Displacement In The Era Of Digital Religion And Virtual Sacred Architecture

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Summary statement

Today, in a world continuously shattered by displacement, the recreation of physical houses of worship that provide a spiritual relief and reaffirmation of an inner constancy becomes arduous and almost impossible. People find themselves with no place and no specific time to continue their spiritual rituals. Hence, there is a great need to explore new ways to express the sacred with no specific physical place. This paper explores how spiritual experience can be created with digital/virtual architectural solutions in situations of displacement.

Scope

To comprehend the scope and foci of this phenomenon and its impact on spirituality, one should consider the epistemology underlying the search of immigrants for new sacred architecture. When people immigrate from their homeland they tend to look for the familiar in their new urban or rural locations (Rapoport 1969; Upton 1987; Fitch 1990). Religious buildings are perceived to express the inter-relationship between architecture and culture through faith. Thus, houses of worship reflect immigrants' collective memory and serve as a symbol of communities' identity and cultural heritage. Therefore, immigrants tend to recreate places of worship that are architecturally reminiscent of those they left behind (Fitch 1990; Geva, 1995, 2002; Dubbelde, 2006). These places when built in the new location remain fixed in place and time. Yet, in situations of displacement, which often violates a certain stability in the process of relocation, people cannot recreate their physical places of worship. Displacement triggers a search for different ways to experience sacredness and spirituality. A potential solution in such cases is the transformation of the real physical house of worship into virtual sacred architecture, where refugees can recreate their original buildings, or use the ones available to them online.

The recent development of new media platforms has led to digital spaces that introduce important changes in the practice of religion and resulted in the phenomenon of digital religion (Campbell, 2012; Wagner, 2012). Religious practice is not bounded by physical constraints of place and time, as it moved within digital spaces like forums, chatrooms, virtual worlds, games, and social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter). Virtual environments can create evocative perceptions despite their immaterial state (Bermudez, 1999). Today, digital religion develops into online prayers, online pilgrimages, 'godcasting', and 'godblogging' (Campbell, 2010; Hill-Smith, 2011). A myriad of digital techniques for online rituals vary from time-lapse interior photographs, to panoramic images of the interior of a sacred building, to religious videos, live broadcasting of services (i.e., masses), interactive religious games, mobile applications, and augmented/virtual reality. Some scholars (Merleau-Ponty,1964) believe that perception of space should not be limited to the visual, tactile, and audible, but should include all the senses at once. Others, (Gelfgren & Hutchings 2014) voice that virtual representations of religious buildings might facilitate a spiritual experience somehow similar to religious buildings in reality. Therefore, the virtual sacred space can create a spiritual experience that is detached from the physical fixed

house of worship and can accompany worshipers on the move (Fig. 1). In addition, these virtual spaces offer unlimited possibilities for architectural styles and religious features which may recreate familiar spaces for the displaced population.
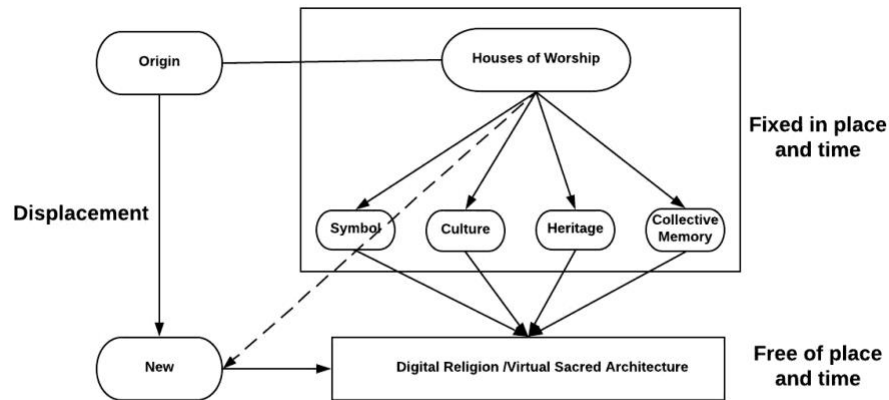

Figure 1 Spiritual Displacement

The question rises, can a recreated scared space in the virtual realm provide a continuation of the spiritual experience of the displaced worshiper? Spirituality can be seen as the continuous human yearning for something larger than the ego (Palmer, 2003); or the experience of the transcendent needless of the religious belief (Bento, 2000); or the inner experience at the encounter of the beyond (Lewis & Geroy, 2000). The common ground between religion and spiritualty is posited as a search for the sacred (Zinnbauer et al, 1999), which this paper suggests can be expressed while being exposed to a virtual sacred environment. For example, websites of virtual Hindu temples[1] where virtual pilgrimages, like Puja, are practiced contain links to meditation rooms, shrines, Puja rooms, etc. The connotation is that a click of a mouse is equivalent to physical activities performed in the physical space like walking up a path and entering a temple (Jacobs, 2007). Another example is the Christian virtual spaces encountered in *Second Life*[2]. This game is a multi-user virtual environment, which serves as the visual manifestation of spiritual imagination, where God may be encountered (Gelfgren & Hutchings, 2014). It is considered a space where spirituality can be experienced. Similar to the physical space, different religious activities can take place within the demarcated sacred cyberspace and create the spiritual experience. Therefore, these virtual sacred places can enable the continuation of the spiritual experience from home lost to people being displaced.

Case Study

In order to test the theory of a continuous spirituality through digital tools, two studies were performed on group of students to assess the extent of their spiritual experience. One group was exposed to a virtual representation of a church in Lyon, France (Figure 4). The other group was exposed to two Italian churches in the cities of Orvieto and Assisi (Figure 2,3). The two groups were asked the same questions about their emotions as related to spirituality after experiencing the real or virtual religious buildings. The results of these experiments showed that no matter the place or time, or the real vs. virtual, both groups expressed emotions that evoked a spiritual feeling. That demonstrates, the possibility to continue and preserve the spiritual experiences of the displaced worshipers through the virtual sacred.

Figure 2 Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi

Figure 3 Orvieto Cathedral

To augment this conclusion, an additional experiment was conducted in a different context that highlighted the notion of no real sacred space and no specific time. This test was performed in a visualization laboratory, in a computer lab, and on home computers. Participants were exposed to various scenarios of the same virtual 'walk-through' of the church[3] (Figs. 4,5). The results showed that no matter the context, or the scenario, the users experienced spirituality similar to the way people visiting a real church did. Furthermore, in these cases, the positive emotions that relate to the spiritual experience, such as the feelings of awe and hope were more significant than the negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and sadness. The conclusion drawn out from these results was that people who are displaced can still feel positive emotions and spirituality while experiencing virtual sacred architecture.

Figure 4 Virtual Model of the St Jean Cathedral in Lyon, France by @Patapom

Figure 5 Different Scenarios of Light Variations in a Walkthrough of a Virtual Church by @Patapom

Summary and Conclusions

In conclusion, displacement does not always allow the physical recreation of the sacred spaces left behind. Therefore, the virtual can create what was already destroyed by recreating the familiar spiritual experiences on two levels: the individual and the collective.

This paper shows that the move from the physical to the virtual sacred places enables the continuation of the spiritual experience. A further conclusion is that the extent of virtual spiritual experience can be measured as an emotion response, such as awe and hope, using assessment scales that were developed in psychology. The empirical results demonstrate that the spiritual phenomenon can be experienced in the digital realm, free from geographical locations and time and thus may support the need for spiritual experience by displaced worshipers.

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