The Reconstruction of Greyfriars Kirkyard’s Sacred Space: From the Franciscan Order’s “Divinity Heaven Garden” into the Protestant’s “the Sacred Cemetery”

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Abstract: The Scottish Reformation in the sixteenth century had a profound influence on the layout and function of Greyfriars Kirkyard. Since the Reformation it has been used in various ways such as a public cemetery, a weapon exhibition and military exercises site, and as the Covenanters prison. By exhaustively perusing historical documents, comparing different layouts in Edinburgh antique maps, and analyzing the epitaphs and engraved monuments within the cemetery, I have concluded the reconstructive principles of the sacred space represent three major shifts. The space has moved from sacred to secular from a single faith to multiple denominational and from an oppressive environment to a supportive one.

1 Historical background
The Reformation’s reconstruction process of the sacred space in the sixteenth century was firstly to deconstruct the Catholic “sacred” space, then to reconstruct a Protestant driven “secular” space. Greyfriars kirkyard was the first Catholic monastery destroyed by the Reformation in Edinburgh, and also was the first Protestant site after the Reformation.

The Greyfriars in Edinburgh were established in the vicinity of Candler maker Row by Papal Bull of Pope Pius II in 1463[1]. The name Greyfriars comes from the color of habit worn by the Franciscans. This habit was often their only position as the Greyfriars took a vow of poverty renouncing all possessions. They didn’t accept money, or any other donations and often use herbal medicine to care for the poor. It is the start point from which the reformer John Knox launch the Reformation of Edinburgh, and the building and kirkyard of Greyfriars were almost completely destroyed by the Reformation in 1559, and new Protestant church was dedicated to the public in 1620, the once time garden was ordered to become a public cemetery[2]. By the twenty first century, fifty thousand people were buried here, many are families. It included not only the Clergy, Martyrs, Covenanters, and Christian, but also many nobles, ordinary citizens and the prisoners.

The National Covenant for Scotland’s religious freedom was signed here in 1638, resulting in the Episcopal regime eventually being declared in the same year. The people of Scotland saw the covenant as a contract between themselves and God, as such, the believers were known as Covenanters[3].

Greyfriars Kirkyard has a wide south and narrow north slope. It is located in the southwest of the Old Town of Edinburgh, and the largest slope ratio is up to ten percent. The kirkyard has four courtyards, lower, upper, southern and western [4] (Figure 1).
The Reformation transformed the sacred space from “sacred” to “secular”, by shaping it from the Franciscan order’s “Heavenly Garden” into the Protestant’s “Earthly Heaven”; from a closed monotheistic space to an open space accommodated other denominations; from an oppressive and hierarchical worship space longitudinally to a relaxed and equal communication space horizontally.

3 The reconstruction of the sacred space

3.1 The transformation of the kirkyard’s planning (Figure 2)
R: The larger slope defended by the Flodden Wall and the steep Castle, met the rainy weather’s drainage requirements. The new architecture occupied the highest point of the yard, overlooking the whole grass courtyard and dominated whole landscape style.

3.1.1 Before the Reformation the kirkyard was designed to be an earthly paradise reflective of the divine abode. The site selected was the central gathering place, about four hundred and fifty meters away from the Castle. It only occupied the lower yard but contained all the necessary functions. The small graveyard was only for the use of the clergy and was concentrated in one block, while the garden played the significant role to simulate the Heavenly Garden landscape[5].

3.1.2 The Protestant cemetery after the Reformation (Figure 3, Figure 4). The layout’s transformation: In 1560, the lower yard was consecrated to be a new public cemetery, then the Protestant site was gradually expanded to the upper yard. The cemetery became the main function, while the garden was diminished. The kirkyard offered the Protestant Christians a positive environment for self reflection and a decent burial space. They believed that if they obeyed Reformed Church doctrine and lived a Christian life, they could calmly wait for the Judgment Day after their death. Meanwhile, their descendants could alleviate their grief in the sacred space by religious reflection.

Figure 3 The layout evolution after the Reformation(From Edinburgh mapping the city.) Later two small yards were added, however, they were soon overcrowded with graves. The southern courtyard was used as the Covenanter’s prison. In 1679, more than three hundred Covenanters were imprisoned in the southern yard. They were subjected to very hard treatment, and some were sentenced to be hanged. The event added to the solemn atmosphere, and the southern yard was separately secured.
Figure 4. The planning of Greyfriars kirkyard in 2016

To make use of the outdoor landscaping several artists and photographers paint images of the Edinburgh castle from the perspective of the Kirkyard (Figure 5).

