



Architectonic theology

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Abstract

This paper argues for a 're-envisioning' of Systematic Theology. Rather than systems, I propose applying architectural design principles to engage with categories of Systematic Theology and Biblical motifs. It is hoped that such a theology may respond creatively to the challenging public concerns and environs. The objective was to develop an Architectonic Theology that offers a theology that is both functional and aesthetic. This article thus models Architectonic Theology by developing five steps in two parts. The first part is an exploration of context, that is, the context of the current environment, and historical theology. The second part is the theological construction and is made up of three steps. The first seeks to build a Biblical foundation in exegetical analysis which extrapolates the Biblical motifs from the Biblical text. The second step constructs 'order and space' by developing a dialectic synthesis. The last step aims to construct 'form and aesthetics' in what may be a public (or other) theology which responds to the issues explored in step 1, the context of the current environment. Architectonic Theology takes Chicago's architectural sculpture, the *Cloud Gate*, as its visual cue and mascot.

Keywords: Architectonic Theology, Systematic Theology, Public Theology, Research Methodology, Biblical Motifs

Introduction

Systematic Theology is all too often viewed upon with suspicion for being too abstract, clinical, and irrelevant for the concerns of our world. It is, after all, a 'system' of theology. I believe, however, that if we take the characteristics and design principles of architecture, which is social, public, functional and aesthetic, then we may well have a proposition for developing Systematic Theology in way of an Architectonic Theology that addresses the concerns about Systematic Theology that is transformative and creative. To develop this theology, I begin by defining what I mean by Architectonic Theology. I then offer a discussion on re-envisioning Systematic Theology, exploring what it might look like if we take an approach in Architectonic Theology. I then construct a model for theological research by outlining five methodological steps, namely, (1) Exploration of context in the current environment, (2) Exploration of context in Historical Theology, (3) Construction of the foundation in exegesis and Biblical motifs, (4) Construction of 'order and space' in dialectic synthesis, and (5) Construction of 'form and aesthetics' in (Public)¹ Theology. Lastly, I will offer concluding remarks.

Architectonic Theology: Definition

I define Architectonic Theology² as an application of elementary architectural design principles to engage with categories of Systematic Theology and Biblical motifs. Such a theological

¹ In this paper I will always include 'public' in brackets because it is not necessary that this step always be done in public theology. It could be done in political theology, philosophical theology or something else.

² By Architectonic Theology, I don't have in mind (Williams, 2011): *Structure, System, and Ratio*, which is more an essay on the reading of Christian theology, focusing 'attention on the epistemological questions inherent in any discussion of theology' (Cf. Strobel, 2012), nor do I have in mind, (Rae, 2017) *The Art of Place*. In this masterful work, Rae engages in a theological conversation with the spatial arts, namely, architecture to explore



approach responds creatively to the challenging public concerns and environs. At its best, Architectonic Theology offers a theology that is both functional and aesthetic. In addition, it shares continuity with Erickson's description of theology: (1) Theology is Biblical, that is, Scripture is its primary source and employs Biblical exegesis as well as insights from other areas of truth, (2) Theology is systematic, drawing from all of scripture, synthesising its various teachings into a harmonious and coherent whole, (3) Theology relates to culture and learning, for example, science, psychology, history, and philosophy, (4) Theology ought to be contemporary, employing current language, thought forms and concepts that are understood easily in our current context and time, and finally, (5) Theology ought to be practical (Erickson, 1998: 23–24).

