

Critical Themes for *Faith and Place Explorations*, 19th March 2015

A: Religious Migration and Transnationalism

An important set of themes to emerge in the 'Perspectives' event concerned the role of international migration and settlement in establishing 'new' religious presences in British cities. Issues which could be explored further include how communities that develop from the migration process also maintain a dynamic relation both to their societies of origin and to the cities and neighbourhoods in which they come to reside. Correspondingly, as discussions throughout the event revealed, these diasporic religious forms present both an opportunity and a challenge to existing social, spatial and institutional arrangements. On the one hand, by claiming a space within the city, 'new' religious groups frequently transform and revitalise urban locations through social engagement as well as cultural and architectural innovation. On the other hand, processes of demographic change and neighbourhood transition can be experienced as socially unsettling, both for the religious community involved and the wider local population. As we have seen, this can create a local politics of resistance and antipathy, some of which can be articulated in the context of planning disputes over new religious sites.

B: Planning & places of worship

A number of issues were raised at the 'Perspectives' event regarding the implications of our discussions for planning and practice. In summary, these were greater religious literacy for planners and greater planning literacy for faith groups, the possibilities around sharing religious space, the suitability or otherwise of planning policy (e.g. D1 use class) and whether revisions are needed in relation to faith groups, and the need for national and local guidance for planners re faith, place and planning, which may well include the sharing of good practice. At the heart of these issues is an ongoing negotiation between faith groups, planning authorities and policy makers, as well as local communities and historic faith groups in terms of how we live with each other in the shared spaces of multicultural cities and regions. There will be a particular focus on these issues at our round table discussion in the afternoon which seeks to identify any policy / implementation changes that are needed.

C: Religious Communities and Built Heritage

Questions of the built heritage of different communities were raised at the 'Perspectives' event and warrant further exploration. It is clear that for some groups, such as the 'newer' Pentecostal churches in London, questions of the preservation of religious buildings were less of a priority. However, for other more established groups among the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim populations, for example, such issues have come much further to the fore. The discussions at the Perspectives event also raised awareness of how dynamic the issue of built heritage is becoming, and the likelihood that recently settled minority groups may also seek to create a 'sense of place' and identity linked to their religious premises in future. Overall, this is an area where sensitive policy development and innovation is clearly required.

D: Theology of place

Questions of theological identity were raised at the last network meeting, and link to the issue of heritage and 'sense of place' addressed above. The discussion revolved around the extent to which the identities of faith groups are invested in their places of worship. For some, particular architectural expressions were important, for others, the exterior appearance had limited significance for a group's theological identity, where community practices and the functionality of space were more theologically distinctive. A key question for some faith groups was the significance of being 'placed' in a particular locality alongside serving a dispersed associational network of members. Also linked to these questions of theological identity is the question of sharing religious sites; how theologically sustainable is such an option for different faith traditions or even between the same faith tradition, as well as across the increasingly blurred uses of secular/sacred places?