WEEK 1

Consecration: The Making of Sacred Space

“Neither the ‘indigenous’ experience nor the academic interpretation of sacred architecture is ever definitive and complete.” (Lindsay Jones, historian of religion)

What is a sacred space?
- How do we make (and unmake) sacred space?
- Why do we make sacred space?
- What work does sacred space do once made?

Special relationship between the sacred & place.
Emile Durkheim defines the sacred as something “held apart.”

Location: Auspicious, topographically impressive, liminal settings (mountain tops, on the border between land and water, etc.) are favoured locations.

Mark off and delimit (by means of walls, e.g.) a piece of propitiously situated land and declare that a different set of values are to reign within than without.

Choosing a location: through revelation or provocation. Mircea Eliade defines revelation as a situation where a place is perceived as already, omherenly holy and we acknowledge it by means of architecture (e.g. St Peter’s in Rome built over the spot traditionally held to be the burial place of St Peter). Provocation is building something in the expectation that the act of building will provoke the holiness into being there. (the translation of relics is an example of a practice that means to provoke the holy into existence at a particular site by transferring something perceived to be holy from elsewhere).

Wendell Berry, in contrast to Durkheim, believes that all space is sacred (unless specifically profaned).

“There are no unsacred places, only sacred places and desecrated places.” (Wendell Berry)

Henri Lefevbre holds sacred space to be a form of all-space that he calls absolute space (def: not existing anywhere in particular, but as a symbolic, mental, mythical space, always proximate and imminent).

The idea of sacred space as all-space, as a microcosm of the macrocosm, is an ancient one in Christianity and most Byzantine churches e.g. were designed with this principle in mind, as an imago mundi (an image of the world).

Berry: all that is required for space to remain sacred is that we refrain from profaning it.
Lefevbre: a positive effort is required on our part to create (provoke) it ongoingly.
Hegel: there is a continual manifestation or revelation of the divine in and through historical events.
The city of Rome: holy in its entirety. Demarcation through city walls, but the holy precinct nevertheless so large as to function for its citizens as an example of “all space as holy.” Every transaction carried out within its walls considered to bind the actors in a sacred bond, with one another and with the realm of divine principles.

Turku as holy city in its entirety during Christmas (as outlined in the Christmas proclamation of peace). Time-bound example of “all space as sacred.” Sacred or extraordinary time (Christmas) turns the city of Turku into an extraordinary, aka sacred, space.

Gradations of the sacred in all sacred spaces.
Example of Rome: a temple more sacred than a market place; the sacrificial altar in the temple more sacred than the forecourt.

Gradations are marked by thresholds. A big part of understanding sacred space consists in understanding the paradoxical nature of thresholds. They are both separating and connecting. Think about a bridge or a gateway. Or the oculus of the Pantheon. Many sacred buildings, especially ancient ones, are hypaethral (i.e. open to – and referencing – the sky), which emphasizes the fact that they are to be seen as thresholds in themselves – between heaven and earth. Sacred space has an aspect of permeability.

This connection and permeability is not only made manifest in the architecture (via oculi and portals, e.g.), but it is also manifested through movement, liturgical and other. Pilgrimages, processions, etc.

Lefebvre calls Christianity a subterranean or cryptic religion (in more ways than one), and compares churches to well-heads. Where x surfaces as a church, there the world is real (Lefebvre) or there the world worlds (Heidegger). Wells and well-heads presuppose underground streams, groundwater, so this image feeds off and amplifies the idea of sacred architecture as connected as well. Connected to other sacred architecture (via movement, e.g.) but also connected to the eternal springs that feed it.

Any too dualistic view of what constitutes the sacred and the unsacred are best dispensed with.

