

Displacement as a Condition of Faith: Four Perspectives

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Summary statement

Works of sacred architecture across millennia have often been described as “Houses of God”—“sacred” or “holy” places in a profane world where adherents of a faith can find spiritual respite in a welcoming home. However, others argue that the idea of a convivial place for faith runs counter to the actual condition in which people view themselves in a world that rejects the spiritual or seeks to corrupt it. This view posits that the human condition of genuine spirituality is one of “displacement,” that the believer is not of this world, and that the focus of faith is ultimately outside this world, disassociated with earthly concerns. Further, aligning this condition with the creation of places for the spirit, might religious architecture reflect this condition of displacement? The paper explores the idea of displacement or “placelessness” as a condition of authentic religious belief, and argues that space conceived as “holy” or “sacred” in this world is perhaps a chimera. Four perspectives on the idea of “spiritual displacement” will be explored through the work of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, religion historian Mircea Eliade, cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, and architect Edward Anders Sövik.

Topic

The paper explores the topic of displacement as a necessary condition of faith, in which a person of spirituality or religious belief finds themselves “displaced” within the dominant world culture. Sacred architecture might reflect this displacement, as seen in the work of Edward Anders Sövik.

Scope

In his prolific writings, the rabbi and Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel notes that the Jewish faith does not view space as sacred; rather, time is sacred. He makes the distinction that space is in the realm of human “things,” it can be created and destroyed. But time is a divine dimension controlled only by the deity. In his landmark work, *The Sabbath*, Heschel observes that, “Monuments of stone are destined to disappear; days of spirit never pass away.”¹ He also notes the historical displacement of Jews in the world: “We do not feel ‘at home’ in the world,” he comments. “With the psalmist we pray, ‘I am a stranger on earth, hide not Thy commandments from me.’”² Heschel borrows an architectural metaphor for this sense of displacement. He quotes Rabbi Jacob from the *Pirke Aboth*: “The world is like a vestibule before the world to come; prepare yourself in the vestibule, so that you may enter the banquet hall.”³ In other works, Heschel cautions that space is alien to human spirituality, while time offers its own sanctity: “Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events rather

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, (New York, NY: Straus and Young, Inc., 1951), p. 98.

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom*, (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1966-5726), p. 133.

³ Jacob Neusner with Noam M.M. Neusner, Editors, *To Grow In Wisdom: An Anthology of Abraham Joshua Heschel*, (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1990), p. 133.

than to sacred places, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year. The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals..."⁴

An historian of religion, Mircea Eliade in his landmark work, *The Sacred and Profane*, describes the creation of the world as the result of the gods making order out of chaos; religious people replicate the work of the gods when they create sacred places. However, Eliade also considers the sacredness of time, not only space, as a vehicle through which humans can share in the work of the gods and make themselves anew. Eliade suggests that "religious man" engages in a form of time travel back to the moment when the world was made, and that this recall of the moment of creation is the basis of all sacred calendars. "The festival is not merely the commemoration of a mythical (and hence, religious) event," notes Eliade, "it *reactualizes* the event."⁵ For Eliade, this reactualization allows man to get closer to God, occupying a moment at the beginning of the world. This essentially displaces religious man outside the everyday world, which ultimately is not his spiritual home.

One of the founders of "humanistic geography," geographer Yi-Fu Tuan articulates a distinction between human place-making (geography) and religion (in his view, not of a place). He argues that for the "true followers" of Buddha, Moses, and Christ, "the shift from place to placelessness is not a cause for regret; for them the true home for human beings is never a geographical place—a holy city or mountain—somewhere on Earth. It is always elsewhere."⁶ Historically, Tuan relates, early Christians were "'people of the way,' or 'people of the road'; that is, drifters."⁷ Roman patriarchs referred to Christians derogatorily as *peregrinus* or pilgrims, by which was meant "wayfarer, bird of passage, foreigner, or resident alien."⁸ But to the early Christians, Tuan writes, the word "pilgrim" was interpreted differently: "They were 'strangers and pilgrims on the earth' [Hebrews 11:13] who willingly took on the label 'wayfarer' or 'resident alien,' because, to them, their true home was in heaven [Philippians 3:20]."⁹

How might the concept of spiritual displacement translate to religious architecture? The idea of a church building not necessarily being a "sacred place" is most vividly seen in the writings and architecture of Edward Anders Sövik, a creative and prolific architect whose practice was based in the Midwest but who gained national stature. Active from the mid-20th-century up through the 1970s, Sövik designed mostly Protestant churches and wrote extensively about church design and its liturgical underpinnings. Sövik's position was that church buildings in and of themselves were not "sacred"; to believe so undermines the true mission of the Church, as he saw it.

⁴ Ibid., p. 79.

⁵ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1959), p. 81.

⁶ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Religion: From Place to Placelessness*, (Chicago, IL: The Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, Center Books on the International Scene, 2009), p. x.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 45-46.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 46.

