

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE IN-BETWEEN

The Mediating Roles of Sacred Places

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Sacred space constitutes itself following a rupture of the levels which make possible the communication with the trans-world, transcendent realities. Whence the enormous importance of sacred space in the life of all peoples: because it is in such a space that man is able to communicate with the other world, the world of divine beings or ancestors.

Mircea Eliade



Summary Statement

This presentation will summarize the principal themes and approaches of my current research and, in particular, a recently completed book manuscript. My research is primarily concerned with establishing broadened contexts, approaches and understandings of architecture through the lens of the mediating roles performed by sacred architecture. Its principle argument is that, similar to the intermediary roles of religion, sacred architecture served as a physical and symbolic mediator in support of the socio-political, doctrinal and ritual agendas of the religions it was built to serve. An essential means of understanding sacred architecture is through the recognition of its roles as an in-between place believed by its creators to establish connections to the gods they worshipped. The sacred place was (and still is), an intermediate zone created in the belief that it had the ability to co-join the religious aspirants to their gods.

The principle philosophical and interpretive positions are as follows:

- Architecture is a cultural artifact that responds to its social, political, economic and environmental contexts and expresses a complex matrix of cultural beliefs and imperatives.
- Architecture is a communicative media that contains and expresses symbolic, mythological, doctrinal, socio-political and, in some cases, historical content. It is an active agent that performs didactic, elucidative, exhortative and (in some cases) coercive roles.
- Religion, religious figures, ritual and their architectural settings have traditionally been put in service of mediating between humans and the gods they worshipped.

- Use and ritual are the means by which architectural settings are vivified and completed. Understanding the ephemeral, mysterious, poetic and immaterial aspects of architecture is essential to deciphering its content.
- Hermeneutic, homological and integrative perspectives and methodologies are effective means to interpret the complex imperatives and contexts that inform the production of architecture.
- The haptic, kinesthetic and multi-sensual experiences of architecture are intrinsic to its significance and meaning. Applying phenomenological and related philosophical traditions are effective means to understand the synesthesia of architecture.
- The application of precedent and the pan-cultural and trans-historical aspects of architecture, as a means to codify and understand repeating, shared patterns in architecture, is an essential component of interpreting architecture. Understanding typologies of morphology, structure, space and organization are intrinsic to this process.
- Substantive understandings of architecture need to confront contemporary cultural and theoretical prejudices and recognize the presumptions that we bring to any analytical and interpretive task.

Background

My current research focuses on the more interstitial, hidden and mysterious aspects of architecture to argue that traditionally it served as a media that incorporated and communicated content, engendered emotional and corporal responses and served to orient one in the world. This theoretical approach is consistent with more nuanced and multivalent understandings of architectural form and space, and incorporates a much broader context within which architecture operates and is experienced. It recognizes the power of architecture to re-veal ("un-veil"), to elucidate, and to transform -- a concept intrinsic to architecture in the past, often misunderstood in the modern era, and essential that we reconsider today.

The book (of the same title of the presentation) intends to provide new perspectives on the history of architecture and features buildings and sites that, up to now, have not been afforded scholarship commensurate with their significance. The case studies include the following:

- Carl Jung's house in Bollingen, Switzerland provides original scholarship on how Jung used architecture and other plastic arts as a means of "inner work" and personal transformation.

- The burial mounds, earth works and effigy figures of the Edena and Hopewell cultures of North America illustrate how, beginning with primordial architecture, symbolic and ritual places were created to define an articulate “place in the world.”
- The Korean Zen Buddhist monastery Tongdo is presented in the context of the path as a mediator and the monastery as serving diverse cultural, symbolic and ritual agendas.
- The modernist monastery and Abbey Church at Vaals, Holland, by the Dutch Benedictine Monk Hans van der Laan, illustrates how the proportioning system he developed incorporated historical practices in ways that elucidate their philosophical and practical foundations. Moreover, Van der Laan’s system served to facilitate cognitive participation to convey the orders it presents, and interconnect the components of the architecture and its larger contexts.
- New perspectives on the Pantheon in Rome and the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul lead to the Ottoman Era mosques by Mimar Sinan. Two of Sinan’s late works, the Selimiye and Sokollu mosques, illustrate the interrelationship of space, surface, light and meaning, and the conceptualization of the perfected worlds symbolized by examples of sacred architecture.

Throughout the book I suggest a repositioning of understandings of architecture based on broadened perspectives regarding its role in materializing symbolic content and deepening its impact through the sensual experiences it provides. It positions architecture as a much more active agent in expressing and influencing a culture, and insists that, as a predominant cultural output, architecture is more important and influential than is commonly recognized in our time and culture. The book argues that architecture is didactic and elucidative -- it communicates content, often at multiple levels and means for a diversity of audiences over a range of time. The most successful architecture reaches a broad spectrum of constituents and remains relevant long after the culture that produced it has lost its relevancy. In this way it transcends culture and time, and exists, like all great art, in a more timeless manner.