



Safety and the Creation of Sacred Spaces: Ancient Models and Contemporary Takeaways

— SHIRA HECHT-KOLLER AND AARON KOLLER

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In this article, the authors present archeological perspectives on sacred spaces and how they relate to privacy, authority, and abuses of power. They introduce us to various designs of space, and ask us to consider how physical structures can shape experience, convey values, and enhance safety.

INTRODUCTION: SPACE INFORMING PRACTICE

Space informs practice within it. It affects how we spiritually engage, how we socialize, how we conduct our professional environments, how we live in our homes. As philosopher Alain de Botton put it:

We seem divided between an urge to override our senses and numb ourselves to our settings and a contradictory impulse to acknowledge the extent to which our identities are indelibly connected to, and will shift along with, our locations. An ugly room can coagulate any loose suspicions as to the incompleteness of life, while a sun-lit one set with honey-coloured limestone tiles can lend support to whatever is most helpful within us. Belief in the significance of architecture is premised on the notion that we are, for better or for worse, different people in different places — and on the conviction that it is architecture's task to render vivid to us who we might ideally be.

The spaces we design, the buildings we construct, and the areas we demarcate all define and shape the experience of moving through the world. There are practical decisions we make when we build a school, design a workplace, and re-model a sanctuary. Is power projected from the center or the corner offices? Are there walls? Are they transparent or opaque? What materials are used in the design process — wood and glass, or steel and brick? How many portals must one pass through to get to an office? To a conference room? To a *bet midrash* (a study hall)?

Each organization has to make these decisions on a case-by-case basis. Our goal in this piece is to highlight two models present in biblical Israel, presenting dramatically different designs of space, one profoundly hierarchical and exclusive, the other radically egalitarian and accessible. Each is appropriate for its own context and purpose, likely designed with intentionality, and with the awareness that ineluctably, space shapes our experiences.

MODEL 1: HIERARCHICAL

The Sages discuss the hierarchy of the sacred in the beginning of Mishnah Teharot (ritual purities). This hierarchy goes upward toward Jerusalem, the Temple, and then areas within it:

⁽⁶⁾ There are ten grades of sanctity: the Land of Israel is more sacred than all other lands... ⁽⁷⁾ Cities that are walled are more sacred... ⁽⁸⁾ The area within the wall [of Jerusalem] is more sacred, for it is there that lesser sacred things and second tithe may be eaten. The Temple Mount is more sacred...The court of the priests is more sacred, for Israelites may not enter it except when they are required to do so: for laying on of the hands, slaying or waving. ⁽⁹⁾ The area between the porch and the altar is more sacred, for [priests] who have blemishes or unkempt hair may not enter it. The sanctuary is more sacred, for no one whose hands or feet are unwashed may enter it. The Holy of Holies is most sacred, for only the high priest, on Yom Kippur, at the time of the service, may enter it.

עֶשֶׂר קְדֻשּׁוֹת הֵן, אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל
מִקְדָּשֵׁת מְכַל הָאֲרָצוֹת (...) עִירוֹת
הַמְּקֻפּוֹת חוֹמָה מִקְדָּשׁוֹת מְמֻנָּה (...)
לְפָנִים מִן הַחוֹמָה מִקְדָּשׁ מֵהֶם,
שְׂאוּכָלִים שָׁם קְדָשִׁים קְלִים וּמִעֶשֶׂר
שְׁנֵי. הֵר הַבַּיִת מִקְדָּשׁ מְמֻנּוֹ (...).
עֲזָרַת הַכֹּהֲנִים מִקְדָּשֵׁת מְמֻנָּה, שְׂאִין
יִשְׂרָאֵל נִכְנְסִים לָשֵׁם אֲלָא בְּשַׁעַת
צְרִיכֵיהֶם, לְסַמֵּיכָה לְשַׁחֲטָה
וְלִתְנוּפָה. בֵּין הָאוּלָם וְלִמְזִבְחַ מִקְדָּשׁ
מְמֻנָּה, שְׂאִין בְּעֵלֵי מוּמִין וּפְרוּעֵי
רֹאשׁ נִכְנְסִים לָשֵׁם. הֵהִיכַל מִקְדָּשׁ
מְמֻנּוֹ, שְׂאִין נִכְנָס לָשֵׁם שְׂלֵא רְחוּץ
יָדַיִם וְרַגְלָיִם. קְדָשׁ הַקְּדָשִׁים מִקְדָּשׁ
מֵהֶם, שְׂאִין נִכְנָס לָשֵׁם אֲלָא כֹהֵן
גָּדוֹל בְּיוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים בְּשַׁעַת
הָעֲבוּדָה
(Mishnah, Kelim 1:6—9)

