

Samenvattingen van proefschriften

Space for Silence

Rooms of Silence in the Netherlands – Where Tradition and Transformation Meet¹

[Ruimte voor stilte. Stiltecentra in Nederland als speelveld van traditie en vernieuwing]

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Rooms of silence as new ritual spaces

From the 1970s onwards, in several public institutions in western society, specific rooms have been set apart for 'silence'. In my dissertation, I define such a 'room of silence' as a room in a public (institutional) space, generally accessible to anyone and set apart primarily to offer space for prayer, reflection, meditation and personal ritual. The book describes and analyzes how these rooms are conceptualized, constructed and used. The aim is to gain insight into the developments and transformation processes in the domains of religion, sacrality and ritual in the Netherlands, taking the locus of rooms of silence as a starting point. Although they are quiet spaces, rooms of silence are at the same time places with a strong dynamic – they are places where public and private, religious and secular, sacred and profane, and tradition and modernization meet, clash, intermingle and affect each other. Therefore, rooms of silence are used here as a lens to explore the relationships, developments and changes in these domains.

A localized approach to religion, sacrality and ritual

In order to study religion, I chose a perspective, mainly based on the work of Hervieu-Léger, Knott and of Beckford, which takes practice and discourse as a starting point. As a consequence, religion and the secular are not seen as strictly separated; religion is instead produced in active processes which are strongly connected to secular processes. Thus, religion and the secular are fluid terms which achieve different interpretations in perpetual reciprocal processes of interaction and influence. This 'struggle for power' becomes most visible in spaces which are contested, where people consciously try to create distinctions. Starting from those spaces, processes of definition and demarcation can be

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traced. This results in a localized approach to religion: from designated places (in this case: rooms of silence), the production of religion in discourse and practice is explored.

'Place' in this approach is not to be considered as a mere background for events but, along with Lefebvre, as an active, dynamic component in diverse processes. Places are defined and determined, but, in the way they are used, their character is transformed and remodeled time and time again. Furthermore, place itself is a constituting element as well, related to time, to its environment and to actors. Starting from this dynamic idea of place, it is impossible to see sacrality as something inherent to particular places. Sacrality rather is a 'label', which springs from processes of sacralization in which the mentioned dimensions of place play a role. When place is shaped and its borders are determined, processes of sacralization can be at work, but by using the space in a certain way, others can confirm, deny or reverse the sacrality that was previously attributed to that space. The history and the position of a place also often interfere in those processes. Therefore, sacrality is to be studied as a situational and relational category. This means that sacrality is contested as well, and that it is not necessarily bound to religion.

This perspective also demands a different approach to ritual: I don't define ritual by pointing out structural criteria. As Knott does, I consider ritual a form of spatial practice that distinguishes itself from usual practice. These distinctions are made by means of ritualization which involves a reciprocity between the space and the 'ritualized body' of the actor. As Catherine Bell has defined it, the 'ritualized body' refers to the sense of ritual a person develops and by which he subconsciously selects strategies to differentiate his actions. He makes value-related distinctions *in* as well as *by* his practices, thus redefining space and time. Ritualization sets space apart, and the set-apart character of the space interacts with the ritualized bodies of others. Thus, ritualization plays an important role in processes of sacralization.

The dimensions of place as a frame of analysis

In order to apply this localized approach, the concept of 'place' needs to be opened up to analysis. Briefly, three dimensions of place are crucial: (1) place is defined and designated; (2) place is redefined and transformed; and (3) place plays a constituting role. The first dimension comprises two aspects: the conceptualization of a place on the one hand, and the physical space (design) on the other. Transformation or adaptation of a place (the second dimension) springs from the way a place is used or 'lived in'. Together, these aspects – concepts, design and use – constitute the basic structure for the description of a place (or places). Then there is this third dimension, the role place plays, which constitutes the ways a place relates to society, time, its environment and power. Basically, this means that in a place different developments, meanings, experiences and power relationships come together, so that they start to interact,

influencing each other and constituting the specific setting of this place. Those relationships play a role in all the aspects mentioned, which results in the following structure of analysis:

		Place is defined		Place is transformed
		Conceptual space	Physical space	Lived space
Place plays a role	Relationship to society			
	Relationship to time			
	Relationship to environment			
	Power factor			

Each of the boxes is filled in with research questions concerning the aspects indicated and the sets of relationships.

The plan of the book follows this structure. After the first section in which the conceptual framework and the approach are presented, Section Two concentrates on the conceptualization of rooms of silence, focusing attention on the views about the phenomenon that have been developed in science, architecture and media. It also describes the rise and development of rooms of silence in diverse (often institutional) contexts, focusing on the way the initiators express their motivations for creating this ‘facility’. Section Three is about the physical aspects of rooms of silence, successively discussing the realization process and its actors, the situation of the rooms in their physical context and the ways they are marked as a special space, along with the design of the rooms, with special attention paid to the objects (which may be ritual) and the use of art in it. Section Four describes the ways the rooms are used by those who are in control of the room and by visitors. It maps out the processes of inclusion and exclusion, of appropriation and sacralization that come to the fore. The book concludes with a synthesis from the perspective of the sets of relationships, thus connecting the results of the sections in order to answer the main questions concerning the processes in which the religious and the secular are defined and redefined, including the developments in the sphere of ritual and sacralization.

