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Elise E. Schlecht
Name

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Title A Home for the Soul: Materiality, Imagination, and the Medieval English Anchorhold

Author Elise E. Schlecht

Degree Master of Arts

Program Art History

Approved by the Committee

Signed by:
1EA95B75F5DC423...

Christina E. Crawford
Advisor

Signed by:
Michelle Armstrong-Partida
9EDF30F6BF3D47B...

Michelle Armstrong-Partida
Committee Member

Signed by:
B3B198CD97904F4...

Lisa Lee
Committee Member

Committee Member

Committee Member

Committee Member

Accepted by the Laney Graduate School:

_____

Kimberly Jacob Arriola, Ph.D, MPH
Dean, James T. Laney Graduate School

_____

Date

A Home for the Soul:
Materiality, Imagination, and the Medieval English Anchorhold

By

Elise E. Schlecht
MARS-REERS, Columbia University, 2022

Advisor: Christina E. Crawford, PhD

An abstract of
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Abstract

A Home for the Soul:
Materiality, Imagination, and the Medieval English Anchorhold
By Elise E. Schlecht

The medieval anchorhold was an austere space of physical and spiritual challenge in which anchoresses, religious women who removed themselves from public life and lived in perpetual confinement for the purpose of uninterrupted contemplation of the divine, imagined and acted out their devotions. Medievalists have written extensively on anchoresses from historical and textual perspectives, leaving the architecture of the enclosed relatively untouched and the impact of physical deprivation on the religious imagination unexplored. I utilize philosopher Gaston Bachelard's analysis of the effect of the hermit's hut on the poetic imagination, and Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa's theories of embodiment, material relationships, and the architectural imagination, to address directly the architecture of the anchorhold. I examine the domestic guidelines found in the *Ancrene Riwle* (thirteenth century) and Richard Rolle's *Form of Perfect Living* (fourteenth century) to identify and interpret how the designers of anchorholds implemented the textual directions.I rely primarily on architectural and textual evidence from Medieval England, since many of the best preserved examples lie in that territory, though I also alight in twentieth-century Rome to explore Sister Nazarena of Jesus' cell, and touch on the architecture of Belgian beguinages. Despite the fact that anachoresis was practiced across Europe, this exploration of Medieval English anchorholds, in dialogue with their design guidelines, complements textual analysis with spatial analysis. Placing these medieval prescriptions for devotional space in conversation with Bachelard's and Pallasmaa's theories, I emphasize the active role architecture played as a physical and metaphorical mediator between the anchoress and the state of divine understanding to which she aspired.

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Contents

> The abbess unlocked a door, and we entered a narrow vestibule, where the priest used to sit while hearing her confession and where the nuns would leave food, other necessities, and the materials for her manual labor. A second door had a metal grate covered with a piece of burlap; the anchoress could be heard without being seen. The abbess unlocked the second door. The room was dark; she threw open a large window, and soft spring sunlight flooded the room. It was clean and bare; the only furnishings were three large cabinets, a bookcase, two low stools–all of unvarnished wood–and a bamboo armchair. The chair had been brought to her room on the evening of her death….
>
> At the first thought of addressing a word to the departed anchoress I almost heard something–a "voice" both strong and gentle telling me to address my prayers to God alone. And then came an invitation to enter into the same quiet, spiritual space where Nazarena prayed….[1]

Thus Father Thomas Matus described his experience of the anchorhold of Sister Nazarena of Jesus. On its surface, the spiritual profundity of the anchorhold—a cell typically adjoining a church or monastery and housing a recluse, known as an anchoress or anchorite, who had vowed to permanently "retreat from the world and lead a life of prayer"—seems to be at odds with its humble physical form.[2] However, the impulse to heavenly communion that so moved Matus existed not in spite of the humility of the space, but because of it. Modest scale, removed location, and simple materials came together to create a space of contemplative solitude meant to facilitate closeness with God.[3] The anchorhold not only acted as a spatial container for ascetic devotion, but was actively designed to create a physically and spiritually challenging environment conducive to introspection, devotion, and transcendence.

The anchorhold was an austere space of physical and spiritual challenge in which the anchoress imagined and acted out devotions she had seen, heard, and read about. The cell's ascetic blankness was one of many deliberate sensory challenges of the space that worked to

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[1] Thomas Matus, "Prologue," in *Nazarena: An American Anchoress* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1998), 3–4.
[2] P. J. P. Goldberg, "Clerks, Clerics, Ecclesiastics and the Religious," in *Medieval England: A Social History 1250-1550* (London: Arnold, 2004), 126.
[3] Jeffrey Hamburger, "The Visual and the Visionary: The Image in Late Medieval Monastic Devotions," *Viator* 20 (1989): 167, https://doi.org/10.1484/j.viator.2.301353.

engage the body, consciousness, and soul. As asserted by architect and theoretician Juhani Pallasmaa, architectural spaces are "amplifiers of emotions."[4] Such spaces "reinforce sensations of belonging or alienation, invitation or rejection, tranquillity or despair. A landscape or work of architecture cannot, however, create feelings. Through their authority and aura, they evoke and strengthen our own emotions and reflect them back to us as if these feelings of ours had an external source."[5] In kind, the anchorhold was a concentrated spatial invitation to follow the path of Christ's suffering in all its physical and material deprivation, to trust in Him as the ultimate companion and protector despite said deprivation, and to embody this belief to the point of ecstasy. Paralleling the spiritual companionship of the clergy and the saints, the architecture of the anchorhold became a third protagonist—a mediator—in the relationship between the anchoress and the divine. More than merely four walls and a roof, the anchorhold provided the devotee with countless spatial promises and obstacles both inviting and challenging the prospect of closeness with God.

Anchoritic cells were uniquely gendered spaces in which both male and female religious assumed the role of *sponsa Christi* regardless of earthly gender.[6] Analyses of medieval texts by Rotha Mary Clay and Ann Warren have demonstrated that the majority of individuals enclosed in English anchorholds were women, while the hermit was traditionally a man.[7] Male anchorites

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[4] Juhani Pallasmaa and Matteo Zambelli, "Amplifiers of Emotions," in *Inseminations: Seeds for Architectural Thought*, (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 3.
[5] Pallasmaa and Zambelli, "Amplifiers of Emotions," 3.
[6] Goldberg, "Clerks, Clerics, Ecclesiastics," 133; for discussions of the gender-neutral visions of Jesus and spousal devotion, see Flora Lewis, "The Wound in Christ's Side and the Instruments of the Passion: Gendered Experience and Response," in *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence*, edited by Lesley Smith and Jane H. M. Taylor (London: British Library, 1997), 204–29, and Sara Lipton, "'The Sweet Lean of His Head': Writing about Looking at the Crucifix in the High Middle Ages," *Speculum* 80, no. 4 (2005): 1172–1208, https://doi.org/10.1017/s003871340000138x.
[7] Rotha Mary Clay, "Anchorites in Church and Cloister," in *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914), 73; Rotha Mary Clay, "Town Hermits," in *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914), 66–72; Ann K. Warren, "Solitaries, Sites, and Support," in *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England* (University of California Press, 1985), 19–22; Ann K. Warren, "Bishops and Anchorites: Procedure and Protection," in *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England* (University of California Press,

were not unheard of (Saints Leobardus, Ghislain, and Wulfric are notable examples), however as the majority of inhabitants of anchorholds were women, and this study is informed by the wealth of scholarship on female Christian spaces, I will henceforth refer to the inhabitant as "anchoress." Similarly, as many of the best preserved anchorholds are found in England, I primarily rely on architectural and textual evidence from Medieval England (albeit with brief forays into the aforementioned Nazarena's cell in twentieth-century Rome and the architecture of Belgian beguinages to highlight the manner in which their forms fostered material-spiritual relationships comparable to those of the medieval anchorhold). Despite the fact that anachoresis was practiced across Europe, the comparison of Medieval English anchoritic architecture to the guidelines motivating its design adds a spatial dimension to the understanding of anchoritic space that cannot be gleaned from text alone.

Clay, Warren, P. J. P. Goldberg, Tom Licence, and other medievalists have written extensively on anchoresses from historical and textual perspectives, leaving the architecture of the enclosed relatively untouched and the impact of physical deprivation on the religious imagination unexplored. I endeavor to rectify this oversight and answer the call of Jeffrey Hamburger to examine the physical factors that encouraged visionary experience in female religious spaces, considering the contexts that conditioned monastic simplicity and mapping the "topography of religious experience within enclosure."[8] Following philosopher Gaston Bachelard's analysis of the effect of the hermit's hut on the poetic imagination, I turn to the anchorhold.[9] I examine the domestic guidelines of the *Ancrene Riwle* and Richard Rolle's *Form of Perfect Living* to identify and interpret their implementation in the design of extant

1985),80; Ann K. Warren, "Aristocratic and Gentry Support," in *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England* (University of California Press, 1985), 205.