As the Mishnah teaches, there are ten grades of sanctity inscribed in geography: the Land of Israel is more sacred than the rest of the lands; walled cities are even more sacred; more exalted is the walled city of Jerusalem, then the Temple Mount, then areas within those precincts. The signs of this increasing sanctity are increasing barriers to entry. Thus, there is a distinction between the sanctuary and the altar, as those with blemishes or unkempt hair may not enter the area between them; the sanctuary itself is another level, as entrance is barred to anyone whose hands and feet have not been washed. And finally, there is the Holy of Holies, "for only the high priest, on Yom Kippur, at the time of the service, may enter it."

The Jerusalem Temple is clearly and dramatically hierarchical: one enters the courtyard, then the sanctuary, and only then the inner sanctum. The entrance is on the narrow side of the building, meaning that one would have to walk through the entire structure to get to the most sacred area. Archaeologists call this type of temple architecture "long room" temples, and the ratio of length to width of the Jerusalem temple, 3:1 (60 cubits x 20 cubits), is more dramatically "long" than other temples in the area of ancient Israel at the time.

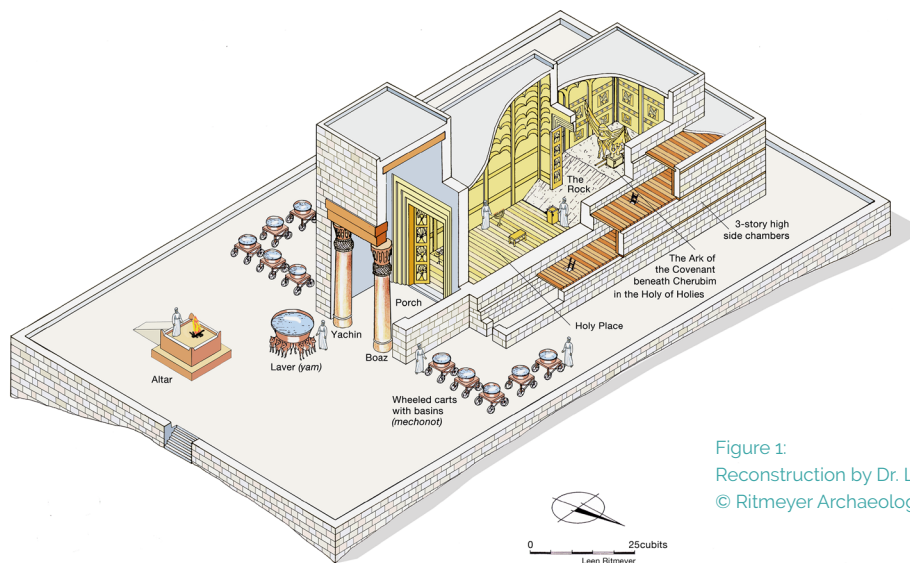


Figure 1:
Reconstruction by Dr. Leen Ritmeyer,
© Ritmeyer Archaeological Design

Temples could be constructed differently, and while some tended toward a square shape, others were built in what archaeologists call the “broad room” structure. Here, the entrance was on the wide side, and the entrant could quickly choose between variously sacred spaces, with the most sacred areas to the left, for example, and other more publicly accessible areas in the center and to the right.