Apart from location, orientation appears to be universally important in sacred architecture.
Cardinal points: east, west, south and north. Equivalent to spring (east), summer (south), fall (west) and winter (north).
East: sunrise, origin of life, growth, spring, intellect, Paradise
West: sunset, end of life, aging, death, harvest, fall, water
South: warmth, heat, summer, big celebrations, virility, vitality (traditionally associated with men), red, sun
North: darkness, cold, winter, communion with dark earth, fire, foundations (traditionally associated with women), blue, moon

Cardinal points in a church context: baptismal font as well as main door in the west denoting physical and metaphorical entrance into the church/Church. Waters of the font – dying to the purely earthly life and being reborn “in Christ.” Movement from west to east (from baptism in the west to resting the coffin in the the chancel in the east), life in between spent in the pews in the nave. Movement towards Paradise. In cases where there was more than one door, men used to enter through the south and women through the north. Men also said on the south side of the church and women to the north. This practice, while it has ceased in most places, is still remembered in the practice of seating the groom’s family to the south and the bride’s family to the north in traditional wedding ceremonies.

Movement: along axes (west to east or north to sound, e.g.) or circular (around the Kaba, around Shinto shrines – sunwise or anti-sunwise).
Is a work of sacred architecture, in a consecrated state, *automatically* and always a sacred space to everyone? There are essentially three attitudes that prevail as far as this question goes.

1. Sacred spaces are universally and automatically perceived as sacred by all. This is believed by the Armenian mystic and philosopher G. I. Gurdjeff, the British art critic and philosopher Roger Scruton, the 19th-century artist and critic John Ruskin…

   Those who hold to this view believe that sacramity can be boiled down to a question of scale, form, materiality, colour, acoustic qualities perhaps, a certain type of connection to or reference to nature perhaps (and through it, to the cosmos)… That certain materials convey certain qualities intrinsically – stone e.g. connotes timelessness, death, commemoration, whereas wood may connote life… its apparent weathering a sign of life, change, time…That qualities such as beauty, goodness, truth, e.g. can be conveyed through a particular choice of materials and shapes and through the use of light and shadow.

2. Sacred spaces are entirely “open works” (this is held to be true by the Italian philosopher and novelist Umberto Eco, the Russian philosopher and critic Mikhail Bakhtin and the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty), i.e. they hold a virtually infinite (and shifting) range of possible meanings.

3. The sacred lies somewhere between the two, between the objective, physical world of the architecture and our subjective interpretation of it. This is held to be true by the Finnish architect and critic Juhani Pallasmaa, the Austrian architect Peter Zumthor, and the American religious studies scholar Lindsay Jones. While sacred architecture does in fact have a superabundance (of meaning and interpretation) it is neither fully chaotic nor infinitely mutable – the locus of meaning resides in the negotiation or interactive relation that subsumes both building and beholder.

Lindsay Jones uses the terms “ritual-architectural occasions” or “ritual-architectural events” to describe how sacred space comes about. Requirements: buildings with a certain ritual-architectural allure (or magnetism in Eliade’s vocabulary) and people with a certain perceptual ability. The five Aristotelian senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell) – but people also need to have a sixth sense, what Pallasmaa calls atmospheric intelligence, in other words to be predisposed to attend to sacred architecture, to project existential meanings onto it, to meet it as a subject rather than as an object, as a new or old friend…

*Between-ness*: a reverberative, resonant process, an interaction, a call and response between subjects, a relationship. When it comes to sacred architecture, it arises from the understanding of the space as a subject, more as a person than as a thing.

William Blake: “as a man is, so he sees.”
Roger Scruton: “where some see stones piled on stones, others see a place of transcendence.”

Just as every person has a limit to their sensory perceptions, so does every sacred place have a limited constituency according to Jones. There needs to be a correspondence between something in the sacred space and something in the viewer/visitor in order for the “ritual-architectural game” to be set afoot.

*Summa summarum:* A sacred space is not sacred once and for all and is not sacred for everyone, or for everyone equally or in exactly the same way. Its sacredness is forever a work in progress; forever a possibility being realised – and not realised. We cannot make architecture that is automatically, inherently and statically sacred, but we *can* make architecture that holds sacredness in a constant state of potential *becoming.*