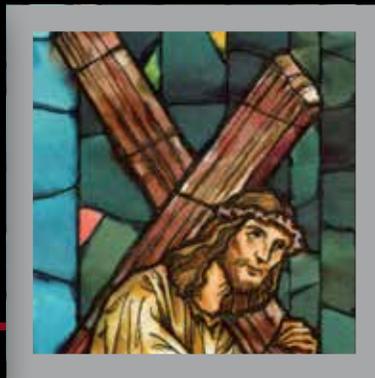
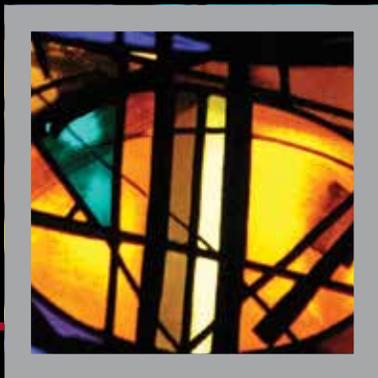
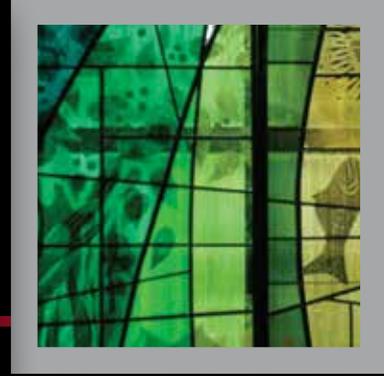
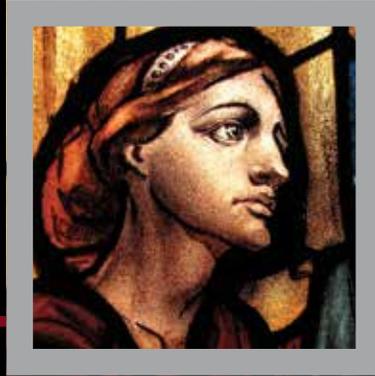
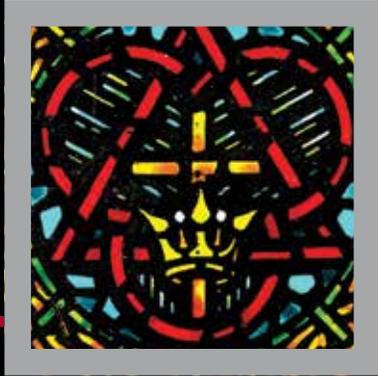


# FAITHS & FORM

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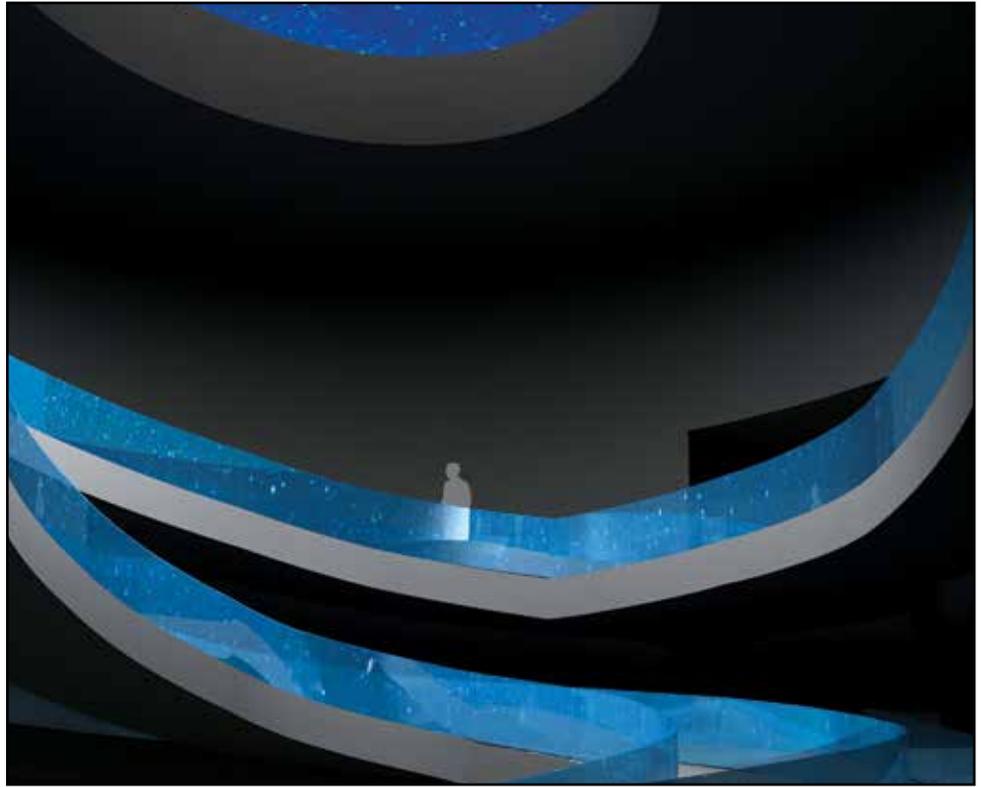
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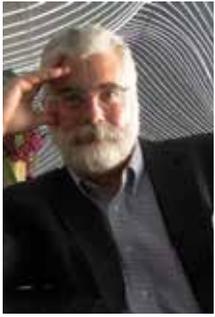
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## NEXT ISSUE