Re-Envisioning Systematic Theology

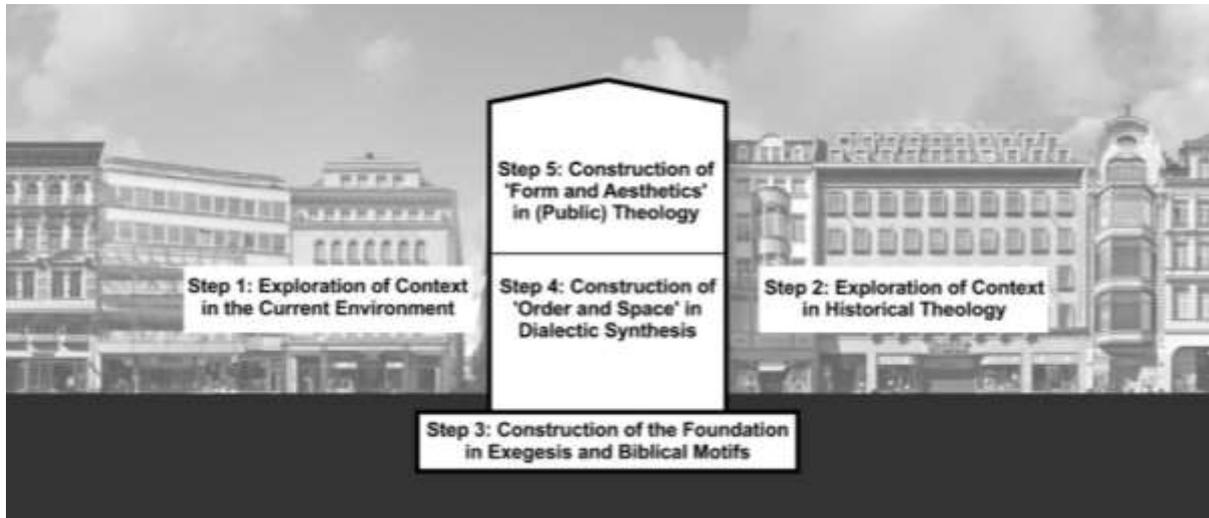
Evangelical Theologians in recent years have produced great and valuable volumes of Systematic Theology. I think of Grudem's, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Bird's, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*, Erickson's, *Christian Theology*, Frame's, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*, Horton's, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*, and so on, each with their own distinct style, but all producing more or less the same thing. This is evident in Frame's thinking about Systematic Theology where he says that Systematic Theology, 'seeks to apply Scripture by asking what the whole Bible teaches about any subject', and that ought to be a practical discipline, rather than mysterious and abstract. Systematic Theology, he continues, is sometimes a system of 'comprehensive attempts to summarize, analyse, or defend Biblical teaching as a whole' (Frame, 2013: 9). No doubt, this is noble and important for any work of theology, but Tillich develops this further for us, proclaiming that theology is a function of the church and that it ought to serve its needs, namely, (1) the declaration of the Christian message, and (2) the truth of this message is to be interpreted for all new generations. Therefore, theology ought to move 'back and forth between two poles, the eternal truth of its foundation and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received' (Tillich, 1953:3). In other words, the 'situation' must not be excluded from theology (Tillich, 1953:5). Tillich argues that 'kerygmatic theology must give up its exclusive transcendence and take seriously the attempt of apologetic theology to answer the questions put before it by the contemporary situation' (Tillich, 1953:7). Similarly, for Barth, theology serves the proclamation of the church, and 'Dogmatics has to investigate and say at each given point how we may best speak of God, revelation and faith to the extent that human talk about these things is to count as Church proclamation' (Barth, 1975:83, 85). In addition, I argue that theology ought also to express aesthetic beauty.

Architectonic Theology envisions Systematic Theology in such a way that it takes on architectural design properties and features. For example: (1) It ought to have form and space (e.g. Kuyperian Spheres of Sovereignty), rather than systems; (2) It is beautiful and aesthetic rather than clinical, as is sometimes the case in Systematic Theology; (3) Such a theology is to be constructive and creative rather than merely cerebral and abstract; (4) Theology ought to be constructed for the community rather than for the professional theologian; (5) It is contextual rather than irrelevant; (6) It seeks to draw people into its narrative, rather than being distant and estranged; (7) It ought to engage with other traditions, styles and other sources (e.g. Greek Orthodoxy, Decolonization, etc.) for beauty and variation, rather than being monolithic and monotone. The next discussion will model Architectonic Theology by proposing a research methodology.

how art forms contribute to the construction of our built environment and how this contribution relates to our Christian faith.