[8] See Jeffrey Hamburger, "Art, Enclosure and the Cura Monialium: Prolegomena in the Guise of a Postscript," *Gesta* 31, no. 2 (1992): 110, 123, https://doi.org/10.2307/767044.

[9] Gaston Bachelard, "The House. From Cellar to Garret. The Significance of the Hut," in *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas with a foreword by Etienne Gilson (New York: The Orion Press, 1964), 31–7.

anchorholds. Placing these medieval prescriptions for appropriate material relationship and their resultant structures in conversation with Pallasmaa's theories of embodiment, material relationships, and the architectural imagination, I emphasize the active role architecture played in anchoritic devotion as a physical and metaphorical mediator between the anchoress and the state of divine understanding to which she aspired.

As activation of space and material by the body and the body by the space and material was integral to the spiritual function of the anchorhold, I have grounded the theoretical aspect of my analysis of dimensions, materials, and revelatory experience in the works of Pallasmaa and Bachelard. Although it may seem unconventional to employ modern theories of architectural perception and embodiment in the analysis of medieval anchorholds, the principles espoused by Pallasmaa and Bachelard are based in certain timeless truths regarding the human experience of architecture—namely, that architecture serves as a frame for human action, thought, and imagination, and that the relationship between body, material, and space affects the perception of life within that space, among other notions. I therefore challenge the reader to look beyond chronological incongruity and consider the manner in which embodied architectural relationships stimulated the spiritual imagination and acted as the key to spiritual understanding and transcendence.

THE DEVOTEE: THE ANCHORESS

Anchoresses were exceptional among medieval religious women. Other female religious actors, such as nuns, beguines, and canonesses, lived lives of communal worship and service within a cloister, compound, or convent. In contrast, the anchoress—a role popularized in medieval England but present in continental Europe as well—took female religious enclosure to a new extreme, living in perpetual confinement for the purpose of uninterrupted contemplation of

the divine.[10] According to medieval literary scholars Cate Gunn and Liz Herbert McAvoy, anchoritism was "an ideological solitude that was personal, perpetual, and fixed, played out within a small, walled-up cell, with God as sole companion."[11] The path to such solitude was a varied one. Some anchoresses, like Hildegard von Bingen, began anchoritic training as small children with the intention of future enclosure.[12] Others, like Christina of Markyate and Saint Leobardus of Tours, used enclosure as a means to maintain their virginity and focus on their heavenly spouse despite familial pressures to wed.[13] Still others, like the anchoress of Colne Priory, had lived full lives and had husbands and children prior to deciding to become an anchoress.[14] Yet all were united by the desire to pursue their relationship with the divine in a dedicated space of concentrated solitude and spiritual imagination, purposely choosing the ascetic life with all its concomitant physical and psychological challenges in the hope that they would grow closer to God.

As enclosure was permanent, the anchoress had to prove the strength of her conviction and mental fortitude to the religious community prior to entering into the anchoritic life.[15]

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[10] Goldberg, "Clerks, Clerics, Ecclesiastics," 126–7.
[11] Cate Gunn and Liz Herbert McAvoy, "Introduction: 'No Such Thing as Society?' Solitude in Community," in *Medieval Anchorites in Their Communities*, edited by Cate Gunn and Liz Herbert McAvoy (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), 5.
[12] Carolyn Muessig, "Learning and Mentoring in the Twelfth Century: Hildegard of Bingen and Herrad of Landsberg," in *Medieval Monastic Education*, edited by George Ferzoco and Carolyn Muessig (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 89–91, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/emory/detail.action?docID=472762.
Despite spending her early years training to be an anchoress, Hildegard chose not to remain enclosed and instead pursued life as an abbess and prophetess. Thus she founded her own convent and spent her days recording the visions she received from God and directing life in the convent in accordance with what she had seen. See Muessig, "Learning and Mentoring," 90–1.
[13] Rotha Mary Clay, "Forest and Hillside Hermits," in *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914), 21; Gregory of Tours, "Saint Leobardus the Recluse Who Labored at Marmoutier Near Tours," in *Vita Patrum: The Life of the Fathers*, translated by Fr. Seraphim Rose and Paul Bartlett (Platina: St. Harman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1988), 287–8.
[14] Cate Gunn, "The Anchoress of Colne Priory: A Solitary in Community," in *Medieval Anchorites in Their Communities*, edited by Cate Gunn and Liz Herbert McAvoy (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), 38–40.
[15] Andrew Thornton, OSB, "Rule Within Rule, Cell Within Cloister: Grimlaicus's *Regula Solitariorum*," in *Medieval Anchorites in Their Communities*, edited by Cate Gunn and Liz Herbert McAvoy (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), 71–2.

Grimlaicus' *Regula Solitarium*, a compilation of anchoritic doctrine, reports various terms of probationary isolation depending on the individual's prior experience with religious isolation and asceticism.[16] Anchoresses regularly fasted, mortified their flesh, deprived themselves of sleep, and subjected themselves to physical discomfort in the name of *imitatio Christi*, so it was necessary for a prospective anchoress to prove that she was physically and psychologically able to endure the stresses of enclosure.[17] In addition, as enclosure in the cell rendered the anchoress entirely dependent on a helpmate—a hired servant, a fellow religious woman, etc.—to meet her daily needs, she needed to prove that she had the ability to fund the endeavor prior to enclosure.[18] Anchoresses did receive alms—again, a form of *imitatio Christi*—however their primary income came from patrons who provided them with a monthly, yearly, or lifetime endowment in exchange for prayers.[19] As anchoresses were venerated for their piety and endowment was quite costly, their patrons received great prestige in addition to the spiritual benefit of intercession.[20] Once finances were secured and fortitude proven, the anchoress was ritually enclosed by a bishop in a consecrated cell that she had designed—and in many cases, personally constructed—to meet her needs.[21] The enclosure ritual at times entailed sealing the door through which the anchoress had entered her cell with bricks and mortar or other means.[22] From the moment of enclosure, she was considered dead to the world, and despite her importance to the

[16] Thornton, "Rule Within Rule," 70, 72–4.
[17] Caroline Walker Bynum, "Food as Control of Self," in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Oakland: University of California Press,1987), 208–10.
[18] Rotha Mary Clay, "Concerning the Body," in *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914), 103.
[19] Goldberg, "Clerks, Clerics, Ecclesiastics," 130; Ann K. Warren, "Royal Support," in *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England* (University of California Press, 1985), 151.
[20] Warren, "Royal Support," 151.
[21] Rotha Mary Clay, "Order and Rule," in *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914), 94–6.
[22] Clay, "Order and Rule," 95–6.

community as intercessor and provider of spiritual counsel, her only stated duty was to devote herself to divine contemplation despite discomfort or temptation.[23]

THE SPACE: THE MEDIEVAL ANCHORHOLD

The anchorhold on the south chancel wall of All Saints' Church in King's Lynn, West Norfolk is among the best-preserved English examples *(figs. 1–3)*.[24] Executed in brick, stone, and rubble with a pitched roof and rectangular floor plan, the cell was constructed in the fifteenth century to replace an earlier anchorhold nestled between the south transept and chancel walls that was demolished following the collapse of the chancel roof in the year 1400.[25] The space measures 3 by 4.3 meters (9.8 by 14 feet) with a total area of a mere 12.8 square meters (41.9 square feet). The anchorhold's verticality is more generous, since a pointed vault springing from the whitewashed 1.9-meter (6.2 foot) side walls brings the ceiling to a maximum height of 3.9 meters (12.8 feet). Two lancet windows—one featuring a portrait of an anchoress in stained glass—face south, and a squint (an eye-level opening into the main space) on the anchorhold's north wall looks out upon Saint Michael's chapel opposite the nave so the enclosed could observe worship and receive communion *(fig. 4)*. The door to the west leads to a small terrace, opposite which would have been the servant's quarters, evidence of which is preserved along the roof line of the remaining structure.[26] In its original state, there likely would have been a "house window" through which food and waste could be passed out of the cell, although this may have

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[23] Gunn, "The Anchoress of Colne Priory," 39.
[24] Benefice of South & West Lynn, "History of All Saints," The Benefice of South & West Lynn, Accessed March 2023. https://www.southandwestlynn.org.uk/history-of-all-saints.html; Benefice of South & West Lynn, "The Anchorhold," The Benefice of South & West Lynn, Accessed March 2023, https://www.southandwestlynn.org.uk/the-anchorhold.html; Julien Litten and Fr. Adrian Ling, "The Anchorhold," *All Saints' Church South Lynn: A Short History and Guide* (King's Lynn: Benefice of South and West Lynn, 2022), 8.
[25] Christine A. James (churchwarden) in discussion with the author, August 2024.
[26] Warren, "Solitaries, Sites, and Support," 31; Christine A. James (churchwarden) in discussion with the author, August 2024.

Figs. 1, 2: Left: interior of the twelfth-century anchorhold at All Saints' Church, King's Lynn, West Norfolk; right: squint detail with view into the anchorhold. Benefice of South & West Lynn, 2023.

Fig. 3: View of the All Saints' squint from the chapel, tourist for scale. Benefice of South & West Lynn, 2023.

