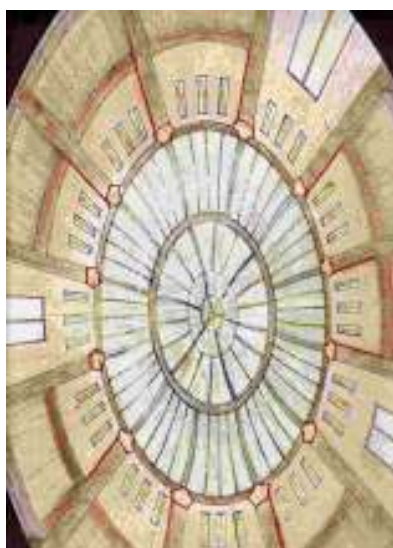


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## The Deventer Hall



An artist's impression looking up to the triple dome of the Contemplation Hall

### ***A Centre for the practices of Prayer, Meditation and Contemplation***

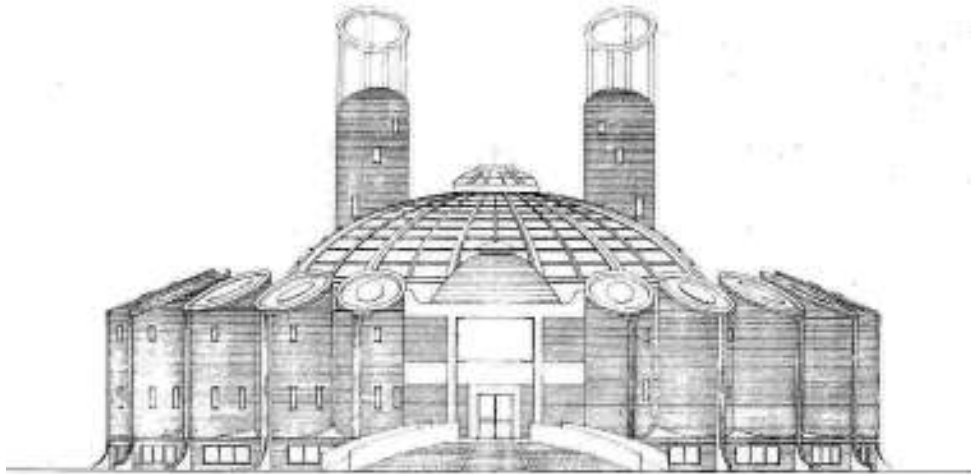
In 1987, while I was studying architecture at the University of North London, I needed both a client and a good idea for my final thesis. I was lucky to find both when a good friend and meditation teacher became my client and gave me a very simple but innovative brief for “a public building able to handle individual prayer, spoken and silent, open to anyone irrespective of their language or creed”.

With the help of two fellow meditators, we worked for about a year developing the original idea further and so “The Deventer Project” was born, whose aim is to build centres for the practices of prayer, meditation and contemplation worldwide. My design of the “Deventer Hall” is a building typology which fulfils these aims and it was deemed good enough to earn me my final architectural diploma.

Ten people donated £100 each in good faith towards the project's aims and so they became its first founder members. I hope one day there is enough money to build a Deventer Hall and so make manifest the noble desire that humans have to live and interact within a world of a larger order. Donations to the Deventer Project, no matter how small, are always welcome.

To give the reader an overall feeling for the project only the original architectural drawings and model photographs have been included within this article. However, over the last twenty years or so the Deventer Hall's form has evolved and so today there exist other design variations that also fulfil the project's original stated aims and architectural brief.

Some time later, after the first design had been completed on paper, the following article by Robin Waterfield – reproduced here in full – appeared in the diversions section of the *Financial Times* on 23 December 1989.



Front Elevation to Deventer Hall

## **Planet Earth**

### **Religion for the future.**

A new project aims to found buildings dedicated to prayer and contemplation.

*The Deventer Project is concerned with global, but non-uniform, religion for the future. Robin Waterfield outlines the thinking behind the project, of which he is the chairman.*

On weekends when the weather is warm, the British are drawn, as if by some force greater than themselves, to the seaside. Some drive Porsches and BMWs, some 2CVs and clapped out Minis; some ride bicycles, and others even walk. The question is this: "Once they are all out of their cars and on the beaches or in the sea, how can you tell the Porsche-owners from the pedestrians?"

The cars in my analogy represent religions. Religion is a natural human striving (which is why anyone who pretends to reject religion is in fact left with a God-shaped hole). What is being sought is something bigger than oneself. However, as we all know, it is not easy to gain access to a bigger, meaningful existence. The doctrines and practices of a religion provide the means for people to grow into a bigger world. In short, religions are vehicles. Some may take them as ends in themselves (just as some people stay in their cars by the sea), but might there not be further to go, something bigger to dive into? If the

members of any two religions meet and talk, but fail to lift themselves over the hurdle of doctrine, they will be easily recognisable. They will be as distinct as a Porsche-driver and a pedestrian. However, if they let go of the vehicle and mingle on the beach of real experience, they will undoubtedly find that their experiences, unclothed, are all but identical.