Modelling Architectonic Theology: Research Methodology

The research methodology for Architectonic Theology consists of five methodological steps. The first two steps explore the context, namely the current environment, and historical theology respectively. The methodology then begins theological construction in step 3, and



continues in steps 4 and 5. Step 3 constructs a Biblical foundation in exegesis and Biblical motifs, step 4 constructs 'order and space' by engaging with dialectic synthesis, and step 5 is the apex of the project, constructing 'form and aesthetics' in (public) theology. The figure below is a visual description of the methodology, followed by a detailed description of each methodological step.

Step 1: Exploration of Context in the Current Environment

The first explorative task ought to offer a thick description of the context in the current environment. Andrew Palframan, one of my professors at the School of Architecture where I studied, identifies four aspects that make up the context in which architecture is developed, providing 'parameters within which any design challenge exists, and presents the issues to be engaged, interrogated and intuitively reflected on through the design process'. Only three of those are relevant for my discussion: (1) *The socio-economic aspect*: This addresses all the legal, regulatory concerns and 'the economic conditions that constrain and inform a project'. (2) *The cultural aspect*: This addresses the values of the client, user, and / or the public that the building is being designed for. This will include the architect's interpretation of patterns and symbolic meanings which are then embedded in 'the spatial (functional) relationships, and the material (aesthetic) expression of a building'. (3) *The physical aspect*: This addresses the physical characteristics of the site, as well as its situation and position in its broader fabric, for example, the 'site's geographic disposition and physical qualities in terms of both natural and built features; its morphology and heritage; its integration in terms of patterns of movement, visual connectedness and infrastructure servicing and the influence of climatic conditions' (Palframan, 2013:15; Cf. Righini, 1999).

Similarly, the theologian developing an Architectonic Theology ought to explore the context of their chosen environment, taking cognisance of the relevant aspects that may inform their project. This approach provides parameters in which the theological challenge exists, identifying and interpreting the environment and its situation in order to engage theologically within that context. One might decide to engage with and explore one, or several of the contextual aspects from the current environment, many of which overlap. Among others these may include: (1) *The religious aspect*: This addresses the religious environment of a specific setting, religions of a people group, and so on, focusing on humanity's relationship with the transcendent, and the supernatural spiritual world. (2) *The cultural aspect*: This addresses



anthropology and includes the phenomena that are communicated via social learning in human societies. (3) *The philosophical aspect*: This addresses such questions like knowledge, existence, reason, values, and so on. This may be generic or specific for a certain context, for example, African epistemology. (4) *The political aspect*: This addresses governance, the making of decisions that apply to the public or a particular people group. (5) *The social aspect*: This addresses the social interaction and patterns of behaviour between individuals within a specific social group or between social settings. (6) *The economic aspect*: This addresses the workings of the economy, as well as the interactions and behaviour of economic agents.

Architectonic Theology is a modified version of Systematic Theology and thus does not necessarily require empirical research, although that is optional. However, the theologian is required to do a thorough literary study of the context to provide a thick description of the current environment. The literary study will require analysing and comparing literary material. On the other hand, empirical research, if required, could be qualitative or a blend of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Further, the researcher may choose to include, grounded theory research, ethnographic research, narrative research, phenomenological research, and case-study research.

Step 2: Exploration of Context in Historical Theology

The second explorative task considers a different context from the previous task. Before architectural design begins, the architect studies the surrounding built environment, adjacent buildings and the surrounding urban syntax, not to mention historical heritage, and historically sensitive buildings. In other words, the architect needs to consider what kind of architecture already exists, before they begin adding their own. The question then is how will his or her building respond and relate to the existing built environment. Similarly, this step explores the development of a specific theology or doctrine in relation to an everchanging context. There are two basic approaches that the theologian may employ when exploring historical theology: synchronic and diachronic. (1) *The synchronic approach* studies the theology of a specific era, a certain theologian, or a particular theological tradition. (2) *The diachronic approach* studies the development of Christian thought on a specific doctrine throughout church history. Two perspectives are generally adopted in this second approach. They are: (i) *The relativist perspective*: This focuses on the 'diversity, disagreement, discontinuity, loose ends, and wrong turnings' as Christianity develops its doctrine. (ii) *The essentialist perspective*: This holds that an essential Christian theology exists. An exaggerated form may argue, 'that, in truth, only one 'correct' Christianity has been handed down, and that all others are erroneous and deviant'. However, one could argue that 'a better approach would be to hold a moderate essentialist perspective, and that there exists an essential core to Christian Theology but does 'not manifest itself in any one particular church or theological movement' (Erickson, 1998: 27; Allison, 2011:30).

