

Making | Meaning: Design Build and the Sacred Ordinary

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Introduction

In what ways does the divine manifest in our daily lives? How might the divine be revealed through the act of making? These inquiries served as focal points in a graduate elective course titled "Making | Meaning," recently developed and taught in the architecture program at Judson University. Students considered connections between epiphany (a divine encounter), ritual (a sacred practice), and the act of making (at a tangible scale). This exploration materialized through the design and fabrication of physical installations and objects aimed at reframing an everyday experience of the divine.

Topic and Background

As the title suggests, the "Making | Meaning" course has a dual focus: students begin by exploring the design of a sacred experience within a non-religious architectural framework; then they strive to actualize their design intentions through the fabrication of a full-scale (non-representational) object or installation.

Traditional notions of sacred architecture are typically confined to religious or consecrated spaces designated for communal worship, service, and ministry.¹ However, this definition inherently constrains the possibility of sacred encounters beyond religious contexts and contradicts the beliefs of many religious traditions that claim that the divine is present in all things.² For these individuals, the divine is perpetually present in the world—in its beauty, its chaos, its joys, and its suffering. As the Franciscan friar and ecumenical teacher Richard Rohr notes, "God comes to us disguised as our life, which seems to be the last place we want God to be."³ Finnish architect and scholar Juhani Pallasmaa writes that the pursuit of the sacred in ordinary architecture is essential to promote a flourishing environment for all humans:

"More than ever before, the ethical and humane task of architecture and all art is to defend the authenticity and autonomy of human experience, and to reveal the existence of the transcendental realm, the domain of the sacred. This calls for the identification of the spiritual and holy, not only in deliberate devotional contexts but in the ordinariness and humility of daily life."⁴

¹ "sacred, *Adj.* (1, 2, 3)," Merriam-Webster, accessed December 18, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sacred>.

² Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Attunement: Architectural Meaning After the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 228. There are a wide variety of ideologies surrounding the omnipresence of God, far too many to explore here. However, most contemporary world religions, including Judaism (Psalm 139:7-12), Christianity (Ephesians 4:6), Islam (Quran 57:4), Hinduism, Sikhism, and certain sects of Buddhism reference the omnipresent nature of the divine.

³ Richard Rohr, *Soul Brothers: Men in the Bible Speak to Men Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

⁴ Juhani Pallasmaa, "Light, Silence, and Spirituality in Architecture and Art," in *Transcending Architecture: Contemporary Views on Sacred Space*, ed. Julio Bermudez, 32. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015.

If we examine the role of architecture in this way, then *all* space is potentially sacred space. Architecture defines, bounds, and edits experience; therefore, architecture plays an essential role in revealing the sacred within the fabric of ordinary existence. This revelation is facilitated through intentional sacred actions (i.e., rituals). Rituals allow users to participate more intentionally in the surrounding environment, involving more attention and commitment than mere observation.

Given the size, intricacy, and cost of buildings, most projects in architectural education are relegated to the realm of scaled representation (such as drawings and models). However, the act of making (especially at full scale) utilizes a rich phenomenological approach to design education, engaging the body, the brain, and the spirit in the learning process. Embodied engagement leads to richer and more intertwined mental, emotional, and spiritual experiences.⁵ Rather than focusing on purely mental or conceptual constructs, a design process involving full-scale making allows designers to concentrate on the elementary—the most *ordinary*—aspects of human experience: what we see, what we hear, what we touch...what we *feel*. Each of these rather ordinary sensory encounters is a miracle if we only stop for a moment to recognize it as such.

A strong emphasis in the “Making | Meaning” course is placed on the relationship between the human physical, emotional, and spiritual experience and the ideas, materials, and details employed in creating functional objects, spaces, and places at full (1:1) scale. A fundamental goal of the course is to explore and experiment with making and meaning. What makes for a meaningful human experience? How might architects design meaningful objects, places, and spaces? How might we make meaning?

Course Methodology

Beginning with the concepts outlined above, students reflected upon three scholarly texts over the course of the semester, including topics related to the neuroscience of attention⁶, spirituality in architecture⁷, and the tectonic expression of joints and details⁸. Each reading/reflection was assigned in conjunction with the beginning of three design projects.

Project 01 focused on the design and fabrication of a “light editing device.” While this introductory project certainly addresses themes related to the sacred experience, the intent of this initial project was to introduce design processes, fabrication methodologies, and conceptual mindsets.

