

TIMELESSNESS IN SACRED PLACES

Your Name

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## Introduction

When studying the architecture of a sacred site and religious buildings, one is forced to pay attention to the religion behind and understand its definition. The construction of houses of worship has been a significant endeavor throughout the history of architecture and building spaces from the perspective of multiple faiths such as Islam, Christianity, and many others. Sacred buildings such as synagogues, churches, mosques and memorials are looked upon and viewed in the context of religious practice. Needless to say, religion has always exercised a powerful influence on civic life and when creating sacred spaces. The essay looks at the concept of "Transcendence" and how it manifests itself in a sacred space. It would be interesting to see how a measurable material can create an immeasurable quality within a sacred site. It is the timelessness that prevails over a religious structure and even a brief experience in a place of faith can leave a profound impact on memory. This discussion is aimed at providing an interpretation of timelessness and how material creates something that is immaterial.

Great architecture gets noticed and affects the quality of life and when architecture is art, it still carries the obligation to be practical and functional. It creates interior spaces that are shared and walked through. Religious spaces are great places of encounter, and being in a great space can uplift the spirit and create a comfortable environment. The synthesis of faith and art created a fascinating universal language that continues to exist even today and it would be interesting to look as to how the buildings can foster this divine encounter.

**Timelessness within the temporal**

Aristotle was able to see timelessness within the temporal and claimed that although the physical objects decay with time, their value and meaning doesn't. Although temporal was considered to be worthless, it was taken literally, or the magnificent cathedral and other religious structures would not have come into being.<sup>1</sup> Sacred and religious architecture are used synonymously and indicate an architecture with a religious purpose. When architecture is sacramental and created for the purpose of a divine encounter, it is in relation to the holy and not profane<sup>2</sup>. A profane architecture such as concert halls or airports might evoke a religious awe while a demonic architecture can dehumanize people. It is all about the question of space, and the close influences between space and the sacred. It is interesting to note that the sacred, architecture relies on materiality and its ultimate expression. The material, in a way, is trying to express something which is not material and in the event becomes timeless in the process. The architecture when creating a sacred space, finds itself working against itself. It struggles to transcend the material and travel cross space to express the transcendent.

There is a complex relationship between the spirit, earth, and the universe and together they create a timeless design. The different sacred archetypes lay the foundation to timeless design, which is further expressed in a sacred architecture. This application of

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Nigel Pennick. *Sacred Architecture of London* (Karnac Books, 2012).

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Bert Daelemans, *Spiritus Loci: A Theological Method for Contemporary Church Architecture* (BRILL 2015), 420.

timeless elements in any sacred architecture persists even today. Even though a church may differ from a mosque in its shape and architecture, the inner spaces carry a timeless design philosophy and stimulate a deeply spiritual vision of humanity once again. Thus, the sacred architecture expresses a unity in multiplicity. One doesn't make use of architecture to understand theology, and any theology interested in architecture is a reflection of God. The most central aspect of any sacred art is that it arbitrates between a higher, divine realm and the earthly realm.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, architecture is not evaluated through theological criteria, and the theology of architecture cannot be found in theology <sup>4</sup> God is transcendental in nature, and He is one whom no one has seen, but he resides in one of us. Theological aesthetics focus only on the holy or the theology through the sacred. Architecture can be called sacred when it is sacramental and mediates a divine mystery. It is the spiritual experiences one gets within the space that calls for the basic distinction.

The wonderful paradox

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Aidan Hart. "The Sacred In Art And Architecture: Timeless principles and contemporary challenges." (aidanharticons, 2016), 10.

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Bert Daelemans, *Spiritus Loci: A Theological Method for Contemporary Church Architecture* (BRILL 2015), 420.

There is an incredible paradox behind as even this most sensuous and intensely physical work within the sacred architecture is not able to keep us away from the spiritual. In fact, the opposite happens when one enters the sacred space of the architecture that shifts us towards the realm of the non-physical. The purely religious space is a space created with a conscious purpose of making the surroundings spiritual. One of the most significant aspects of any sacred space is the way in which it transcends time and has no real connection to it. The religious building could have been built ages ago, but it still connects to the present and will do so in the future. This is what makes it timeless, it is from other era and yet feels right even today.