Pannenberg explains that theology's task is not simply to explore the origin and original content of Christian doctrine, or how it has changed over the course of time, but instead to discover the truth within a theology or Christian tradition. Truth content may be discovered in both Biblical exegesis and church history (or historical theology), and these are part of the task of Systematic Theology (Pannenberg, 1991:6–7). I argue that Biblical exegesis is primary and historical theology is secondary. In Architectonic Theology, historical theology is contextual, while Biblical exegesis is foundational. Even so, historical theology provides context and may offer some guidelines for Biblical exegesis itself. Further, there remains the possibility for an interplay of historical theology, or even biblical motifs in step 4 when constructing 'order and space' in dialectic synthesis. Pannenberg continues to describe how every historical situation requires a new effort in distinguishing the truth of the gospel and Christian doctrine 'from the evanescent forms of language and thought that at one time served to express such abiding truth' (Pannenberg, 1991:7). Similarly, Frame reminds us that historical theology analyses previous theological work, but that it is only truly theological if it applies Biblical teaching to the church in its present situation. He defines 'historical theology as a study of the church's past



theology, for the sake of its present and future' (Frame, 2013:9). Likewise, Allison writes, 'Historical theology is the study of the interpretation of Scripture and the formulation of doctrine by the church of the past' (Allison, 2011:23), he then offers several benefits of historical theology: (1) It assists the current church to 'distinguish orthodoxy from heresy.' (2) It offers 'sound Biblical interpretations and theological formulations.' (3) It provides great examples of faith, love, hope, courage, mercy, and obedience. (4) It protects Christians 'against the individualism that is rampant' in much of Christianity today. (5) While it assists the church to comprehend the historical development of its theology, it also enables it to articulate those beliefs in contemporary language. (6) It encourages Christians to emphasise the essentials. (7) It provides the church with 'hope by providing assurance that [Christ] is fulfilling his promise to his people'. (8) Finally, Christians are beneficiaries of a great heritage of theological development which is 'sovereignly overseen by Jesus Christ, [and] the church today is privileged to enjoy a sense of belonging to the church of the past' (Allison, 2011:24–29; italics omitted).

Now that the architectonic theologian has carefully examined the contexts, the construction of the foundation begins, but unlike architecture proper, the foundation must not be buried but rather displayed and articulated as an object of exquisite beauty.

Step 3: Construction of the Foundation in Exegesis and Biblical Motifs

Once we have a clear understanding of the context, the current environment and historical theology, the construction of the foundation begins³, that is, an investigation into the images and themes in Scripture to help us interpret the topic under study (Rutledge, 2015:207). Any work in Systematic Theology, or in this case, Architectonic Theology, that is to be meaningfully Christian ought to be grounded in Holy Scripture and radiate Biblical faithfulness (Kunhiyop, 2012: xiii–xiv; cf. 22–41). Studies in exegesis and Biblical motifs go beyond proof-texting and examine redemptive-historical developments and are to engage current scholarship. We lay the focus on identifying various themes or motifs in both the Old and New Testaments to expound the topic under study, and 'locate them within the Biblical narrative to avoid forcing that narrative into one narrow theoretical tunnel'⁴. Further, Rutledge advises that 'Continuing controversies about cross-interpretation suggests that a dynamic, flexible combination of the various themes and motifs in the Old and New Testaments is the best way to proceed' (Rutledge, 2015:209). Yet, she rightly cautions that theories that are overly rationalist may force the Biblical imagery into restrictive categories (Rutledge, 2015:211).