Project 02 concentrated directly on the topic of sacred space and human experience. Students began this project by reflecting on a personal epiphany (an encounter with the divine). The character of the divine encounter was unique to each individual student and may or may not have been related to a formal religious activity. From this reflection, each student developed a ritual (a sacred action) in response to their divine encounter. Students were encouraged to imagine these rituals not as traditional religious undertaking, but instead an action taken to reveal the sacred inherent in ordinary experience. This ritual action provided the basis for shaping the program of an architectural space. Following the programmatic development, each student selected a location for the project site, and designed a small architectural intervention (i.e., a shrine, chapel,

⁵ For more on the neuroscience behind embodiment, especially the connection between physical sensation and emotional experience, refer to Bessal van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York, NY: Viking, 2014).

⁶ Iain McGilchrist, “Tending to the World,” in *Mind in Architecture: Neuroscience, Embodiment, and the Future of Design*, ed. Sarah Robinson and Juhani Pallasmaa, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 99-136.

⁷ Pallasmaa. “Light, Silence, and Spirituality in Architecture and Art,” 19-32.

⁸ Kenneth Frampton, “Carlos Scarpa and the Adoration of the Joint,” in *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), 299-333.

or pavilion). A sacred element or object contained within the space was designed as the focal point of the ritual action or sacred experience.

Project 03 involved the development and full-scale fabrication of the sacred element initially conceived of in the previous project. Students were given latitude at this stage to adjust initial concepts, aesthetics, program, and functional utility based on critical feedback and the transition from representation to full-scale.

On a pragmatic level, the “Making | Meaning” course was not conceived of as a full architectural design studio; rather it is a 3-credit hour elective course. While students were expected to design and fabricate at 1:1 scale, the size and complexity of projects were limited to accommodate the schedule. Project 02—the architectural intervention at the scale of chapel, shrine, or pavilion—was represented in scaled drawings and models. Projects 01 and 03 were fabricated and presented as 1:1 full scale functional objects, similar to furniture or product design. There are strong parallels between product design and architecture, as Charles Eames stated, “The details are not details—they make the product just like details make the architecture. The gauge of the wire, the selection of the wood, the finish of the castings—the connections, the connections, the connections.”⁹

Select Student Work

As is appropriate with graduate level study, students were given wide latitude and autonomy in their response to project prompts. The following three selected projects demonstrate the sacred qualities of common human existence imagined as scaled representation and realized in full scale fabricated objects.

Aiden Stevens' sacred space design features an entry pavilion and a seating area arranged around a long table, taking inspiration from the material and tectonic properties of Japanese tea houses. Initially centered around communal coffee preparation and consumption, the project evolved during the transition from representation to full scale. The focus shifted from communion to contemplation, turning the ritual of coffee preparation into an intentional moment for profound engagement with the present experience—from the initial scent of roasted beans to the warmth of the last swallow.

⁹ Charles and Ray Eames, “Eames Contract Storage” in *An Eames Anthology: Articles, Film Scripts, Interviews, Letters, Notes, and Speeches*, ed. Daniel Ostroff, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961), 224-225.



Figure 1: "Contemplative Coffee" by Aiden Stevens. (© the student and Judson University.)

"*Kul Ma fawq el torab torab*. Everything above sand is sand." Peter Saad's design seeks the divine through an interaction with perhaps the most mundane and ubiquitous material available: sand. Hailing from Egypt, Peter recalls the inescapable presence of sand in his memories of home—permeating daily existence both indoors and out. His design features a sunken floor filled with sand, creating a "holy ground" where occupants remove their shoes upon entry. The final design and full-scale fabrication involve carving a depression into a slab of wood sliced from a tree trunk, meticulously sanded to a polished surface. This depression cradles a small pile of sand, serving as a reminder of the omnipresence of the divine within the mundane.



Figure 2: "Everything Above Sand is Sand" by Peter Saad. (© the student and Judson University.)

Elisa Arce discovers a sacred experience through the act of releasing worry and anxiety, inspired by scripture from the New Testament (Matthew 6:23-27): "Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them." Initial designs manifested in the act of pulling a thread and unravelling fabric as a reminder to relinquish concerns. The sacred space design incorporates an overlapping matrix of wood members,

allowing strings to be threaded, wrapped, and pulled throughout the structure. The fabricated full-scale object encourages a ritual in which users unravel a spool of thread, weaving it through an armature of brass and wood pegs. Each unraveled spool of thread forms a new layer on the pegs below, symbolizing the beauty and serenity found in releasing anxiety and relying on the comfort of the divine even amidst uncertainty and chaos.

