

The Space Between: A Christian Engagement with the Built Environment

by Eric O. Jacobsen

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Reviewed by David W. Gill

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Eric Jacobsen (PhD, Fuller) is pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Tacoma, Washington. His earlier book was *Sidewalks In the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith*. *The Space in Between* continues Jacobsen's effort to think not just theologically but very practically about buildings, their design and configuration and location --- in relation to each other and to the environment and to individuals and groups of people. Buildings and spaces are embedded with values. Some say "come together," "talk" or "play." Others say "be in awe" or "go away" or whatever.

Jacobsen takes pains to review how the automobile has done more to disconnect us than to connect us and how zoning has often destroyed neighborhoods. He draws inspiration from Jane Jacobs's *Death and Life of Great American Cities*. He discusses the historic role of monuments and thresholds and the central place of the church building in many traditional communities --- not quite the same as today's suburban megachurches miles outside of town, accessible only by car, and surrounded by huge parking lots. The meaning of church changes; the meaning of neighborhood and community changes. These changes in our cities and our built environment have had a real impact on our families, our politics, and our churches. The question is whether we mindlessly move forward accepting these huge modifications.

What Eric Jacobsen has done is to get us to think, deeply, broadly, sociologically, and, above all, theologically about the built environment in which we live and work and worship. Christians need to have renewed minds that engage every aspect of life. We must think, discuss, pray, and act. After reading a book like this many readers will want to move to a neighborhood where real life and community can occur (like my street in Rockridge, north Oakland) for all the reasons Eric describes: walkable streets, neighbors on porches chatting with passers-by, locally-owned and run stores and restaurants two blocks away, parks and playgrounds and churches close by. But not everyone can move to --- or rebuild --- a neighborhood like this. Obviously if we have a vote on city zoning and development policies we can have some little impact. But even if we are living in "exurbia" we must not give up on the challenge of creating alternatives and compensations for what is otherwise missing. The big shopping mall is not my thing, but I know it does fulfill some neighborhood and main street and community building functions at the creative initiative of some who will not give up. Anyway, either *The Space Between* or *Sidewalks in the Kingdom* by Eric Jacobsen would be a great choice for an adult class or small group to read and discuss together.