

# **Architecture, Culture & Spirituality (ACS)**

*Creating a forum for scholarship and discussion of spirituality and meaning in the built environment*

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## **Proposal**

This white paper proposes the creation of an international scholarly/research forum composed of individuals interested in the relationship between architecture, culture and spirituality. The contemporary cultural and academic context as well as growing public, scientific, humanistic, and artistic interests suggest support for such efforts. The timing is therefore right to develop opportunities to support architectural and interdisciplinary scholarship, research, practice, and education on this important subject area.

## **Background & General Intention**

During the past fifteen years a number of conferences dedicated to the subject area of the cultural significance, ritual use and meaning of sacred places and religious architecture have been held. These have included the "Multidisciplinary Symposium on the Definition and Design of Sacred Space," (Miami University, 1993); "Making Sacred Places," Built Form and Culture Research Conference, (University of Cincinnati, 1997); "Pilgrimage and Complexity," (Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, 1997); "Space, Place & Spirituality in the Built Environment," (Ball State University, 1999); and "Evangelical Worship and Church Architecture" (Judson College, 2001).

During the 2006 ACSA Annual Meeting in Salt Lake City, faculty involved in the study of the relationship between culture, architecture, and spirituality met and exchanged ideas. After exploratory work conducted over the following months, this group concluded that there are enough people and organizations interested in the topic to consider the creation of an international forum to advance scholarship on this subject. We also agreed that the contemporary cultural setting is very receptive to a forum of this type. Recently, there has been a remarkable growth in scientific and professional research on mind and spirituality accompanied by a parallel increase in public interest in the subject (see Appendix). It seems timely to utilize this context to engage a national/international audience. We consider this effort as integrative (interdisciplinary), diverse (ecumenical), cutting-edge (at the forefront of research), rigorous, and open.

## **Definitions of Terms**

The use of the term "architecture" is applied to include the disciplines of architecture, building technology, landscape architecture, urban design, and planning. Another term to consider may be the "built environment." "Culture" is used to underline the important role that economics, politics, religion, heritage and the natural environment play in shaping the built environment. The choice of "spiritual" to

describe this area of inquiry is arguable but is applied to suggest places that possess spirit or "life" (Alexander). Other potential terms include "sacred", "meaningful," "possessing wholeness" (Alexander), "separation from the mundane" (Eliade, Yi-Fu), "sublime", "aesthetic", "metaphysical" and "trans-personal." (See appendix for a longer discussion.)

### **State of the Art**

The context of contemporary architectural scholarship and research, as indicated by ACSA and other architectural conference proceedings, funded projects, journal publications, topics and guest speakers at most schools' lecture series, indicate that the interrelationship of architecture, culture and spirituality is a subject area that has been inadequately covered.

We recognize that groups such as IFFRA (the Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art and Architecture), EAP (Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology), Built Form and Culture, SAH (Society of Architectural Historians) and EDRA have engaged this area of scholarship. However, these efforts have remained relatively isolated and marginalized. Given the central role that aesthetics and creativity play in architecture, their potentially rich, direct, and natural relationship with spirituality, along with the mounting quality and quantity of research work in the subject elsewhere, we expect to have a growing number of architectural scholars, practitioners, and educators involved in these studies. Imperatives such as environmental and cultural sustainability add further impetus to these efforts. The creation of a forum devoted to the study of the relationship between architecture and spirituality would provide a timely, and necessary venue to support and share such work.

### **Interdisciplinary Approaches**

Scholarship on architecture, culture and spirituality, offers significant opportunities for interdisciplinary studies. For example, insights and methods from comparative religion, cultural studies, environmental theories (sustainability), phenomenology, aesthetics, creativity, alternative medicine, psychology, philosophy, neuroscience, history, theology, psychoanalysis, art criticism, anthropology, hermeneutics, and spiritual traditions are essential to discern the connections between architecture and spirituality. Conversely, architectural research in this area may create new approaches for other disciplines. The current scientific and professional interest in the study of the mind and brain suggests potent interdisciplinary collaboration and cross-fertilization (See Appendix).