Now to turn the analogy into philosophy and theology. Philosophically, consider the difference between “oneness” and “unity” (despite the fact that the words are often used interchangeably). “Oneness” implies individuality: every single thing in the universe is one thing, and therefore has oneness. “Unity” implies a gathering together of all things.

Theologically, we may say (after the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart) that God is one, but Godhead is a unity – or the Unity. Every god is one, whether it has a recognised religion formed around it, or whether it is your or my personal god. There are many Gods, but you cannot count Unity. Unity cannot be conceptualised, imagined, formulated in words or images, because it is greater than the sum of its imaginable parts; it would be a small Divine that could be grasped by the human mind. Unity cannot even be approached, because that implies separation between you and it. It can only be acknowledged.

The aim of the Deventer Project is simple. It is to build buildings dedicated to the practice and development of prayer, meditation and contemplation – in short, of any form of non-accidental access to the Divine. The buildings would be altogether non-denominational and would be open to anyone who wishes to perform or learn such practices, in private or with others, in silence or not, and whether or not these practices fall under those of an established religion.

The buildings the project intends to establish would all be based on a common architectural design, which is complete on paper. The design is based on numerical laws representing the descent of utter simplicity into relative complexity in which simplicity is nevertheless comprehensible. But these principles are implicit: the overall design is such that it is recognisably religious, but does not conform to the architectural idioms of any religion in particular. Essentially, it consists of a central domed hall surrounded by a corridor off which are ‘cells’, so that the building as a whole allows for both private and group practice of prayer, meditation or contemplation. The building has an entrance hall designed to strike a note of order and freedom; and twin elliptical towers soar from the rear of the building. The basic pattern of central hall and surrounding cells could be built out of marble on a grand scale in a Western environment, or out of mud in an African village, and it would still conform to the same principles.

The Deventer Project is named after the original home of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life. This movement – its most famous early member was the German monk Thomas à Kempis – is little known in this country, though better known in Europe. Its concern was to make knowledge available on a wide scale, chiefly through establishing both lay and clerical schools and colleges throughout Europe. While acknowledging the precedent, the Deventer Project recognises that the wide scale today is a global scale. The Deventer Project holds then, that it is the same divine which is worshipped in all times and in all places under the many guises of the many different religions, sects and sub-sects; and it holds that no religion or philosophy possesses a monopoly on religious truth or on the way to approach the Divine. This might sound obvious to some people. And it might sound no different from the familiar ecumenical and interfaith movements, or from the Baha’i religion. If it were identical to these, the Deventer Project would be redundant. It is not redundant. Consider this apparent contradiction: how can it claim that there is only one Divine, and in the same breath offer a home for anyone, of any denomination (or none at all) to worship? The first suggests an interfaith crusade; the second contradicts such integration.

But if the “one Divine” is understood as “Unity”, then the Deventer Project’s aims come into focus. The reason for building such buildings is not just to provide a common home for all the different religions, nor just to cater for the huge numbers that are

homeless. The reason is to create an environment in which Unity can be glimpsed – no more is possible. But it cannot be glimpsed by thinking or vague feeling; and it cannot be glimpsed by “dialogue” between different sects or religions, because such dialogue is a meeting of things which are recognised as different – i.e. as onenesses. It is worth noting in passing that it is always the concern of onenesses of any order to preserve their own integrity – even at the expense of making war on other onenesses.

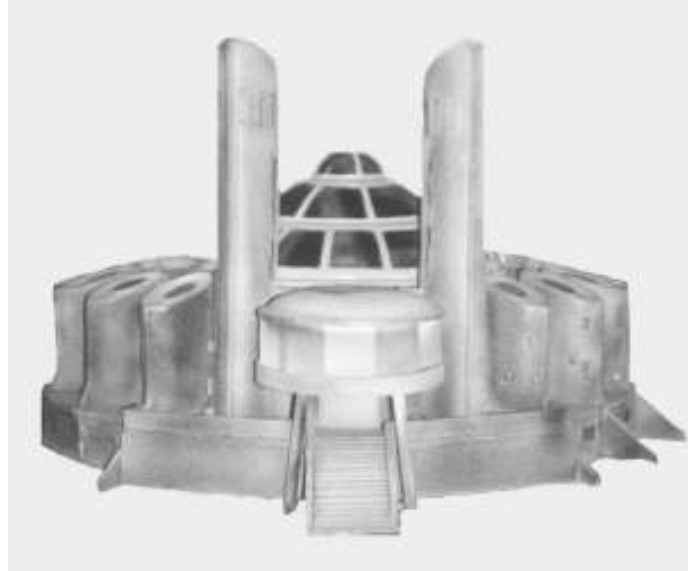
Unity can perhaps be glimpsed or acknowledged within a building (or an attitude) which encompasses all spiritual strivings, whether or not they conform to a religion, and practically recognises them all as equal, while allowing differences to flourish. Unity encompasses them all and is not affected in the slightest. A humble parallel is that a Deventer Hall can encompass them all and still retain its own architectural nature.