When studying and discussing cathedrals and churches as works of structure, one talks of them in sacred terms. The less tangible aspects such as space and light are discussed. The making of sacred architecture is very much like the creation of sacred space that is powerfully spiritual. The architecture is materialistic in nature and carries a rational structure. However, the sacred is otherwise and does not demand logic. Thus, while logic has been used to create the religious structures, after a point, those structures become sacred and go beyond logic. It is amazing how the sacred spaces unite the spiritual and the material worlds. Any sacred art mediates between a higher realm and our realm, and its objective is to change us and our vision. The making of a sacred architecture relies on the expression of materiality. Thus, in a way, the architecture works against itself in its attempt to create a sacred space. Thus, when discussing a sacred architecture, it is essential to use the psychical to express the transcendence.

Taking the example of Thorncrown Chapel, a humble chapel that lies hidden in the Arkansas' Ozark Mountains, enclosed by forests filled with the oaks, maples, and oaks.

The light filled Gothic chapel has been listed among the AIA's top 10 constructions of the 20th century<sup>5</sup>. The design of the chapel is very simple. Although it is small in size, it has hundreds of windows and a central skylight that fill it with generous light. The use of organic material and the play of light and shadows play a major role in creating a special ambiance in the chapel that changes each hour of the day and during different times of the year. The sustainable techniques and the strong connection between the inner and outer spaces and the repetition of thatched diagonals moving throughout the building create a quality that is dynamic spiritual in nature. The flooding light and the raised roof motivate the spirit of one to soar and connect with the divine.

Space is less rational and less material. When one discusses the sacred architecture, for example, the Gothic cathedrals, one talks about them in sacred terms and focused more on the space and the light. When sacred architecture is in the making, it is creating a sacred space. Architecture is made of a material by nature, but it must have a rational. However, sacred is not logical or material in nature. Thus, there is a contradiction here as the means is rational, but the end is not. The architects of those ancient Gothic cathedrals created far from rational effects. One can describe the physical structure of any church or cathedral which is describable and measurable. The emotions and feelings one gets when

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Galloway, Andrew. "AD Classics: Thorncrown Chapel / E. Fay Jones." 2014. archdaily (Dec 9, 2016). <http://www.archdaily.com/533664/ad-classics-thorcrown-chapel-e-fay-jones>

standing in the sacred spaces are not measured or rational. The structure itself defies the very essence of its structure. One can say that in a sacred palace the material has been used to go beyond the material and which cannot be measured.

Andelsbuch Mountain Chapel is a small chapel that was built in 2008<sup>6</sup>. It is enclosed by a gently sloping grassland and is surrounded by panoramic views. Made of a single material, the altar wall remains connected to daylight and seasons, and there is a cross placed on the back wall. The interiors are simple and windowless, this forcing one to place his attention on the cross and the light that surrounds it. Thus, the design creates space that connect one to the supreme right away. It is at the moment when the architecture dons its highest role and when the material enters the non-martial realm that joins the rational to the irrational<sup>7</sup>. One can get a religious experience through the architecture, even though the screed need not be aesthetic.

### **The traditional architecture in sacred spaces**

Human beings make buildings not just to live in. Some are meant to come closer to divine and encounter spiritualism. The contemporary church architecture offers a rare

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"Cukrowicz Nachbar Mountain Chapel Alp Vordere Niedere Andelsbuch." 2016. divisare (Dec 9, 2016). <https://divisare.com/projects/317554-cukrowicz-nachbaur-mountain-chapel-alp-vordere-niedere-andelsbuch>

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Paul Goldberger, *Epilogue: on the relevance of sacred architecture today* (Paul Goldberger, n.d.), 224-230.

opportunity to the architecture so as to develop a pure architecture that is capable of expressing transcendence. The freedom allows the architecture to go beyond the merely functional task expected from a building as it is a sacred task to create an atmosphere for the divine. The purpose behind is to create a powerful emotional response from the visitor.

*“There are small and large, impressive and important buildings or complexes that dwarf me that oppress me that exclude or rebuff me. But there are also buildings or ensembles of buildings, both small ones and monumental ones that make me feel good, that make me look good, that give me a sea of dignity and freedom, that make me want to stay awhile and that I enjoy using “ Peter Zumthor<sup>8</sup>*

The Modernism deals with the issue of meaning because of the contrasting images. In the Cathedral of Leon<sup>9</sup>, one sees a sacred building because of its different and demanding size, because of the deep entrance and enormous windows and the towers. Thus, the questions remain as to what is sacred today and what makes a traditional religious experience. When one looks at the history of sacred architecture, there are more natural forms of the early structures. For example, the Teotihuacan, z ceremonial site echoism the

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Bert Daelemans, *Spiritus Loci: A Theological Method for Contemporary Church Architecture* (BRILL 2015), 420.