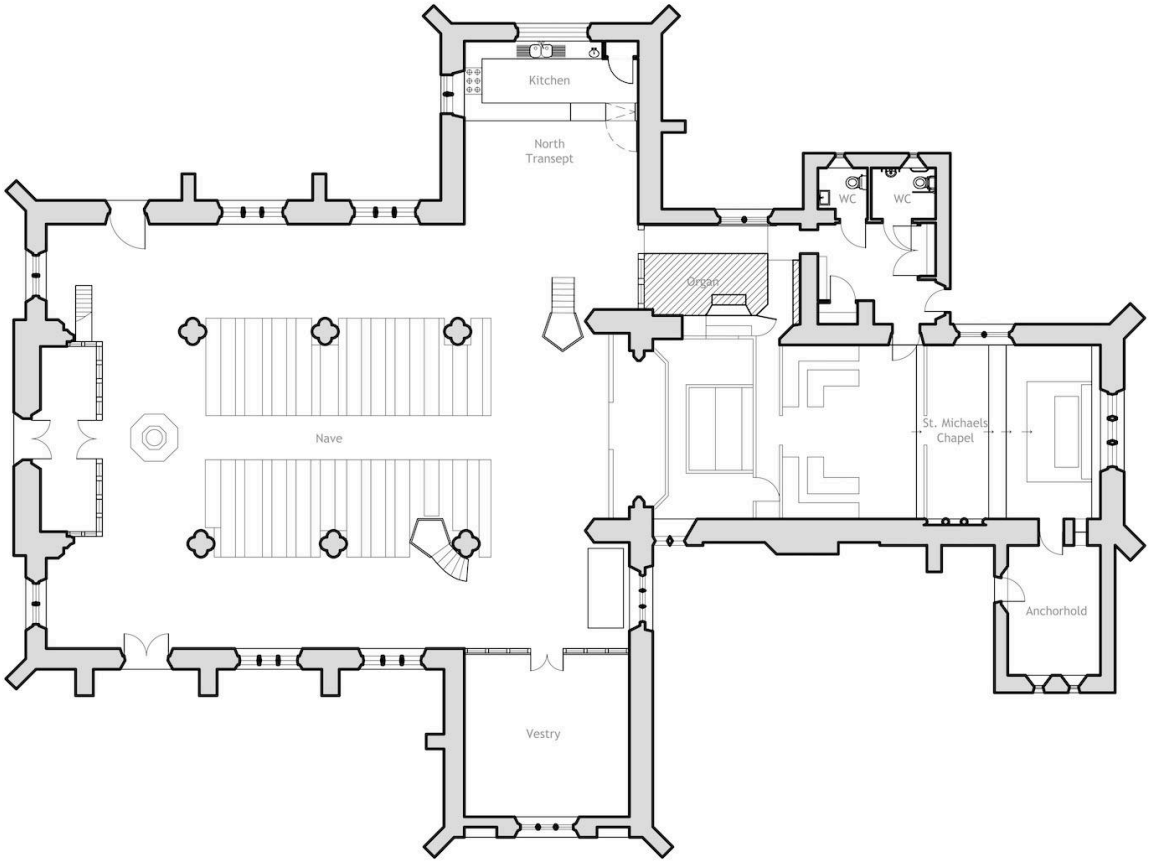

Fig. 4: Plan of All Saints Church, King's Lynn, featuring the anchorhold on the warm south wall with the squint facing Saint Michael's Chapel to the north (scale 1:200). © Waite & Wallage Architects, c. 2020.

been made superfluous by the servant's quarters.[27] There would have also been a dirt floor in which the anchoress would dig her own grave daily as a reminder of the eternal life of the soul despite the death of the body.[28] The closeness of the walls is uncomfortable, natural light is minimal, and the protrusion of the anchorhold into the gravestones in the church cemetery would perpetually remind the enclosed and those who witnessed her enclosure of her death to the world *(fig. 5)*.[29] Although the anchorhold ceased to house anchoresses after the Reformation in 1458,

[27] Warren, "Solitaries, Sites, and Support," 31.
[28] Clay, "Concerning the Body," 113–4.
[29] Licence, "Eradicating Sin, in Theory," 125.

Fig. 5: Exterior view of the All Saints' anchorhold showing its position in the church cemetery. Benefice of South & West Lynn, 2023.

the space is still used by the parish for prayer, and is furnished accordingly with a wooden floor, small table outfitted as a pseudo-altar, with crucifix, candles, books, and linens.[30]

These spaces of concentrated piety were dimensionally minimal. Cate Gunn's archaeological study of the anchorhold at Colne Priory showed it to be 4 meters by 1.5 meters (13 feet by 5 feet), or approximately 6 square meters (65 square feet) in total area, while Christina of Markyate's cell was described in contemporary sources as "not bigger than a[n arm]span and a half."[31] A letter of appeal for enclosure on behalf of anchoress Christina

[30] Benefice of South & West Lynn, "The Anchorhold"; Christine A. James (churchwarden) in discussion with the author, August 2024.
[31] Gunn, "The Anchoress of Colne Priory," 38.

Carpenter of Shere describes her future cell as "a narrow place", while Ann Warren's survey of anchoritic life describes cell dimensions more broadly as "restricted."[32] The general qualities of narrowness and restriction are perhaps most fitting for conceptualization of the scale of the anchorhold because the size of the space was highly dependent on a number of factors: how much penance the anchoress wanted to extract through spatial confinement, in what kind of building the space was located (monastery, castle, church, belltower, fortress, etc. were all possible locations as E. A. Jones notes), what her endowment would allow, and any spiritual guidance she had received on proper material relations.[33]

Regarding footprint, some anchorholds were a single room, while others consisted of the residential cell and an adjoining oratory or parlor in which the anchoress would pray, speak to townspeople, or collect alms, among other activities. The anchorhold at King's Lynn is thought to be an oratory, its side door once leading to a residential cell or servant's kitchen or quarters, as previously mentioned. Cells could also be adjoined by a private garden for a productive pastime, extending the space outdoors while still maintaining enclosure. Such physical delineation of living and working spaces was intended to ease the psychological stress of prolonged confinement and isolation.[34] Exterior spaces like the garden and interior spaces like the squint served as physical and spiritual outlets, encouraging the anchoress to focus on the beauty of creation and the promise of salvation instead of her material circumstances. By moving from one zone of use to another, she could physically and mentally compartmentalize her domestic

[32] St. James' Church, Shere, *Christine Carpenter: The Anchoress of Shere* (Shere: St. James' Church, n.d.); Warren, "Solitaries, Sites, and Support," 32.
[33] E. A. Jones, "'O Sely Ankir!'" in *Medieval Anchorites in Their Communities*, edited by Cate Gunn and Liz Herbert McAvoy (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), 18–21.
[34] Tom Licence, "Eradicating Sin, in Practice," in *Hermits and Recluses in English Society, 950-1200* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 147.

activities and spiritual pursuits in effort to stave off the depression and apathy (also known as "accidie") that so often plagued the enclosed.[35]

Despite attempts to make the hardship of enclosure more tolerable through architectural and zoning tools, enclosure still took its toll, and it was not unheard of for solitaries to leave their cells as a result. The case of a fifteenth-century solitary at Arundel's Blackfriars Dominican Friary is a representative example—after years of enclosure in a cell in the notoriously poor monastery, the friar requested to be released, "pleading [his cell's] inconvenience and the extreme poverty of the community."[36] Similarly, the stress of complete dependence on outside assistance to meet their basic needs could cause tensions to rise between the enclosed and members of their community. As recounted by Gregory of Tours, sixth-century solitary Saint Leobardus of Tours considered leaving his cell due to a dispute with a fellow monk.[37] However, reminded by Gregory of the higher purpose of his isolation, he decided to remain in his cell and died there after twenty-two years of enclosure.[38] Such stasis—what Clay terms "constancy of abode"—was highly valued as a sign of an anchoress's devotion to her faith despite earthly difficulty.[39] Should an anchoress leave her cell, as Christina Carpenter did circa 1330 for unknown reasons, she risked excommunication.[40] Therefore, design choices were made with both

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[35] Clay, "Concerning the Body," 101; Lina Eckenstein, "Art Industries in the Nunnery," in *Woman under Monasticism: Chapters on Saint-Lore and Convent Life between A.D. 500 and A.D. 1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896), 246–7; Lina Eckenstein, "Anglo-Saxon Nuns in Connection with Boniface," in *Woman under Monasticism: Chapters on Saint-Lore and Convent Life between A.D. 500 and A.D. 1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896), 124.
[36] Rotha Mary Clay, "Human Intercourse," in *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914), 144.
[37] Thornton, "Rule Within Rule," 71.
[38] Gregory of Tours, "Saint Leobardus," 289–90.
[39] Clay, "Human Intercourse," 141.
[40] St. James' Church, Shere, *Christine Carpenter*; Liz Herbert McAvoy, "Carpenter, Christina (fl. 1329–1332)," Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, September 1, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/105610.

the imposition of material hardship and the viability of long-term endurance of said hardship in mind.[41]

Because of the limited availability of construction materials in medieval England, the choice of wood or stone in construction of a hermit's hut or anchorhold was significant. On a spiritual level, wood was perceived as temporary, while stone signified permanence; a stone hut or anchorhold therefore connoted the indefinite duration of the inhabitant's enclosure.[42] However, this "permanence" is relative for two reasons. First, anchorholds were often demolished after the occupant died and was interred in the grave in the floor (not always, but it was a frequent occurrence).[43] And second, in the grand scheme of Christianity, nothing earthly is permanent. By this reasoning, a wood structure might be an even more appropriate choice for the anchorhold's primary material, as it would emphasize the temporariness of earthly penance in comparison to the eternity of heavenly reward.

