

Surreal Transcendence: Exploration of The Sacred and Profane through Artificial Intelligence

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Introduction

The project of Surreal Transcendence entails an exploratory journey that aims to investigate the interplay of sacred and profane through the lens of a new technology: artificial intelligence (AI). The project draws inspiration from the Research Studio, "The Sacred in Between: Architectural Explorations of Sacred Spaces," I have taught during Fall 2022. The studio explores the complexities of sacred spaces and their connection to various spiritual practices, utilizing both digital and physical mediums to understand and model the sacred in our world. The research delves into the intersection of technology and the sacred, seeking to uncover the ways in which AI can partake in our understanding of the sacred ultimately leading to a deeper comprehension of the human experience. Through this project, I hope to contribute to the ongoing conversation on the role of technology in shaping our relationship with architecture and specifically the sacred one.

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Project Idea and Theory

“Man becomes aware of the Sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the Profane ... In his encounters with the Sacred, man experiences a reality that does not belong to our world, yet is encountered in and through objects or events that are part of the world.”¹

The distinction between the sacred and the profane is a complex and debated topic within various fields of inquiry such as architecture, religion, philosophy, and sociology. Emile Durkheim² suggests that the sacred refers to societal elements that inspire reverence and awe, while the profane encompasses the mundane aspects of everyday life, such as going to work and paying bills. On the other hand, Mircea Eliade argues that any physical space can become sacred when people perceive it to be so. Eliade's conception of the sacred and profane consists in a polar understanding contrasting spatial experiences that revolve around three dichotomies: homogeneity vs. heterogeneity, cosmos vs. chaos, and quantity vs. quality.

Against this backdrop, the first part of the research studio tasked students with investigating how the interplay between the sacred and profane can be graphically represented in architectural design through the use of digital collages. To achieve this, the project required students to first establish a clear definition of what constitutes the sacred, and subsequently utilize this conceptual framework to identify keywords and phrases that capture various architectural elements and scenes.

In order to generate imagery that communicates the identified dichotomies, the studio employed Artificial Intelligence (AI) algorithms, specifically the Midjourney AI program, that was at that time

¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, vol. 81 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1959).

² Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

at its infancy stages, by providing it with prompts derived from the students' conceptual syntheses. This approach was referred to as "sketching with words," which leveraged the students' design thinking to train the machine to comprehend their ideas and communicate with them.

Ultimately, the students created digital architectural collages that incorporated various AI-generated images, along with their own digital manipulations and image choices, to communicate the four dichotomies mentioned earlier. Importantly, religious iconography was intentionally omitted, and light was the primary means employed to convey the relationships between the sacred and profane.

Project Outcome

In the context of the sacred architecture research studio, the students engaged in individual explorations of the interplay between the sacred and profane by utilizing Midjourney AI. The students employed definitions of the sacred and profane, as well as their own interpretation and synthesis of relevant literature, as prompts for the generation of imaginary scenes using the AI program. The result of this short timed exercise required each student to employ numerous text prompts and generate more than 200 Midjourney images, which were subsequently amalgamated into a multilayered digital collage that conveys the dichotomies of the sacred and profane. Three instances of the sacred and profane interpretation are illustrated in Figures 1, 2, and 3. Furthermore, the students were directed to formulate a title and brief reflection elucidating their perceptions and ideas regarding their newly created collages. In Figure 1, entitled *Passage of Perception: Framing of the Mind*, the accompanying narrative provided by the student reads as follow "A bowl of knowledge perched upon the shoulders of the individual, clear and delicate, is enriched through the cosmos of thought and ponderance of the intricacy that lies ahead. Upon nurturing the mind through absorbing the scared presence, chaos preys upon the vulnerability of the individual, consuming them in a cloud of negativity. By combating the internal turmoil that the mind creates, one is able to navigate clarity by feeling a serene moment of relief. The complex quality of contemplation of the individual opposes that of the quantity of beings profanely proceeding forward with their inattentive dispositions. Shining down upon them, into the depths of the hazy interior, a homogenous light brush against the intricacy of the space highlighting the harmony between both the details and the voids. The space itself is perceptually and optically formed through the illusion of both a physically inhabitable space and a visually engaging framed piece of art."³

Alongside the creation of the collage, the students were prompted to reflect on their experience working with AI and respond to a set of questions that inquired about the impact of Artificial Intelligence on architectural education and profession. This inquiry served as the topic for an organized class debate. The final collages were presented in an exhibition attended by faculty and students of the architecture program, as well as scholars from various academic disciplines, including psychology, sociology, history, art history, and graphic design (Figure 3).

