

Murray Rae is a senior lecturer in Systematic Theology at Otago University. He is involved internationally with the Theology Through the Arts (TTA) movement, jointly chairing the Theology and the Built Environment Colloquium. Murray spent several years as an architect before pursuing theology, which he studied in Otago, Germany and London.

After three years as chaplain at the University of Auckland, he spent seven years teaching theology at King's College in London where his courses on the person of Christ regularly incorporated the visual arts in teaching. He then moved back to Otago in 2005, and is currently writing a book on Theology and the Spatial Arts. Murray talks to *CS Arts* about his architectural

'I think the kind of spaces we inhabit do matter. Winston Churchill once remarked that we shape our buildings and then they shape us. It's not quite as simple as that, but the spaces we live and work in can contribute to our wellbeing, or indeed they can work against human wellbeing.

'Architecture always has to reckon with constraints of various kinds. That's quite proper, and good architecture is architecture that responds well to the constraints of environment, budget, client expectation... Sometimes, however, architects are constrained by a client's curtailed vision of what it means to be human, and by their not being prepared to entertain anything beyond merely pragmatic

Spaces and conversations



Murray Rae. Photo: Kelk Photography.

background and how it has contributed to his involvement in TTA. He also shares with us his vision for the movement, both its position internationally and its place here in New Zealand.

Architectural inclinations

'My interest in buildings was prompted by walking past building sites on my way to school as a child and being fascinated by the construction—things emerging and spaces being created. For a while I thought that it would be good to be a builder, but then I discovered what an architect was and decided that that would be even more fun. The challenge of designing space is what attracted me.

'I found it very satisfying making space for people to live life, whether at work or at home or, as happened a couple of times in my architectural career, in worship. I mean that not just in a physical sense—obviously architecture provides shelter from the rain and so on—but I'm concerned about people's spiritual and emotional wellbeing as well.

considerations about the space we inhabit. Sadly, I have encountered that attitude even in the building of churches.'

From the structural to the sublime

'The shift [from architecture to theology] came in response to the call of God. Just as I was about to embark upon my architectural training at Auckland University, I felt very strongly God's call to offer myself for ministry in the Presbyterian Church. My father, also a minister, wisely advised me to continue with architecture in the meantime, and to train for ministry after gaining some experience of the wider world. I completed my architecture degree and worked for three years in Auckland in private practice, before moving to Dunedin to study theology. I'm pleased that I took that course. I've not lost my love for architecture and building, and am now able to combine two passions—theology and architecture—through chairing a research group on theology and the spatial arts.

'Theology and architecture are both concerned with good and responsible habitation of our world. Architects are concerned with human wellbeing and with human flourishing, increasingly so in ways which are responsive and responsible to the wider creation. Sometimes architects have operated with a deeply impoverished and sinfully distorted vision of what constitutes human wellbeing. That is, in some measure, true of us all. Theologians will be glad to join in conversation with architects, therefore, about what human wellbeing really consists of—they too have important things to say about what responsible habitation of our world entails.

'There has been very little done in this area. Theologians have tended to neglect the question of what it means to be in space. They've said an awful lot about time and history and so on, but not much about space. It's an interesting area to be in because it's new, kind of ground-breaking. I specifically enjoy talking about theological space, church architecture for instance. We all go into churches all the time and meet a lot of people who are tone deaf—if I could use a musical term—to what's going on in the architecture. So it's great fun walking through with people and pointing out to them how the architecture works—what the symbolism and meanings are. I find that very satisfying.'

Our own designs

'I wouldn't speak of "designing" ideas about God. Theology is not essentially concerned with ideas of our own making or design. It begins rather with silence, the silence of attentiveness to the God who makes himself known, who speaks his own Word to us, and gathers us into communion with him. We don't design that process; indeed, faithfulness in theology very often requires that we leave aside our own designs, our own conceptions of who God is and how God should behave. Our privilege is to participate in the design God has for the world and to bear witness to it, in word, in deed, and in art as best we can.'

Theology Through the Arts

'Through most of its history, Christian theology has been shaped to a very considerable extent by its conversation with the prevailing philosophies of the day, and more recently by its conversation with science. Despite a rich history of Christian art, theologians have not engaged in conversation with artists as much as they might have done. TTA thus seeks to broaden the conversation. Artists typically open up new ways of seeing the world. It is assumed by TTA that they may also help theologians to new ways of seeing, new insight, and new ways of expressing their particular subject matter, namely the reality and purposes of God. So we are in that mode really, to have a conversation with artists and see what comes of it. Not attempting to tell artists how to do their job—how and what they should be saying—we are hoping to learn more rather than teach through this conversation.

'Jeremy Begbie is the founder of the movement. A brilliant musician in his own right, Jeremy has always thought about theology and music together. He began TTA precisely in order to support and encourage others who might be interested in bringing theology and the arts into constructive conversation.

'Jeremy is chair of the Theology and Music Colloquium, and Alan Torrance and I jointly chair the Theology and the Built Environment Colloquium. I must say, however, that I prefer to speak of "Theology and the Spatial Arts". The Colloquium has drawn together architects, theologians, art historians, geographers, and philosophers. Hopefully there will be more established in the future, for the visual arts, for film—those are yet to emerge.

"Spatial arts" comes as all sorts of things ... architecture is one of them, but it includes everybody that is involved in shaping our built environment, so that can include town planners, geographers, engineers, and also sculptors. Frequently these days, public building projects are encouraged to incorporate art in public space, so sculpture is quite important in a definition of spatial arts. Any artist who is working in three dimensions is creating space, and qualifies.'

A vision for New Zealand

'I do hope that there will be many people who are able to come to Dunedin to participate in the summer school course.¹ As well as being an excellent musician and theologian, Jeremy is a superb communicator. He regularly lectures to packed auditoria in the United States and typically sits at the piano as he delivers his lectures, regularly using art and music to communicate the theological point. I hope therefore, that Jeremy's course will open the eyes of theologians to the fruitfulness of conversation with the arts.

'I hope too that it will attract artists from around the country, as well as people doing theology degrees. It would be really good for them too to engage with the theologian who's at the forefront of this whole area, and hopefully begin to see how they might be inspired to think more deeply about theology and art.

'I would hope that the art community in New Zealand can learn more about theology and the Christian Gospel. The Christian tradition for the most part has used art a great deal. Where would the western artist heritage be without Christian themes and explorations? And when you scratch below the surface there is quite a strong tradition of that in New Zealanders. Despite the kind of official creed in New Zealand being secular, a lot of artists have actually engaged in religious exploration through art.

'The other thing I'd like to see is more attention to religious art in secular media. One of the things that concern me about school education—even university level education—in the arts and literature is that students these days are increasingly ignorant about Christian tradition. They haven't a clue about how to actually understand the cultural and artistic heritage because, for instance, they just don't get the biblical allusions. They have no framework within which to understand a lot of the religious themes in art. I'd like to see a bit of an education campaign, in which some sort of biblical literacy is recognised as vital to understanding our culture more generally.'

1 CHTX 412 Theology in the Company of the Arts, Professor Jeremy Begbie, 21-25 Jan 2008, University of Otago. Contact theology@otago.ac.nz for further info.