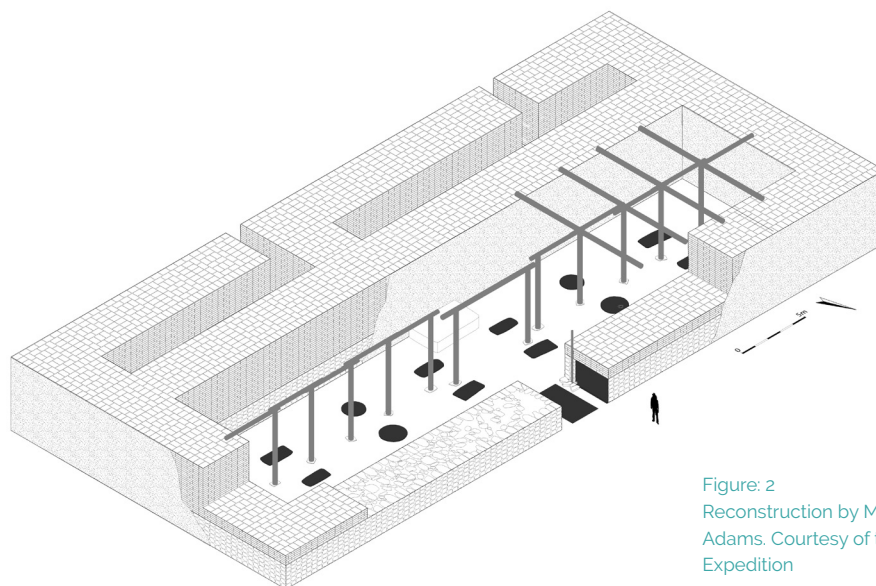


Figure 2:
Reconstruction by Matthew J.
Adams. Courtesy of the Megiddo
Expedition

Clearly the Temple in Jerusalem framed sanctity as explicitly and consciously hierarchical, and aimed to create a feeling of the sacred through exclusivity. It is important to emphasize that this is explicitly conveyed through the architecture, and marked implicitly and explicitly at every turn. As Josephus reported (*War of the Jews* 5.208; this has been verified archaeologically), there were inscriptions displayed outside the Second Temple with the following text in Greek: “No stranger is to enter within the balustrade round the temple and enclosure. Whoever is caught will be himself responsible for his death.”

Even with this transparency, where the architecture itself clearly conveys the message of restriction, there is a danger inherent in this structure, exemplified in the narrative of the sons of the High Priest Eli. Sequestered in the sacred precincts of the mishkan (the tabernacle) at Shiloh, these priests used the lack of general access—and therefore the lack of oversight—to exploit their positions for personal gain.

Their unethical behavior was recorded in 1 Samuel 2:12–17:

⁽¹²⁾ Now Eli's sons were scoundrels; they paid no heed to the LORD. ⁽¹³⁾ This is how the priests used to deal with the people: When anyone brought a sacrifice, the priest's boy would come along with a three-pronged fork while the meat was boiling, ⁽¹⁴⁾ and he would thrust it into the cauldron, or the kettle, or the great pot, or the small cooking-pot; and whatever the fork brought up, the priest would take away on it... ⁽¹⁵⁾ [But now] even before the suet was turned into smoke, the priest's boy would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, "Hand over some meat to roast for the priest; for he won't accept boiled meat from you, only raw." ⁽¹⁷⁾ The sin of the young men against the LORD was very great, for the men treated the LORD's offerings impiously.

וּבְנֵי עֲלִי בְנֵי בְלִיעַל לֹא יָדְעוּ אֶת־
יְהוָה: וּמִשְׁפֹּט הַכֹּהֲנִים אֶת־הָעַם כָּל־
אִישׁ זֶבַח זָבַח וּבָא גַעַר הַכֹּהֵן כְּבִישׁל
הַבָּשָׂר וְהַמְזֶלֶג שְׁלֹשׁ־הַשָּׁנִים בְּיָדוֹ
וְהִכָּה בַכִּיּוֹר אִוּ בְדוּד אִוּ בְקַלְחַת אִוּ
בַפְּרוֹר כָּל אֲשֶׁר יַעֲלֶה הַמְזֶלֶג יִקַּח
הַכֹּהֵן בּוֹ (...) גַּם בְּטָרִם יִקְטְרוּן אֶת־
הַחֶלֶב וּבָא גַעַר הַכֹּהֵן וְאָמַר לְאִישׁ
הַזֶּבֶח תִּגַּה בָשָׂר לְצִלוֹת לִכְהֵן וְלֹא־
יִקַּח מִמֶּנּוּ בָשָׂר מִבְּשָׂל כִּי אִם־חֵי:
(...) וְתִהְיֶה חֲטָאת הַגֹּעֲרִים גְּדוּלָּה
מְאֹד אֶת־פְּנֵי יְהוָה כִּי גָאֲצוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים
אֶת מִנְחַת יְהוָה:

