

The Importance of Sacred Architecture



IDST 4000: Interdisciplinary Studies Senior Seminar



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The Meaning of Sacred Architecture

Sacred Architecture can mean different things to different people, but what is generally universal is that seeing it evokes something deep inside of us. It calls out to our spirits, simultaneously forcing us to remember that we are more than material, while also giving us space to reflect on the implications of being more than just flesh; and nourishing some of the need for the spiritual in our lives. On Arch Daily, Duo says “Sacred Space connects us to a reality that transcends our fears” (Dickinson, 2020). He goes on to describe several scenes in nature that do this, and then adds “Architecture can create places where we feel part of a Sacred reality” (2020). It is not that the space itself is necessarily holy or sacred, but that it can point us to something beyond the physical world.

The role Sacred Architect plays remains significant for our spiritual health. In Architectural Review, Ayla writes, “Architecture does not teach us what the sacred is, but it may touch it and draw others to it [...] Architecture interprets holiness and offers it to the people” (Lepine, 2016). It acts as a conduit for us, to set our minds on something higher; and good sacred architecture will point peoples’ hearts and minds up to God and make them marvel at His glory.

The Need for Cautious Humility

A challenge for designing Sacred Architecture is to not confuse the project for what it represents. Ayla mentions this, “the biggest risk of all is that an architect would, in an attempt to craft a holy place, build a temple to the architect. Architecture itself is not divine” (Lepine, 2016). In the design of a sacred space, care must be taken to keep our eyes on that which we

wish to reflect, and remember that our efforts are like seeing “through a glass, darkly” (King James Version, 1769/2024, 1 Corinthians 13:12). For Christians, we want to reflect the glory of God and try to capture some of the splendor of His Majesty, but expressing the infinite is a unique challenge. We must also be careful to remember that our work is not truly ours, but the result of God’s internal guidance, if we work according to His will.

Methods to Convey the Sacred

With the goal of pointing upwards, both literally and figuratively, there are many generally accepted traditions that guide us in how to go about designing a building in Sacred Architecture. Taking the right view of tradition is helpful for cultivating the right mindset; Gustav Mahler said “Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire.” In essence, his point is to avoid formalism but to retain that which is valuable. Tradition done right provides us with function and spirit to guide the future. A similar sentiment is echoed in a talk done by Professor Duncan Stroik on *Principles of Sacred Architecture*, where he quoted Tocqueville saying, “When the future is no longer illuminated by the past, the spirit walks in darkness” (Stroik, 2018). Looking at the past for guidance then, will help us see the way forward. In an article summarizing the talk, Noelle Johnson briefly described the five main principles he mentions, writing, “Professor Stroik concluded his talk with the fact that a good Church needs all of these principles, but a great Church needs them all to be done excellently” (Johnson, 2018).

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and can be a good option for architecture as well, when used tactfully. The Cathedral of Covington in Kentucky, finished in 1901, “is a recreation of the great Parisian cathedral at forty-five percent of the original’s size” (Turner,

2024). Fittingly referred to “America’s Notre Dame,” from which it was modeled, it exemplifies many of the key elements that go into Sacred Architecture. The verticality awes the senses, the beautiful Gothic detailing captivates the heart, and spaces are well laid out and functional; as well as aesthetically pleasing. The sense of crossing a threshold is achieved as well, “upon entering the cathedral, one is struck by its uplifting nature. Gothic architecture raises one’s heart and mind to the spiritual realm” (2024).

The feature of verticality itself serves to make people think on the unfathomable heights and glories of God, but it also makes people physically look up, to see the whole building. This act of looking upwards becomes symbolic in itself as it sets people up to think in higher ways as well. These are perhaps some of the most important features and goals of Sacred Architecture, using the artistry of human hands to elevate our hearts and thoughts towards God.

Why it matters

There are many reasons why Sacred Architecture is important, even to the non-religious. It ultimately affects culture as a whole, as people are strongly influenced by their surroundings, to be demoralized or inspired by the types of buildings in their town. At a deeper level though, it applies to how we see community, ourselves, and God. Reverend Scalia writes about Saint Raymond in Virginia, “On either side of the large window are three panels presenting God as a master builder” (Scalia, 2020). This design directly honors God by giving Him the proper place as the builder of everything: the supreme creator. This is the highest goal anything in any person’s life may have, to honor and glorify God, with praise and thanksgiving for all He has given us.

The influence that Sacred Architecture has on the community is critical too, because of its influence on the lives of individuals, and the way those individuals then interact and form community. Sacred Architecture offers spaces for spiritual communities to flourish and connect in, as well as contributing to the spiritual lives of individuals. As Reverend Scalia puts it:

A church is, finally, a place of the community. Not a community center, but a place where true community is formed by Communion, where the mystical Body of Christ is formed by the people who constitute the Body of Christ. (Scalia, 2020)

Naturally, the sacred places are more meaningful to people who embrace spirituality. These people end up going out into their community and bringing a unique energy with them, a level of optimism and goodwill, that ultimately effects the greater community too. So the non-religious benefit directly from the beauty of Sacred Architecture, and indirectly through the spiritual people who are even more deeply enriched by it.

Sacred Architecture has something to offer everyone, but more importantly, it is something we can do to glorify God and to strengthen our communities. It helps people grow, and it helps people to grow closer together, and closer to God. Sacred Architecture, when done in the right spirit of humility and service, is invaluable to society.

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