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*Constructing the Ineffable: Contemporary Sacred Architecture* (Yale University School of Architecture, 2011), 7-47.



shape of a mountain and running with springs. In the classic Maya temples, they stand as raised structures and rise high in the air. The location of temples and their raised

structures towered over the city. The Ziggurat of UR used a continuous stairway to connect the earth to the sky. These examples show that sacred places were built at elevated grounds where there were no mountains, or the mountains became sacred themselves if they existed. Greeks followed the tradition but created more demanding structures and buildings. However, in their architecture, nature's laws and human wish were brought together and examples can be taken from the Temple of Athena and the Temple of Hera. One can see how the Greeks always developed the same temple type to convey the physical body of divinity. The major difference between the Greeks and the Romans is that the Greeks<sup>10</sup> worshiped the body while the Romans worshiped the space. From Romans, a temple meant a sacred space. They created magical spaces with windblown canopies that were not supported by columns but held down by them.

The early Christians were seen to gather in house churches to offer prayers. The man has always been placed in a sacred location about God. The first altars were the places where God received worship. The Church has long been engaged in a meaningful collaboration with artists and architects and thus has always been a great patron of art and architecture. Christian faith has inspired artistic creations, and the cathedrals experienced a rebirth of religious architecture. There are splendid Baroque churches and Gothic cathedrals that act as a manifestation of the divine. The architect develops the natural

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elements so as to direct the fundamental awareness towards the experience of the God<sup>11</sup>. The ornate Baroque churches evoked the spiritual by making overwhelming grandeur architecture<sup>12</sup>.

The introduction of pointed arches supported by stout pillars increase the height considerably and create an upward thrust, which forces one to look up and join hand in prayer. Thus, the architecture introduced the architectural lines to create a longing for God. The purpose of sacred architecture and use of the element of sacred art and furnishings such as the tabernacle, the ambo, the altar, the crucifix and the celebrant's chair create a suitable space<sup>13</sup> for the celebration of the divine.

Ravenna's sixth century San Vitale looks very logical and ordinary from the outside, and it is the inside that counts and space. The same can be said about St. Peter in Rome. The transcendental landscape of Hagia Sophia with a square plan and the dome that seems to float above is a union of the opposites. The music and the windows dazzle one, and it is all about the experience created by the space. With the development of Gothic

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Justin Cardinal Rigali."address to Conference on Sacred Architecture".2016. sacredarchitecture (Dec 9, 2016).  
[http://www.sacredarchitecture.org/articles/documentation\\_address\\_to\\_conference\\_on\\_sacred\\_architecture](http://www.sacredarchitecture.org/articles/documentation_address_to_conference_on_sacred_architecture)

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"Architecture, Sacred Space and the Challenge of the Modern." 2010. paulgoldberger (Dec 9, 2016).  
<http://www.paulgoldberger.com/lectures/architecture-sacred-space-and-the-challenge-of-the-modern/>

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Justin Cardinal Rigali."address to Conference on Sacred Architecture".2016. sacredarchitecture (Dec 9, 2016).  
[http://www.sacredarchitecture.org/articles/documentation\\_address\\_to\\_conference\\_on\\_sacred\\_architecture](http://www.sacredarchitecture.org/articles/documentation_address_to_conference_on_sacred_architecture)

architecture<sup>14</sup>, the fabric of the church dematerialized and convinced one that both the fabric and the spaces is sacred itself. The architects of the Renaissance had their own ideas what a sacred place should be like. The architects loved the purity of the design of the circle inside a square. Andrea Palladio took the square and the circle to make the central plan of the Villa Rotonda, and like the ancient architects, he condenses the two opposites of the Greek temple and the Christian church. Bernini pushed the oval of his magnificent colonnade towards space and thus brought the façade and dome together. The sacred buildings towards the twentieth century became more rational and secularized.

Islamic architecture is particularly noted for its doctrinal iconoclasm through non-iconographic imagery, space, geometry and light. The expression of piety is a conscious spiritual exercise by the architects. One can take the example of Ottoman mosque carry the most imagery and symbolism<sup>15</sup> in the mosque which was a centralized place. One can recognize the formal elements of flanking minarets, and how a hierarchal order is created through scale ad placement. When one thinks about the Protestants and the Jewish congregations in many countries, or the Islamic places of worship on Wester cities, their sacred places are left over spaces of urban areas. Yet, those sacred places are able to

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*Constructing the Ineffable: Contemporary Sacred Architecture* (Yale University School of Architecture, 2011), 7-47.