The Sacred Aural Environment



# SACRED TIME, SACRED SPACE

EDITOR'S PAGE \* MICHAEL J. CROSBIE

The core of Abraham Joshua Heschel's book *The Sabbath* is that the divine can never be found in space, but only in time. Heschel articulates this view of the sacred, based in the Torah and Jewish teaching, as outside of the control of human beings. Published in 1951, *The Sabbath* is full of revelatory gems, rendered with poetic lilt. Heschel writes: "Space is exposed to our will; we may shape and change the things in space as we please. Time, however, is beyond our reach, beyond our power. It belongs exclusively to God." He notes that our preference to locate God in the physical world, rather than in history, is, in a sense, to not acknowledge the sacred's overwhelming power, beyond dimension: "There is no quality that space has in common with the essence of God. There is not enough freedom on the top of the mountain; there is not enough glory in the silence of the sea. Yet the likeness of God can be found in time, which is eternity in disguise."

For us, the creators of what we call "sacred space," Heschel's view can be a bit deflating. How can we as architects, artists, and designers make places in which we and others might find transcendence, where we implore some deity to be in communion with us? After all, as temporal beings space is all we really have. Heschel notes that each of us occupies a portion of space exclusively—it is not shared with any other being. But we cannot occupy time, we cannot possess it; we can only share it with other beings. "Through my ownership of space, I

am a rival of all other beings," writes Heschel, "through my living in time, I am a contemporary of all other beings. We pass through time, we occupy space."

Heschel's view invites us to reconsider the importance of our work as creators of sacred space, and its ultimate aim. Might we conflate the two: space (over which we have a certain control) and time (over which we have no control, and are at its mercy)? When we create a place for people to meet, to be in communion with each other, we fashion space in which people can share time together, in each other's presence. Through this sharing, we potentially open a portal to the sacred. It is a door through which the spirit might be received even if we are alone, but present in the moment, without distraction, in time. If we see our work as creators of sacred space in this way, our architecture and art assumes a different role, not as a divine object in itself. We might think of it as a vehicle that enables people of faith to move through shared time, together, and not necessarily just through space.

While composing this present issue it was not my intent to make the space/time question an underlying theme, but it happens that many of the articles herein consider these dimensions and the roles they play in creating the sacred. And I came upon Heschel's book (thanks to my colleague Karla Britton) only after the articles were in place. Independent of each other, these seemingly random events have delivered us to a "place," inside this issue, where we might consider the importance of time and space to the sacred.

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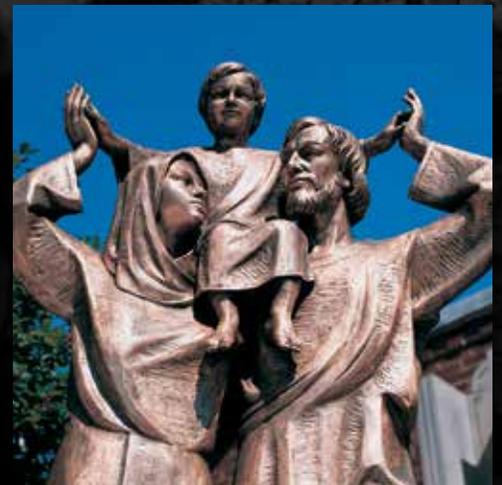
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*Matthew Hoffman and Lisa Passeri use the garden metaphor to create sacred place for the community, giving the neighborhood a green space. The vertical structure is a chapel.*

## Searching for New Sacred Space

A design studio explores the changing definition of what makes a place sacred.