### **Goals**

The goal of a forum for scholarship and discussion of spirituality and meaning in the built environment is to support ongoing architectural research in this subject area and its implications regarding architectural education and professional practice. Three immediate objectives are (1) the building of a community of interested individuals, (2) the organization of a conference, and (3) initiate scholarly peer-reviewed publication(s).

### **(1) Community Building**

We recognize that there are a number of academics and individuals who are committed to research and dissemination of findings in these subject areas. Among existing organizations that may be supportive of this endeavor are participants of past conferences in this area, SAH, EDRA, IFRAA, contributors to the EAP publication, the readership of the Faith & Form magazine, and the Built Form and Culture group. It is hoped that the ACSA and ARCC might also be interested. In addition, this effort may attract attention from other fields such as religious studies, integral psychology, philosophy (aesthetics, phenomenology, and hermeneutics), preservation and art criticism. Potential interest and even collaborations may also be possible with centers engaged in the scientific research of phenomena associated with spirituality.

### **(2) Meeting/Conference Organization**

**Goal:** The goal of the conference is to provide a multidisciplinary forum for sharing and critically assessing research efforts and outcomes regarding architecture, culture and spirituality. It is possible that the papers from the conference will form the basis for scholarly peer-reviewed proceedings and/or an edited volume.

**Frequency:** A conference held every 2 years would provide sufficient continuity without putting too much pressure in our organization's starting period. However, there may be enough interest to justify a conference a year similar to the Beginning Design Conferences that have been held for many years. There may also be opportunities for special focus sessions at ACSA conferences. A listserv, blog or e.journal may also serve as means of collaboration and communication and an edited volume as a means for knowledge dissemination.

**Theme:** No specific theme for the first conference has been established but it should probably be relatively open-ended (like the first Making Sacred Places Conference), and include a range of objective and subjective approaches.

**Location:** Initially the conferences may be held at supportive academic settings. Eventually other locations could be chosen that either represent places of spirit or one's that are in need of transformation.

### **(3) Scholarly Peer-Review Publications**

This ongoing work in this area of inquiry needs to be published following strict peer-reviewing methods. We see conference proceedings and/or an e.journal as initial ways to disseminate such knowledge. ACS will focus in determining the format, system, and frequency of such scholarly publications.

### **Organizing Committee**

Tom Barrie – North Carolina State University  
Julio Bermudez - University of Utah  
Anat Geva – Texas A&M  
Randall Teal - University of Idaho

# Appendix

## Spirituality in the larger context

National polls have consistently shown that spiritual matters are a concern to a large majority of Americans (Adler 2005, ARDA, Associated Press 2006, Polling Reports.com, Religious Tolerance, Tanner 2005). Even though much of this interest is manifested in traditional religious adherence, its prevalence suggests the potential for a broadened discourse. In other words, if spiritual matters are important for many people, then it will affect their perspectives whether or not the nature of spirituality is agreed upon. This is partially the reason for the current interest in research on spirituality in disciplines as far apart as nursing (Dyson et al 1997, Tanyi 2002), medicine (Davidson 2005, Lee & Newberg 2005) higher education (Chickering et al forthcoming, Tisdell 2003), psychiatry and psychology (Grof 2000, Hayes 2002, Slife et al 1999), and brain-mind sciences (Austin 1998, Dalai Lama et al 1991, Mind & Life XIII, Newberg et al 2001, Pinker 1997). In fact, many scientific centers devoted to such work have been created at prestigious institutions over the past few years and are supported by grants.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, American mass media has featured results from these research efforts with good market response.<sup>2</sup> In this light, recently the *Academy of Neuroscience for Architecture (ANFA)* was created by the AIA.<sup>3</sup>

## Definitions of Spirituality

Defining what constitutes "spirituality" and how it relates to architecture is a challenging task. However, at the risk of oversimplification, we use a working definition of the spiritual as referring to a *heightened or alternative state of mind in which one is overcome by, or perceives the presence, insight, or action of forces beyond self-limited consciousness*. William James's definition of 'generic religion or spirituality' as "*the attempt to be in harmony with an unseen order of things*" is perhaps clearest. Spiritual experiences are realized individually and although possible to articulate, they cannot be completely conveyed due to the limited nature of our symbolic language. More specifically, spirituality addresses the human need for transcendence, and connection to others and the self (Dyson et al 1997). Scholars agree that nature constitutes a basis for spiritual experiences. Studies also show that by providing a transcendental framework (i.e., belief), spirituality imbues life with meaning, hope, and a sense of belonging.