The project is attempting to gain charitable status – which is quite difficult under British law, which seems (for perfectly understandable reasons) to require from a religious charity specific doctrines and/or specific forms of worship. This is plainly the opposite of what the project intends. It is not trying to convert anyone; its sole aim is as stated above. It is testing the water: there may be many people who share the same convictions. If you care to, please contact us.



Front Model View

Read also Robin Waterfield's other related article "The Quiet Revolution" First published in *Gnosis: A Journal of the Western Inner Traditions*, no. 25, Fall 1992, pp. 22-29. See the *Gnosis* website, [www.lumen.org](http://www.lumen.org)  
You can find it in the library section of the meditator site [www.meditator.org](http://www.meditator.org)



Rear Model View

## Architect's brief

- A building that is able to handle individual prayer, spoken and silent.
- The building should be open to anybody who wishes to pray, meditate or contemplate, alone or with others. Anyone can practice in their own language or creed.
- Anyone can learn or teach meditation to others within the building.
- The building must be recognisable in its own right and its form should not favour any current or past architectural style or dialect. However, it should have an identity which is inviting and compatible with the street elevations to be found in the city, village or countryside.
- Wherever possible the visible dimensions of the building should conform to the golden proportion. The form of the building should be able to be constructed anywhere in the world so a study should be made of possible methods of construction using different materials.
- The building should not be built in areas of social unrest or where town-planning laws distort the building's architectural form.
- The viewing towers should be able to be seen from the front of the building
- The acoustics of the cells and the main hall should enhance the practices of prayer, meditation and contemplation and also provide good sound insulation to the inhabitants.

## Specific Requirements

### Ground Floor

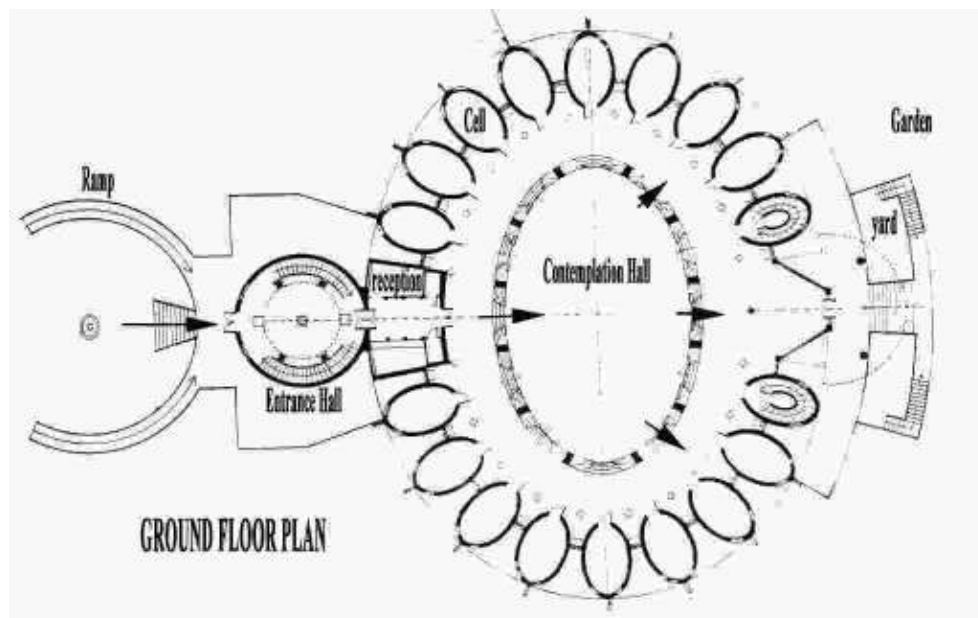
- A reception area, which is welcoming and which reflects the building's identity and function.
- Stairs and lifts to all areas of the building.
- Cloakrooms and advertising area.
- Circulation space (perambulatory), linking private cells, main hall and gardens.
- Private cells capable of seating 1-8 people for the purpose of silent or spoken prayer or meditation.
- The 'Contemplation Hall' capable of holding 200 people comfortably even when seated in a cross-legged fashion. A single person should not feel oppressed when seated alone in the Hall.
- A garden area at the rear of the building. Parking facilities for 100 cars.