Here, according to the Book of Samuel, the priests took more meat, of higher quality, from each sacrifice than they were entitled to, and utilized their monopoly on the sacrificial rituals to force people to give them what they wanted. They also exploited a class of women at the *mishkan*, reported for example in 1 Samuel 2:22–25:

⁽²²⁾ Now Eli was very old. When he heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who performed tasks at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, ⁽²³⁾ he said to them, "Why do you do such things? I get evil reports about you from the people on all hands. ⁽²⁵⁾ If a man sins against a man, the LORD may pardon him; but if a man offends against God, who can obtain pardon for him?" But they ignored their father's plea; for the LORD was resolved that they should die.

וְעֲלִי זָקֵן וְשִׁמְעַתְּ אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־
יַעֲשׂוּן בְּנָיו לְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר־
יִשְׁכְּבוּן אֶת־הַנְּשִׁים הַצֹּבְאוֹת פֶּתַח
אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד: וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם לְמָה תַעֲשׂוּן
כְּדַבְּרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי שֹׁמֵעַ אֶת־
דְּבָרֵיכֶם רָעִים מְאֹד כָּל־הָעַם אֵלֶּה:
אִם־יִחַטָּא אִישׁ לְאִישׁ וּפָלְלוּ אֱלֹהִים
וְאִם לַיהוָה יִחַטָּא־אִישׁ מִי יִתְפַּלֵּל־לּוֹ
וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ לְקוֹל אֲבֵיהֶם כִּי־חִפֵּץ
יְהוָה לְהַמִּיתָם:

These abusive practices were abetted by the exclusivity and hierarchy of the mishkan. That does not mean that exclusivity and hierarchy are inevitably to blame or are to be avoided in our own planning; that perspective would mean the loss of hierarchies of sanctity which are at the core of much of Jewish practice. We must, however, be cognizant of the choices we are making and the tradeoffs involved, and find ways to mitigate and eliminate the abuses that such hierarchies facilitate.

MODEL 2: EGALITARIAN

A very different model is on view in the common Israelite house of the Iron Age (1150-586 BCE)—the very period of the First Temple. The typical Israelite house over the course of these centuries is based on a pattern known as the “four-room” house. In this floor plan, the house was essentially a square. The entrance led into a long room with openings into two other long rooms, parallel to the central one. Each of those long rooms led to a broad room in the back of the house. These areas were divided by rows of pillars, which also often supported the second story of the house that contained living quarters for the family. Based on the size of the house, which averaged 40-80 square meters, the archaeological assumption is that each was for a nuclear family.

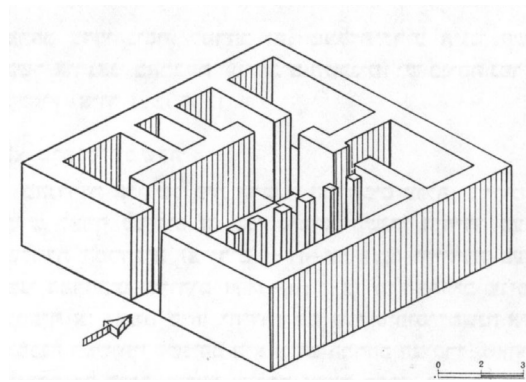


Figure 3: From Yigal Shiloh, “בית ארבעת המרחבים – טיפוס הבית הישראלי,” *Eretz Israel* 11 (1973), 277-285. Courtesy of the Israel Exploration Society

These houses are not unique to Israelite settlements—some have been found in modern-day Jordan and elsewhere—but they are typical of Israelite settlements. Putting aside questions of origins, the functions of this space are of primary interest here. As argued by archaeologist Avraham Faust, the four-room layout reflects an ideology of egalitarianism within the family, as all rooms are all equally accessed from a central space. All people entered into the front room, and from there, all other rooms were equally accessible. No room was more or less “internal” than another. Other domestic layouts of the period have an inherently more hierarchical structure in which some rooms could be entered only by passing through other rooms.