The squint of a cell at Saint Nicholas Church in Compton, Surrey, presents a juxtaposition of both wood and stone in the squint itself and the built-in twelfth-century prayer desk below it *(fig. 6)*.[44] On the sensory level, wood is a more effective insulator than stone—it remains warm to the touch—which brings consideration of human comfort into the equation of material choice. Wood also shows signs of wear more quickly to visually and tactilely engage the individual with their material environment, as seen in the example of the wooden prayer desk singed from candles (devotional or otherwise) and worn away from repeated contact with the left

[41] Some solitaries went so far as to "redesign" their bodies in order to ensure that they would never break their enclosure. Clay notes the case of the anchoress of Mantes, who refused to leave her burning cell during an 1087 attack by William the Conqueror despite it being permitted for anchoresses to leave if their lives were threatened, as well as the story of Saint Henry who prayed for his body to fail him so that he could not physically leave his island hermitage even if he so desired. See Clay, "Human Intercourse," 141, and Rotha Mary Clay, "Island and Fen Recluses," in *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914), 6.
[42] Gunn, "The Anchoress of Colne Priory," 38; Goldberg, "Clerks, Clerics, Ecclesiastics," 130–1.
[43] Warren, "Solitaries, Sites, and Support," 21; Warren, "Bishops and Anchorites," 60.
[44] Lionel Wall, "Compton and Shere," Great English Churches, accessed April 2023, https://greatenglishchurches.co.uk/html/compton_and_shere.html.

elbows of a succession of anchoresses *(fig. 7)*.[45] In his analysis of the hermit's hut, Bachelard also further highlights wood's unique auditory properties, specifically in response to violent wind, which stimulates the mind to perceive the structure as a sentient, protective being.[46] In the case of a wooden anchorhold, such a sense of physical protection would mirror the ever-present spiritual protection and companionship of God.

Stone's coldness, on the other hand, and the discomfort it brings to the inhabitant, could be employed as a form of penance or *imitatio Christi*. The aforementioned Leobardus, for example, tested his fortitude by continually chipping away at the mountain into which his cell

Figs. 6, 7: Anchorhold squint, Saint Nicholas Church, Compton, Surrey, c. 1185 AD. Left: exterior view; right: interior view with original prayer desk showing wear from devotional candles and repeated contact with anchoresses' elbows. Lionel Wall, c. 2020.

[45] Wall, "Compton and Shere."
[46] Bachelard, "House and Universe," 44–6.

was built with nothing but a pickaxe.[47] A potential spiritual advantage of stone, on the other hand, could be found in its protection of the interior from the incursion of pests, which were often interpreted as demonic attacks.[48] In addition, the audio-reflective property of stone would either intensify the incursion of sound into the otherwise often silent space (music, sermons) or cause oral prayers uttered in solitude to reverberate, serving as an "amplifier of emotion," as will be further discussed below.[49] The pointed stone vault of the King's Lynn anchorhold reflects its resident-designer's investment in the acoustic dimension of spirituality. On the effect of reverberation on the experience of a space, Pallasmaa states:

> We can also recall the acoustic harshness of any uninhabited and unfurnished house as compared with the affability of a lived home, in which sound is refracted and softened by the surfaces of numerous objects of personal life. Every building or space has its characteristic acoustic qualities and sounds of intimacy or monumentality, invitation or rejection, hospitality or hostility. A space is understood through its echo as much as through its visual shape.[50]

The austerity of the King's Lynn cell with its stone walls and sparse furnishings breeds echoes of rejection and hostility, while the reverberation of prayers and protection from pests reflect the intimacy and hospitality of communion with the divine. In this balance of austerity and intimacy, the acoustics of the anchorhold enlivened with prayer remind those within of the sweet purpose of anchoritic "persever[ance] in hardness."[51]

In many ways, the experience of the anchoritic cell is not unlike that of a medieval prison cell. The materiality of anchoritic experience finds a physical parallel in the archaeological evidence of cells at Devon's notorious Lydford Castle prison: light is controlled, surfaces are unforgiving, quarters are close, and the level of comfort is dependent on the individual (although

[47] Gregory of Tours, "Saint Leobardus the Recluse," 289–90.
[48] Licence, "Eradicating Sin, in Practice," 144.
[49] Pallasmaa and Zambelli, "Amplifiers of Emotions," 3.
[50] Juhani Pallasmaa and Matteo Zambelli, "Sound," in *Inseminations: Seeds for Architectural Thought*, (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 213.
[51] Clay, "Trial and Temptation," 127.

in the case of the prison cell, comfort was not dictated by prisoner preference, but prisoner social status).[52] Although anchoritic spaces occasionally housed prisoners, they were not designed for punishment as an end in and of itself, as is suggested by the King's Lynn cell's location on the warm south side of the church as opposed to the north side, the customary location for an anchorhold.[53] Even in the case of Christina Carpenter who petitioned for reenclosure at Shere in 1332, preventing future escape or exacting penance for the sin of abandoning her cell were not the only reasons for replacing the cell door with a solid brick wall and reducing the size of squints and windows, modifications attested by the archaeological evidence that—in the opinion of medievalist Liz Herbert McAvoy—likely dates to the time of Christina's reenclosure.[54] Although effective containment was part of the consideration of the cell's redesigner (in this case presumably not the enclosed but the encloser), it was still hoped that through the penance exacted by absolute enclosure she would recognize her sin *and* draw closer to God.[55] McAvoy acknowledges that it is unknowable whether Christina did in fact live out a life of prayer and divine contemplation upon her "emphatic re-enclosure," however such was her stated intent when petitioning.[56] As recorded in the episcopal register of Bishop of Winchester John de Stratford, Christina "changed in heart, wishing to return to her former abode and calling."[57] Papal penitentiary John Wrotham, who authored and endorsed her petition, requested that the bishop "take care to guard her, thus enclosed, in due form, that she may learn at your discretion how nefarious was her committed sin, and that thereafter dedicating herself worthily to God, *having first offered to God that which is inflicted on her by us, she may be enabled to achieve her*

[52] See A. D. Saunders, "Lydford Castle, Devon," *Medieval Archaeology* 24 (1980): 163, and Allan, Brodie, Jane Croom and James O. Davies, "Prisons and Punishment before 1775," in *English Prisons: An Architectural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002), 9–28.
[53] Gunn, "The Anchoress of Colne Priory," 42–3.
[54] McAvoy, "Carpenter, Christina (fl. 1329–1332)."
[55] St. James' Church, Shere, *Christine Carpenter*.
[56] McAvoy, "Carpenter, Christina (fl. 1329–1332)."
[57] St. James' Church, Shere, *Christine Carpenter*.

salvation, nor shall [she] wander from the laudable intention otherwise solemnly undertaken…."[58]

Rolle further unravels the assumption of the anchorhold as a space of punishment for punishment's sake, stating, "Men suppose that we are in torture and in penance great; but we have more joy and more very delight in a day than they have in the world all their life. They see our body: but they see not our heart where our solace is."[59] In other words, anchoritic spaces were designed by the penitent as a reflection and amplification of their own soul or "inner house" that had forsaken the material world in favor of a life of reliance on Christ.[60] It was hoped that the reciprocal relationship between the individual and their tiny, designed universe would lead to a new realm of ecstatic experience enabling the utmost spiritual transcendence. The anchorhold's austerity asserted an inverse relationship between the richness of the material world and the capacity to know God on the most intimate spiritual level. As Bachelard describes in his discussion of the hermitage,

> The hermit is *alone* before God. His hut, therefore, is just the opposite of the monastery. And there radiates about this centralized solitude a universe of meditation and prayer, a universe outside the universe. The hut can receive none of the riches "of this world." It possesses the felicity of intense poverty; indeed, it is one of the glories of poverty; as destitution increases it gives us access to absolute refuge.[61]

For the hermit, the recluse, and the anchoress, this refuge was in Christ, and the road to said refuge was one of physical deprivation, solitude, and meditation in a purpose-designed space. While many monastic traditions, including the Stations of the Cross, are predicated on movement to identify the individual with Christ's progression to the cross and to heaven, such identification

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[58] St. James' Church, Shere, *Christine Carpenter*.
[59] Rolle, "The Form of Perfect Living," 12.
[60] Gunn, "The Anchoress of Colne Priory," 49.
[61] Bachelard, "The Significance of the Hut," 32.

was achieved in the anchoritic cell through a lack of significant movement. One could interpret the anchoritic *imitatio Christi* as an imagined, stationary version of the Stations of the Cross that intensified identification with Christ's suffering and their higher purpose through the physical inability to leave the space and sever the imagined connection. However, the mere fact of inhabitation of the space did not guarantee miraculous experience—only the few who were able to maintain their resolve in the face of unforgiving material circumstance could hope to know God on a higher level.

