

# Seeking the Spiritual Self within the Interior Environment: Analyzing the Work of Heidegger to Define the Human-Object Relationship

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## Introduction

The often cited alienation of contemporary society has given rise to the need to create sacred spaces where one may discover a spiritual experience. This desire for sacred space emanates from a fundamental and long standing need of humans to connect with their origins. The modern psyche springs from the legacy of past generations and is a “thread of interconnections woven back into the fabric of time” (Barrie, 1996, p. 3). However, the current state of humankind emphasizes and relies on scientific methodology and technological innovation, diminishing the philosophical resources needed to experience art, architecture, or design in general in terms of the sacred. In a sacred space, one realizes personal awareness and knowledge that connects the individual to the community on a psychosocial level. While humankind continues to seek connections to icons and objects of modern culture searching for a sense of self, deliberate efforts to create non-liturgical sacred spaces have all but disappeared. The notion of sacredness as a fundamental societal need seems to become more antiquated as human evolution progresses towards a future that technological innovation creates.

Martin Heidegger, a pioneer of philosophical reasoning, emphasizes the need to foster of sacredness in contemporary landscapes. One of his recurring philosophical concepts in “Building, Dwelling, Thinking<sup>1</sup>” and “The Thing<sup>2</sup>” is the secular alienation of contemporary society. This paper contends that Heidegger’s less secular viewpoint towards sacredness can be a tool in understanding the relationship between humans and the tangible objects used and encountered daily, which in turn translates to architecture and the interior environment, offering its users their own set of relationship values.

This paper reasons that in order to express and experience the sacred, humans must modify their relationship with objects (to their respective needs) and appreciate them for their latent spiritual value as opposed to their tactile and profane purposes. Sacred design principles expose this human-object relationship along with the intrinsic benefit of interior architecture as an agent through which humans can rediscover the notion of the self as the “center” from which we can navigate towards self-identity, and ultimately giving contemporary sacred design a more profound significance (its latent value) that surpasses our profane existence.

## A Conceptual and Historical Discussion of Sacred Space

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<sup>1</sup> “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” is contained in Heidegger’s larger work *Poetry, Language, Thought*. See references for citation information.

<sup>2</sup> “The Thing” is contained in Heidegger’s larger work *Poetry, Language, Thought*. See references for citation information.

It is important to discuss the ways in which sacredness relates to the earth, sky, humankind, and the divine, as this forms the basis of humankind's search for self-identity and place in the world. It is important to note that the architectural term *sacred* in this case of this argument refers not to religious sentiment, but as a function between composition and form, a connection made in the subconscious mind (Barrie, 1996, p. 5). Goldberger (2010) concurs adding that "the use of material forms to evoke feelings that go beyond the material, [that] which cannot be measured," brings one towards the sacred. The non-liturgical notion of sacredness points to the existential and spiritual nature of being as well as the sense of peace one may experience being in a space having intrinsic value and meaning. This concept transcends the architectural standard that form follows function, and rather leads the user to the clear meaning of sacredness within the design structure.

Contrary to the sacred religious architecture of the past, built to glorify God and bring the public closer to the ethereal, modernism maintains the idea that "a building would acquire its spiritual quality by how profoundly it represented human aspiration, not because it showed the glory of God (Goldberger, 2010)." As sacredness takes on a less religious model, a more spiritual and individualistic role, humankind is brought closer to the self and is able "to fix his abode at the center of the world" (Mircea, 1959, p. 22). In this pursuit, "architects have taken the material, taken elements of the physical world, and put them together in such a way as to take us away from the physical world" and for the built environment to take on a timeless nature (Goldberger, 2010). Goldberger discusses this coinciding notions of sacred space and timelessness; sacred space "transcends our normal sense of time [by showing] with absolute clarity what the meaning of the word 'timeless' is." One of the central tenets of sacred design is its paradoxical nature, being both timeless and of the present, and is perceived as more than a vestige of times past but rather as a "vital force in our own time" (Goldberger, 2010). This idea of sacredness transcending time to connect humans to a past also recalls their connection to the "center," a necessary ingredient in the search for self-identity.

