INTO THE MYSTIC: PERSPECTIVES ON SACRED ARCHITECTURE

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Time: 1:30 - 3:30 p.m.
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WEEK 2

Dedication: The Meaning of Sacred Space

Why do we make sacred space? What is its purpose?

Three modes of analysing sacred architecture:

- literal/formal
- allegorical/symbolic; and
- anagogical (mystical or spiritual interpretation).

In an allegory, an invisible phenomenon is merely signified or represented by a visible action or object; an anagogical exegesis allows for the invisible to actually be disclosed or revealed from or through the visible.

All three modes of analysis can with advantage be used to explore sacred architecture. Which method one chooses ought to be informed by what it is one wishes to find out. The formal mode excels at analysing architecture as container whereas the allegorical and anagogic modes are essential to understanding sacred architecture as content (in other words, in answering the question about the purpose and meaning of sacred architecture). One cannot get to what a temple really is, what it means and does, merely by explaining its forms, spaces, materials, proportions, and organizations.

In spite of this, architecture historians have traditionally only concerned themselves with the first two, with the weight squarely on the formal, even when it comes to sacred buildings, but I believe that there ought to be a correspondence between how sacred architecture is supposed to work and how we analyse it.

What the relationship between the material (visible) and immaterial (invisible) aspects of a work of sacred architecture is – how the one is disclosed or revealed through the other – lies at the heart of the exploration of what sacred architecture is. The material and the immaterial should not be thought of as antonymous categories. It would be more correct to see the material as a medium to the immaterial.

Goethe: “you don’t get to infinity by turning your back on the finite, but rather by going through the finite.” Similarly, you don’t get to the immaterial by turning your back on the material…

The immaterial in question, where churches are concerned, is often heaven or God or the cosmos – so the church ends up trying to be an imago mundi or imago Dei. So how a church looks says a great deal about how the people who made it imagine, or would like, heaven to look. And of course, an image of heaven could be both perfectly simple and infinitely complex, both images being equally “true.”
The history of church building: a repeated series of shunttings between the austere (the simple, the clear) and the ostentatious (the complex, the intricate).

Two types of simplicity:
1. unselfconscious and unassuming vernacular architecture (Finnish smoke saunas, farm kitchens, Shaker homesteads and Quaker meeting houses);
2. intentional sublime simplicity (Cistercian abbeys, Egyptian pyramids, the architecture of a Louis Khan or Mies van der Rohe): structures where the scale is often beyond human measure, where severe simplicity and geometry rule the day.

Two types of complexity:
1. unselfconscious, accidental, organic accumulation of things; and
2. deliberate accretion of objects, materials, meanings.

We might like the deliberate complexity but not accidental. And the unassuming vernacular of a sauna but not the designed sleekness of a minimalist foyer. Or vice versa. And we may tire of one preference and find ourselves gravitating towards the very opposite of what we’ve up to then liked, which is just what has happened across the great sweep of architectural history.

A few examples of iconoclastic movements:
a. Byzantine iconoclastic movements in the 700s and 800s;
b. the formation of the Cistercians;
c. the Reformation
d. Vatican II.

A few examples of iconophilia:
a. the counter-reformation;
b. Tractarianism/the Oxford movement.

In the examples above, the impetus for the iconoclasm and iconophilia respectively was theological. The impetus can also be a matter of style, of fashion, or a result of engineering or structural inventions.

Example of stylistic iconoclasm: Swedish church interiors during the Gustavian era (mid- to late-18th century). The non-iconoclastic Lutheran Reformation had left virtually all images intact, but the cool and elegant Gustavian aesthetic called for white walls, pale grey, pale blue, or pale green furnishings and restrained gold or silver accents and is responsible for the loss of many medieval interiors in Sweden.
Example of changes in church interiors attributed to new building techniques: the Gothic style. The ambulatory of St Denis (1140s) is generally considered the origin of French Gothic. Its (relatively) big windows were made possible because of the greater load-bearing capability of the pointed arch and relocating the main load-bearing work from the exterior walls of a building. It was the advances in building techniques that led to the new emphasis on light as metaphor for God, not the other way around.

Joseph Brodsky: “Aesthetics is the mother of ethics.”

**Church plans – comparative approach.**
Santa Sabina in Rome (C4): the prototype for the Western basilica type of church: a columned longitudinal nave with a rounded (or sometimes square) apse at one end and lower side aisles.
Key words for basilican churches: clarity (unidirectionality); order (single focus); (human) authority, rationality.

Hagia Sophia (C6) in Istanbul: a cross-in-square or centralized church. Keywords: cosmic order; (divine) authority; mystical; idea of truth as veiled.
One can interpret the space of Hagia Sophia as:
1. an encounter with the cosmos and its creator; or
2. an illustration of our (inadequate) understanding of it.

What work does sacred space do, once made?

**Cosmic positioning:**
- represent and illustrate the cosmos;
- to reveal and be that cosmos;
- orient us (physically, psychologically and spiritually) in the world
- George Bachelard: dream house: both cell and world. Like Bachelard’s house, sacerd architecture is both cell and world.

Sacred space as **cell**: it domesticates, and acts as a deep defence against, the forces of the universe. Sacred space as **world**: it seeks to conquer its share of the sky, eliciting broadened existential horizons, metaphysical reflections, and posing the question of the ultimate nature of being.

**Social anchoring:**
- place-making;
- totems (of our particular history, community, etc.);
- corporation;
- permanence.
Liminality:
– provides a break in homogeneously, by-default profane space (from which it is qualitatively different).

Heidegger’s notion of “dwelling.”
Requirement for dwelling: the Gathering of the Fourfold (the earth, sky, mortals and divinities).
Mortals “dwell” in so far as they:
– save the earth;
– receive the sky as sky;
– await the divinities as divinities; and
– initiate mortals into their nature as mortals…

A church is a place that admits and installs earth, sky, mortals and divinities. And this is both what makes possible and is in itself dwelling.

Sacred space as icon.
Def. of icon: a representation that presences the divine; a portal, a place of encounter in which the eye transcends the visible, penetrating beyond the medium, entering a metaphysical dimension; an instrument that orients the gaze towards transformation. It is made to communicate content beyond itself.

Just like an icon, a work of sacred architecture must:
– succeed in pointing to itself and away from itself simultaneously; and
– in so doing, enable the transitive and transformational to take place.