Conclusion

The advent of digital technologies has become increasingly relevant in contemporary society, particularly in light of the global Covid-19 pandemic and the surge towards the Metaverse. The concept of metaverse is not just seen as a potential prospect for entrepreneurs and architects, but it is also perceived as a thrilling and dynamic advancement that has the potential to transform

³ Shylo Hilbert, Fifth year architecture student at SDSU. Quote used with permission of author, 2022.

society on a cultural, economic, and political level⁴. This development raises a crucial inquiry for architects and designers: how can the sacred be adequately conveyed in generated digital environments? The urgent need to rethink the design of sacred spaces in response to the recent crises that have impacted our lived experiences has prompted an escalation in the discourse surrounding the architect's role in the digital realm. As we continue to embrace the digital landscape, it is essential to consider the implications of these new technologies in shaping our understanding not only of sacred architecture but architecture as whole. When inquiring about the impact of the use of AI on architecture education and profession, ChatGPT3⁵ provided the following response "The impact of the use of AI, including Midjourney AI, on architecture education and profession is significant. AI has the potential to empower architects to create more complex designs with greater efficiency and accuracy, and to explore new design possibilities that were previously impossible to imagine. In architecture education, AI can be used to enhance design studios and provide students with new tools for design exploration and iteration. Additionally, AI can assist in the analysis of complex data sets, such as environmental factors and building performance metrics, leading to more informed and sustainable design decisions. However, there are also concerns about the potential displacement of human creativity and intuition in the design process, as well as ethical considerations around the use of AI in decision-making"⁶

In essence, the question of AI's impact on architecture is complex and contingent on a range of factors including its application and use. Nevertheless, its presence calls for an examination of its potential and thus, it is imperative to comprehend its utilization.



Figures: 1(left) *Passage of Perception: Framing of the Mind*, by Shylo Hilbert – 2 (right) *Combatting Consumption through Communal Spaces*, by Katherine Ishol

⁴ Patrick Schumacher, "The Metaverse as Opportunity for Architecture and Society: Design Drivers, Core Competencies," ARIN 1, no. 11 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44223-022-00010-z>.

⁵ ChatGPT is an AI chatbot developed by OpenAI, an AI research company.

⁶ ChatGPT3, April 30, 2023

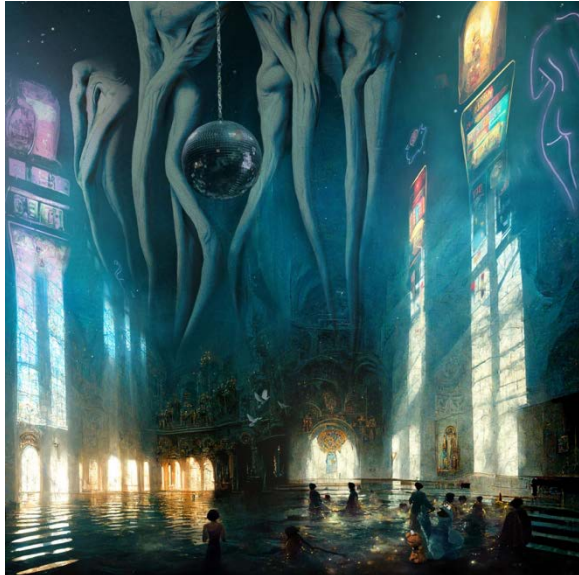


Figure 3 (left) *Neon Deseccration* by James Van Westen Figure 4 (right) *Students Final Exhibit* by author

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