

The Path as a Mediator -- Spatial Sequences and Symbolism of Korean Soen (Zen) Buddhist Monasteries, with a Case study of Tongdo-sa.

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Abstract

This paper interprets the spatial sequences and symbolic narratives of traditional Korean Soen (Zen) Buddhist monastic architecture. A discussion regarding typical monastic organizational patterns leads to a detailed interpretation of the case study of Tongdo-sa. The paper pairs the author's field research with Western spatial theories and interpretive methodologies to focus on an ontological interpretation of the organization, path sequence and symbolism of Korean Zen monasteries in general, and the case-study in detail.

Rudolf Arnheim's scholarship on the dynamic experience and relationships of architecture, and theories regarding the "in-between" by Aldo van Eyck and Herman Hertzberger constitute the basis for a discussion on the mediating role of the path. The paper also provides a background of the organizational patterns and interrelationship of mythology, religious beliefs and rituals in sacred architecture. Mircea Eliade's emphasis on the comparative, universal nature of religion and mythology contribute to this section. The paper also incorporates aspects of the historic context of Korean Buddhism, including Heo Gyun's scholarship on the symbols of Korean Buddhist architecture and Robert Buswell's documentation of Zen Buddhist monasteries. Lastly, the paper incorporates the trans-cultural aspects of Buddhist beliefs, practices and symbolism. The conclusion argues that, even though at one level Tongdo-sa is organized according to a hierarchical, axial path sequence -- a sequential spatial sequence and symbolic narrative that leads to the sacred center of the main Buddha Hall -- a deeper reading reveals a dynamic hierarchy of multiple centers congruent with aspects of esoteric Mahayana Buddhism.