### First Floor

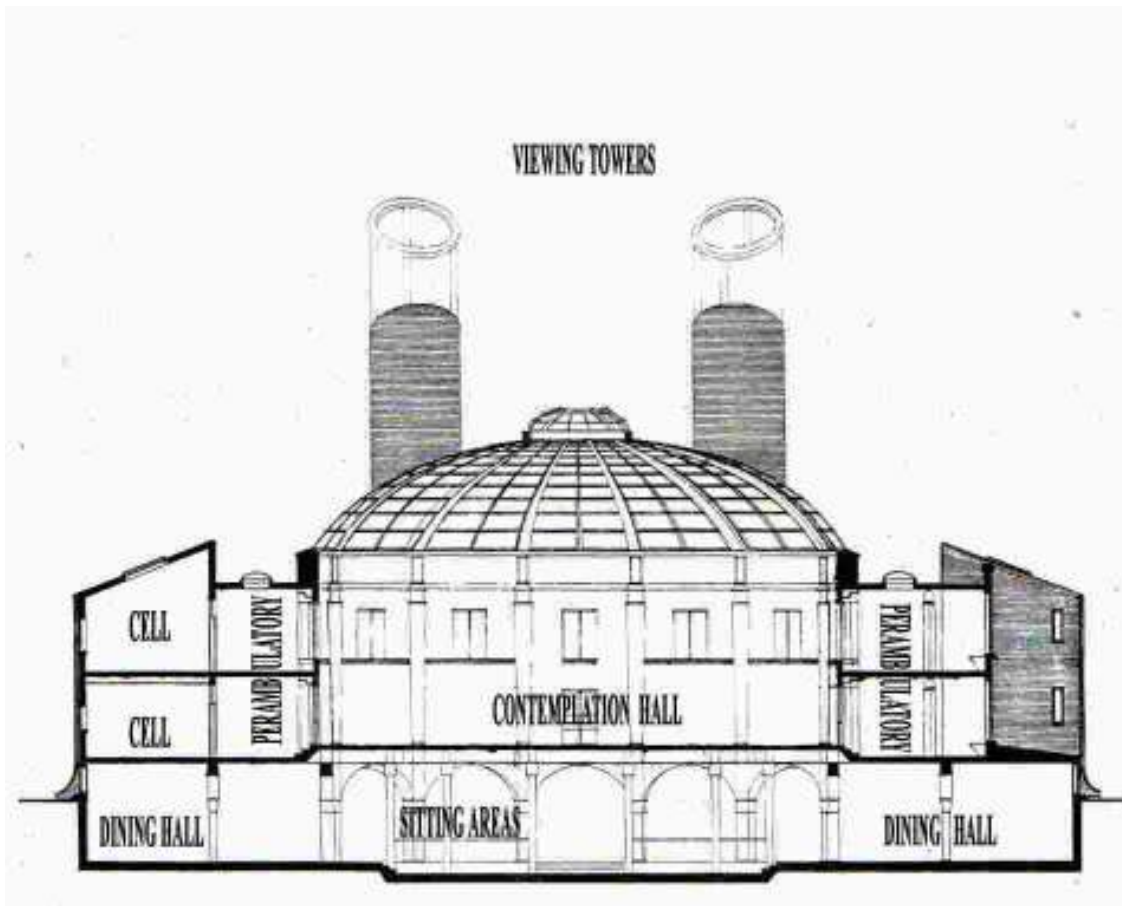
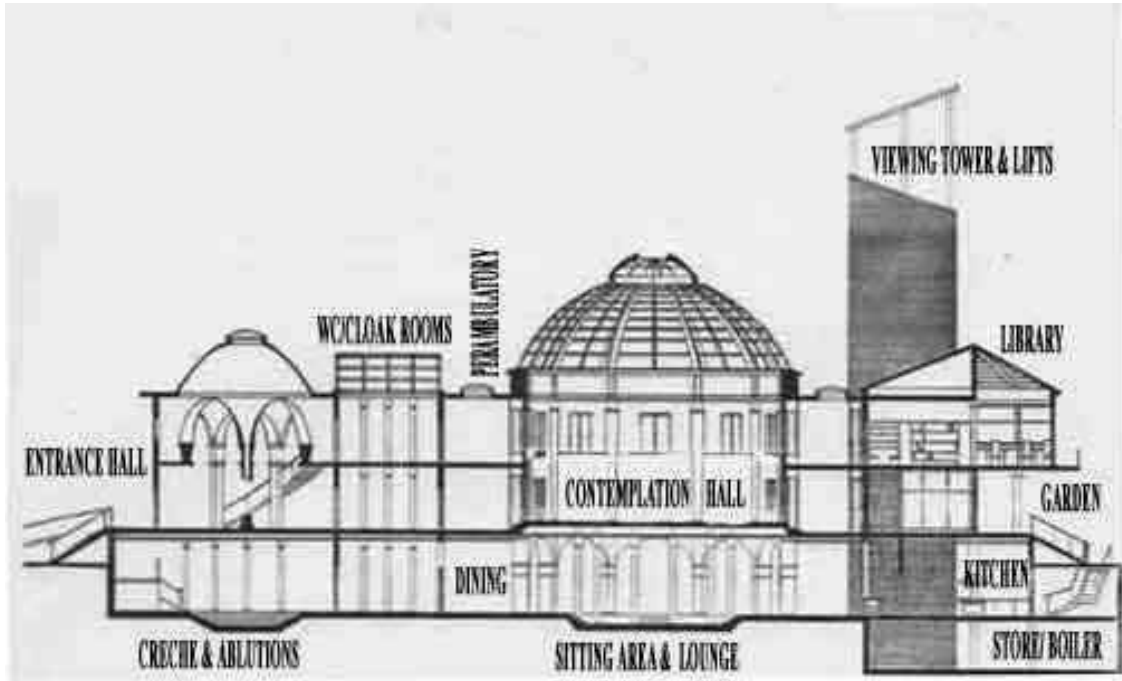
- Private cells capable of seating 1-8 people for the purpose of silent or spoken prayer or meditation.
- A study/library and archives section situated in a quiet part of the building.
- WC/Restrooms.
- Stairs and lifts to all areas of the building.