THE DESIGN PROCESS: FROM RULE TO PREFERENCE

Texts written for the edification of medieval English anchoresses—namely, the letters of fourteenth-century hermit and mystic Richard Rolle to his disciple, anchoress Margaret Kirkby, and the thirteenth-century *Ancrene Riwle* [Guide for Anchoresses], a set of guidelines for anchoritic life and devotion prepared for three anchoresses upon their request—reveal a distinct anxiety regarding the sensory dimension of such austere spaces. Rolle establishes that anchoresses should not take enclosure to a torturous extreme lest deprivation lead to physical injury or exhaustion and hinder their ability to devote themselves to God.[62] Rolle rebukes those who excessively restrict their food, water, or sleep, stating:

> That is often temptation of the devil, for to make them fall in the midst of their work, so that they bring it to no ending as they should have done, had they known reason and had discretion; and so they lose their merit for their frowardness. This snare our enemy lays to take us with when we begin to hate wickedness, and turn us to God. Then many begin a thing that they can never more bring to an end: then they suppose that they can do whatsoever their heart is set on. But oftentimes

[62] James Morton, ed., "Of Domestic Matters," in *The Ancren Riwle: A Treatise on the Rules and Duties of Monastic Life* (London: Camden Society, 1852), 413–31.

> they fall or ever they come midway; and that thing which they supposed was for them is hindering to them.[63]

These words of warning imply that it was common practice for anchoresses to engage in extreme acts of deprivation and punishment, therefore making it necessary for the author to caution his reader not to embrace such practices out of fear for her soul. Rolle asserts that the temptation to excessively deprive themselves in the name of Christ is a trap laid by the devil for believers who become overly confident in their own abilities. He acknowledges that testing the flesh can be productive, but when taken too far, it can become a hindrance to the spiritual labor of work, prayer, and thought. Rolle further states that the road to heaven is long and requires much endurance, requiring the anchoress to pace herself—if she cannot, she has only herself to blame, as it is not God's intention for her to become so focused on her own flesh that she loses sight of her greater purpose. He states, "For the prophet says: 'Lord, I shall keep my strength to Thee,' so that he might sustain God's service till his death-day, and not in a little and a short time waste it, and then lie wailing and groaning by the wall."[64]

Rolle further clarifies the dangers of performative austerity for his disciple, keen to note that she should not take pride in visible self-deprivation, as her heart would be the only determinant of heavenly reward.[65] Such a statement implies that religious women felt pressure to prove the strength of their conviction through extensive visible acts of penance, a complication of female enclosure that placed female anchoritic practice in tension with the advice of male spiritual authorities. Historian Bernadette Barrière suggests in her work on the architecture of the Cistercian convent at Coyroux that "insalubrious" conditions were tolerated and perhaps even

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[63] Richard Rolle, "The Form of Perfect Living," in *The Form of Perfect Living and Other Prose Treatises*, translated by Geraldine E. Hodgson, *Project Gutenberg* (London: Thomas Baker, 1910), 5–6, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/25856/25856-h/25856-h.htm.
[64] Rolle, "The Form of Perfect Living," 6.
[65] Rolle, "The Form of Perfect Living," 16–18.

desired by the sisters, as they may have added another level of physical difficulty to their daily lives and made their devotion all the more impressive to potential detractors.[66] Of the monastic infrastructure at Coyroux she states, "No function was neglected, no element was missing, all the necessary technical services were there, yet nothing was conceived to last; the daily conditions of use were difficult and precarious, as if any possibility of comfort, even the most rudimentary, had been thoroughly ruled out."[67] Rolle's proscription of performative austerity can be read as both confirmation of excessive physical deprivation by English anchoresses and the expectation by their largely male superiors—bishops, confessors, and clergy at large—that they be attuned to the higher purpose of their penance.

The anonymous—likely male—author of the *Ancrene Riwle* similarly underscores the necessary flexibility of any recommendations for the "external" or physical rule that serves as the "handmaid" of the internal spiritual life.[68] The author emphasizes that anchoresses and the clergy who oversee them know their capabilities best and should modify their domestic habits according to ability and need:

> But all men cannot, nor need they, nor ought they to keep the outward rule in the same unvaried manner….The external rule, which I called the handmaid, is of man's contrivance ; nor is it instituted for any thing else but to serve the internal law. It ordains fasting, watching, enduring cold, wearing haircloth, and such other hardships as the flesh of many can bear and many cannot. Wherefore, this rule may be changed and varied according to every one's state and circumstances. For some are strong, some are weak, and may very well be excused, and please God with less….Every anchoress must, therefore, observe the outward rule according to the advice of her confessor, and do obediently whatever he enjoins and commands her, who knows her state and her strength.[69]

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[66] Bernadette Barrière, "The Cistercian Convent of Coyroux in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries." *Gesta* 31, no. 2 (1992): 81–2. https://doi.org/10.2307/767040.
[67] Barrière, "The Cistercian Convent of Coyroux," 81.
[68] James Morton, ed., "Introduction," in *The Ancren Riwle: A Treatise on the Rules and Duties of Monastic Life* (London: Camden Society, 1852), 7.
[69] Morton, "Introduction," 7.

From the author's perspective, the goal in anchoritic isolation was not to discipline the flesh for its own sake (as discipline could be achieved without corporal punishment through spiritual atonement and the contemplative regimentation of word and deed), but to embrace the divine "as God's bride to her beloved bridegroom" in hardship and joy, to use a notion from the *Ancrene Riwle*.[70] Senses were to be controlled and the body tested in order to focus the individual's attention to her inner relationship with God and contemplate "what he is, and what she is, and how great is the love of one so exalted as he is toward one so low as she is."[71] However, excessive deprivation or punishment of the senses distracting from such spiritual labor, a concept Patricia Cox Miller terms the "double valance" of a consciousness divided between the physical and spiritual worlds.[72]

Throughout the literature, and no doubt, throughout anchoritic practice, the anchorhold took many forms and fostered myriad coincident relationships in effort to bridge the divide between those physical and spiritual worlds. Tom Licence's *Hermits and Recluses in English Society, 950-1200* defines the anchorhold as a "workshop of astonishing spiritual exercise."[73] It has been interpreted variously as heaven on earth, purgatory, wilderness, prison, or coentombment with Christ.[74] The architectural choices of the enclosed were as varied and personal as these spiritual interpretations of the embodied space. As each anchoress had different

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[70] Rolle, "The Form of Perfect Living," 21; Morton, "Introduction," 3.
[71] James Morton, ed., "Christ Sheds Rays of Love from the Cross," in *The Ancren Riwle: A Treatise on the Rules and Duties of Monastic Life* (London: Camden Society, 1852), 401.
[72] Patricia Cox Miller, "Introduction," in *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 5.
[73] Licence, "Eradicating Sin, in Practice," 149.
[74] Tom Licence, "Eradicating Sin, in Theory," in *Hermits and Recluses in English Society, 950-1200* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 124, 120; Gunn, "The Anchoress of Colne Priory," 48; Rotha Mary Clay, "Trial and Temptation," in *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914), 123; Licence, "Eradicating Sin, in Theory," 123; Flora Lewis argues that the ultimate contemplative exercise for both genders was to imaginatively enter and embody the wound in Christ's side, entering into a "meditative union" with God. In a certain sense, the contemplative space of the anchorhold could be seen as the embodied wound, although such an interpretation may be a bit more metaphorical than truly analytical. See Flora Lewis, "The Wound in Christ's Side and the Instruments of the Passion: Gendered Experience and Response," in *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence*, edited by Lesley Smith and Jane H. M. Taylor (London: British Library, 1997), 214.

capabilities, needs, and spiritual perspectives, anchorholds looked quite different depending on the priorities of their resident-designer.

The seventh-century case of Saint Cuthbert presents an intriguing example of the influence of the individual on the design of a reclusive space. Although his hermitage does not survive, it is said that Cuthbert designed the windows of his enclosure to be directed at the sky, above the horizon and transcending the earthly realm, and he vaulted the roof to serve as a constant reminder of the upward focus of his devotions.[75] Cuthbert's hermitage exemplifies what Pallasmaa terms architecture's "mediating and structuring task in human experience and consciousness," insofar as the saint deliberately configured his cell "with angelic aid" in order to foster the appropriate spiritual mindset so that through his interactions with the architecture and its interaction with him, his way of life would bring him closer to the divine.[76]

A similar instance of anchoritic architecture structured to emphasize upward devotion can be seen in the form of the pointed vault, door, and lancet windows at King's Lynn. However, in contrast to Cuthbert's windows pointed at the sky, the windows at King's Lynn are at eye level, allowing the laity access to receive the anchoress' counsel, request prayers, and give alms. The anchoress' prioritization of her role as public intercessor is further

Fig. 8: Portrait of an unidentified anchoress in stained glass, southeast lancet, All Saints' Church, King's Lynn, West Norfolk. © Ian Ward, 2022.

