The directive sounds simple—“provide a worship space for everyone to share, where all faiths are welcome”—but given that there are thousands of religions in the world, what, if any, are the common elements in worship space architecture? Is the sense of awe one gets when entering a worship space a shared experience regardless of faith? Are highly revered and expected features of one religion’s worship space offensive to other faiths? For example, the presence of iconography may be important for worship to some, yet the same iconography may be objectionable to others. Is it possible to create a shared worship space that is awe-inspiring and welcoming for everyone? Would our understanding one another be enhanced if we were knowledgeable about each other’s worship space?

Multi-faith spaces are relatively new. Religious facilities throughout the world evolved from small places serving individuals or small groups in caves, homes, or in the open air, to large structures that serve centrally governed communities. The physical segregation of different cultures and religious beliefs reinforced the development of specialized structures for specific faiths. Today, with opportunities for people to study, live, and work almost anywhere in the world, dedicated multi-faith buildings are fulfilling a need for community institutions to serve a diverse global society. The religions and the degree to which they are served in these places, reflects implicitly and explicitly, the values of those who construct them. A multi-faith building can provide an opportunity to teach, and to satisfy

1. Boston Government Service Center Chapel, Boston, MA
2. Houghton Chapel and Multifaith Center at Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA
3. Northeastern University Center for Spirituality, Dialogue and Service, Boston, MA

Background: Interfaith Center at Tufts University, Medford, MA
curiosity about many different religions through its design. The design challenge is to speak a multi-lingually through forms, surfaces, color and light, so that a space serves the functions of worship by all and becomes a meaningful place.

One characteristic of worship spaces that may be found in most, if not all, is a strong sense of a separation from surrounding contexts. This reinforces a sense of safety—of a place that is emptied of ordinary, everyday, secular associations. The journey from the surrounding environment to the sacred space is often part of the experience, part of the transition to a separate place. How does the architecture contribute to, enhance, or impose these experiences?

How followers of different religions use the space, furniture, and other elements in the worship space may inform what is necessary for inclusive multi-faith space. A look at the rooms used by major world religions reveals many variations within each faith thus complicating the search for universal worship space elements. The concept of, reverence for, and attitudes about the use and presence of light and nature among the different religions show common themes as well as striking differences. Is it any wonder that so many of these places are white boxes, plain rectangle volumes painted shades of white and sparsely furnished?

4. Interfaith Prayer Room, Munich Airport, München, Germany
5. Interfaith Center at Tufts University, Medford, MA
6. Temple Beth Zion, Buffalo, NY

Background: First Unitarian Church of Rochester, NY
Light in some form—for example natural sunlight, artificial, or colored light—is a design element used by designers as carefully as if it were a tangible building material such as stone or wood. Light can evoke transformational emotions and contribute to ineffable qualities of a space. Light can be juxtaposed with darkness, or can stream from a window as a beam illuminating one object in a space, or can be a presence without a visible source. Historic examples of the churches, synagogues, and mosques of the Abrahamic faiths have large areas of stained glass that filter light into large worship spaces as spectacular contrasts to surrounding secular buildings. The Shinto and Buddhist temples of Asia use light as a connection to the spiritual element of fire. Candles or oil lamps are used and large window openings are not commonly found. Some temples located in moderate climates have no roofs or large openings that could focus light on a special feature of the worship space. The use of fire, a central focus in many religions, can be in conflict with modern building codes and a management challenge in a multi-faith space.
References to the natural world through the use of particular building materials may reveal shared values among different faiths. Wood, stone, glass, and clay products such as tile and brick are examples of materials from nature that are often seen used in ways that celebrate their natural state. The structural support of buildings may mimic the vertical trees and stones that support structures and caves found in nature. Water used in pools and fountains add sensory elements to the experience, as can live plants and music. The use of decorative calligraphy, or murals that recall shapes, textures, and colors found in nature, unites the space with the primal world.

10. Thorncrown Chapel, Eureka Springs, AR
11. First Unitarian Church of Rochester, NY
12. Center for Ethics and Religious Affairs, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, State College, PA

Background: Bethlehem Chapel, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
The shape, or geometry, of the worship spaces for different religions depends a lot on the way the spaces are used, the necessary orientations and the hierarchies of religious leadership. Overlaying these requirements reveals some commonalities and differences. The direction to Mecca may not align with the direction of the sunrise. The location of a focused area may be a cause to consider a dome shape for the ceiling or a place for a change in ceiling height to permit a shaft of light to shine on a sacred object or place. Some of these considerations have led designers to consider floor plans that are circular, free-form, or polygonal to democratize the use of the space. Mandalas, labyrinths, or ordered geometric shapes found in the plan views of the buildings of many world religions may be a resource for use in a multi-faith design.
Acoustic provisions for music and for preaching or speaking to groups differ. Music is best in a space with a lot of reverberation while speech is supported in a space with little reverberation. A multi-faith space should support both, and to do so the acoustic properties should be considered from the earliest stages of design. Sound and silence are powerful design elements that can be used to enhance the ineffable experience of a space.

13. Ronald K. and Kati C. Machtley Interfaith Center at Bryant University, Smithfield, RI
14. Students’ Quiet Room at Bunker Hill Community College, Charlestown, MA
15. Lorimer Chapel at Colby College, Waterville, ME

Background: Congregation Shaarey Zedek, Southfield, MI
For more information on multi-faith spaces, additional case studies, and a listing of other resources, visit multifaithspaces.com

Front Cover (top):
Center for Spirituality, Dialogue, and Service, Northeastern University,
Boston, MA

Front Cover (left to right):
1. Medicine Wheel Earth Work, Haskell Indian Nations University,
   Lawrence, KS
2. Berlin and Bethelhem Chapels, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
3. Center for Ethics and Religious Affairs, Pennsylvania State University,
   State College, PA
4. Temple Beth Zion, Buffalo, NY

Back Cover:
Interfaith Center at Tufts University, Medford, MA