Nevertheless, before a theology can be developed from Biblical images, themes, or motifs, the first task in this step ought to explore the original meaning of a Biblical passage by making use of in-depth exegetical analysis. This includes the following: (1) *Contextual analysis*: Analysing the direct historical and literary context of the pericope. (2) *Verbal analysis*: Investigating the words of the passage, their meaning, that is, lexical analysis, and relationships, otherwise called grammatical analysis. (3) *Literary analysis*: Examining the literary features of the pericope to discover their influence on the meaning of the selected text being studied. Literary features may include Genre, Structure, Composition, and Rhetoric. (4) *Exegetical synthesis*: In this section, one begins by pulling together the exegetical findings. The primary question here is, 'What was the Biblical author attempting to communicate to his readers through the passage?' (Smith, 2008:169–182; Cf. Stuart, 2001; Fee, 2002:5; Klein, Blomberg & Hubbard, 2004:8–21; 213–272; Bock & Fanning, 2006). This analysis, therefore, progresses from exegesis to the study of the Biblical motif.

Once an in-depth exegetical analysis has been done, the relationship between the concerns of the Biblical passage and its motifs can be explored by, (1) highlighting the motifs in the

³ Here the architectural analogy fails us, because in practise, the Engineer only designs the building's foundations once the design and technical drawings are finalised. In Architectonic Theology, the foundation is constructed in order to develop or construct a theology.

⁴ Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, 208; original italics omitted.



historical milieu of the Biblical book, and (2) articulating the significance of the Biblical motifs for contemporary theology or application. According to Rutledge, this may be achieved by presenting in detail the multiplicity of motifs employed by Scripture on the topic being explored, to highlight its nuances and significance (Rutledge, 2015:213). Further to this,

The goal is to allow each motif to speak in both literary/metaphorical and literal/historical ways, as the context requires, and to support a deepened commitment to preaching, teaching, praying, and working in the total context of this rich tapestry, not selecting some threads to the exclusion of others, but allowing them all to interact with one another (Rutledge, 2015:213).

Exegesis is not an end in itself but is ultimately a happy combination and careful integration of the data into a readable presentation in way of Biblical motifs that ought to be applied to the contemporary church and our world (Fee, 2002:1–2, 5).

Step 4: Construction of ‘Order and Space’ in Dialectic Synthesis

In architecture, the order establishes a relationship between the building and its elements and introduces rationality and logic into decision-making processes. Space is ordered by the arrangement of geometry, functional activities, social considerations, and proportioning systems (Righini, 1999:47). The whole process of architectural design is one of synthesising, going back and forth, working towards a final workable design. This is not only between architectural elements, like order and space, light and darkness, materials and textures, but also the interchange between various parties such as the architect, the client, and various professionals from other disciplines. Architectonic Theology may make similar use of dialectic movements between scholars or various theologies or philosophies, for example, the Kuyperian tradition and African philosophical thought.

Step 4, the construction of ‘order and space’ in dialectic synthesis (Cf. Berniker & McNabb, 2006) is, therefore, a theological statement or model for our own contemporary context, formulated by dialoguing with contending theologies, responses, and models. The construction of ‘order and space’ in dialectic synthesis is the intentional work of ordering and reordering theological partitions and elements, articulating specific flows and movements in theological ‘space’. This is done by the traditional Hegelian dialectic methodology (or a variation thereof) in three tasks.

The first task is the thesis description, describing the first theoretical or theological problem, exploring what the theological objectives are, together with their theological significance. This task may develop into an extended literature review whereby one also engages with the theology of those theologians who engage positively with the theology under examination. The next task is the antithesis description and describes the second theory or theology which is the reaction to the theoretical or theological problem examined in task 1. Again, the theologian will explore the theological objectives, together with their theological significance. The step may also develop into an extended literature review whereby one engages with the theology of those theologians who engage positively with the second theology under examination. The third task is the development of a synthesis between the tensions in the thesis, that is, the problem (task 1) and the antithesis, that is, the reaction (task 2) which negates or contradicts the thesis. This synthesis attempts to find a solution between the thesis and antithesis. The process looks something like this: problem → reaction → solution. In other words, one juxtaposes a theology or theory with another from a very different perspective. There are several ways of doing this, for example, one might synthesis ancient and contemporary theological models, two biblical motifs (e.g. *Christus Victor* and penal substitutionary atonement), specific theological and philosophical schools, two theological schools (e.g. Barthian & Kuyperian) the options are almost endless. The problem and the reaction tussle until a working solution is produced. Such a solution ought not only offer a fresh creative look at the theology, but is also to be biblical, that is, in line with the findings in step 3.