[75] Licence, "Eradicating Sin, in Practice," 133.
[76] Juhani Pallasmaa, "Introduction," in *The Embodied Image: Imagination and Imagery in Architecture* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2011), 13; Pallasmaa, "The Architectural Image," 123; Sawicka-Sykes, "Heavenly Communities," 60.

emphasized by the stained glass portrait of an anchoress that adorns the southeast lancet, in effect advertising her services *(fig. 8)*. Thus, the contrast between the upward thrust of the lancets and their position and ornamentation strikes an uneasy balance between the anchoress' heavenly and earthly duties that likely reflected and structured her internal struggle to maintain her focus.

Yet in some cases, the anchoress could not dictate the parameters of her architectural container. It was not unheard of for anchorholds to be appropriated from existing architecture, ostensibly removing the anchoress' hand from their design. Medievalist E. A. Jones has found records of anchorholds within castles, fortresses, and bell towers, among other locations.[77] It is likely that such anchorholds would have been of a different form than those attached to a church owing to the fact of their inclusion within (as opposed to attachment to) a preexisting structure. The anchoress likely could not specify materials, dimensions, window number or placement, or means of outdoor access, as she had merely to select a space within the building or have one assigned to her. In such cases of architectural inflexibility, interior design became ever more important, as it was the only means by which the anchoress could modify her material environment to reflect and encourage her faith and her relationship with the divine.

The case of the most well-documented modern anchoress, the aforementioned Sister Nazarena of Jesus, née Julia Crotta, presents an example (albeit from contemporary times) of how an anchoress might transform a preexisting cell to meet her needs. To be sure, the religious, cultural, and natural climate of twentieth-century Rome was significantly different from that of medieval England, including but certainly not limited to the lack of misogynistic pressure on the modern anchoress to prove her worth through endurance of physical hardship. However, Crotta's design choices bear striking resemblance to those suggested by pictorial and archaeological evidence from the medieval period and as such may provide some insight to the role of interior

[77] Jones, "'O Sely Ankir!'" 18–21.

design in transforming preexisting spaces into anchorholds. I therefore proceed with guarded optimism.

Born in New Jersey to Italian parents, Crotta studied music and composition before receiving a vision that inspired her to pursue monastic life.[78] At the age of thirty-eight, she requested special dispensation from Pope Pius XII to live as an anchoress in the Camaldolese Monastery of Sant'Antonio Abate in Rome where she had previously been a sister.[79] Her request was approved, and Crotta assumed the name Sister Nazarena of Jesus upon her enclosure.

Crotta's request is worth quoting at some length, as its prescriptions for inhabitation and daily life reveal her personal conception of the ideal relationships between an anchoress and her physical environment:

> Miss Julia Crotta, in virtue of the indult of the Sacred Congregation of Religious, number 3706/45, dated 31 October 1945, enters the Monastery of the Camaldolese Benedictines on the Aventine, there to lead a secluded, eremitical life, in perfect union with God. Such is her ardent desire.
>
> The Anchoress earnestly requests that the nuns receive her purely as an act of charity, and she declares herself ready to leave the monastery in whatsoever moment the Mother Abbess should order her to do so.
>
> She shall remain perpetually segregated from the Community and from the individual nuns, in a separate cell to which no one else shall be admitted.
>
> Every morning she may go down to the Chapel to hear the Holy Mass, and once a week she may approach the confessional of the Monastery.
>
> During the day she may take a walk in the garden or on the terrace: She shall be free to make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament in the Chapel when the nuns are not present. The Anchoress shall take particular care to have no contact with the Community or the nuns.
>
> She shall divide her day between prayer and work. She shall work for the Monastery, receiving the materials at the door of her cell, in silence, or with a few words if strictly necessary.
>
> She shall be authorized to ask the Abbess for books on spirituality and the lives of the Saints.

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[78] Matus, "Prologue," 2–3.
[79] Thomas Matus, "In the Desert," in *Nazarena: An American Anchoress* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1998), 34–5.

> Her nourishment shall consist of bread, water, and a teaspoon of oil in the morning; bread, water, fruit, legumes, vegetables, and salad at mid-day and in the evening. She shall follow a vegetarian regime. Her food shall be left at the door of her cell.
>
> Her bed shall consist of simple, rough boards, without straw ticking or a mattress and with blankets as necessary. The cell may be furnished with a table and a bench. On the wall she may have a rudimentary Cross and a modest image of the Immaculate Virgin.
>
> The Anchoress shall dwell in the Monastery as if she were not there at all, ignored by the nuns, and perfectly extraneous to everyone and everything.
>
> In case of illness all the necessary and opportune exceptions to this Rule may be allowed.
>
> The Anchoress freely commits herself to observe this Rule, which was written out in full harmony with her devout wishes, under obedience to the Ecclesiastical Superior, whose consent is required for any future derogations or modifications of the Rule.[80]

Even though she requested these guidelines and was involved in their preparation, Nazarena felt that they were too lax.[81] Thus, upon her enclosure the anchoress implemented a much more extreme level of confinement and material deprivation. According to a 1962 *Time* article on the "secluded, eremitical life" of one of the world's only modern anchoresses, Nazarena rarely indulged in eating vegetables, tested her body by dressing in a cilice and sackcloth robe, and had not left her cell since her enclosure sixteen years prior despite having permission to use the chapel and confessional and walk outdoors.[82]

As Nazarena was enclosed in a preexisting room in the monastery—potentially a form of spatial discipline imposed upon her, potentially a manifestation of her desire to be "perfectly extraneous to everyone and everything"—she did not have the opportunity to design an ascetic space from the ground up. With its stucco walls and terracotta tiled floor, the cell does not employ wood, stone, or dirt, materials traditionally associated with the anchorhold. In addition,

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[80] Matus, "In the Desert," 35–6.
[81] Matus, "In the Desert," 37.
[82] "Religion: A Nun's Story," *TIME*, April 13, 1962, https://time.com/archive/6623434/religion-a-nuns-story/.

Fig. 9: Nazarena's antechamber and curtained squint. Romualdica, 2015.

the cell is on the top floor of the monastery and features only one window, removing the community-facing function of the accessible parlor window in a bid to isolate Nazarena as much as possible, "as if she were not there at all."[83] Modern plumbing in the form of a small washroom eliminates the hardship of medieval waste disposal practices, further reducing the anchoress' dependence on outside assistance. However, the sealing of the door and the inclusion of an antechamber with a curtained squint so that Nazarena could observe Mass and receive meals, medical care, and her confessor reveal that the room was thoughtfully selected and likely somewhat modified to fulfill its practical and spiritual purposes *(fig. 9)*.[84]

Despite Nazarena's apparently minimal involvement designing the structure of her enclosure, she did have the opportunity to exercise limited spatial animacy through furniture selection and interior design. Photographs and fellow religious figures' descriptions of their experiences in Nazarena's preserved cell reveal a thoughtful selection of furnishings rife with spiritual significance *(figs. 10, 11)*. The most overt manifestation of Nazarena's spiritual aspirations through interior design comes in the form of her bed, the proposed "bed [...] of

[83] Matus, "In the Desert," 36; "Religion: A Nun's Story."
[84] Louis-Albert Lassus, "La Terre Promise," in *Nazarena: Une recluse au cœur de Rome, 1907–1990* (Le Barroux: Éditions Sainte-Madeleine, 1996), https://www.clerus.org/clerus/dati/2001-05/22-13/Nazarena.html.

Fig. 10: Interior view of the cell of Sister Nazarena of Jesus featuring her cruciform bed-cabinet and cane chair. Romualdica, 2015.

Fig. 11: View of the cell from the head of the bed-cabinet featuring Nazarena's study corner and the door to her antechamber and squint. Romualdica, 2015.

simple, rough boards, without straw ticking or a mattress and with blankets as necessary." In keeping with the text of her request, Nazarena slept atop a wooden cabinet emblazoned with a raised cross, heightening her personal identification with Christ not only through discomfort but also by recreating the crucifixion each time she rested her head.