### Lower Ground Floor

- Toilets, and separate ablution facilities. Boiler, service and storage areas
- A crèche and play area for children.
- A spacious kitchen with easy access to the dining-hall area. Storage space and service yard.
- A dining hall to cater for 1-200 people.
- A social sitting area which can double up with the dining hall. Vertical circulation to all areas.
- Vertical circulation to all areas of the building including viewing towers.



Long and short sections through the building.



## Design Philosophy of the Deventer Hall

The brief for a Deventer Hall is unique and probably without precedent. It aims to provide a neutral space where people from any faith, or none, can pray, meditate or contemplate under the same roof and in a peaceful environment.

Who would use such a building?

The fact is that many are already doing something similar to this. In many airports around the world one may find a secluded room that is labelled “chapel” or “meditation room”, which anyone is allowed to enter. Usually one would find there a small bookcase and a few icons or symbols from one of today’s major religions in each of the four corners of the room, ready to be used. This gesture by the state’s architects acknowledges the fact that there are many people travelling who also need a space in which to pray, meditate or contemplate in their own fashion and that it is important to offer them this space.

The Deventer Hall aims to do a little more than this, though. It aims to create a powerful environment that helps to raise the practitioner’s awareness, so that a larger order of reality, common to all spiritual practices, can be glimpsed. It also offers the opportunity to its users to communicate with each other and to even learn meditation should they wish to do so.

Today, in the twenty-first century, when people can interact with one another through their computers almost at the speed of thought, and when as a species we communicate on a daily basis with people from all corners of the globe, we need to learn fast how to cope with this complexity and how to protect our own integrity in an efficient manner. So when it comes to practising our own spiritual path, we need to perceive directly what we have in common with other beings around us, so that we can understand what they are doing and respond to them from a place of knowledge and affection. Without such insight we are likely to react in ignorance and try to suppress anything that is different to what we habitually believe to be true. This leads to a host of problems.

The Deventer Hall is a new building typology that celebrates the differences in spiritual practices by creating a physical space where all these may take place safely. However, it stays detached in its form by not showing allegiance to any particular architectural style and by not displaying in its design the recognisable sacred symbols of any religion or spiritual system. Its form had to be built on a foundation of objectivity, and to this end the golden mean proportion was deliberately chosen and used throughout the design process. The golden mean often dictates the sizes and relationships between the building’s structural elements and the overall architectural composition. For instance, both the cells and Contemplation Hall are in the shape of a golden ellipse – an ellipse with two of its axes in golden mean ratio to one another.

What is the golden proportion? It is a special relationship between any two terms, where the smaller term is to the larger as the larger term is to the smaller plus the larger. This ideal relationship, often talked about in ancient philosophical writings and also used widely in architecture by the master builders of old, expresses something about the optimum equilibrium between the macrocosm of the divine world and the microcosm of man. In the picture below you can see how the proportions of the Parthenon temple in



Greece are in accord with the golden mean, which might be the reason why it is universally felt to be one of the most beautiful pieces of architecture ever built by man.



This proportion or mean has been named “golden” because it expresses the most harmonious balance possible between any two elements. People all over the world usually agree that objects with golden proportions are attractive to humans. This is perhaps because the golden proportion is also found within many natural forms such as leaves, shells, webs and also the ratio between the limbs and torso of the human body itself. An example of this is that for most adults the distances from foot to navel and then again from navel to top of the head are usually in a golden mean to one another

In mathematics the golden mean is found in the Fibonacci series:

0, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34...

(to find the next number in this sequence simply add the two previous numbers to one another eg.  $13 + 21 = 34$ ,  $21 + 34 = 55$  etc)

The ratio of any one number to its neighbour approximates 1.618. As the numbers get larger the closer is their approximation to the ‘golden mean’ proportion.