Pannenberg argues that Systematic Theology (or Architectonic Theology in this case) ought not to be confined to simply restating traditional theological formulations. Rather, it must demonstrate how God is Lord and creator of all reality. Therefore, we ought to be 'concerned to integrate into its own synthesis the wealth of insight gained by the secular disciplines into the mysteries of nature, of human life and history'. This, he proposes, opens 'our eyes to all kinds of new possibilities from both sides' (Pannenberg, 1991:18–19). Frame adds that in order for us to do good theology, in addition to some knowledge of extra-Biblical sources, such as Biblical languages and ancient Biblical culture, the creeds and confessions, etcetera, we also require some level of 'knowledge of secular disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, politics, economics, philosophy, literary criticism, and the natural sciences'. These may assist us in understanding contemporary situations in which we wish to apply Scripture (Frame, 2013, pp. 9–10). Once we have created 'order and space', attention is given to what the theology might look like in terms of 'form and aesthetics'. This is the task of the next step.

Step 5: Construction of 'Form and Aesthetics' in (Public) Theology

Architecture is by nature functional and public, after all, 'form follows function' is the cry of modernist architecture. Yet while architecture ought to be functional, it also requires the characteristics of beauty and aesthetics, without which it's merely a shed, shack, or bomb shelter. In some sense form and aesthetics find a place in all the 5 steps in Architectonic Theology, but it is in the final step where it flowers (into public space).

Ching explains form as 'the formal structure of the design of a work'. It is the way in which the compositional parts and elements produce a coherent image (Ching, 1996:34). The construction of 'form and aesthetics' in (public) theology considers all the previous steps and explores its implications, working towards a functional theology that is deeply attractive and appropriate as it seeks to engage with the context of the public concerns and its current environment.

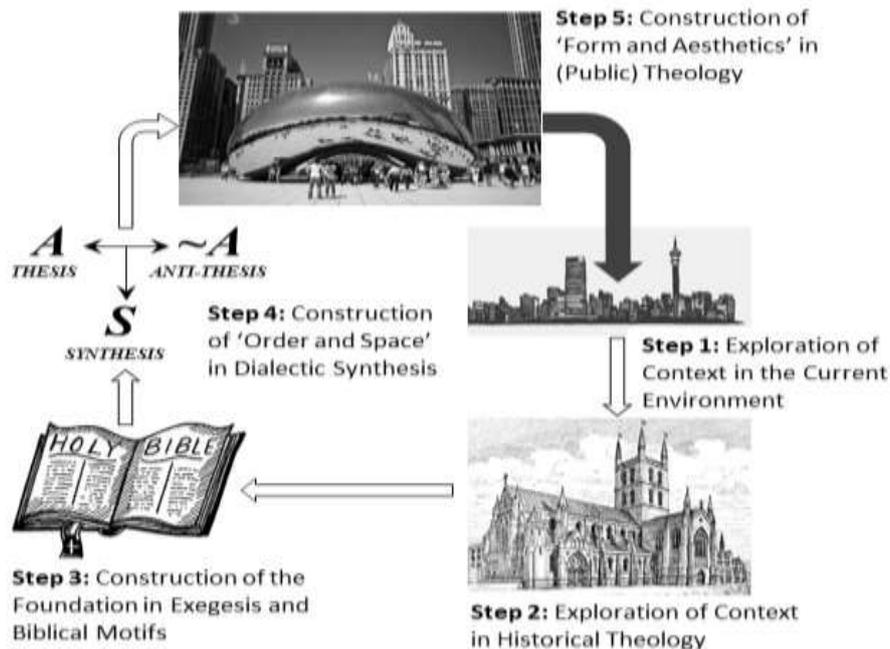
Moltmann offers some direction, though I would modify his 'theology of the cross for politics', for my purpose of constructing a theology in 'form and aesthetics' in (public) theology. Architectonic Theology would remain incomplete if it remained in abstractness, failing to address concrete issues of (public) life. Attention ought to 'be paid to religious problems of politics and to laws, compulsions and the vicious circles which for economic and social reasons constrict, oppress or make impossible the life of man and living humanity'. Christian faith is to be lived out in public faith, which urges men and women 'towards liberating actions because it makes them painfully aware of suffering in situations of exploitation, oppression, alienation and captivity' (Moltmann, 1993:317; Cf. Boersma, 2004:240). Therefore, this step explores the significance and functionality of the proposed theology, not only for Christians and life and ministry but also for public life, constructing a Biblical worldview for Christians and their communities.