By Michael J. Crosbie and Julio Bermudez

Over the past few decades, particularly in the West, the concept of sacred space as a setting for the rituals of organized religion has been changing, some might even say radically transforming. Surveys by such esteemed groups as Pew Research and the Trinity College Survey on Religious Identity have shown a precipitous drop in people who belong to organized religions, particularly in the Christian and Jewish faiths and among those under 35. Membership in mainline faith traditions has and continues to decline. Today the largest single segment of the population in the US describes itself as “Nones”: affiliated with no organized religious group. People of all ages are turning away from organized religion but they are not choosing to be atheists. Rather, they are looking for a more genuine, personal experience of the spiritual in their lives.

More people today describe themselves as “SBNR”: spiritual but not religious. They are suspicious of the institutional power of all religions, no matter what the faith tradition. And they are searching for an expression of that spirituality. The idea that you need a building or a space as the place to practice your religion or to be spiritual is being questioned. What does it mean for religious architecture and sacred space when you ask these questions: Do we need a building at all to be religious, to

be spiritual, to practice our belief? Does the changing nature of how we identify ourselves as spiritual open a new realm of what a sacred space can be? Is there a future for religious architecture at all?

### EXPLORING QUESTIONS THROUGH DESIGN

These are some of the questions that we were eager to explore in a graduate design studio at The Catholic University of America in the School of Architecture and Planning’s Sacred Space and Cultural Studies concentration last fall. The studio’s students (Joseph Barrick, Devon Brophy, Ariadne Cerritelli, Kathleen Crowley, Megan Gregory, Shawndra Herry, Matthew Hoffman, Sina Moayed, Ugochukwu Nnebue, Emily O’Loughlin, Lisa Passeri, Madeline Wentzell) were invited to learn about the shifting landscape of spirituality taking place in the US and abroad, and to reflect on what it means for the future of sacred space. In the first part of the studio we shared statistical data on people’s changing attitudes toward organized religion, how these changes are expressed in personal ideas concerning spirituality, and how these social shifts might be having an affect on the creation of sacred space. In the context of these cultural developments we included two other factors: the connection between spirituality and sustainability (seeing the stewardship of the earth as an element of belief, as recently expressed by Pope Francis in his encyclical, *Laudato Si*), and the urban concentration of the world’s population (for the first time in human history more people live in cities than in rural areas). These social and intellectual contexts were prompts for the students to design two studio



*A private garden behind the chapel in Hoffman/Passeri's design allows connection with nature, signifying the biblical location of humans' first encounter with God.*

projects: a quick sketch problem dealing with the concept of “situational” sacred space; and a longer, multi-month design problem about the creation of a sacred place outside of the conventional notions of a “religious” building. Both design problems were set within an evolving, thriving urban neighborhood. This article focuses on the larger project.

We provided the students with a range of readings on these topics: the shifting landscape of spirituality; ideas about “situational” and “substantive” sacred space; demographic changes in organized religion; the place of the city as the context for sacred space; the creation of “safe places” for exploring one’s spirituality beyond the walls of religious buildings; the notion of living “in cathedral” within a city. It was noted that many of the changes in spiritual belief are being led by Millennials, those between the ages of 18 and 34, the demographic that included most of the studio’s students. We asked the students to reflect upon their own experiences regarding organized religion, the contours of their own spiritual lives, and the spiritual “search” that they might be engaged in. We told the students to consider the studio itself as a “safe place” where they could present their views on religion and spirituality. Working in teams, the students made short presentations reflecting on the readings, their own beliefs, and how architecture might respond to these new circumstances. How might they address new attitudes about belief that are being led by their own generation, and how could they explore a realm of design that has few architectural precedents, to give form to these new frontiers of belief?

The student presentations regarding their reflections on the reading material and their own attitudes about spirituality revealed a willingness to greatly broaden the realm of the sacred. Students found new opportunities to define the sacred in such activities as in performing music; in moving their bodies through space in the medium of dance; in digitally connecting with people and events around the globe; in sharing with

and caring for other human beings by giving and receiving; in creating a safe place for women who are victims of domestic violence; in landscape and nature serving as a setting for contemplation, reflection, and celebration; in providing support to those seeking to strengthen their bodies and spirits through nutrition and exercise. What these presentations revealed to us, as the studio critics, is that we needed to carefully consider how to define the design problem we were to assign. Conventional notions of sacred place and space would not do.