(i.e.  $34/21 \sim 1.618...$ )

Direction is implied in any journey one makes to get to the heart of a building. This journey may take the form of an ascent (a temple at the top of a mountain), a descent (a grotto, the labyrinth, the catacombs), or a processional journey (such as a route from the aisle to the altar, or a procession through various courts before entering a sacred space). The Deventer Hall provides many such journeys. From the entrance hall, through the Contemplation Hall and into the garden, the journey could be a processional route. The space that surrounds the main hall and which also provides access to all the cells is called the “perambulatory”, that is wide enough for groups to do walking meditation. Ascending to the top of the viewing towers will give one a panoramic view of the building and the surrounding grounds. The spaces in the lower ground floor are intimate and suitable for people to get together to chat and eat, and there is space where children can play. The garden would offer many opportunities for outdoor activities.

The orientation of the building as a whole is such that when approached from the road one can see the three “corners” of the building – those of the entrance, one of its sides and the two viewing towers. In this way there will be a gradual unveiling of the building’s form as the visitor progresses towards the building. The Deventer Hall was designed as a typology which can be built anywhere in the world. Its curved contours would mean that it could be situated in a city square as well as in isolated sites.

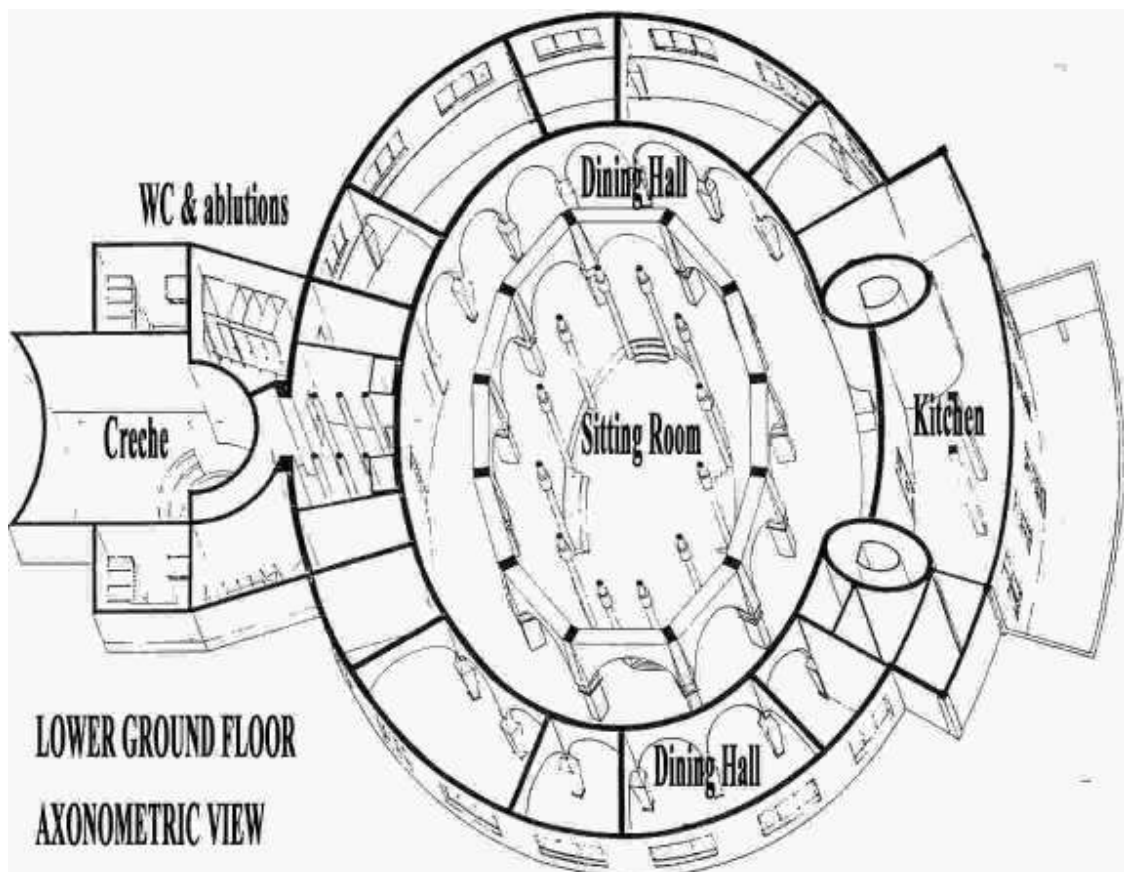
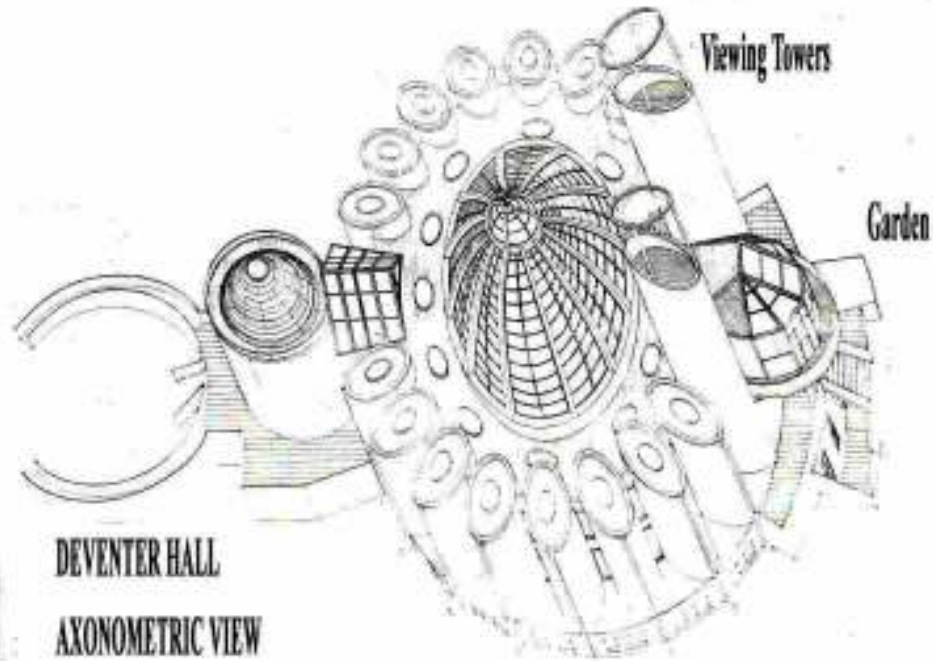
The orientation of the cells within the building are not fixed in respect to the four cardinal directions. Since this is a public building open to anyone, irrespective of their creed, the various cells should be able to face any of the compass points, and enable anyone to meditate facing the direction of their choice without having to face the corner of a room. To achieve this, a “golden ellipse” was chosen as the most appropriate form for the cells and the “Contemplation Hall”. The golden ellipse implies a harmonious development of