### ***Dwelling and the Fourfold***

Sacredness in the built environment is essentially a medium through which self-identity flows once its latent value is uncovered. Heidegger refers collectively to a built structure as a *dwelling*, in which humans dwell. In distinguishing between building and dwelling, Heidegger (2001, p. 143) writes, "[w]e attain to dwelling, so it seems, only by means of building." Humans dwell, therefore they build. Since there are built environments that are not necessarily buildings per se, they still allow for man's dwelling, and therefore dwelling is the end result of building. Thus for all intents and purposes, the term *dwelling* (as a noun) will be utilized as such throughout this paper. The action of dwelling is a separate concept. Humans dwell "on the earth" as mortals which implies that this occurs "under the sky," and, according to Heidegger (2001, p. 147), "before the divinities," and thus we have his concept of the "fourfold: earth, sky, divinities, and mortals" belonging together, dwelling in "oneness." However, it must be understood that dwelling is essentially "a staying with things" where mortals "nurture and nurture the things that grow, and specially construct things that do not grow" (Heidegger, 2001, p. 149). Dwellings also preserve the fourfold; in saving the earth, receiving the sky, awaiting the divinities, and escorting mortals, "genuine buildings give form to dwelling [and] hous[e] this presence" (Heidegger, 2001, p. 156). It seems the oneness of the fourfold (earth, sky, mortals, and divinities) implies that sacredness and purposeful dwellings should exist in a contemporaneous nature.

The technological uprising of contemporary society has expedited the need for the purposeful dwelling, which places dutiful importance on the service the dwelling provides for the users, who in turn passively receive experiences in a predetermined fashion; one encounters the object and its ideal purpose without experiencing the meaning within it and results in a lack of connection to the inner self. This seems unfortunate since modern models of architectural theory acknowledge that each individual brings a distinct set of identity-related needs. A less passive model would

allow users to actively construct their own personal meanings within the said dwelling, further enhancing the quality of the human experience within it.

### **The Human-Object Relationship**

As previously mentioned, Heidegger considers a dwelling to be essentially “a staying with things.” His essay “The Thing,” analyzes the human relationship to objects, which he refers to as *things*, and in doing so, this relationship provides insight into the contemporary loss of the sacred (Heidegger, 2001, p. 163). Replacing religion and spiritual pursuits of the mind is a mode of pragmatism and materialism referred to as “scientific knowledge,” which he argues has caused the relationship between humankind and objects to be based purely on their subjective, tangible self-serving purpose, ultimately resulting in the recession of the sacred in many forms (Heidegger, 2001, p. 168). “The character of the thing,” he argues, “does not consist in its being [the] represented object” conventional thinking defines it as (Heidegger, 2001, p. 165).

How does architecture and the interior environment relate to the nature of things in this sense? The built environment, or dwelling, is still a *thing* in its most basic form. When one interprets an element of architecture (a thing) purely for its material nature (dwelling), the true essence of the object is obscured; scientific knowledge inherently leads humankind to recognize architecture for its profane purpose, and its latent attributes are obscured. Science, according to Heidegger (2001, p. 168), “makes the...thing into a non-entity in not permitting things to be the standard for what is real.” Mircea (1959, p. 22) views profane objects as “homogenous and neutral [with] no break qualitatively [differentiating] the various parts of its mass.” Profane material objects, the interior environment in this case, may potentially reveal a more profound implication than humankind’s scientifically-driven methodology can embrace. However, to reveal this potential, humans must reconnect to the spirit of things in order to return to the realm of the sacred. In returning to the fourfold, understanding Heidegger’s philosophical idea of universal unity and the true essence of the object relates to its latent sacred potential of *being*. Mircea (1959, p. 12) concurs that as the sacred is manifested “any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain *itself*, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu.” Ontologically, this new understanding of objects allows humans a sense of self-identity, sense of place, and a mode of continuity between earth and the spiritual self, which reinforces humankind’s role in the fourfold.