L: The direct castle vantage point, and the kirkyard’s graves erected in seventeenth century on the west wall were obviously borrowed the castle to be the background. (By author)

M: A Romanticised depiction of the signing of the National covenant. (From Greyfriars church’s exhibition)

R: A photography on ancient graves in front of the Castle. (From http://www.greyfriarskirk.com)

Figure 5 Using direct castle vantage point to landscape

The monuments landscaping (Figure 6): The kirkyard is thickly strewn by gravestones which delicately carved like artistic masterpieces. The graveyard is crowded due to the once popular belief that a person who was buried in the precincts of the Franciscans was assured a certain road to heaven. Various tombstone patterns and epitaphs express the Protestants’ appeals to be “blessed by God”, gradually adding to the “human centered focus” of the kirkyard. For example the inscription of George Buchanan reads “one of the most distinguished Reformers in the sixteenth century”; The Martyrs Monument
records that here lies one hundred “noble martyrs for Jesus Christ” [6]. The sorrowful epitaphs were quoted from Holly Bible, Rev 6:9, 11, 7:14 and 2:10. Quotes from the Bible is also prevalent in other citizens’ inscriptions. “Washed us from our sins in his own blood to him be glory” was from Rev 1:5, 6; “Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God.” was from Matt 5:8; “The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of Lord.” was from Job 1:21[7]. The planting landscaping(Figure 7): The majority are indigenous Scottish plants, and the herb beds have been replanted in the kirkyard, for medical, culinary, dyeing and memorial use. Such as in the Women’s bed planted all herbal medicine for women to give a birth, from the pregnancy, labor, breastfeeding to postpartum recovery.

L: The tombstones on the east wall, using inside niches to simulate façade fragments between the building’s pillars. This style is employed to enshrine their deceased relatives.
R: George Buchanan’s monument, is a type of using a bust in the low obelisk to build a solemn commemorative space.

L: The Martyrs Monument is a wall to simulate architecture gables with pediment, no image but full of the inscription, carrying a large amount of information. This design is suitable for memorial groups.
R: The statue of the Loyal Bobby is located the street out of the Kirk gate. Its base is round shape and the dog is squatting to await. This design is suitable for tourists to watch, touch and take pictures.

The graves and monuments on the outside of the building, left is on the east pediment, right is on the south east wall.

Figure 6. Part monuments of the Greyfriars Kirkyard (By author)
3.2 Reconstruct the Architecture (Figure 8)

L: Greyfriars (E) and the Castle (B) in 1513.
M: Without spire it is still taller than ordinary residences. From Edinburgh mapping the city.
R: The Protestant building after the Reformation. A six bays outbuilding with simple buttresses and a squat tower on the west end. From the Greyfriars Edinburgh, in 1647

L: In 1718, an explosion destroyed the west tower, consequently a new partition was built along the eastern fifth columns. Left section is the new building since 1722; right section is the old building since 1613. They have different roofs respectively. (From The epitaphs and monumental inscriptions in Greyfriars Churchyard, Edinburgh.)
R: In 1845’s fire destroyed the old church, the roof and part furniture of the new church. Now they share one rebuilt roof. (By author in 2016)

Figure 8. The architecture facade comparison before and after the Reformation

3.2.1 The building aimed at “Worshiping God” had Catholic traditional facade with a spire, by extruding longitudinally to seek the infinite close to the Heaven, forming the typical medieval Gothic church[8].

3.2.2 The Protestant building “engaged human” oriented design was considered austere and ugly. It was constructed as a six bays outbuilding with simple buttresses and a squat tower on the west end. However, it was rebuilt to be employed in various secular uses the reconstruction was always kept simple, in order to avoid the tendency to embrace “the decadent condition of Gothic architecture”. Wars and fires also shaped the building’s appearance.
3.2.3 Integrated with other denominations’ space. The building has been reserved by different denominations, such as Lady Yester’s Aisle, St John’s Aisle and the New North Church. And there are exhibiting their relics like the communion table, lectern, marble font, and memorial tablets in the Aisles. It also combined with current denominations’ space evolving into today’s local church (Figure 9), and more importantly this is the only church which holds regular Gaelic worship in Edinburgh.

In the forty days before the Lent, Greyfriars minister organized a discussion group, but the address is in the Augustine United Church, and then the reflection service of the Holy Week is in St Columba’s church; In the Tenebrae, the night service in the Eve before Easter is held in the Greyfriars, but the ministers come from St. Columba’s church.

