



# Global Faculty Initiative

**The Faculty Initiative  
seeks to promote the integration  
of Christian faith and academic disciplines  
by bringing theologians into conversation with scholars  
across the spectrum of faculties  
in research universities  
worldwide.**

[www.globalfacultyinitiative.net](http://www.globalfacultyinitiative.net)

Disciplinary Responses to Theology Brief Preview

## **LOVE EXPRESSED IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF A PUBLIC LIVING ROOM WITH A DIFFERENCE**

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Just imagine...you are a twenty-year old asylum seeker, a migrant from a Middle Eastern Country, warm but unsafe. You are now a lonely stranger in Helsinki where the winter snow and the winds blowing in from the sea are hostile. You live in a youth hostel, do not know anybody and life is exceedingly hard.

But one day you discover a large public building in the centre of the city which is warm and welcoming for seven days a week, open from 8.00 am until 9.00 pm. It is a library, or more accurately a public living-room. Here, you can have a warm shower, wash your clothes, cook your food, be taught how to use a sewing machine to repair your torn jacket, go to the cinema, read books and newspapers, contact family and friends at home via the INTERNET, attend a course to improve your language skills and gradually make friends.

Here, within the [Oodi Central Library](https://oodihelsinki.fi) vulnerable people—migrants, elderly, homeless, disabled or the lonely—are welcomed and treated with essential love, understanding and respect, not ignored, isolated and marginalised.

(More information can be found by Googling - OODI Central Library Helsinki) <https://oodihelsinki.fi>

Pondering Christ's second commandment has always been an utterly demanding injunction that has proved to be a continual challenge in all my social relationships. And although I have been studying, practising, teaching or writing about architecture for over 70 years, it was not until I read Oliver O'Donovan's lucid essay that I considered whether the commissioning, design, construction and patterns of use of a building could be regarded as a response to loving my neighbour as myself. (*'Love is ...a practical purpose...'*)

Oliver reflected that:

'Love is to be described at large, as an unfolding practical relation of the subject to its object, in which there are many moments, passive and active: admiration, desire, practical purpose, settled commitments, identification, etc.'

Then I recalled my 2019 visit to the Oodi Library, designed by ALA Architects, completed in 2018, and the sense of wonder and disbelief my wife and I experienced as we wandered around this most unusual of public buildings. It was buzzing with

life and industry, occupied with crowds of people of all ages and varied nationalities, all being enabled to pursue their interests and everyday needs within these generous spaces.

More than any building I have experienced, here was a public living space in the centre of Helsinki that actively and passively, through its responsive design and varied functions, manages to accurately express that great second commandment. A rare building indeed, one that attracts up to 20,000 daily visitors, that inspires public authorities everywhere with its magnanimous approach and the example it offers as a challenge to any socially concerned architect and planner.

As I enthusiastically described this building and its many functions to a retired Archdeacon of the Church of England, he responded that it seemed as if this was a building that Christ himself would have deeply welcomed.



Oodi is a living meeting place at Kansalaistori square, at the heart of Helsinki



Sewing Machines



Staircase with double handrails at different heights – one for children and the other for adults



Computer workstations, including 3D printing zone



Parents and Children play and reading area of the Oodi Library

*(Photographs by Ian Davis (2019) free of copyright)*

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