

Notes on Spirituality and Sacred Space

For The Yale University School of Architecture students and members of
Of the Architectural Design Studio conducted by Brigitte Shim and Hilary Samples
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Space is what the body moves through to understand creation. This suggests that architects and designers are entrusted with the task of a moral education.

Good religious architecture is not construction. It is a molding of space, a sculpting of it, a choreography of it. It releases the body into the body's expression of sentiment, and by *sentiment* I mean the human posture in relation to the ineffable, the limitless, the timeless. Such that all good architecture is spiritual.

Sacred architecture is not just churches, temples, chapels, etc.. Besides which formal places of worship are dysfunctional in a secular age. Architects have been expanding the formal sense of sacred space for a long time, and we have rediscovered the inadvertently spiritual in landscape and built form in places that had not been intended for worship.

The crudest evocations of the majestic in the religious impulse are now the domain of corporate and financial (temples of affluence). We have thankfully become more imaginative our apprehension and provision for spiritual design. It seems to me artistic architecture has used the lyrical and the liberating to induce the citizen towards spirituality, without calling it that. All artists are high priests. That is, they implicitly bring the citizen to a higher order or higher version of the human condition.

Otherwise, architecture is a function of predisposing the habitant to function.

Function is not the realm of spiritual architecture, apart from the business of making pews, seating and points of meditation.

That said, a spiritual space, natural or built, or both, is a space, not that enables spirituality, but in which spirituality is enacted. The actor moves through it or, rather, finds "home" in it.

The principles of spiritual space are:

The elicitation of wonder

The imperative of stillness.

The benevolent connotation of forces that nurture, gentle and release.

This is a simplified register of religious sentiment

Such space, clearly can be independent of built form.

Nature is the obvious provider of spiritual space.

Nature within and with built form is conducive to spiritual architecture.

Meditative walks, pathways, urban design; the contexts for a civic spiritual experience can be planned or unplanned. The spiritual need in the citizen finds the three principles where and when it will. This explains a lot of reaction against development, when development mars sacred space, or corrupts the possibility of sacred space. (A neighborhood can be a sacred space, not merely by ownership, but by the elements of nurture and gentleness of the neighborhood. The architecture of the relational substitutes for built form).

There is civic life that propounds yet another aspect of spiritual space--- convening, gathering, civil encounter in any form indicates the civic need for communion. All design and architecture directed towards this is a less ascetic form of spiritual space. It is easily abducted by retail and commerce, and infrequently graduates to the ascetical. It easily takes the need for civic communion and reduces it, maintains it to the manufacture of buzz, excitement and consumerism.

Good spiritual architecture takes the need for civic communion and graduates it to the level of collective wonder in a convivial forum for the spiritual. The effect is re-introduce the "pilgrim" to the timeless in the company of others

I have been very familiar, as a priest, with contemporary churches. Their mimicry of modernism without thought accounts for their regular resemblance to "pizza hut" and other corporate genialities. Church architects tend to be, like everyone else, tamed by the cost-effective and a contemporary feel for horizontal form with a bias against the transcendent spires and longitudes of an earlier theology. These are "congregationalist" structures that are big on "immanentism"; in an effort to make the pilgrim feel "welcome", they sacrifice grandeur; well and good, but they turn church spaces into "comfort zones". The unclear theology of the times, in any denomination, makes for contrasting structures. At best, church architectures are reflective of their sacramental structure. Where Christian churches are concerned, the theology of baptism dominant over the theology of the eucharist will, for example, mean different spatial principles. or the notion of the altar and its importance in the liturgy will centralize space and resist the free-play of movement. Theologies that aggrandize the individual over the collective will figure differently. Simply, the theology of the church will be reflected in form.

A note on Spirituality and the city

The onus in the 21st century will not be “diversity of culture”, but “diversity of spirituality. As religion is increasingly privatized, for fear of feud, fanaticism and market irrelevance, when the ethics of the home is in increased variance with the ethic of the market place, with no national or institutional ethic short of the manufacture of political correctness---it will behoove the architect, the planner to design public space that mediates the spiritual instinct to communality and transcendence. The communing of streetscape, landscape, building, skyline enjoins the citizen to commune with projects and entities and re-establishes trust with others. It is the only commonality we have. The movement in physical space is a shared liturgy. Words, ideas, cultures and lifestyles are not universals. The effect of architecture and space on the entire person, in the advent and presence of other persons is universal. It gentles the civic creature. It can gentle disparate cultures and peoples by the vocabulary of the sublime, bringing them to the point of awe, gratitude and mutuality by shared space, making such space sacred.

The aesthetic of “prayerfulness” is in each and every architect intent on a sacred form. It doesn’t matter that one architect formulates the cosmic differently from another. The articulation of the cosmic, the divine is signature and identifiable. The articulation matters. It is done with veneration, quietude, wonderment as a disposition in the artists own talent. Reverence for the cosmic and the human is the hallmark of any successful sacred space. To bring the citizen to that same threshold is a priestly function-- an architectural function. It is the environment of reverence that will save the environment of nature and permit a habitable environment of the urban.

Such things, I think, are the considering of those who shape sacred space.

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