Figure 9. The location map of the incorporated churches of Greyfriars. (By author)

3.2.4 The third space: The Grassmarket Community Project[9]
The charity project operates in the north building of the kirkyard, and the board manages office, catering, Tartan sales, workshop and volunteer departments. Applicants have equal opportunity to become a member of the charity project after completing a registration form and completing an induction program. The ground floor is a cafe, meeting room and kitchen while the second floor is divided into various group rooms. The project not only provides free meals for the homeless, but also offers classes to groups aimed at creating a safe environment in which people can build self esteem. For instance, disabled people in the herb garden group will work for two hours and then share lunch together with group members without discrimination, like weeding loosing up the soil, cleaning and maintaining, and sharing herbal medicinal method and so on. While arts and craft projects are often sold in the northwest corridor to raise money. The choir participates the worship service; Chips from wood workshop will be stocked in the yard for planting soil after the degradation; The primary objective is to blur the lines artificially created in society around marginalized groups such as the disabled, homeless, or those struggling with addiction or mental illness. In order to reconnect disengaged people, they have stepped out of the church building, which is marked with a religious label, to an unchristian space. Their innovation in using the third space to convert has been very successful.
The interior space before the Reformation.
The Friars stand higher, scolding the people who disobeyed the rules, forcing them wearing implements of punishment in a narrow space. (From: History of the Old Greyfriars’ Church Edinburgh.)

The interior space after the Reformation.
Left is the new Greyfriars kirk since 1722; right is the old Greyfriars kirk since 1613. The partition was built then removed repeatedly, finally resulting in a united building in 1938. (From: The Kirk of the Greyfriars, Edinburgh.)

In the thirty two unit modules, visitors center occupied eight modules, and the nave has twenty four ones. Basically the east twelve ones of the nave are the division for “Sacred” use, while the six ones concentrate on the western part of the nave are for “Secular”. To keep the space scale as two to one is very important method to build a “human” sacred space.

Figure 10, The interior space comparison before and after the Reformation

3.3 Reconstruct the interior space (Image 10)

3.3.1 The interior space before the Reformation
The infant Observance of Friars had the typical Catholic features like chancel, chapels or statuary. When it was built, the early Francis refused to accept the gifts. For it is not to be the dwellings of poor men but of the great ones. It used raised icon symbols to guide parishioners to look upward toward heaven. When preaching, all the vision lines are towards to the altar, there is no eye contact among the parishioners.
That was effective approach to create an oppressive and hierarchical worship space.
3.3.2 The interior space after the Reformation
The evolution of interior column grid for now displays eight bays each four columns deep. The Christians’ division in the regular worship is compressed in the western half of the nave. In festivals, interior display changes according to the theme, the vision line become equal because of eye contacted (Figure 11).

L: During the Advent the hall is furnished with a double ringed sitting space focused on the adven candles which are all lit together.
M: The Nitekirk is a meditation activity welcoming the New Year. A plan is offered to guide visitors i the reflection of the past year and the planning of the New Year.
R: The Tenebrae is a tradition night service in the last three days in Holy Week. Half of hall is used, to witness fifteen candles extinguished in a ceremonial rite with singing, reading, and listening together.

Figure 11 The interior planning comparison for different festivals (By author)

The decorative centerpiece no longer displays biblical figures but rather ministers, principles or humanists. The stained glass window is largely transparent glass, decorative patterns are limited to the minimum, keeping the color contrast soft. So the indoor space is light, airy and comfortable (Figure 12).

The sacred space gradually descended from the chancel, and deconstructed the oppressive longitudinal space of the Franciscans’ order, into a Protestant Christians’ social space, emphasizing equality and designed to relive stress.

Figure 12 The interior space of the Greyfriars church. (By author)

4 Conclusion
There are three transformed principles in reconstructing the sacred space: sacred to secular, one faith to multiple denominations, and oppressive to supportive. In term of the design procedure, the methods to reconstruct the physical space are manipulated and duplicated, even reversible. It could answer few space planning questions, like how to pattern the various belief space models, or how to enhance the spiritual tolerance capacity in the public region, and how to integrate “The third space” with blurred boundaries between different belief spaces in the modern city planning. Edinburgh has experienced a rapid growth in population, however, the amount of believers has gradually decreased, and the congregation’s engagement with the community has weakened. However, Greyfriars, the distinctive and inculturated church, is an attractive parish with high vitality in organizing volunteers and helping the
homeless, through combined with other churches, making use of “The third space”, and building a virtual community via the internet.

Greyfriars church is “In the world”, but not “of the world”. It is endeavoring to return to its roots, to practice the rules laid down by St Francis of Assisi in the 13th century[10]:

I firmly command all the friars not to accept coin or money in any manner of way either by their own hands or through an interpose person. […] and to appropriate nothing to themselves, neither house nor place nor anything. As pilgrims and strangers in the world, let them seek alms with confidence and they need feel no shame in doing so, because the Lord made Himself poor in this world for us.

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