### **Response of the Built Environment**

Employing sacredness in architecture and the interior environment requires a change in the perception of how the users experience the dwelling as an object, as well as how architects and designers guide and sustain that experience for the users, while responding to the vacant profanity of the age. How does design and architecture respond to the waning existence of sacredness and the evolving needs of secular society and its search for a sense of place? The solution requires the end to justify the means. A newly constructed and designed dwelling may engender feelings of emptiness, lacking a sense of the human touch such as individuality, personalization, etc. Day (2004, p. 159) concurs that until the building is given spirit, “many buildings are lifeless...offer[ing] nothing other than spatial constraints and architectural qualities.” According to his thought process, new buildings simply have no soul. Day (2004, p. 160) defines “soul” as an “intangible feeling” created through a “composite of sensory experiences reinforced by historical [and personal] associations.” The dwelling’s essence lies dormant until it receives a *soul* from the inhabitants. He refers to this as *ensouling*: a process through which the human spirit “incarnate[s] progressively into a building with each step from wish, through idea, planning, constructional design and building to occupation (2004, p. 159);” a sense of the sacred must be present from the inception of the project. While this concept of ensouling a dwelling is paramount in this argument, it must be considered that ensouling a building is in essence developing a relationship with the dwelling that did not exist before the process was initiated.

Common architectural and interior design elements (entrances, exits, thresholds, boundaries, scale, volume, shape, texture, light, materiality, and symbolism, amongst others) are more than stylistic elements in sacred design. Traditionally, sacred architecture is relegated to centers of worship, and sacredness is thus equated with spaces of a religious nature. Evident today is a rebirth in the interest sacred endeavors in the built environment, but without the bounds religion. Sacredness is traditionally achieved in the built environment through the use of symbolism<sup>3</sup> to aid in the “construction and depiction of identity” (Hourston, 2004, p. 6). Artists, writers, designers, and architects have employed the use of these symbols for centuries. While symbolic value is inherent in these art forms, one can generalize that, aside from centers of worship, the intrinsic value of symbolism in architecture and the interior has been ignored. Surely, a changing society’s needs are a prime reason for this omission, yet it is this same society that will benefit from the recognition of symbolism in producing sacred environments.

The ultimate goal of introducing symbolism to an architectural setting is to create an experience that is intuitive, intimate, and brings the inner self into harmony with the user’s surroundings. The sacred space holds a vast amount of latent knowledge, and can offer the user a sense of validation, a significant platform in the construction of self-identity<sup>4</sup>. A meaningful space must also have an identity of its own, creating in its users a sense that they belong and can connect to it. In this way, when a space is seen as the center of the users’ world, a sense of ownership is subconsciously created within this space (Barrie, 1996, p. 39).

### **Conclusion**

Despite man’s ongoing desire to find a place in the universe there is a discrepancy between the historical and modern importance of sacred space. This omission becomes more obvious when the built environment is examined in the context of sacred space. In this sense, architectural design becomes a means through which designers can change the relationship between the user and the space, therefore ensouling the dwelling and filling it with significant meaning. This is an example of Heidegger’s belief that sacredness will reveal itself once the human-object relationship is correctly understood. Humankind must reevaluate the tactile and profane purposes of objects and dwellings, and instead appreciate them for their latent divine significance. A sacred place, when revealed in this way, alters its world altogether, and self-actualization is met in the presence of the sacred. Thus humankind should be mindful that sacred space and self-identity share a symbiotic relationship; neither should or could exist without the other.

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<sup>3</sup> Conventional symbolism and architectural elements, intentionally designed as paradigmatic of the cosmos, includes (but is not limited to) the golden section, the Fibonacci series, squaring the circle, the vesica piscis, the axis mundi, a clear demarcation between the sacred and the profane world, transitional zone referred to as a threshold, and sacred paths or circulation (axial, split, segmented, radial, grid, and circumambulating).

<sup>4</sup> Self-identity relates to the experience of place in that it embodies an “intimate and individual” form of knowledge. The internal process of experience is, according to Nineteenth century German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (as cited by Klonk 2009, p. 9), a “fundamental life force” universally available to all, through which cultural heritage is accessed. On a more basic level, self-identity creates “intellectual, ethical, and spiritual development” and is a critical element in the human experience of existence (Stewart-Pollack and Menconi, 2005, p. 11).

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