

The Everyday Sacred of Serenbe Community

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"What is the goal? It is the transformation of life in its smallest, most everyday detail." Henri Lefebvre

"Give us this day our daily bread..." The Holy Bible

Instead of focusing on the sublime and ideal, the heroic and formally fashionable, the sacred here is explored in the context of the common or as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote [1], "the low." Rather than shiny, perfect and reduced, the sacred is crusty, soul infused and complex. And contrary to the need of attaining some kind of eternal cosmic peak-experience, the sacred is a simple luxuriating in and pervasive appreciation for the sustenance of life. Yet the sacred in the everyday viewed this way is not simply the sordid celebration of the profane, but more a respect inextricably co-partnered in the territory of our own journeys and the repeating elevation of the ordinary in everyday occurrences. There is a certain relationship between everyday sacred and architecture, which this paper seeks to understand. Serenbe Community is an experimental development that is in part based upon sacred architectural practices. Something rather remarkable is happening there that can only partially be explained.

EVERYDAY SACRED IN ARCHITECTURE

The sacred in this kind of architecture does not express through a thoroughly reduced perfect object, nor is it informed by stultifying doctrines or rigorous liturgical programs. But rather it is expressed through a respectful process supported by the local and familiar environment. We wake up in the morning, greet the day, care for our bodies, tend to our loved ones, function in our homes, extend out in the world around us, work, and perform our daily activities. To Rick Fields [2], we "chop wood and carry water." So, what is this everyday sacred and how does it manifest in architecture? The Tetractys is a remarkable Pythagorean philosophical model identifying the hierarchy of *source*, *archetypal*, *ectypal* and *typal* levels. It is at this *typal* level that the sacred *source* splits and divides the perfect, or "high sacredness" and the imperfect, or "low sacredness." Therefore, in the physical world these expressions are most distanced from one another and give a framework for the answers to these questions [3].

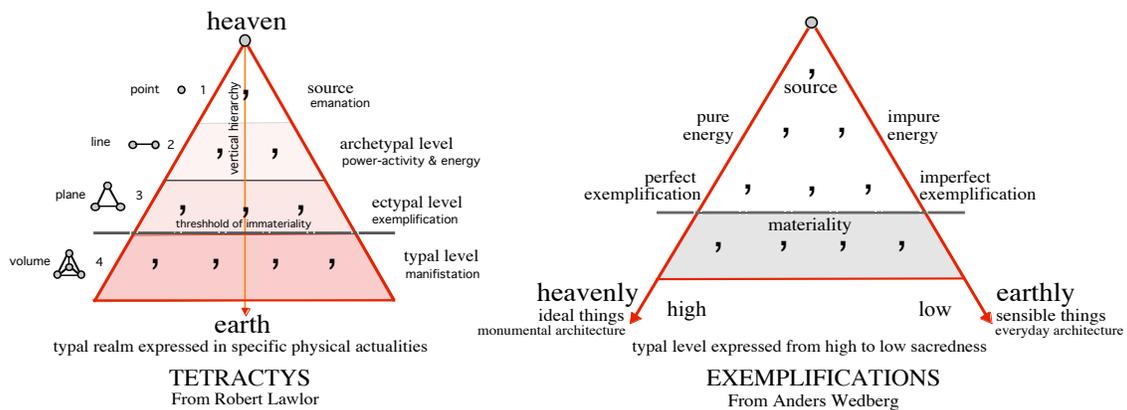


Figure 1. The Tetractys

Qualities, seemingly integral in the sensible world and everyday sacred, include *being present* to and having a *conscious awareness* of the existence of these experiences, and as geographer Peirce F. Lewis observed, "Sacred Place is not chosen; it chooses [4]." There is a genuine *love of place* that in a large measure is supported by a meaningful *connection to nature*. There is an inherent *reverence and respect*, which creates a *stewardship* of the physical, social and living environments. *Ritual* and *ceremonial order* form a special and recurring interactive bond with both a place and time. And finally they most often are *informal* and *personal*. The architectural consequence of these qualities is the emergence of modest, unostentatious design. Architect Anthony Lawlor would suggest that these are the temple of our basic nature and "an awakening to the miracle of everyday circumstances" [5].

SERENBE COMMUNITY

In this presentation everyday sacred is explored using the case study of Serenbe Community located near Atlanta, Georgia. Serenbe is a new residential development occupying approximately 30% of a 900-acre rural site. The masterplan is composed of a constellation of small mixed-use hamlets organized by omega forms with around 150 dwellings each. The four omega hamlets (Arts Hamlet, Farm Hamlet, Health and Wellness Hamlet, and Hill Village) are located around intimate forested valleys and will accommodate a build-out of 750 homes. Each omega hamlet has differing housing typologies and non-residential activities, public spaces for light recreation, community gardens, and vegetated wetlands. The omegas incorporate a density gradient, which provides a climax at the center of the serpentine road where there is a concentration of higher density housing, commercial, and other non-residential activities. It is within the context of this overall design that everyday sacred has found expression with the present residents.

Serenbe was initially designed incorporating sacred geometry [6]. The double-loaded serpentine spatial organization of an omega form responds to a natural interface between the sloping hills and wetland valleys below. The beneficial consequence of this particular form is the creation of a sense of place through its circular nature where center, boundary and domain are clearly given form. Further it is open ended, which allows for a healthy flow of energy and a meaningful connection to nature and neighboring communities. That which is contained is also allowed to escape and refill. In the ancient I-Ching, The Chinese Book of Changes [7], the omega functions like the *caldron* or a bronze-cooking vessel called the *ting* as it provides nourishment and transformative powers. Figure 2 shows the angelic masterplan and an aerial photograph of Phase I, Selborne Hamlet, illustrating the omega form and close connection to nature.



Figure 2. Masterplan and Aerial Photograph of Phase I Serenbe Community

While the geometry of Serenbe is evident, the everyday sacred is experienced in the patterns of daily life. The sacred is experienced in small ways – a walk to the BakeShop, a gathering at the Hil Restaurant, dinners at resident friends, a walk along the numerous trails, quiet time by the small waterfalls, an evening at the bonfire, the children’s treehouse, the intimate contemplative places found in the woods, the Labyrinth, participation with Serenbe Farms, the Saturday farmer’s market or the Sunday Interfaith meeting. All of these are activities that are enriched and perhaps enabled by the nature of the design. Serenbe Community is truly a place where everyday living affords opportunities for interaction, community, and wellness and is replete with sacred moments. Figure 3 illustrates two stewards of Serenbe Farms and the Farmers Market held on Saturday mornings. Residents mingle and shop for local produce and goods or simply gather with family, friends and fellow residents.



Figure 3. Rural and Urban Character of Serenbe Community

There is an incredible change in the air. Woven together are certain placemaking patterns, an ineffable geometry, the willing community residents and the wonderful spirit that pervades Serenbe. These everyday experiences are real affecting the remarkable sense of community, the deep sense of place and a modest, yet profound sense of sacredness. As architect Keith Critchlow exclaims, "each essential human need has its sacred origin and is sacred for all tradition-based societies [8]. The power of Serenbe is modest, sustaining and very contagious. According to Serenbe resident John Graham (2008):

"Serenbe is marked by an extraordinary sense of community. What has contributed to this remains something of a mystery: The founder's vision, the inculcation to the sacred, and the commitment to the principles of sacred geometry in physical design, have resulted in a strong sense of place that attracts residents sharing a commitment to the land, the environment, and to each other. The formula may not be simple, but the results are obvious to all."

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