

# Why we Need the Athenaeum

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**P**EOPLE ARE SOCIAL ANIMALS. We thrive in communities; we need shared interests, convivial debates, and meaningful interactions. In their absence, we decline mentally, emotionally, even physically. Last April, the office of the U.S. Surgeon General published an eighty-page report titled *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*.<sup>1</sup> It detailed a worrying trend of Americans becoming more socially disconnected and lonely. While acknowledging that this trend is not entirely new, the report emphasized the exponential growth of loneliness and isolation, just as technology continues to provide new ways of easy virtual communication. The report also claimed that effectively everyone (96 to 99 percent of adults under 65) engages online at some level, while revealing that one in three adults are online “almost constantly”—twice the proportion just eight years earlier, in 2015. This growth of digital engagement is in directly inverse proportion to the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of Americans. Life online offers only a simulacrum of interpersonal engagement,

1 “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community,” 2023. [www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf](http://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf)

without the benefits of genuine human connection. The sad, and inevitable, conclusion is that online contacts simply do not, and cannot, provide what people need. Even setting aside the egregious behaviors enabled by online anonymity, virtual social media interactions, bolstered by targeted algorithms, lead the participants away from nurturing open-minded discussions, and towards the acrimony of echo-chamber auto-confirmation and biased environments.

Reading through this report is a strain. For a start, it is counterintuitive to find bureaucratic terminology used in an effort to foster our shared humanity. Phrases like “collective efficacy,” “social cohesion,” “social isolation,” “social negativity” and “social participation” appear artificial next to the simple, colloquial “belonging,” which is identified as “a fundamental human need—the feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences.” Despite such lapses into newspeak, however, this thorough and well-meaning report is perfectly timed, even urgent, given the damage that evidently stems from the lack of human connectivity. The health problems recounted here, all documented and statistically proven, range from

cardiovascular disease, through hypertension, diabetes, reduced cognitive function, depression, and anxiety, all the way to self-harm and suicidality. These subsequently translate into wider, societal problems. The report concludes with a blueprint for a national strategy to advance social connection, proposing improvements in social infrastructure, including the “physical assets of the community (such as libraries and parks), programs (such as volunteer organizations and member associations), and local policies (such as public transportation and housing).” In other words, the solution to the crisis of loneliness and isolation is physical, not virtual, and involves the reintegration of people into real-life communities.

The Edith and Peter O’Donnell Jr. Athenaeum will fulfill this mandate for community-building, on a scale significantly more ambitious than a comparable, mid-size town infrastructure project suggested in the U.S. Surgeon General’s report. The 12-acre campus art district, now under construction, will contain two dedicated museums with nearly 120,000 square feet of combined space, a 53,000 square-foot performance hall, and a three-story parking structure to accommodate over 1,000 vehicles. The Athenaeum’s design and construction are being executed by Morphosis—an iconic design and architecture firm founded in 1972 by Thom Mayne, who still serves as its design director. Morphosis made its name with projects ranging from large urban developments to civic and institutional buildings, and bespoke residential architecture. The firm’s longevity and reputation undoubtedly derive from its flexibility and adaptability. Named after the Greek term for “to form or be in formation,” Morphosis “is a dynamic and evolving practice that responds to the shifting and advancing social, cultural, political and

technological conditions of modern life.”<sup>2</sup> This very flexibility and adaptability are vital to the Edith and Peter O’Donnell Jr. Athenaeum’s conception of a bold, large-scale project that provides a formidable, sympathetic response to the kinds of social shifts which have led to loneliness and isolation on a scale that now requires a triage from the U.S. Public Health Service.