The "Ladder of Virtues" from Herrad von Landsberg's twelfth-century pedagogical manuscript the *Hortus deliciarum* exemplifies the anxiety over an anchoress' relationship with her bed, and by extension, the furnishings of her cell at large, in the context of a broader critique of the material temptations that plagued those pursuing monastic life in the medieval period *(fig. 12)*. The image depicts six Christian roles—the hermit, anchorite, monk, cleric, nun, laywoman, and soldier—and the temptations that prevent them from ascending the ladder to the Hand of God and receiving the crown of heaven. The closest to heaven is the hermit, or *heremita*, who is

Fig. 12: "The Ladder of Virtues," in *Hortus Deliciarum* by Herrad von Landsberg, folio 216r. Wikiart, 2023.

nevertheless distracted by his garden. Following him is the anchorite, or *inclusus*, who is drawn down by his plush bed and its richly patterned bedclothes. This image of the dangerous bed operates on multiple levels. First, in her foundational text on the reclusive life, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*, Rotha Mary Clay cites Lina Eckenstein's description of the bed as a symbol of sloth, as boredom and despondency were common ills among the enclosed.[85] In her analysis of the manuscript, Fiona Griffiths describes the image differently as both cautionary tale against false piety and proclamation of the necessity of *contemptus mundi*.[86] However, Herrad's pictured anchorite's preoccupation with his bed can also be read more concretely as a critique of improperly furnished anchoritic spaces and the improper spiritual mindset they fostered. As the purpose of anchoritic enclosure was for the enclosed individual to walk in the path of Christ's poverty and humiliation as man, and through such a form of living, become closer to the divine to an ecstatic degree, a comfortable bed or the prioritization of physical comfort within the cell through furnishings or other means would hinder identification with the physicality of Christ's suffering.[87] Therefore, by sparsely populating her cell with rudimentary furniture, both medieval and modern anchoresses could resist the temptations of sloth and luxurious indulgence while simultaneously enhancing their bodily understanding of Christ's experiences as man.

In the case of Nazarena, penance, poverty, and identification with Christ's suffering were further heightened by the discomfort of her cilice and wooden sandals, the former being popular among medieval ascetics as well, and the restriction of all furnishings in her cell to their most physically and spiritually utilitarian versions. Instead of the table and bench requested in her petition, a reading space is defined by a storage trunk, Bible stand, and unpadded stool across

[85] Clay, "Concerning the Body," 101; Eckenstein, "Art Industries in the Nunnery," 246–7; Eckenstein, "Anglo-Saxon Nuns," 124.
[86] Fiona J. Griffiths, "Reforming Women in the Garden of Delights," in *The Garden of Delights: Reform and Renaissance for Women in the Twelfth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 205.
[87] Rolle, "The Form of Perfect Living," 46–52.

from the bed. Following the dictum that the anchoress should be immersed in her studies, Nazarena's plain wooden bookcase is stocked with the aforementioned "books on spirituality and the lives of the Saints" and surmounted by a modest altar featuring the "rudimentary Cross" and "modest image of the Immaculate Virgin" she was to be allowed per her request for enclosure.[88] Another wooden cabinet provides storage space for ascetic clothing and tools emblematic of the division of her time between prayer and work. To restate Barrière's impressions of the archaeological evidence of the convent at Coyroux, "No function was neglected, no element was missing, all the necessary technical services were there, yet nothing was conceived to last; the daily conditions of use were difficult and precarious, as if any possibility of comfort, even the most rudimentary, had been thoroughly ruled out."[89] Achieving a balance between the relative comfort of the monastery walls and the discomfort of her furnishings, Nazarena's selections reflect the desire for each and every design element within her control to emulate the deprivation suffered by Christ in the hope that such emulation would bring deeper understanding of her heavenly spouse. Although no medieval anchorhold has been preserved with its original furnishings, the similarity of Nazarena's preoccupations to those suggested by Herrad and Barrière indicates the possibility that medieval anchoresses selected furnishings for their cells with a similar eye for ascetic utility.

Yet even with the guidance of trusted spiritual advisors, such as Herrad, Rolle or the author of the *Ancrene Riwle*, there were no strict design parameters or rules for living prescribed. Variation, personal need, and personal intent were acknowledged, and although the anchoress had to navigate clerical oversight, she had significant agency in determining what was best for her sould and body as she knew her capabilities best.[90] In this way, the gender dynamic of

[88] Matus, "Prologue," 5.
[89] Barrière, "The Cistercian Convent of Coyroux," 81.
[90] Morton, "Introduction," 7, 9; Rolle, "The Form of Perfect Living," 4–6.

anachoresis presents an unexpected flexibility: while the male authors of the given texts played a highly paternalistic role, the women to whom they wrote could interpret their guidance as they saw fit unless overruled by a bishop. The author of the *Ancrene Riwle* acknowledges this agency when he states in the introduction to the texts that he is only writing the treatise because his female disciples specifically requested it, and not out of a desire to impose his will.[91] Prior to discussing appropriate relationships between anchoresses and their spaces, he reiterates,

> I said before, at the commencement, that ye ought not, like unwise people, to promise to keep any of the external rules. I say the same still; nor do I write them for any but you alone. I say this in order that other anchoresses may not say that I, by my own authority, make new rules for them. Nor do I command that they observe them, and ye may even change them, whenever ye will, for better ones. In regard to things of this kind that have been in use before, it matters little.[92]

In this instance, it is likely that the women followed guidance given on the appropriate relationship between anchoress and cell, as they sought out that guidance (or, in the case of Margaret Kirkby, had deep respect for the author), but it is unknowable if others who read such texts felt similarly. Gunn and McAvoy remark that "ideology and lived practices are very often at odds with each other" in the anchorhold, making the examination of physical spaces and material relationships all the more important as opposed to maintaining a singular focus on anchoritic rules and writings.[93] Nevertheless, the intention behind the guidance—to encourage the design of spaces that would accommodate the anchoress' physical and spiritual needs—can be considered typical. The spiritual resonance of sensitively designed embodied spaces was undeniable, and therefore, highly sought after.

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[91] Morton, "Introduction," 5, 7, 9.
[92] James Morton, ed., "Of Love," in *The Ancren Riwle: A Treatise on the Rules and Duties of Monastic Life* (London: Camden Society, 1852), 411; James Morton, ed., "On Domestic Matters," in *The Ancren Riwle: A Treatise on the Rules and Duties of Monastic Life* (London: Camden Society, 1852), 413.
[93] Gunn and McAvoy, "Introduction: Solitude in Community," 7.

THE ACTIVATED SPACE: THE EMBODIED ANCHORHOLD

Pallasmaa asserts that architecture is experienced "in its fully embodied material and spiritual presence", and this is certainly true for the anchorhold.[94] The mutual activation of space and body is integral to the anchorhold's function as an amplifier of the religious imagination. One of the most useful models for understanding the manner in which the architecture of female religious spaces fostered such material-spiritual relationships is found in the Low Countries Court Beguinage. A beguinage is a community of female religious women that was significantly integrated into the urban fabric of the city: sisters lived in walled shared compounds of

Fig. 13: "Magnum Begynasium Bruxellense." In *Chorographia Sacra Brabantiae* by Anthonius Sanderus, Brussels: Christiaan van Lom, 1726–7. © Schleiper 2024.

[94] Juhani Pallasmaa, "The Many Faces of the Image," in *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2019), 49.

individual houses centered around a church, hospital, charity facilities, etc.[95] These spaces were semi-permeable, allowing the sisters to leave to interact with the community and the laity to enter for religious services, medical treatment, charitable aid, and schooling, among other purposes.[96] An engraving of the Brussels Grand Beguinage from Antonius Sanderus' *Chorographia Sacra Brabantiae* of 1726–7 highlights the spatial relationship between the beguinage and the city at large *(fig. 13)*. Bordered on all sides by bustling streets, the compound's residential buildings form a barrier to the outer city and the beguinage is permeable only through designated entrance gates. The inward focus of the buildings culminates in the spire of the central church, which dominates the panorama in both physical form and spiritual implication.

Fig. 14: Exterior view of the beguinage gate, Diest, Vlaams-Brabant, Belgium, 1671. Anna Brékine, 2021.

Beguinages were designed so that upon entrance there would be architectural indications of the religious focus of the space to invite

[95] Sarah Joan Moran, "Of Locked Doors and Open Windows: Architectural Strategies at the Low Countries Court Beguinages in the Seventeenth Century," *Chicago Art Journal* 20 (2010): 4, 13.
[96] Moran, "Of Locked Doors," 18.

the individual into a unique psychological relationship with it. Monumental gates adorned with sculptures of the virgin or a patron saint marked the transition from secular exterior to sacred interior *(fig. 14)*. These gates were the only point of entrance, as the residential buildings forming the compound's perimeter were only accessible from within the compound. Crosses or crucifixes above the doors of these residences further direct the viewer's mental attention toward the heavenly orientation of Christian thought and action, a quality emphasized by the central position of the church within the compound.[97] In this sense, enclosure in the beguinage was mental rather than physical, with architecture "mediating and structuring…human [spiritual] experience and consciousness."[98] Upon entering the space, the individual—beguine or alms-seeker—was encouraged to let go of the surrounding world and focus on the internal world of their soul.

