

Bruno Taut: Architect as Modern Spiritual Builder

Aaron French

University of Erfurt, Germany

aaron.french@uni-erfurt.de

Keywords: *sacred space, design, aesthetics, modern architecture, religious studies*

This paper investigates how the architect Bruno Taut (1880–1938) developed a new religiosity for modern times and reconceptualized the notion of “sacred space” for European modernity in terms of reconnecting human beings with each other and the local environment. Taut attributed the problems of his time to the chaos and breakdown accompanying Europe’s transition to modernity, which he described in terms of an overreliance on narrow technical knowledge and the rise of a faith in nationalist politics. Instead of rushing toward either of these extremes – whether toward a nationalistic conservatism that idealized tradition or toward a purely functionalist, materialist, technocratic future – he worked to bridge this polarity by striving for a middle path.

Taut reimagined modern cities and their dwellings as representing a new society in which human beings could participate with nature and the natural processes and aggregate around a local unified center, a spiritual core of the city-state he referred to as the “city crown.” This vision was not unique to Europe, as Taut engaged with non-European ideas of design and architectural practice and lived in Japan (where he was especially interested in Shinto temples), and Turkey, designing buildings there that he believed were in harmony with local traditions and practices. Taut’s ideas about design and a spiritually inflected space culminated toward the end of his life when he was given the opportunity to design the catafalque and viewing area for Atatürk. Such experiences informed his overarching idea of a climate-based form of cosmopolitan architecture, which at the same time remained local and traditional, universal and rational, and in his view had the potential to restore the fractures and breakages of modernity.

To craft this vision, Taut was inspired by the modern currents of alternative spirituality popular during his lifetime, such as theosophy, anthroposophy, and the fascination with “Eastern wisdom.” Through his social networks and experiences, he sought to sacralize the present through a modern religiosity focused on design and spatial aesthetics. Taut’s new form of spatial sacredness was cross-cultural and focused on holism, unity, and harmony, as opposed to the fragmentation and meaninglessness of the modern world, and he envisioned this using ideas of utopia and socialism. His future epoch of architecture was conceived as a socialist society concentrated around a peculiar structure he referred to as the city crown. Taut designed a prototype of this structure and displayed it as the “Glashaus-Pavillon” at the Kölner Werkbundaussstellung in 1914. Along with Taut’s plans for “garden cities,” the city crown was meant to replace the medieval gothic cathedral as the spiritually connective tissue between humans and spirit. Through the use of concentric circles, Taut based his design of the garden city on the medieval city, surrounded by trees instead of walls, and he called on architects to divert the focus of the modern city away from materialism and to recenter it on this spiritual form of socialism energized in the city center by means of a *Kristallhaus* infused with light. In this sense, Taut described the modern architect as a “geistige Schöpfer [spiritual creator],” whose architecture is the “direct carrier of the spiritual forces” The *Kristallhaus* as city-crown represented the all-embracing epitome of this creative power.¹

Taut’s ideas and designs contributed to a new approach to spatial aesthetics combined with the formulation of modern religiosities. Through his architectural theories, as well as in his

¹ Bruno Taut, “Ein Architektur-Programm,” in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th Century Architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads (1918; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1975), 41.

concrete constructions in Europe and beyond, Taut remained invested in the idea that certain spatial configurations in the modern world could become harmonious and utopic, free of the oppressive intellectual and materialized power structures of the past. The result was a distinctly modern form of religiosity that was spatial in its orientation and combined urbanity and nature and was attached to the city. Taut was receptive to non-European ideas and lived and worked outside of Europe, displaying an openness to other cultures, which many others at the time resisted. In short, Taut participated in the reformulation of the entanglement processes of European and non-European cultures, processes that are now synonymous with the idea of “modernity.” He began from a traditional approach, drawing on the historical currents of his time, but the result of his efforts was to develop something new, a modern form of religiosity related to architecture and space.

References

Taut, Bruno. “Ein Architektur-Programm.” In *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th Century Architecture*, edited by Ulrich Conrads. 1918; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1975.