

Carrying the Sacred

Architecture, Embodied Presence, and the City

Dr. Reza Assasi

University of Hartford / West-Hartford, CT / United States
assasi@hartford.edu

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Introduction

What, if anything, do we carry away from a place experienced as sacred? A building remains where it stands, but an encounter with it may persist in bodily memory and affect how another place is perceived. This Discussion Circle asks whether the sacred can emerge through embodied experience without requiring shared religious belief, and how such an experience might continue within everyday urban life. Its proposition is that architecture's significance may extend beyond the duration and boundaries of an encounter through changes in attention, recollection, and relations with others.

Here, sacred names an experience that participants may understand as having exceptional significance or calling for particular care. It is not a synonym for beauty, calm, or sensory intensity. Secular describes the possibility of participation without religious assent; it does not imply that a place's religious identity has disappeared. These distinctions allow the Circle to examine the relation between atmosphere and sacred meaning while leaving that relation open to disagreement.

Place, ritual, and historical difference

A relational account of the sacred must still take the particularity of places seriously. In *To Take Place*, Jonathan Z. Smith examines how ritual and constructed settings organize religious significance. His critique of explanations that begin with an assumed universal sacred directs attention toward what people do in historically specific places. His later account of that study also describes how communities reformulated ritual systems after losing access to particular sites.¹ These histories do not establish that an individual visitor carries sacredness away. They do show why the relation between sacred meaning and location cannot be reduced to permanent containment within a building.

Montréal makes this historical dimension tangible. Notre-Dame's present church was constructed in 1824–1829 to James O'Donnell's Gothic Revival design; its interior was substantially reworked under Victor Bourgeau in the later nineteenth century.² The atmosphere encountered today is therefore a historical production, shaped through successive architectural decisions and religious uses. A visitor's response cannot exhaust those meanings. The transition from the Basilica to Place d'Armes offers a precise question for the Circle: what changes at the threshold, and what remains in the visitor's attention? This is a proposed comparison, not an assertion that church and square possess equivalent sacred status.

¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), chap. 1, https://press.uchicago.edu/books/excerpt/2018/Smith_Relating_Religion.html.

² Notre-Dame Basilica of Montréal, "Our Notre-Dame Basilica," accessed September 6, 2026, <https://www.basiliquenotredame.ca/our-notre-dame-basilica>.

Embodied memory and the work of carrying

Juhani Pallasmaa's critique of visual dominance in architectural culture supports an account of encounter involving the whole sensing body.³ Light and material are experienced alongside sound, movement, bodily orientation, and proximity to others. Yet a multisensory account alone does not explain why an encounter matters after it ends. Edward S. Casey's treatment of body memory and place memory provides a more specific basis for asking how remembering exceeds the retrieval of a mental image.⁴ A place may return through a remembered rhythm of movement or a familiar acoustic quality, as well as through visual recollection.

I use carrying to describe this possible continuation and transformation of an encounter. It does not designate a substance transported from one location to another. After concentrated listening in a church, a person may notice the overlap of voices in a street differently. A pause shared with others may make an ordinary gathering more perceptible as a form of coexistence. These are possibilities to examine, not predictable effects of design. The experience may fade, remain private, or produce no discernible change. Nor does heightened attention necessarily become care: the passage from perception to ethical conduct requires further interpretation and action.

From the morning workshop to the city

The Circle develops a reflective counterpart to my morning Salon workshop, Resonant Presence: Music, Poetry, and Storytelling in Sacred Space. At the Church of St. John the Evangelist, known as Red Roof Church, that workshop invites attention through sound, spoken language, silence, and collective presence. The Circle returns to the encounter after participants have left it. The interval becomes part of the inquiry: what has persisted, what has changed, and what has become noticeable elsewhere? Participants who did not attend may draw on another encounter in Montréal or a place they remember.

The distinction between the two sessions is purposeful. The workshop offers conditions for experience; the Circle examines the interpretations and claims made about experience. Neither presupposes that participants will encounter the sacred. A remembered stillness, discomfort, distraction, or absence of response can challenge the suggestion that an atmosphere has a common meaning. Walking, listening, or storytelling will be considered as possible secular rituals when participants deliberately frame them as meaningful practices, rather than simply because they occur.

Michel de Certeau's discussion of walking distinguishes the city conceived as an ordered whole from the spatial practices of its inhabitants.⁵ This helps locate the proposal's urban stakes in ordinary actions. The journey from Red Roof Church into nearby streets, or from Notre-Dame into Place d'Armes, becomes an opportunity to consider how remembered experience enters a subsequent encounter. The inquiry also asks whose movement, comfort, and belonging are enabled by those spaces. A contemplative visitor's interpretation must remain answerable to the people who worship, work, and live there.

³ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, 4th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2024), part 1, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781394200702>.

⁴ Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), chap. 7, "Walking in the City."

A shared inquiry

The 45-minute Circle begins with a five-minute introduction and three minutes of quiet recollection. Participants are invited to identify one architectural condition, their bodily response, and something noticed after leaving. Seven minutes of voluntary exchange in pairs prepare a 25-minute collective conversation, followed by five minutes of closing reflection. The opening prompt is simple: describe the encounter before naming it sacred. This encourages participants to distinguish an observed condition, a felt response, and the meaning they assign to it.

The conversation will return to three questions. What makes an encounter sacred rather than merely memorable? What, if anything, survives the passage into another place? Under what conditions might that persistence affect how we attend to others in the city? Participation may remain seated, and listening or passing is welcome. Shared agreement is not the intended outcome. The contribution is a way of considering architecture through what follows an encounter: the possibility that a place continues to matter through embodied memory, without losing its historical specificity or guaranteeing a common response.