The anchoritic cell presents an intensification and personalization of this notion of architecture as a frame for spiritual engagement. In her cell, the anchoress dwelled in the deliberate "felicity of intense poverty" and solitude and "inhabitation of the world in spite of the world" in a manner akin to Bachelard's hermit with his hut.[99] It is likely that anchoresses had preconceived notions of what kind of physical environment would foster such physical and mental processes based on their experiences of other anchorholds and ascetic spaces. However, architecturally structured spiritual engagement was not one-size-fits-all. In plan, dimensions, materials, and characteristics of use, anchorholds were highly variable and deliberate. The anchoress was involved in the design and, at times, construction of her anchorhold, as it was a space for her personal spiritual inspiration and could only be suitably prepared by a person

[97] Moran, "Of Locked Doors," 19, 21–3.
[98] Pallasmaa, "Introduction," 13; Pallasmaa, "The Architectural Image," 123.
[99] Bachelard, "The Significance of the Hut," 32; Gaston Bachelard, "House and Universe," in *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas with a foreword by Etienne Gilson (New York: The Orion Press, 1964), 47.

knowledgeable of both her personal capabilities and the kind of space that she found most spiritually engaging.[100]

Despite varying opinions regarding the spiritual resonance of individual design choices, the anchorhold was a shelter that fostered spiritual imagination through the frictional intensity of enclosure that facilitated identification with Christ's suffering and embrace of his protection.[101] As stated in the *Ancrene Riwle*, "It is our happiness that we bear in our body the likeness of Jesus Christ's death, that it may be shewn in us of what nature was his life on earth."[102] The anchoress turned to Christ for support and devotion in her daily struggle, simultaneously testing her reliance on Him and strengthening her understanding of his earthly suffering. Anchoritic cells played an integral role in provoking and heightening such religious feeling and encouraging the sacred imagination. As stated by Pallasmaa, the elements of an architectural construction:

> …are promises and invitations: the floor is an invitation to stand up, establish stability and act, the door invites us to enter and pass through, the window to look out and see, the staircase to ascend and descend…. Consequently, authentic experiential or mental elements of architecture are not visual units or geometric *gestalt*…but *confrontations*, *encounters* and *acts* which project and articulate specific embodied and existential meanings.[103]

Nowhere is the mental and spiritual provocation of anchoritic architecture more evident than in the form of the squint. Gazing at the crucifix through a (frequently cruciform) squint, the anchoress would be separated from her beloved. But in that separation lies the distance required to activate the imagination so that she could embrace Christ not physically, but within her mind, heart, and soul. In spite of—and thanks to—the physical restrictions of her enclosure, the anchoress learned to reach out with her higher senses to engage with and understand the divine

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[100] Warren, "Solitaries, Sites, and Support," 30.
[101] Bachelard, "The Significance of the Hut," 31–4.
[102] James Morton, ed. "Love Maketh All Things Easy: Example," in *The Ancren Riwle: A Treatise on the Rules and Duties of Monastic Life* (London: Camden Society, 1852), 383.
[103] Juhani Pallasmaa, "The Architectural Image," in *The Embodied Image: Imagination and Imagery in Architecture* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2011), 123–4.

as much as possible while still on Earth. As stated in the *Ancrene Riwle*, "This taste, and this knowing, come of spiritual sight, and of spiritual hearing, and of spiritual speech, which they ought to possess who forego, for the love of God, worldly hearing, earthly speech, and fleshly sights."[104]

The anchorhold also served as an amplifier of religious imagination for the laity. The laity were not to see the anchoress herself, as curtains in front of the squint and parlor windows respectively would have obscured her from view.[105] Rather, in the austerity of the squint within the nave and the cell walls and windows from the exterior, the laity were to be impressed by *the power of God that drove the individual* to follow Him so completely, a condition that Brother Andrew Thornton refers to as "preaching by silence."[106] While those who observed the state of the anchoress' isolation were not to consider her a holy individual, they were encouraged to draw inspiration from her dedication to her faith.[107] The anchorhold served as a marker of that spiritual dedication. The materiality of the embodied anchorhold challenged those within and without to follow the path of Christ—a difficult path to be sure, but one that ended with the sweetest reward: heaven.

THE GOAL: HEAVENLY ECSTASY

The spiritual outcome of the embodied relationship between anchoress and architecture was to be one of intimate divine knowledge and edified faith. In his letters, Richard Rolle defines solitude as the earthly state most conducive to revelation, reassuring his disciple that she would learn to love her cell for the divine closeness it enables.[108] Having "forsaken the solace and joy of

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[104] James Morton, ed. "Holy Anchoresses Rewarded in Heaven," in *The Ancren Riwle: A Treatise on the Rules and Duties of Monastic Life* (London: Camden Society, 1852), 95.
[105] Clay, "Anchorites in Church and Cloister," 79; Clay, "Trial and Temptation," 122.
[106] Thornton, "Rule Within Rule," 79.
[107] Thus, there is a great irony in the canonization of such anchoritic figures as Wulfric of Haselbury or Saint Ghislain, whose sanctity was not intended to be assumed by themselves or others.
[108] Rolle, "The Form of Perfect Living," 12.

this world" in poverty and enclosure "for God's sake to suffer tribulation and anguish" until her death, she would be led each day by her heavenly Father and taught how to think, pray, and work in a manner befitting a *sponsa Christi*.[109] And with time and discipline, she would release herself overwhelming the glory of His love—described variably as burning or sweetness—and be more content in the passion of her solitude than if she had all the treasures of the world.[110] He states,

> The goodness of God it is that He comforts them wonderfully that have no comfort of the world, if they give their heart entirely to Him, and covet not nor seek but Him: then He gives Himself to them in sweetness and delight, in burning of love, and in joy and melody and dwells aye with them, in their soul, so that the comfort of Him departs never from them. And if they any time begin to err, through ignorance or frailty; soon He shews them the right way; and all that they have need of, He teaches them. No man to such revelation and grace on the first day may come; but through long travel and carefulness to love Jesus Christ, as thou shall here-afterward.[111]

The author of the *Ancrene Riwle* expresses a similar sentiment in his closing words to his patronesses, praying that the Lord "give you joy and comfort, my dear sisters, and for all that ye endure and suffer for him may he never give you a less reward than his entire self."[112]

Such was the goal of both the anonymous anchoress of King's Lynn and Sister Nazarena of Jesus. Despite their differences, the motivations guiding the physically and spiritually conscious design of their cells at King's Lynn and Sant'Antonio Abate remain comparable. Whether constructing a new anchorhold in medieval Norfolk or furnishing an existing space in modern Rome, the anchoresses created spaces of liminal friction marked by material simplicity, physical restriction, and sensory control to focus their thoughts heavenward and encourage and challenge their spiritual goals. The architecture of the cell served as a mediator between the

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[109] Rolle, "The Form of Perfect Living," 11.
[110] Rolle, The Form of Perfect Living," 11–3.
[111] Rolle, "The Form of Perfect Living," 12–3.
[112] James Morton, ed., "The Author's Concluding Benediction and Prayer," in *The Ancren Riwle: A Treatise on the Rules and Duties of Monastic Life* (London: Camden Society, 1852), 431.

anchoress and her beloved, removing the anchoress from the world and placing her on a path of contemplation structured by its physical similarity to Christ's earthly poverty and suffering. As stated by Pallasmaa, "A powerful architectural experience silences all external noise; it focuses attention on one's very existence. As all art, architecture makes us aware of our fundamental solitude."[113] Yet in her solitude, the anchoress was never truly alone.

Neither anchoress documented her experience of her cell or the revelations that occurred within. However, having investigated the principles of anchoritic life and the manner in which anchoresses related to their domestic environment, we can imagine the hardships and joys of enclosure and the manner in which architectural relationships heightened religious experience. Their path was not an easy one, but Christ does not promise earthly ease. Their reward was heaven, and its price, their trust in Him. So in their space there was no room for comfort. They could not ground themselves in what was concrete. Reaching out and touching, there was only hardness; underfoot and in the air there was only cold. Their beds were no safe haven, food no pleasure, company impossible to find. Yet gazing outward on the horizon they saw the majesty of His creation. Gardens grew by His grace, they dared not call them theirs. Light trailed through the window, kissing their cheeks with its feeble warmth, and they were reminded of who had called them to be who they were, where they were.

The cell was familiar to them—this space had witnessed their lives, and they its life. It had left its mark on them, and they on it. They existed thanks to each other, in spite of each other—they built it, it edified them; they tended to it, it sheltered them; they challenged it, it challenged them. But they never turned their backs on it because of what it represented—the trials of the savior, imitated in imperfect form by sinners unworthy of Christ's love, yet blessed

[113] Juhani Pallasmaa and Matteo Zambelli, "Silence, Time and Solitude," in *Inseminations: Seeds for Architectural Thought*, (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 210.

with it nonetheless. In times of grief they may have lost sight of this fact. Their thoughts felt as though they were theirs alone, and they became lost, unable to soothe their minds by their own strength. But relinquishing control, surrendering to their faith, they opened their hearts and minds to receive the divine grace and protection of a loving God. And they could not reach out and touch Him, but in this there was no hardship, for He was forever by their side.

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