: Toward an understanding of th place-world*. (2nd ed.) Indiana University Press: Bloomington.

Casey, E.S. (2017). *The world on edge*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington.

Church, C. (2020). *Annunciating the word in image: Visual exegesis of the annunciation to Mary (Lk 1:26-38) in counter-reformation Italian altarpieces*. [PhD in Theology]. University of Exeter:

Exeter. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/annunciating-word-image-visual-exegesis/docview/2827703947/se-2>

Daelemans, B. (2022). The need for sacred emptiness: Implementing insights by Paul Tillich and Rudolf Schwarz in church architecture today. *Religions* 13(6), pp. 1-15, <https://search-ebscohost-com.ufs.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAI0220812000268&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Dahlin, Å. (2002). On architecture, aesthetic experience and the embodied mind: Seven essays. [Doctoral dissertation]. KTH, Royal Institute of Technology, School of Architecture: Stockholm. <https://kth.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A9211&dswid=7350>

Davies, C. (2011). *Thinking about architecture: An introduction to architectural theory*. Laurence King: London.

Esrock, E. (2010). Embodying Art: the spectator and the inner body. *Poetics Today*, 31(2), pp. 217-250. DOI:[10.2307/40984376](https://doi.org/10.2307/40984376)

John Paul II (1999). Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to artists: Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (14 September 1998), 80: AAS 91. [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_23041999\\_artists.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html)

Harries, K. (1997). *The ethical function of architecture*. MIT Press: Cambridge.

Karatani, K. (1995). *Architecture as metaphor: language, number, money*. (2nd ed.). MIT Press: Cambridge.

Meiss, M. (1945). Light as form and symbol in some fifteenth-century paintings. In *Art Bulletin*, 27(3), pp. 175-181.

Nesbitt, K. (Ed.). (1996). *Theorizing a new agenda for architecture: An anthology of architectural theory, 1965-1995*. Princeton Architectural Press: New York.

Pallasmaa, J. (1996). The geometry of feeling: A look at the phenomenology of architecture. In K. Nesbitt. (Ed.) *Theorizing a new agenda for architecture: An anthology of architectural theory, 1965-1995*. Princeton Architectural Press: New York. pp 448-453.

Pallasmaa, J. (2005). *The eyes of the skin: Architecture and the senses*. Wiley Academy: Chichester.

Pallasmaa, J. (2011). *The embodied image: Imagination and imagery in architecture*. Wiley: Chichester.

Peters, W. & Kotze, P. (2013). NG Kerk Welkom-Wes: Reforming unity temple, Part 1: What the building wants to be. *Architecture SA*, Jan/Feb, pp. 35-43

Rapaport, A. (1994). Spatial organisation and the built environment. In T. Ingold. (Ed.). *Companion encyclopaedia of anthropology: Humanity culture and social life*. Routledge: London. pp 460-502.

Seiler, P. (2002). Duccio' s Maestà: The function of the scenes from the life of Christ on the reverse of the altarpiece: a new hypothesis. In: Schmidt, Victor M. (Hrsg.): *Italian panel painting of the Duecento and Trecento [Kongressband]*. New Haven, Conn. [u.a.] 2002, pp. 250-277

(Symposium papers / Centre for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts ; 38) <https://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/3098/>

Stilgoe, J.R. (2005). *Landscape and images*. University of Virginia Press: Charlottesville.

Sullivan, R.W. (1988). Duccio's raising of Lazarus re-examined. *The Art Bulletin*, 70(3), pp. 374-387. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3051173>.

Van der Merwe, D.G. & Albalaa, P.Y. (2013). The metaphor of light embedded in the Johannine prologue, Part 1: The Light before the incarnation. In *die Skriflig*, 47(1), pp. 214-233. [http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S2305-08532013000100023&lng=en&tlng=en](http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2305-08532013000100023&lng=en&tlng=en).

Von Meiss, P. (1991). *Elements of architecture: From form to place*. Spon Press: New York.

Verrycken, K., Van Kerck, W. & Cools, A. (Eds.). (2013). *Metaphors in modern and contemporary philosophy*. ASP: Bruxelles.

Verster, W. (2013). A study of the life-cycle, re-use and adaptation of places of worship in Bloemfontein from 1948 to the present, with a specific reference to the Afrikaans Reformed churches. [Master of Architecture]. University of the Free State: Bloemfontein. <https://scholar.ufs.ac.za/items/c287ba95-0fa8-4674-9747-956163eaa1e6>

Wells, P. (2023). Quick and modelling the difference between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. *Unio cum Christo*, 9(2), pp. 135-143. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ufs.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAIREM240311001004&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

**Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.



This article is open-access and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence CC BY: credit must be given to the creator, the title and the license the work is under. This license enables reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the creator.