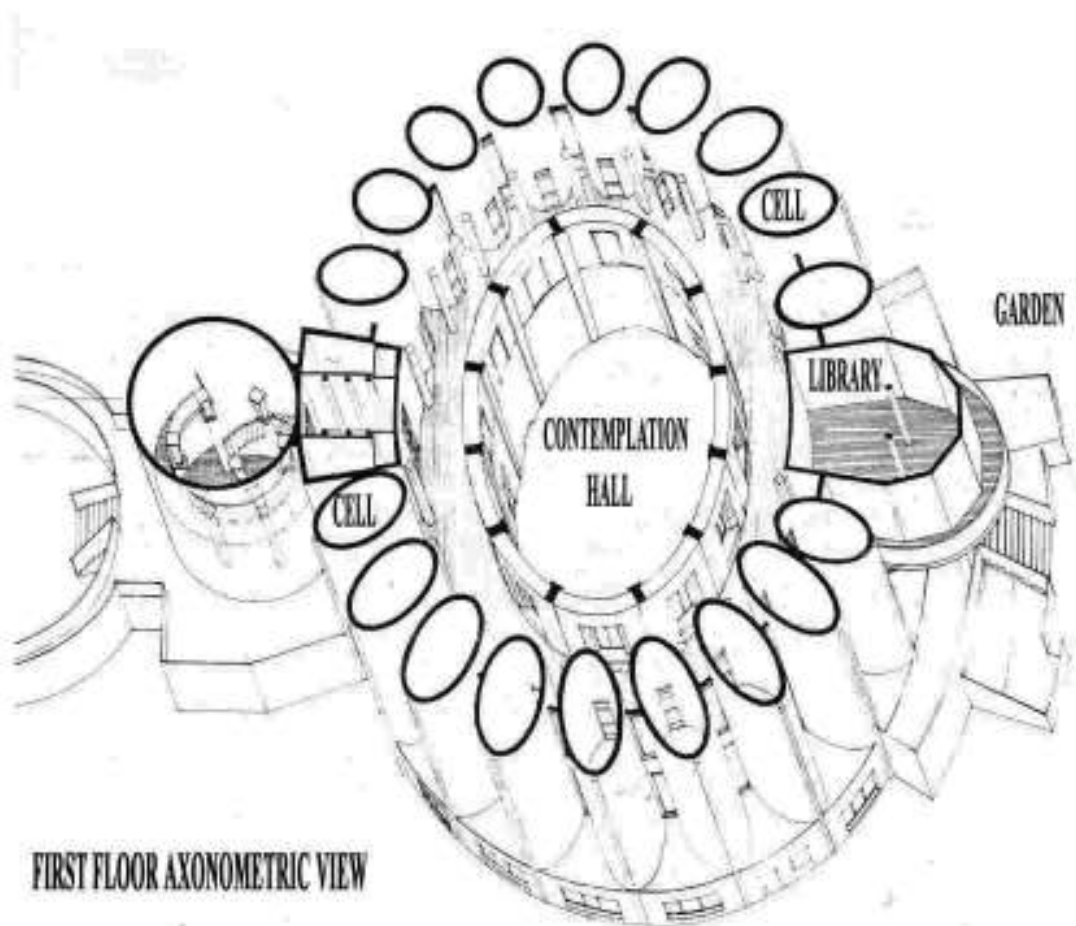
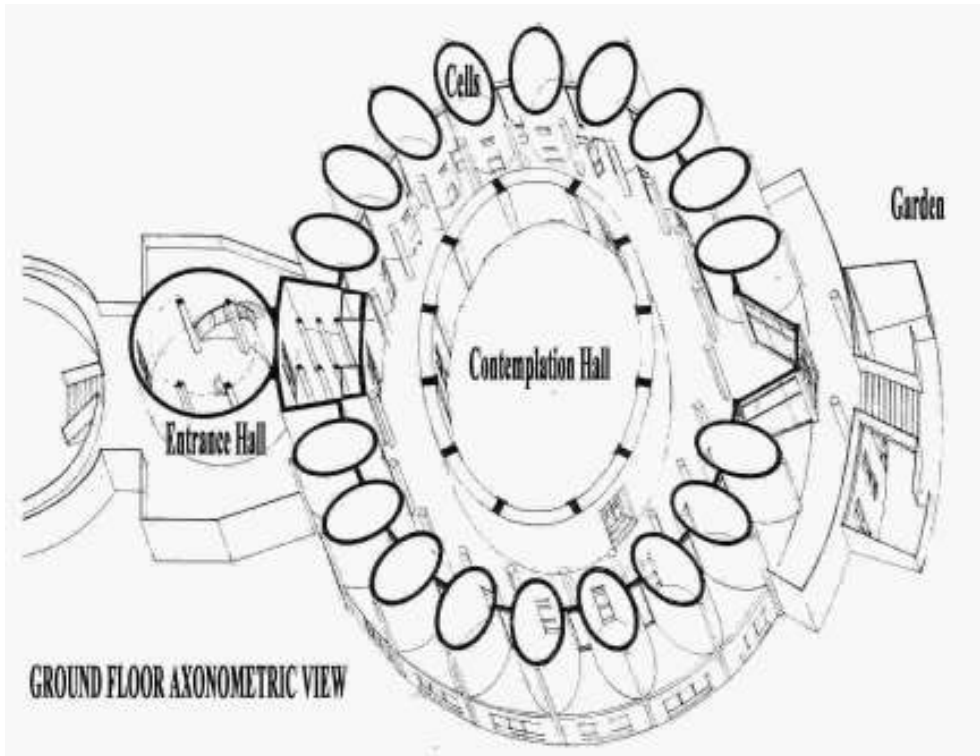
space from the circle, which in nature is egocentric, to the bifocal ellipse, the construction of which is based on the hyperbola, a symbol of infinite expansion.