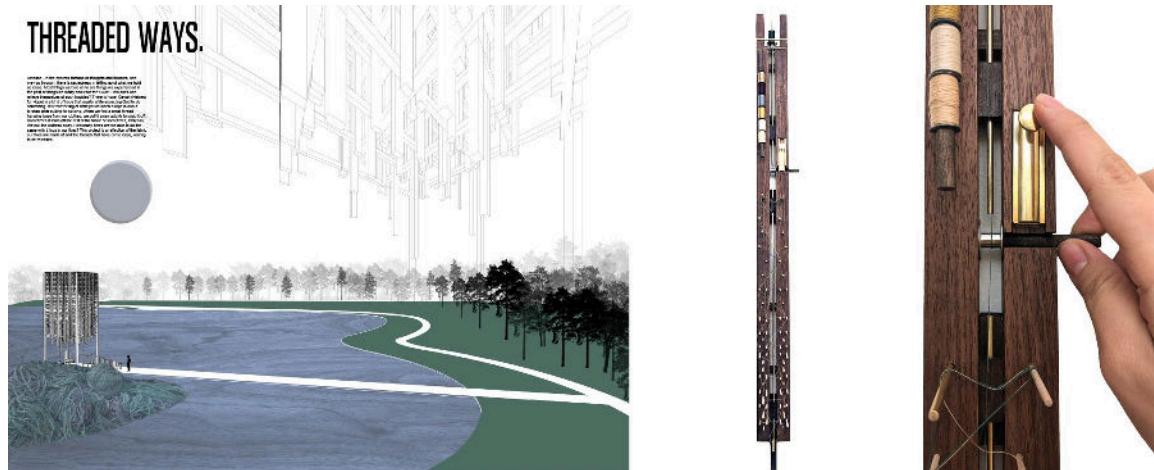


Figure 3: “Threaded Ways” by Elisa Arce. (© the student and Judson University.)

Conclusions and Outcomes

These projects show how architecture and making might engage meaningfully with a spiritual human experience. Students reflected on divine experience, explored ritual actions, and discovered the divine in the most ordinary of experiences: making coffee, holding sand, and unraveling thread. In many cases, the process of design and making became a sacred experience on its own. Moved to tears, one student stated during her final presentation, “There’s so much attention I’ve put in the making, the shaping, the experience... The process [of making] was just as sacred as the original divine experience.”¹⁰

As students grappled with the course content, they found the process to be involved, complex, and occasionally contradictory. Developing an external (embodied) sacred action to recall something that was primarily internal (emotive, cognitive) proved challenging. Attempts to reproduce the mystery of a divine experience at times felt artificial; however, this challenge also encouraged contemplation of the conditions that fostered the original sacred experience.

“Part of the challenge during the process was translating [my sacred experience] into a ritual that could be repeated... I found that by giving so much attention to something, it was becoming more meaningful to me... but why? Was it related to the hours of work, thought, meditation, and craft put into making it? I am not sure, but I can say that when I finished my project it felt like I had made something meaningful.”¹¹

Upon reflection, many students observed that their sacred elements were designed in a vacuum. Apart from the context of the imagined sacred space (Project 02), and with minor adjustments made to suit the context of their everyday lives, the objects felt like an artifact of a sacred

¹⁰ Paige Soth, ARC600 Making | Meaning, Project 03 (Sacred Experience) final review, December 7, 2023.

¹¹ Elisa Arce, interview with Madison Psinas, April 25, 2024.

memory, an object that “does not quite fit” within the context of the rituals in which they engage every day.¹² For some, their sacred element did present an opportunity for a new commonplace ritual, like releasing stress or grounding one’s senses with an awareness of heritage and home.¹³ These projects evolved to become a means for reflection on the meaningful moments created within mundane daily experience.

Overall, the course was recognized as an exercise in developing an intentionality beyond a routine response to a design problem with a general programmatic solution. If we are to “defend the authenticity and autonomy of the human experience,”¹⁴ the architect has a responsibility to understand the commonplace human rituals occurring within a space. “Good architecture is a space tailored to one’s everyday life,” reflected one student¹⁵, declaring the mundane deserving of the same level of attention—of intent—as was given to the sacred acts and artifacts designed within the class. By imbuing this higher level of intention into the creation of objects, places, and spaces, architects might better engage in the sacred act of making meaning.

¹² Aiden Stevens, interview with Madison Psinas, April 2, 2024.

¹³ Elisa Arce, interview with Madison Psinas, April 25, 2024.

¹⁴ Pallasmaa, “Light, Silence, and Spirituality in Architecture and Art,” 32.

¹⁵ Aiden Stevens, interview with Madison Psinas, April 2, 2024.