

Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality

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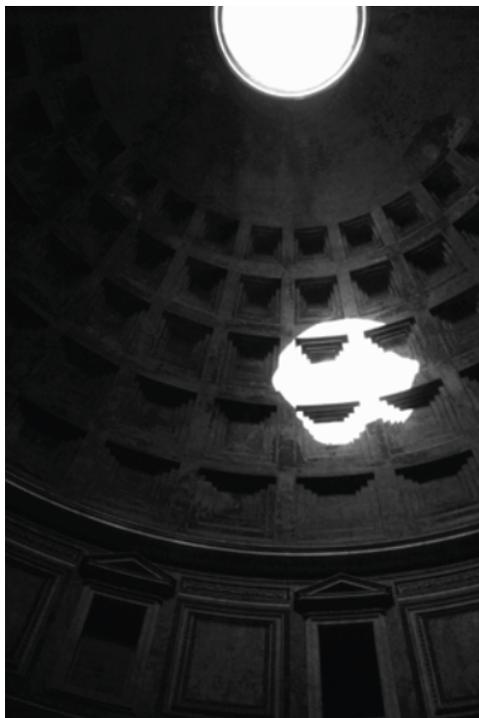
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Introduction (Chapter 1)

Thomas Barrie, Julio Bermudez, and Phillip James Tabb



Considering the relationship between architecture, culture and spirituality demands addressing its unavoidable phenomenological dimension and the first-person experiences that evoke the transcendent.



Scholarship on architecture, culture and spirituality has traditionally included the empirical study of sacred buildings with the purpose of learning what 'measurable' attributes make them successful at facilitating visitors' access to what architect Louis Kahn named the 'immeasurable.'

In a world whose complexity is both exhilarating and bewildering, its paradoxes are perhaps the most accessible. This may not be a phenomenon unique to our time but it is arguably one that defines it. Parts of the world enjoy unprecedented prosperity, longevity, political continuity, and energy and food security, while others have very little – and there is everything in between. Communication technologies have connected humans in ways that have rendered traditional notions of space and time obsolete, while ideological misunderstandings and national, cultural and religious divisions have persisted. Globalized economies have resulted in egalitarian opportunities for economic advancement while also supporting political and economic hegemonies. Technologies formally reserved for a few are now available globally, but resource depletion and ecological consequences threaten the advances they set out to achieve. The rise in worldwide living standards, all of which are dependent on increased consumption of material and technological resources, are also attributable to global climate change and vast environmental destruction, perhaps the most significant imperatives of our time and ones that are most attributable to human activity and the built environment. Complicating matters further is that these transformations and challenges are happening at a speed and scale never before encountered and that our success at resolving these enormous challenges remains fundamentally elusive. For certain, there is a need for more reflective, effective and insightful approaches to creating and sustaining habitation.

This book, its authors and its essays, are firmly positioned within this contemporary milieu. The authors recognize that the design professions and built environment can be similarly characterized according to the paradoxes outlined above, yet they often propose that complementary viewpoints, supplemental philosophies, and new means are required to arrive at promising perspectives and appropriate solutions. The focus of the work is the intersection of the built environment, culture and spiritual traditions, and as



Scholarship on architecture, culture and spirituality also includes the ethical, compassionate, and empathic ways in which the built environment can help us traverse our hardest existential challenges, such as sickness and death. Maggie's Cancer Caring Centre, Tuen Mun, Hong Kong (2013)



Participating in carefully choreographed rituals has long been a fundamental element of the experience and significance of sacred spaces. Walking the labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral in Chartres, France (2005).



Architecture, culture, and spirituality have always found their natural joint expression in sacred spaces, here in Delphi, Greece.

such presumes that they retain a certain degree of potency and veracity to address the complexities of our era. Religious and spiritual beliefs, explorations and practices are brought into focused consideration through the lens of the built environment. The authors do not shy away from the paradoxes inherent in such artifacts built to serve them. However, not all essays are concerned with architecture designed to serve traditional religions, some are more interested in consciousness, culture, landscapes, and the more secular everyday, individual, and indigenous expressions of spirituality in the built environment.

The book's primary argument is, that even though the mentioned cultural and civilizational conditions have transgressed, degraded or superseded shared belief systems and symbolic languages, the built environment can again retain its experience, significance and meaning with veracity and potency. Put differently, despite the ephemerality of contemporary media and consumerism and the placelessness attendant to globalization, the solidity and stability of architecture can provide a stable framework to facilitate transcendent experiences and meaning. This is at least the message that recognized experts in architecture, urbanism, landscape architecture and other disciplines deliver in this book.

Additionally, the book's contributors advance a number of timely and pertinent questions including:

- what is missing in the contemporary discourse regarding the built environment?
- are there perspectives from the past that are still relevant?
- what are new ways to approach and understand what occurs at the intersection between architecture, culture and spirituality? and,
- in what ways can the practice, design and stewardship of buildings assist in meeting today's challenges?

Throughout the authors examine ways that professionals and scholars can respond to the contemporary milieu: to reflectively and strategically recover forgotten, repressed or suppressed perspectives; and to revive and apply new philosophical, scientific, and theoretical thinking to envision an improved and more hopeful future.