Results

Rooms of silence appear in a range of different sectors of society. In order to classify those sectors, I have looked for similarities regarding the physical context, the target group and the parties involved. A rough divide then presents

itself: one part of the rooms of silence is found in 'open' public space, attracting a very heterogeneous audience; the other part is situated in an institutional context, as a facility for the employees and clients of the institution. The first group comprises rooms of silence in airports, along highways, in shopping malls, exhibition buildings, churches and commemoration sites; the second group concerns rooms of silence in health care and educational institutions, office buildings and penitentiaries. This divide represents the most important difference in the dynamics of the spaces: whereas the first category is characterized by anonymous masses, abundance of impulses and superficial experiences, the second category often encompasses a more or less strong relationship to the institutional environment and experiences (of crisis, for example) are more personal and more intense.

In the rise and spread of the phenomenon of 'rooms of silence', religious traditions have played an important role. The first rooms of silence appeared in the 1970s, initiated by churches in shopping malls, city centers and at airports. From the 1980s onwards, rooms of silence were also integrated in public institutions, starting with hospitals where they replaced the chapel. In the 1990s, educational institutions and penitentiaries followed, often in response to the growing cultural diversity and requests for Muslim prayer spaces. In due course, rooms of silence increasingly parted from their relationship with chapels and prayer rooms, developing into an independent phenomenon with its own functions and characteristics. In recent years, for example, commemoration has become an important function of several rooms of silence, and in business communities rooms of silence have entered the scene as a means to reduce the stress of work. The rise, spread, design and functioning of rooms of silence thus strongly represent the changing position of traditional religion in the Netherlands, throwing light on the transformation processes that have taken place in recent decades. Those changing relationships between tradition and transformation are also reflected in the typology that is presented in this book. This typology is not, like earlier typologies, based on differences in the design of the rooms, but on the views about rooms of silence that have been developed over the course of time. These views differ from each other with regard to the relationship between the room of silence and its environment. They also express different perspectives on 'religious' and 'secular', and the relationships between them. The typology consists of five categories of rooms of silence:

- 1 The **beacon type**: the room of silence of this type is presented as a way to serve the society and as a place that is a buoy and provides orientation in a sea of impulses and activities. These initiatives are based on Christian values, missionary perspectives and diaconal engagement. Yet they are characterized by a modest attitude: it is not about spreading the faith but about 'offering clues for the interpretation of personal life stories'. There is space for individual appropriation: the room of silence does not point in one direction; it helps visitors to choose their own path.

- 2 The **temple type**: the room of silence is here considered a place for religious ritual and encounter with the divine. Most rooms of this type are multi-religious, starting from the point of view that the room should be inviting to everyone, taking the specific characteristics of different religious traditions into account. This perspective has different explanations: in some institutions it is the expression of the ideal of spiritual exchange between religions, of a 'universal *oecumene*'; in other organizations, though, it is explained as an expression of hospitality or tolerance. In both viewpoints, the main line is that the religious and secular do not exclude each other as long as everyone is free to choose and no specific religion dominates the others.
- 3 The **escape type**: in this case, the room of silence is defined as a place of rest and relaxation, a place where people can escape the rules and the pressure of the institutional environment. To formally avoid religious connotations, these rooms of silence are connected to a context of rest, health, inspiration and productivity. Sometimes the notion of 'spirituality' is used as well, often explained in psychological terminology.
- 4 The **cocoon type**: these rooms of silence are meant as a safe and embracing haven where people can confront their questions and emotions. Contrary to the escape type, rooms of silence of the cocoon type are explicitly connected to religiosity and spirituality, which is qualified as religious. Symbolic art and ritual receive a great deal of attention, stressing individual interpretations and discovering and addressing 'personal inner resources'.
- 5 The **memorial type**: this concerns rooms of silence that were primarily initiated to commemorate or rooms where commemoration has become the primary function. The emergence of this type must be seen against the background of the actual memorial culture in which place plays an important role in relation to the past. This type shows individualization as well by the stress it places on the memory of specific persons. Yet, these types of rooms are also often intended to bring people together by means of creating communities of fellow sufferers or by pointing to shared values, such as peace, justice and nonviolence.

This typology directs the reader's attention to two important recurring themes. The first theme is the changing function of religious traditions. Rarely do they constitute a frame of reference for interpretations, practices and community building anymore; rather they present possibilities or options. Every type basically passes the responsibility of attributing meaning onto the individual visitor. Even with their variety of different references to religious traditions, rooms of silence are meant as open interpretable spaces where every visitor personally constructs his/her own meaning. In the analysis of rooms of silence, several developments point to the conclusion that the manifestation of religious traditions outside their specific places consists of a jumbled collection of places, objects, texts and authorities. Community no longer requires ideological unity.

Therefore, connections and relationships are to be constructed time and time again, thus making meaning a subjective construct and a product of place and practice.

The second theme which the typology and the other results shed light on is the changing position and function of the religious and secular in relation to one another. The interpretation of changes and developments in terms of a return to or a transformation of religion appears to fail since these innovations not only affect the position and definition of religion, but also the way in which 'secular' is presented and constructed. What strikes one most when looking at the relationships between the religious and the secular is that they are not dominated by contrast, but by overlapping and fluid boundaries. Just the given fact that rooms of silence have established themselves as a facility in public spaces points to that. A certain balance between the religious and the secular appears to be attainable by the creation of positions that are open to being claimed by both sides. Yet, those claims manifesting themselves in the use of rooms of silence show how precarious this balance can be. At the same time, it is possible for different forms of individual use to exist simultaneously without causing any trouble. This is connected to the personal and time-honored character of the use of the rooms. Simply because of the fact that rooms of silence are strongly individual places in a public space, they are continuously open for new, personal interpretations and practices.