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Thomas Barrie, *The Sacred In-Between: The Mediating Roles of Architecture* (Routledge Press, 2013), 288.

inspire their people and inspire the feelings of transcendence<sup>16</sup>.

Corbusier tried to evoke the sacredness of the body, and in Beton Brut, he masks his glass surfaces and creates the impression that the walls are not a container of space but a sculptural body. The Utilitarian Church at Rochester shows cinderblock walls that allow light to enter from the corners of the building.

Timelessness is sacred architecture

What is the element of timelessness in a sacred architecture is connected to the belief of man? When a being is inside a religious building, he tries to connect with the Higher Being within the universe, and it is the spiritual vision of humanity that extends the timelessness in the holy space. The architecture and built form of the sacred site strengthen his systems of belief according to his religion. This is why those timeless qualities are persistent even in ancient architecture carrying a sacred identity.

Timelessness is an unearthly component of sacred architecture, and the spaces are used to express belief in a divine power of the universe. Different religions and belief systems get conveyed strongly by means of architecture and built form. There is a timelessness about that ancient religious architecture that carries a sacred identity. It reflects the complex inter-relationship between the universe and the spirit. The various sacred archetypes implemented in sacred Christian and Islamic architecture reveal the timeless elements.

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Buildings can be mute, or they can speak. One has to listen to them and feel them hear what they are trying to say. How one approaches the building and interacts with the space and light in its interiors allows one to connect to the anonymous sacredness that prevails in all religious buildings. The dimension of synaesthetic space corresponds to the Spirit while the kerygmatic space corresponds to the divine and incarnation<sup>17</sup>. The material of the matter matters only when an individual approaches and enters the religious space keeping in mind the spiritual space as a divine encounter.

When looking at some of the ancient architectural works, they are argued to have a timeless quality. Certainly, the visual order has been exploited here through the connections and relationships in the spatial order, with a certain repetition and patterns in the building. It is observed that constructing spaces that appeal to the most central individualities of mankind are timeless as they appeal to the permanent side of him and thus follow a timeless design approach. The need for social interaction and connecting to the divine have been among the most fundamental aspects of human life. Timelessness in architecture doesn't have any set rules<sup>18</sup> but is a mindset.

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Bert Daelemans, *Spiritus Loci: A Theological Method for Contemporary Church Architecture* (BRILL 2015), 420.

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Malte Koeditz. "Timelessness in Architecture: Perception, Interpretation, Function." 2011. maltekoeditz (Dec 9, 2016). <http://www.maltekoeditz.com/pages/timelessness-essay.html>

Although one can contemplate the idea of God, they cannot plan the physical reality of God. The architects of the cathedrals and religious structures used structural systems to make the far-from-rational effects. The religious spaces evoke feelings that are beyond the rational and the measurable, and this is where the genius of those structures exists.<sup>19</sup> They leave us in awe, forcing us to raise our consciousness towards the divine. As the quest for the sacred remains, so will the aura of the sacred architecture. One can take the example of modern architecture, Ground Zero and how the whole experience of being there makes it sacred. Being on the location forces one to look within and think about those who died there and honor their souls. The Ground Zero teaches us something vital about sacred space and how one can get transported to a new and different world that lies hidden in the rational world.

People can have deep architectural and religious experiences when they visit a sacred place. Not all will pay attention to the architectural details. However, great architects do carry the skills to enhance the religious experience; they have little control over<sup>20</sup> it. What makes the sacred spaces divine are not strictly controlled by the architectural elements and design. For the people, space is transcendent and relies on what they bring to it as well as what the architect has done to it.

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"Architecture, Sacred Space and the Challenge of the Modern." 2010. paulgoldberger (Dec 9, 2016). <http://www.paulgoldberger.com/lectures/architecture-sacred-space-and-the-challenge-of-the-modern/>

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Paul Goldberger, Epilogue: on the relevance of sacred architecture today (Paul Goldberger, n.d.), 224-230.

## **Conclusion**

It is the creative intelligence of artists and the knowledge of the various schools of design and study of classical motifs, and a meditative architectural planning that allows an understanding of how architecture nourishes faith. Those careful designs, distinct painting and decorations and strategic placement of sculpture in the interiors and exteriors evoke prayerfulness and aid meditation. Artists and architects create sacred spaces meant for worship and lead us to contemplate the mysteries of the divine. The ability of architecture to create the sacred and awe remains a paradox. The ancient connections between art and religion are far deeper and are independent of the logic and materialism. It is the elevation of the spiritual over the aesthetic that create the transcendence. The architects use the material of the physical world and then move us away from the physicality of it.

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