## What could be considered spiritual in architecture?

Architecture that integrates, accommodates and expresses spirituality includes:

- Places built to symbolize religious beliefs and facilitate communal rituals.
- Places built for separation from the mundane.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the University of Pennsylvania "Center for Spirituality and the Mind" (<http://www.uphs.upenn.edu/radiology/CSM/>), the Neuroscience Institute in La Jolla (California) (<http://www.nsi.edu/>), the University of Wisconsin "Body-Mind Center" (<http://aging.wisc.edu/research/mindbody.php>) and "Lab for Affective Neuroscience" (<http://psyphz.psych.wisc.edu/>)

<sup>2</sup> For example: National Geographic (March 2005), Newsweek (Aug 29, 2005), Scientific American MIND (since 2004), Time (Jan 27, 2007 and Aug 4, 2003), Wired (Dec.2002), etc. Consider also to the many National Public Radio and Public TV shows.

<sup>3</sup> For more info, visit <http://www.anfarch.org/>. Refer also to <http://www.architecture-mind.com/>

- Places with significant cultural meaning as established by archeological, historical or literary evidence as well as by a community.
- Ancient places viewed by contemporary culture as possessing accessible, though often occult, knowledge that is applicable to today.
- Places where the potential for epiphany is viewed as propitious.
- Places revealed through some agent to be sacred, or where a significant event occurred.
- Places where earth energies are believed to converge.
- The act of creating spiritual places -- architecture as a media of spiritual development.

The closest accounts describing spiritual experiences or insights in architecture are from two areas: *aesthetics and creativity*. The former addresses the experience of something built (or natural) and the latter focuses on the process of design. For example, writings on *aesthetics* in philosophy (Bachelard 1964, Dewey 1934, Merleau-Ponty 1962, Heidegger 1971, and others), art criticism (Elkins 2001), and architecture (Barrie 1996, Hiss 1991, Holl 1994, Jones 2000) tend to agree that, at their deepest or highest levels, architectural experiences are engaged in a realm that transcends the purely material, rational, or practical. Similarly, studies and accounts of *creative making* coming from the arts and humanities (Chiari 1977, Ghiselin 1952, Matisse 1995, Read 1966), psychology (Arnheim 1954, 1966, Csikszentmihalyi 1990, Maslow 1971), the sciences (Bohm and Peat 1987, Simonton 2004), and of course architecture (Lobell 1979, Zumthor 1999) consistently describe situations beyond ordinary experiences that could be considered "spiritual". However, disagreement starts the moment we consider whether such receptive and productive experiences are purely limited to our bio-psychological machinery (i.e., only referable to the matrix of the real) or actually connect us to something beyond. Although there is no consensus, from Louis Kahn's eloquent discourse on the intangible and immeasurable nature of architecture (Wurman 1986) to the references to the existential and spiritual dimensions of buildings made by many others (Harries 1987, 1997, Koonce 2005, Norberg-Schulz 2000, 1985, 1979, Pallasmaa 2005, Silvestrin 1999), there is agreement that qualitatively significant events exist that account for profound types of experiences.

### **How to approach Spirituality**

Spirituality may be studied without being trapped by religious discourse, dogma, or expectations. The openness that the term "spirituality" indicates, its fundamental reliance on direct experience (instead of unchallengeable belief or text), its adoption by many ongoing scientific and scholarly efforts, and its widespread application across traditions and people provide us with a field of inquiry ready for systematic investigation. At the same time, we also acknowledge the standards of traditional research methods. To this end, we suggest maintaining the highest standards as well as humbleness, self-criticism, and care. The work must be approached slowly, systematically, and rest on solid foundations in order to guarantee a substantive study of spirituality in architecture.

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