#### DEFINING A NEW SACRED PLACE

The students’ wide range of attitudes about what the sacred might be and how architecture could respond to it prompted us to make the design assignment more fluid than a typical program list of required spaces with certain sizes and adjacencies. We identified a site in the Petworth neighborhood of Northwest Washington, D.C., not far from the Catholic University campus. The students’ site analysis would include not only the physical neighborhood but also the historical/social/economic changes that this neighborhood is experiencing, as shifts in population, property development, and social class change the face of this historically African-American neighborhood. We identified an under-developed site at the northwest corner of Georgia Avenue and Randolph Street (a Wendy’s currently occupies the site and would be removed). We encouraged close observation of the character of the neighborhood, its people, and its assets and encouraged students to talk with residents and business operators. We wanted students to note the neighborhood’s existing sacred spaces and its potential as a setting for contemporary sacred space. We also encouraged them to pay particular attention to the message of *Laudato Si*, the pope’s recent encyclical, about our estrangement from the natural world and the ecological and spiritual consequences of that distancing.



*Interior of Hoffman/Passeri's chapel space, whose colors and tracery suggest the tree of life.*



*Section of Joseph Barrick and Ariadne Cerritelli's building reveals large and small spaces where people from the neighborhood can 'share, learn, and celebrate with one another.'*



*Above: Circulation space in Emily O'Loughlin and Megan Gregory's scheme for a shelter for women and the homeless provides a sense of journey and gracious welcome with its high ceiling and natural light.*



*Joseph Barrick and Ariadne Cerritelli conceive of this new spiritual place as a way to interact with the people around the globe, through a variety of media, such as a large screen visible from an open plaza.*



The program for the design problem essentially evolved from the student presentations about the readings we had assigned and their own ideas about where the sacred might be found. The “Petworth Place for Spirit and Wellbeing” should reflect some of the elements of contemporary ideas about spirituality, along with some recognition of traditional sacred spaces. Petworth Place was to be between 25,000 and 40,000 square feet, with a combination of places for the spirit, places to share community, places for outreach, places for creation, places for worship. Then we gave the students a program list of the kinds of spaces/places that they might consider in the design of Petworth Place:

**PROGRAM LIST**

A place to pray, to leave a prayer and to take a prayer.

A place to serve meals to those in need.

**An outdoor space that has some privacy.**

A place devoted just to view the moon and stars.

A place for target shooting.

A place where young people and old people can share.

**A traditional worship space.**

A place where items and non-perishable food can be deposited by neighbors for those in need.

A place to cry and grieve a loss.

**A program element that is “Your Thing.”**

A place where one can obtain information and guidance on health and nutrition.

**A pub or coffeehouse, with a place for groups to share conversation on spirituality/religion.**

A place to slow down and appreciate the wonders of nature.

A place where art can be made, displayed, and performed.

A place to find, experience, and practice silence.

A place to house or attend those in (you define) need.

A spiritual home for those feeling spiritually homeless.

A place to give or receive.



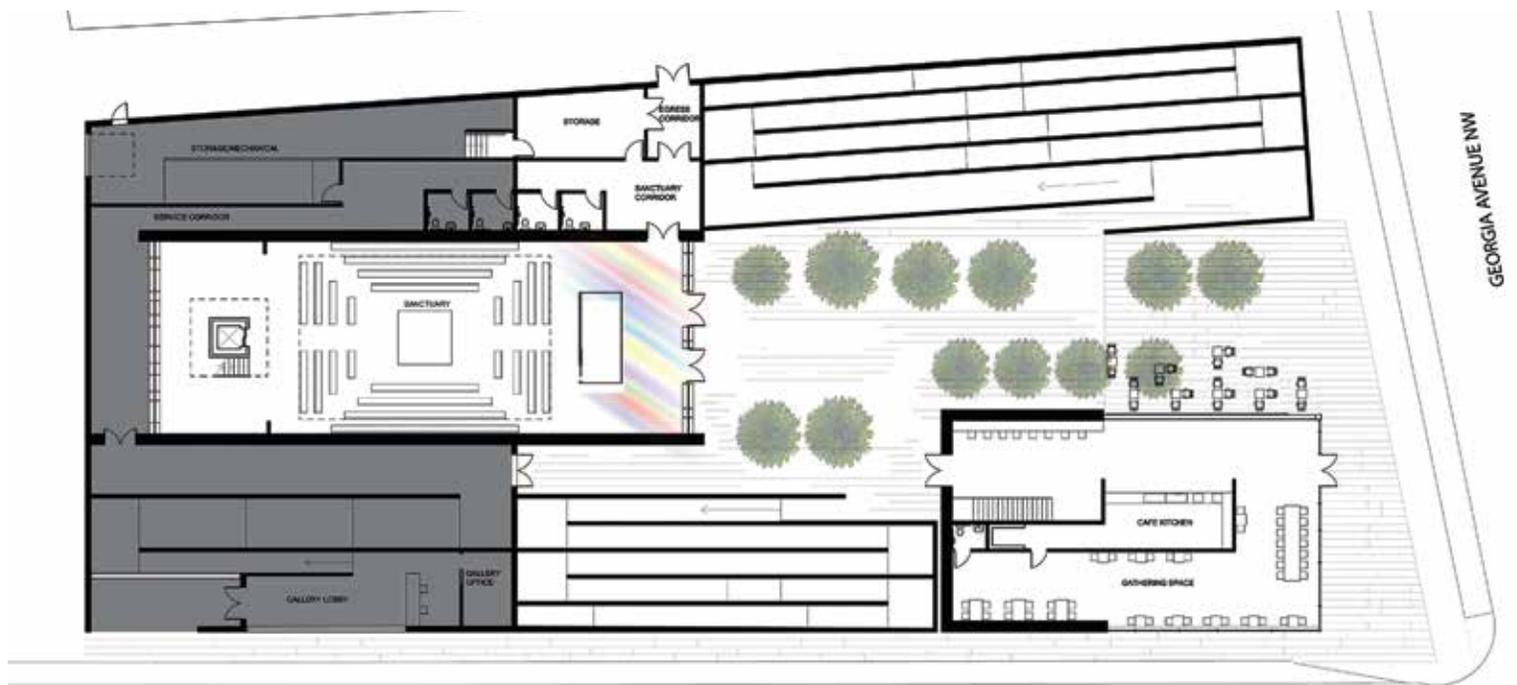
*A ‘double wailing wall’ in Barrick/Cerritelli’s scheme allows local Petworth residents to take a prayer and leave a prayer through moveable drawers.*