A lot of attention was given to the acoustics of the cells and main hall. There is excellent sound insulation between the various spaces on the horizontal and vertical planes. People will be able to chant, sing, or dance within their cells without the fear of disturbing their neighbours. Within the confines of the Contemplation Hall, however, only silent practice will be encouraged, unless it is being used by a group that shares the same belief system or language.



Artist's impression of the Entrance Hall.







## Contacts

If you feel in sympathy with the aims and ideals of the Deventer Project, and would like to be involved in realising it, please contact us.

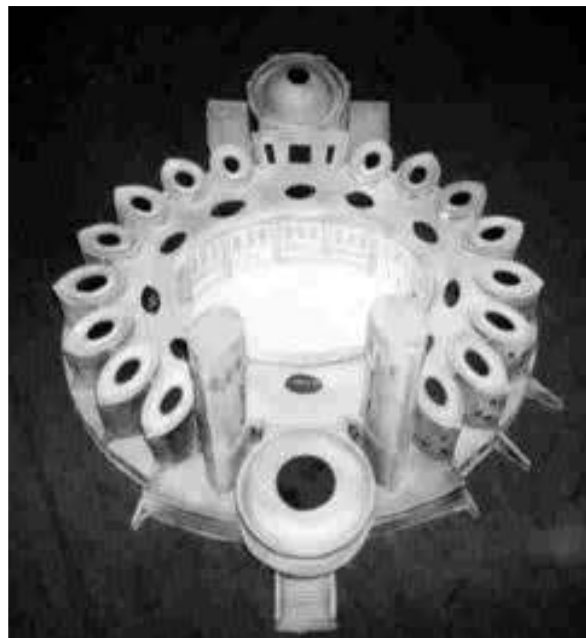
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