This new Athenaeum taking shape on the southeast corner of the University of Texas at Dallas campus, is modeled after historical *athenaea*—the loci of knowledge and the exchange of ideas, where ancient Greeks could partake in learning, and communicate with their peers. The classical *athenaea* were founded on the free circulation of thought. The concept of the athenaeum was revived during the Enlightenment, albeit in the less inclusive form of salons and clubs, accessible only to select and educated participants. Even in these narrower circles, however, the guiding principle was the pursuit of knowledge, truth and beauty. As the Morphosis “Athenaeum Masterplan” explains, these 18th-century salons were places “where some of the most significant ideas of the era were first presented, challenged, and developed.” Critically, the UT Dallas Athenaeum, as conceived by Morphosis, will not concentrate only on “libraries, galleries, and collections” as in the past, but will now “focus on activity as well as artifacts.”<sup>3</sup> Hence such plans as outdoor space for events at the Crow Museum of Asian Art, music practice rooms, and choral and orchestra rehearsal rooms at the Performance Hall. The Edith and Peter O’Donnell Jr. Athenaeum is designed to hold collections of precious objects, but also to accommodate “happenings, events, and

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<sup>2</sup> [www.morphosis.com/about](http://www.morphosis.com/about)

<sup>3</sup> “The Edith and Peter O’Donnell Jr. Athenaeum Masterplan,” [www.morphosis.com/planning/289](http://www.morphosis.com/planning/289)

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interactions through the day and night.” It will “support a great variety of ways in which knowledge and ideas are created and shared, from formal lectures, exhibitions, and research engagements through casual student meet ups or individual study and contemplation.” In other words, it will be as much a forum for intellectual exchange as a repository for cultural artifacts.

This connection between the personal and the public, in the context of shared culture, makes the model of the *athenea* especially important in a contemporary culture plagued by ideological balkanization. As the first public athenaeum in North America, the UT Dallas Athenaeum hopes to provide an example of how to salvage free discourse by taking it out of formal and fixed educational settings, and relocating it in an open arena accessible to the local community. It will help to maintain a breadth of view that is in palpable danger of becoming extinct, to be replaced by narrow and utilitarian epistemological models.

In a recent lecture “A Revolution in Thought?” delivered to Darwin College, University of Cambridge, the psychiatrist, philosopher, and literary scholar Iain McGilchrist argued for the urgency of preserving this disappearing breadth of

view.<sup>4</sup> The reason, according to McGilchrist, was to counteract what he termed the ongoing “meta-crisis”:

*Not just the odd crisis here and there, but the despoliation of the natural world, the decline of species on a colossal scale, the destabilization of the climate, the destruction of the way of life of indigenous people, the fragmentation and polarization of once civilized society with escalating, not diminishing, resentments on all sides, an escalating, not diminishing gap between rich and poor, a surge in mental illness, not the promised increase in happiness, a proliferation of laws, but a rise in crime; the abandonment of civil discourse....*

McGilchrist, who spent nearly two decades studying the human brain, became widely known following the publication of his first book on the subject in 2009. Using clinical research on the function of the hemispheres, *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* explores how our understanding of hemispheric modalities (the difference between the functions of the right and the left hemispheres) can be translated into an understanding of human history and culture.

McGilchrist expanded his theories in his next book, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World* (Perspectiva Press, 2021), a two-volume, 1500 page *magnum opus* where he delves into the functions and malfunctions of the brain. The first volume addresses such matters as attention, intelligence, creativity, and truth. The second considers the repercussions of the brain’s left hemisphere’s modality becoming increasingly dominant for the condition of

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<sup>4</sup> “A Revolution in Thought? – Dr. Iain McGilchrist,” Darwin College Lectures Series, Cambridge University, Feb. 13, 2024, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuQ4Hi7YdgU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuQ4Hi7YdgU)

our society. McGilchrist's argument, laid out with great depth and precision, is that the fundamental difference between the right and the left hemispheres consists in the variances of what he calls their "attention." This in turn, creates two divergent phenomenological worlds. McGilchrist summarizes these two modalities in the Cambridge lecture:

*In the case of the left hemisphere, the world is simplified in service of manipulation. It is made of isolated static things that are already known, familiar, predetermined and fixed. They're fragments that are importantly devoid of context, disembodied and meaningless, abstract, generic, quantifiable, fungible, mechanical, ultimately bloodless, and lifeless. This is indeed not so much a world, as a representation of a world, which means a world that's actually no longer present, but reconstructed after that fact. And it is literally two-dimensional, schematic, and theoretical.... Here, the future is a fantasy that remains under our control. The left hemisphere is unreasonably optimistic and fails to see the dangers that loom.*

He contrasts this detail-focused, manipulative, "narrow-beam attention" left-hemisphere modality, to the modality of the right hemisphere which, as he puts it, "is on the lookout for everything else that's going on while we're manipulating for mates, or predators." The right hemisphere's kind of attention is "broad, sustained, coherent, vigilant and uncommitted as to what it may find." It is "in the service of understanding of the contextual whole":

*In the case of the right hemisphere, by contrast, there is world of the flowing processes, not isolated things. One where nothing is simply fixed entirely, certain, exhaustively known, or fully predictable, but always changing and ultimately interconnected with everything else. Where context is everything. Where what exists are*

*wholes of which what we call the parts.... Where what really matters is implicit, a world of uniqueness where quality is more important than quantity. A world that is essentially animate. Here the future is a product of realism, not denial. This is a world that is fully present, rich, and complex, a world of experience which calls for understanding....*

McGilchrist suggests that a breadth of perspective is growing rare because our society, and our culture, are focused on the explicit, at the expense of the implicit. We are, that is to say, increasingly favoring the left-hemisphere modality. As a result, the larger context, which is synonymous with a broad view, is neglected in favor of categorization and control. Citing the British mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, McGilchrist apports some of the blame to the human propensity for self-reflexive language and discourse: "a culture in its finest flower [is] before it begins to analyze itself." In our postmodern condition, he says, where everything and anything can be deconstructed, "the explicit stands forward, and the implicit retires." To make the implicit explicit is to alter it, and ultimately to destroy it. A mutation of the implicit into the explicit leaves in its wake a simplistic notion of human nature as mechanistic: "in the entirely predictable parallels we have become enslaved by the machine that should be our servant." McGilchrist points out that, despite evidence to the contrary provided by modern physics, which debunks the mechanistic model of the universe, many people "still imagine that the machine is the best model for understanding everything we come across: we ourselves, our brains, our minds, our society...." McGilchrist rightly sees this ultra-materialism as delusory because human beings, unlike linear and sequential machines, are complex systems.

Their default status is not stasis, as it is with machines that can be switched on and off. The default status of human beings is flow, evolution, interaction with their environment, all of which has the potential of altering people and their nature.

Quoting the mathematician and biophysicist Robert Rosen's book *Life Itself: a Comprehensive Inquiry into the Nature, Origin, and Fabrication of Life*, McGilchrist points out that all naturally occurring systems differ from machines, insofar as they "are never merely complicated, but complex, and therefore never fully predictable, ...whether we choose to see them as alive or not." Prompted by the hubristic belief in the supremacy of technology, or perhaps by the lack of awareness characteristic of the left-hemispheric modality which "is unreasonably optimistic and fails to see the dangers that loom," we human beings have become overreliant on the very machines that deprive us of the idea of "the implicit," which is indispensable for our well-being.

This has narrowed the breadth of our viewpoint, whose expansion can emerge only out of free and rational debate.

McGilchrist's theories about the increasing prominence of the left-hemispheric modality help us understand why and how the replacement of human with virtual interaction has resulted in the deplorable epidemic of loneliness and isolation. The logical solution to the meta-crisis would be to re-embrace contextual awareness and the spirit of interconnection that the right hemispheric modality stands for. Both the Surgeon General's report and McGilchrist in his Cambridge lecture talk about the need to promote a society of trust, identified in the Report as "an individual's expectation of positive intent and benevolence from the actions of other people and groups." This requires the open-mindedness that arises only from convivial disputes. And that is exactly what the Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum cultural center aspires to provide.  ♠