

A Framework for Sacred Architecture

Karim Youssef
California Baptist University
kyoussef@calbaptist.edu

Keywords: *theory, form, architecturality, sacred space, transcendence, rhythmicity, meaning*

Introduction

Keith Critchlow defines architecture as a sacred expression that involves the uplifting principle of levity in the physical, emotional, intellectual, inspirational, and ontological realms, dedicated to raising the human sense of inclusive and comprehensive unity and integrity. However, the architecture and urban form of contemporary cities have lost every connection to the sacred and ceased to prefigure a better world. There is an urgent need to rediscover architecture's core and establish a firm foundation upon which to construct a framework for sacred architecture with the intent of raising awareness and widening its scope to include the secular alongside the religious as equally potential sites for the sacred. In addition, the intention behind constructing a framework is to help differentiate between types of sacred architecture encountered experientially, in practice, and theoretically, in scholarly work, such as existential, phenomenological, symbolic, and transcendental architecture which may confound users, researchers, and designers as they try to make sense of the sacred associated with those types. The hope is that fulfilling these purposes will emancipate designers from grappling with vague notions, such as the notion of the numinous, when dealing with the architecture of the sacred, or from blindly following prescriptive guidelines which soon become inert when applied unreflectively, such as the case with the notion of procession. Hopefully, establishing a framework will serve as a guide for designers who face the challenge of creating meaningful, communicative, and transformative places. Realizing these intentions does not mean that the enigma of sacred architecture has been solved, an enigma that harbors dichotomies between the ideal and the real, the transcendent and the material, mind and matter, but presents a step towards dealing with the enigma in hopes of designing better places for dwelling, intimacy, participation, and transcendence. Catering to the construction of such lively places lays the groundwork for the framework I am proposing.

Earlier Frameworks

Several frameworks for sacred architecture have already been proposed in scholarly literature with varied and sometimes questionable usefulness to designers depending upon the approach adopted by each framework. I noticed that a few of such frameworks seem simplistic and arbitrary by juxtaposing and singling out (with no clear basis), for instance, transcendence, procession, and beauty as dimensions of sacred architecture. To that arbitrary bundle, geometry and light are usually added to the formula as special ingredients. The need to develop a framework and to facilitate the design of the sacred at the architectural, urban, and landscape scales was recognized by Philip Tabb in his recently published book, *Thin Place Design: Architecture of the Numinous*, where he proposes a framework of 20 archetypal patterns grouped along five archetypal principles and examines their effect on human emotions. Other earlier frameworks proposed by scholars delineate the role of sacred architecture as a mediator for

sacred space. For example, Lindsay Jones proposed a framework for three roles of sacred architecture: orientation, commemoration, and ritual context. At the end of his two-volume work, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, Jones declared that the framework is descriptive, sketched from a historian's perspective rather than having instrumental use for designing sacred architecture.

Additional frameworks such as the Tree of Life Model proposed by Nader Ardalan is geared towards sustainable design thinking and provides guidance on design considerations when undertaking the design of environmentally and culturally sustainable environments. Nevertheless, Ardalan's framework remains descriptive of a spatial hierarchy without explicit consideration of the dynamics of form. Likewise, Kim Knott proposes a holistic framework for the sacred that pivots around the human body as the source around which sacred space is constructed. Knott's construction involves Foucauldian concepts such as configuration, simultaneity, extension, and power, as well as the Lefebvrian triad of perceived, conceived, and lived space, returning once again to the body as the category boundary of the sacred. As comprehensive and useful as it is, Knott's framework is essentially a spatial theory that is not easily translatable to an integrated theory of form which may otherwise be more accessible to designers of sacred architecture.

Sacred Architecture as a Meta-Architecture

The objective of my presentation is to share with ACSF community and symposium members a framework for understanding sacred architecture that I developed in my recently published book. The framework finds its inspiration in the theory of human becoming by Rosemarie Parse and builds on the foundation of the theory of place as developed by David Seamon. Anchoring the framework to our six main human mental faculties provides the basis upon which threshold crossings are identified. Thereby, sacred architecture is defined as a place (event) of human becoming having the capacity to transform, empower, and originate through the concealing and revealing of images and the enabling and limiting of values.

To demonstrate the applicability of the framework, the case of Hagia Sophia, as mentioned in the book, exemplifies all three dimensions of the framework: chaosity, amorphicity, and dispositionality. Chaosity captures the spatialized and symbolized character of the sacred. Amorphicity captures the fixed and fluid identity of the sacred. Dispositionality situates sacred architecture along a spectrum of actuality and potentiality. To construct the framework, I borrowed the notion of architecturality to delineate two axes that lay the ground for the framework: (1) an axis of time, a performative dimension for disclosure of truth; and (2) an axis of agency, a performative dimension for changing the context and meaning in which sacred architecture is placed. The framework brings together several strands of scholarly literature and synthesizes perspectives on the sacred from several disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, and religious studies as well as architecture and urbanism. The ultimate purpose from constructing the framework was to circumscribe the task of designing sacred architecture in a graspable way while widening the scope of sacred architecture to include the secular alongside the religious as built places that have comparable capacity for affecting and uplifting the spiritual, emotional, and phenomenological experience of architecture. The framework offers an analytic lens to disambiguate the existential from the symbolic and the phenomenological from the transcendental. Understanding sacred architecture as a meta-architecture connects between those types of architecture through the process of threshold crossing. For purposes of aiding in design, the framework captures the difference between the transcendent and the sacred by distinguishing different kinds of transcendence involved in the sacred.

References

- Ardalan, Nader. "From Within: On the Spiritual in Art and Architecture." In *Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality*, edited by Thomas Barrie, Julio Cesar Bermúdez, and Phillip Tabb, 221-237. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Jones, Lindsay. *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*. Harvard University Press, 2000. A Morphology of Ritual-architectural Priorities: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison.
- Knott, Kim. "Spatial Theory and Method for the Study of Religion." *Temenos-Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 41, no. 2 (2005).
- Parse, Rosemarie Rizzo. "Human Becoming: Parse's Theory of Nursing." *Nursing Science Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 1992): 35-42.
- Seamon, David. "Place, Place Identity, and Phenomenology: A Triadic Interpretation Based on J.G. Bennett's Systematics." In *The Role of Place Identity in the Perception, Understanding, and Design of Built Environments*, edited by Hernan Casakin and Fátima Bernardo, 3-21. Bentham Science Publishers, 2012.
- Tabb, Phillip James. *Thin Place Design: Architecture of the Numinous*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2023.