Sövik's view, based in Protestant belief, was that religious faith is not expressed through ecclesiastical architecture, but rather by how one lives out his or her religious beliefs. Sövik wrote that church buildings should be considered secular places, not imbued with "holiness"; they should serve the needs of the community in which they are built and should be viewed as everyday in nature.

Sövik argued that early Christianity had lost its way in regard to "sacred" buildings under Emperor Constantine, when the idea of a "sacred place" became more important. In his seminal book, *Architecture for Worship*, Sövik writes that, in the 3rd century CE, "In a Roman Empire where a great variety of religions existed and a multitude of deities, each with its shrines, temples, altars, and holy places, the Christians saw themselves uniquely as a community of faith *unattached* to any place."¹⁰ Sövik believed, in a sense, that Christians are a faith community *displaced* in this world, because followers of Christ are not of this world. Their spiritual home lies elsewhere.

Sövik advanced his concept of the "Non-Church," his term for a new kind of "religious" building that should not be considered "sacred" and should freely serve community needs. Sövik writes: "...our places of worship must not be conceived of as distinctive 'holy' places as are most of those we know and have been building, but should be fully secular in character. They should not be seen exclusively or specifically as places of worship but should be offered to our communities for purposes other than worship. They should be so designed as to be very flexible...because the commitment of these spaces to events other than worship requires it."¹¹ Sövik strongly expressed his belief that even the architectural expression of the Non-Church be secular: "A church building should not 'look like a church.'"¹²

Intended Conclusions

Sövik's liturgical architecture gave form to the idea that people of belief, whatever their spirituality, experience a sense of displacement within the quotidian world. His design work and writings seem particularly worthy of closer examination today, as many established "traditional" religions are experiencing a declining relevance to once-loyal congregations. Today, architects and others involved in the creation of "sacred space" must respond to the growing number of people who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious," and increasingly find secular places, such as bars, coffeehouses, and other "Third Places," the preferred venue for living out their spirituality in the world of the everyday. In this context, people who are spiritual but not religious might be leading ecclesiastical architecture in directions that promote transcendence within secular realms.

¹⁰ E. A. Sövik, *Architecture For Worship*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1973), p. 13.

¹¹ E. A. Sövik, "The Return to the Non-Church," *Faith & Form*, (Volume 5, Fall 1972), p. 13.

¹² *Ibid.*

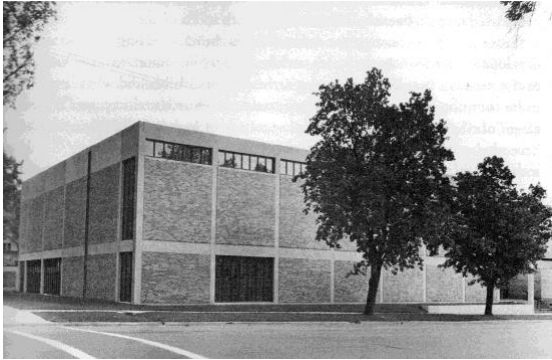


Figure 1



Figure 2

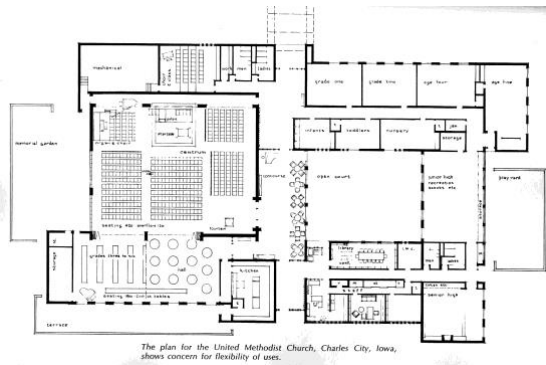


Figure 3

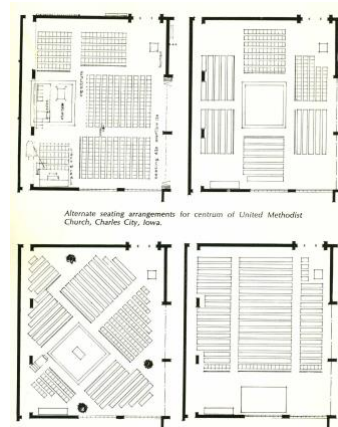


Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 1: Edward Anders Sövik's St. Leo Catholic Church in Pipestone, MN (1969) is decidedly secular in its exterior appearance.

Figure 2: Interior of St. Leo Catholic Church is devoid of ecclesiastical overtones in its design.

Figure 3: Plan of Sövik's United Methodist Church, Charles City, IA (1969) accommodates many secular functions.

Figure 4: Flexibility of United Methodist sanctuary (or 'centrum') is a hallmark of Sövik's architecture.

Figure 5: The rooftop cross on Sövik's Westwood Lutheran Church, St. Louis Park, MN (1963) is one of the few clues that it is a house of worship.