Perhaps paradoxically, this archaeological egalitarianism enables the physical separation of ritually pure and impure, presumably including in particular the impurity of menstruation. By establishing the possibility of separation without household members being multiply barricaded behind other rooms and spaces, this architecture allows for the preservation of purity norms without imposing a hierarchical structure within the household.

Lest one rush to affirm architectural egalitarianism as the obvious ideal, we should pause to note what might be lost here as well. The focus on equal access comes at the cost of privacy and perhaps, to some degree, authority as well. With no “master bedroom,” the architecture does not itself communicate and may even undermine the power structure of the household.

CONCLUSION

Our purpose in presenting two such different ways in which ancient space was structured is to highlight the difference that architecture can make in the way we understand and structure our lives, relationships, and organizations. We have seen, different structures open up different possibilities for how people relate to one another and to their leaders. Turning our attention to our contemporary spaces, the design of a communal building can invest some of its occupants with greater power and (however unwittingly) can help cover up wrongdoing, or it can foster transparency and accountability.

Like our ancestors, we make choices about how we design the spaces where we live, work, gather, and educate our children. Our goal here in providing these two brief examples is to encourage the reader to study the spaces in which you spend time, examining the ways in which the architecture shapes experience and conveys values. Given the opportunity to re-shape these spaces, what would you do differently to design them with your core values in mind? And more specifically, how would you create a space that would enhance a sense of safety, sacredness, and belonging?

We ought to be deliberate in our architectural and design choices, and make decisions with consciousness and with our goals and values in mind. No decision will be entirely perfect, and each will come with costs and benefits, dangers and opportunities. In working to create safe spaces, clarity about our values, expectations, and aspirations and how they might be reflected in and shaped by architecture is crucial.

If we put safety from abuse at the center of our design, our spaces will likely look different than when we highlight other values.

Discussion Questions

1. The authors distinguish between egalitarian space and hierarchical space in ancient Jewish life. Take a walk through the space where your Jewish community gathers. What do you think it communicates about your community's values? About who is powerful? About who is important, or in need of protection?
2. The story of Eli's sons illustrates how leaders can take advantage of physical features of a building to conceal acts of corruption and abuse. In your space, which physical features facilitate oversight, transparency, and safety? What design choices do you imagine shaped the space in which you are sitting right now? Which aspects of the space do you think enhance safety, and which aspects of the space pose risks?
3. What do you imagine our sacred spaces would look like when designed with safety from abuse as a goal?
4. What lessons about holiness are conveyed by the ancient structures described here? How do you imagine ancient Jews negotiated between the value of privacy and authority on the one hand and transparency and safety on the other?
5. Recently, there has been a lot of discussion about safety and security in the Jewish community, with the emphasis on threats that come from outside, not on threats from within the community. Looking around your physical space, what measures are in place to enhance a sense of safety? In what ways do specific parts of the building keep people safe? Are there steps you can take that would enhance the safety of children and adults within your building from abuse by those already in the building (i.e., known or trusted individuals)?

Further readings

Eyal Ben-Eliyahu (2019) *Identity and territory: Jewish perceptions of space in antiquity*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Alain de Botton (2006) *The architecture of happiness: The secret art of furnishing your life*. New York, NY: Pantheon.

Abraham Faust (2014) *Israel's ethnogenesis: Settlement, interaction, expansion and resistance*. London, England and New York, NY: Routledge.

Katharina Galor and Hanswulf Bloedhorn (2013) *The archeology of Jerusalem: From the origins to the Ottomans*. New Haven, CT and London, England: Yale University Press.

This piece is part of the Respect & Responsibility: A Jewish Ethics Study Guide that is a joint project of Sacred Spaces and the Center for Jewish Ethics. Learn more at www.jewishsacredspaces.org.