

GREENING GOD'S HOUSE

Connections Between Theology, Ecology, and Architecture

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It is nearly impossible to open a magazine or a newspaper, watch TV, or surf the Internet without finding at least one mention of sustainability. There are many reasons to be green: you can reduce your carbon footprint, save money at the gas pump, spare a tree, preserve an endangered species. All of these are good reasons, but these and many more are reactionary. All are attempts to mend the mess we've made of the planet.

However, the impetus for sustainability in communities of faith is *not* reactionary. For faith communities around the world, the green impulse is a direct expression of their embrace of God's creation. The decision to be green is simply not a matter of choice for many, but rather an integral part of their religious beliefs. Pope John Paul II posited that our environmental crisis is also a spiritual crisis: two sides of the same coin, recognition that we are stewards of this creation, that sustainability is a form of praise.

Renewal, a documentary produced by Marty Ostrow and Terry Kay Rockefeller, tells the story of religious communities all across the U.S. that are supporting sustainability by living their faith. A Christian congregation in New Jersey discovers that by working with GreenFaith, an environmental coalition, for very little cost they can install a photovoltaic system on the roof of their church to generate their own electricity. This same congregation spent an afternoon sorting through a week's worth of trash to understand how better to recycle, and how, by making sustainable choices, to reduce their waste footprint.

In Illinois, a Muslim organization, Taqwa, works with local farmers to create a market for organically grown vegetables, meat, and poultry. Taqwa supplies mosques and Muslim communities with food raised in accordance with religious guidelines on the humane treatment of animals. This food is also nutritionally superior.

A community of Buddhists in San Francisco, Green Sangha (which means *community* in Sanskrit) strives to save trees by promoting the use of recycled paper. One of their projects is to convince magazines to use it (less than 1 percent of the nation's 18,000 magazines do). Members of the group meditate together to hone their interactions with those they wish to persuade through non-confrontational techniques.

Interfaith Power and Light is active in 20 states across the U.S. to help congregations reduce their use of nonrenewable fuels and increase the use of renewable energy sources. A segment of *Renewal* profiles this national and shows how it works to lobby Congress for reforms that promote energy conservation to lessen pollution and address climate change.

One of the most surprising profiles in the film is of a wide-ranging group of Evangelical Christians who are now working together in Kentucky and West Virginia to stop mountain top removal, which literally takes off the heads of Appalachian Mountains to extract coal for power plants. The result is nothing less than the rape of the land, devastation of the mountains, erosion, and the pollution of rivers and streams. Though Evangelicals may be among the last to engage in the environmental debate, many now see the connections between faith and environmentalism.

There are scriptural precedents as well for communities of faith choosing to practice a green theology. Ellen Davis, a Biblical scholar at Duke University Divinity School, has written about the connection between the sacred places we building within the larger context of God's creation. Davis notes that the Bible offers detailed descriptions of only two construction projects, both of which are for worship: the portable Tabernacle erected during the years of wandering in the wilderness and Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. Davis posits that if these Old Testament writers were interested in the creation of sacred space, "beyond all other forms of material or cultural production," it is because "they understood that a place for worship is not like other things that people design and create. In a very real way, a sanctuary has a kind of creative capacity of its own. Specifically, it has the capacity to shape the people who spend time there, to form us as believers." (1) The sanctuary itself, notes Davis, "deepens religious experience and insight. The physical space we inhabit as worshippers may itself contribute to our awareness of new possibilities for living in the presence and to the glory of God." (2)

Drawing from the works of religious philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Davis notes that "sacred art depends upon sacred science." (3) What does this mean for us? Davis observes that, "when religious architecture is actually practiced as a sacred art, it elevates our hearts and minds toward God and at the same time roots us in the created order. Through stone, brick, wood, glass, and space, religious architecture articulates a holy knowledge of the world that is, properly speaking, ecological." (4)

Several works of architecture that physically express the beliefs in earth stewardship and eco-theology of the congregations who chose to build them are profiled. For example, the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Reno, Nevada, has built a solar-heated and naturally cooled fellowship hall in the desert, which

collects rainwater for irrigation and used low-embodied energy building materials. The hall relies on the collection of solar energy to heat the main spaces.

Another project profiled is Temple Bat Yam in California, the product of a congregation that ties in Jewish faith into sustainable architecture that also uses natural light symbolically. The temple's site is carefully designed to minimize water runoff and to preserve green spaces.

The eco-theology of Father Thomas Berry and his belief that people of faith must work towards establishing a mutually enhancing, human-earth relationship is the inspiration for the design of St. Gabriel's Church in Toronto, which responds to this imperative in a tangible, realistic, and meaningful way and in so doing defines a new typology for Christian worship. St. Gabriel's is glazed with clear glass, which helps to collect the solar energy of the winter sun and connect the congregation to the world outside the church. The church also employs green plants to purify the air, and rainwater collection for irrigation.

Many inner-city congregations face dwindling membership and escalating energy and maintenance costs. The Ecumenical Campus project in Seattle, another project profiled, is showing the way for congregations to pool their resources to create new, sustainable, ecumenical spaces in the inner city. The development will also provide affordable housing and new retail space to help support the congregations.

The sustainable work of architecture students in the design and construction of green worship spaces is also presented. Specifically, the work of the Rural Studio at Auburn University is also discussed.

The presentation sets the ecological and sustainable work of many faith communities in the context of theology and religious belief—a connection between architecture, conservation, and the tenets of stewardship.

Notes

1. Ellen Davis, "Wise and Holy Work," *Faith & Form*, Volume 38, Number 3, 2005, p. 6.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 7.