

Paper

## **CONSTRUCTION AS PRAYER: The Making of the Sukkah**

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### **Summary statement**

The act of designing/making can be seen as a way for people to externalize themselves into the world, to make it symbolically meaningful, at the same time that the repetitive nature of most building construction can be likened to a form of prayer. The design/making of a campus sukkah by architecture students offered the opportunity to study this connection in action, and students found the experience of making the sukkah offered opportunities for transcendence.

### **Topic**

Materials and the act of making as a form of prayer.

### **Scope**

The design and construction of architecture is a product of human thought and labor. Whether practiced by talented professionals or inspired amateurs, the act of conceiving a design and then acting upon materials to bring it forth can allow the designer/maker to extend one's self into the environment, inhabiting the built world. Such constructions can be the result of creative actions in which the maker's spirit and labor are transformed into symbolically meaningful objects. Peter Berger writes that this very human drive "externalizes" people into the world outside of themselves. He describes humans as "world constructors" who fabricate objects through which they externalize themselves, projecting their "own meanings and reality," thus transcending the natural world.<sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade expresses a very similar idea in *The Sacred and the Profane* when he notes that in creating a world to inhabit through human labor, one not only "cosmicizes chaos but also sanctifies his little cosmos by making it like the world of the gods."<sup>2</sup>

Another perspective on human labor is as a form of prayer through which the human spirit is projected into the object being created. Much physical labor, particularly building construction, is made up of repetitive actions: digging trenches, laying bricks, tiling roofs. In most world religions prayer is also a repetitive action: the celebration of the Roman Catholic Mass is a ritual repeated over and over for millennia; praying the Christian rosary incorporates the repetitive action of prayers recited in decades; Muslims use misbaha prayer beads to recite a circuit of 33 prayers;

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Berger, *The Social Construction of Reality*, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 104.

<sup>2</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1959), p. 65.

Buddhists and Hindus employ the Japa Mahala to recite 27 prayers four times in repetition; those of the Baha'i faith recite a verse 95 times after ritual ablutions. Professor Paul Tesar at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, touches on repetitive actions as a gateway to the transcendent when he describes habit this way: "The execution of repetitive and uniform acts enables us to broaden and to deepen our spiritual life by unburdening our mind from paying undue attention to everyday routines."<sup>3</sup>

### **Case Study**

We explored the connection between designing/making and prayer in the design and construction of a sukkah by Department of Architecture students on the University of Hartford campus in West Hartford, Connecticut, working in collaboration with the campus Hillel Jewish student organization. The sukkah is a freestanding or attached enclosure in which the Jewish holiday of Sukkot is celebrated. Sukkot begins on the fifth day after Yom Kippur and lasts seven days. During this time, a benediction is offered and meals are shared within the sukkah, which should be made of natural materials and have a roof covering partially open to the sky. The sukkah must be built under the open sky without obstructions (not under a tree or another room above it). The walls can stay up all year, but the roofing should be unprocessed plant material (known as *sechach* or *s'kahakh*) and should be in place no longer than 30 days before the holiday to prevent it from wilting. Its material should grow out of the ground but no longer be attached to the earth. In the case of this sukkah, the roof covering was of saplings collected in a nearby woods, and phragmite obtained from around a pond. These were laid over the open roof between the sukkah walls. By Jewish law the walls can be no higher than 30 feet and no lower than 3 feet tall, and the space must be big enough for at least one person (preferably more).

Because this is a campus structure, the sukkah walls are designed so that they can be easily assembled with repetitive units that can be demounted and stored for next year's holiday. In Judaism the numbers 6, 12, and 18 are sacred, so the students incorporated them into demountable units 18 inches square, which had depths of 6, 12, and 18 inches. When assembled into a wall, these square niches are open to receive gifts and offerings for the holiday, and they are adorned with graffiti (another sukkah tradition) that was laser cut. The sukkah wall units were constructed by the students weeks before final assembly on campus.

The work was completed by students and faculty of Jewish, Islamic, Christian, agnostic, or atheistic backgrounds, but all seemed to engage the project in the spirit of construction as a form of prayer. As 150 individual plywood units were fabricated, transported, and assembled, the work took on a repetitive nature, which some students and faculty likened to prayers and chants. During construction, a Catholic student remarked that he felt that he didn't have to attend mass that day because he considered his sukkah work a form of worship. A practicing Muslim student asked to help because she had just received word that her grandmother had passed away in Bangladesh. She felt alone, and wanted to help construct this space for Jewish ritual as a way to pray for departed grandmother. Prayers were offered at the beginning and end of the two days of construction.

### **Intended Conclusions**

The conclusions to this paper are that the process of designing and making architecture—even non-religious structures—can take on the spiritual dimensions of prayer. In fact, the act of prayer and the repetitive nature of building construction offer ways of transcending the everyday and accessing the spiritual. As the writer Wendell Berry has so eloquently observed: "If we think of ourselves as living

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Tesar, "Habit, Spirituality and Architecture," paper presented at ACS Inaugural Forum, Mount Angel Abby, St. Benedict, Oregon, March 24, 2009.

souls, immortal creatures, living in the midst of a Creation that is mostly mysterious, and if we can see that everything we make or do cannot help but have an everlasting significance for ourselves, for others, and for the world, then we see why some religious teachers have understood work as a form of prayer.... Work connects us both to Creation and eternity.”<sup>4</sup>

### References

Wendell Berry. “Christianity and the Survival of Creation” *Cross Currents*, Volume 43, No. 2, 2011, <http://www.crosscurrents.org/berry.htm>, accessed January 4, 2017

Peter Berger. *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967)

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Figure 1: University of Hartford architecture student design for the sukkah includes a partially covered roof and niches for offerings. Image: Courtesy of the University of Hartford Department of Architecture



Figure 2: Sukkah construction underway on the University of Hartford campus; elements prefabricated by students are assembled and will be disassembled after the festival of Sukkot. Photo: Rebecca Tuscano-Moss



Figure 3: Natural, unprocessed materials such as saplings and phragmite are set in place in the sukkah's end wall. Photo: Rebecca Tuscano-Moss