Architectonic Theology's culmination in the construction of 'form and aesthetics' in (public) theology could be visualised, for example, as Anish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate* (affectionally called, 'the Bean') in Chicago. The architectural sculpture is inspired by liquid mercury. Its smooth, stainless-steel surface reflects the surrounding buildings and cityscape, the sky, human activity, and the park lights. The 'Bean' invites people to touch and interact with it, their image reflecting in multiple perspectives as they walk around and under it (*Cloud Gate 'The Bean'*, no date). Kapoor commented,

What I wanted to do in Millennium Park is make something that would engage the Chicago skyline ... so that one will see the clouds kind of floating in, with those very tall buildings reflected in the work. And then, since it is in the form of a gate, the participant, the viewer, will be able to enter into this very deep chamber that does, in a way, the same thing to one's reflection as the exterior of the piece is doing to the reflection of the city around (Keppler, 2016).

The Cloud Gate provides a panoptic view, and its geometrical shape and highly reflective surface emulate the city's beauty and vastness (Archana, 2015). It is an object not only to view but also to experience! Kapoor tells us that his work is 'an intersection between sculpture and Architecture' and calls it the 'Cloud Gate' because 80% of its surface reflects the sky. However, he also says that it is an iconic piece as it represents 'the cultural value of the city in the public space' (Archana, 2015). Upon observation, one notices that the Cloud Gate is itself a play of dialectics, exploring the dualities of male and female, solid and void, reflection and reality, earth and sky, and so on.

Like the Cloud Gate, Architectonic Theology reflects its current and historic environs whilst also emulating its beauty and vastness in such a way that engages with human culture, activity, and concerns. One of the ways in which it seeks to do this is by constructing dialectic syntheses. But like our Lord's prayer, 'Thy Kingdom Come', it seeks also to articulate the kingdom of God by reflecting something of the heavens (transcendence), and its celestial God into our cultural and public spaces, because after all, he is also immanent in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Evidently then, Step 5 ties back into step 1 as the response to the current environment, creating a full circle as we see in the diagram below.



Conclusion

While this paper does not overthrow traditional Systematic Theology, it has attempted to provide a provocative way of doing Systematic Theology by considering the characteristics and design principles of architecture, with its social, public, functional and aesthetic expressions. This forms an Architectonic Theology that seeks to move away from the oftentimes abstract, clinical, and irrelevant forms of Systematic Theology and towards transformative and creative theology addressing the concerns of our world. I began this discussion by defining what I mean by Architectonic Theology, stating that it is, 'an application of architectural design principles to engage with categories of Systematic Theology and Biblical motifs. Such a theology responds creatively to challenging public concerns and environs. At its best, Architectonic Theology offers a theology that is both functional and aesthetic'. I then explored what it might look like if we take an approach in Architectonic Theology, that is, how we might re-envision and re-engineer, hence 're-revisioning'



Systematic Theology. Finally, I outlined five methodological steps that may help us develop such a Theology, namely, (1) Exploration of context in the current environment; (2) Exploration of context in historical theology; (3) Construction of the foundation in exegesis and Biblical motifs; (4) Construction of 'order and space' in dialectic synthesis; and (5) Construction of 'form and aesthetics' in (public) theology.

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