The program was flexible in the sense that the students had to address eight spaces/places from the program list: the four bold items were required in every design, and four were to be chosen by the students. It was up to the designer to decide how much space the program uses should occupy to successfully serve their function. The program element identified as “Your Thing” could be defined as a space that the student was particularly interested in exploring as a new kind of sacred space.

Because this was not a single-use building, but multifaceted in its spaces and functions, it should offer opportunities to design “in cathedral.” The term “in cathedral” was coined by author and educator Elizabeth Drescher and explored by Keith Anderson in his recent book, *The Digital Cathedral* (Morehouse, 2015). Being “in cathedral” recognizes the sacred in everyday life, in everyday places, the network of relationships among neighbors and even strangers, and the witness of believers beyond the confines of an enclosed sacred space. Petworth Place should be “in cathedral” with the surrounding neighborhood and the people who live there.

Related to this fluid sense of the sacred was the notion of “situational” versus “substantive” sacred space, which we also encouraged the

*Left: Emily O’Loughlin and Megan Gregory’s project includes a shelter for women and the homeless, those whom they describe as ‘spiritually underserved.’ The wood symbolizes the warmth of a home.*



*Pilgrimage as a way of discovering the sacred is at the heart of Devin Brophy and Madeline Wentzell's design, in which a labyrinth occupies much of the site, leading to a traditional sacred space. Contemporary sacred space at the corner of Georgia and Randolph offers a social setting for discussion of spirituality and philosophy.*

students to consider. Historian Jeanne Halgren Kilde writes in *Sacred Power, Sacred Space* that "substantive" sacred space is that in which a divine presence is believed to reside, and which makes the space sacred. This view posits "sacredness" inherent in objects, including buildings. But another orientation sees sacredness as "situational": anyplace can be sacred or holy depending on the presence, location, and actions of human beings. "Situational" sacred space or place is suggested in Matthew 18:20, in which Christ is quoted, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." The verse describes a relational aspect to the sacred among people in community. Petworth Place presented opportunities to design this kind of "situational" sacred space.

#### THE SEARCH FOR THE SACRED

The search for the sacred through the design studio assignment of Petworth Place resulted in what we think are some provocative, challenging schemes, shown in this article. But the design process seemed at times frustrating. We concluded that we had asked the students to take on a design project that had no clearly defined expectations—studio critics as well as students were in the search together, which at times made it difficult to provide guidance through studio critiques and to help the students to move forward. However, we know that the changing nature of sacred space right now is a question without ready answers and a clear path to solutions. In fact, we had to admit that we, as design critics, might not be ready to accept the new kinds of sacred places and spaces that the students might develop. This became apparent during some of the formal design reviews, when the whole question of what could or should be considered sacred and what wasn't, and architecture's role in defining it, was debated by reviewers and students alike. It was at that point that we realized that the design studio had achieved a measure of success: to broaden, challenge, confront, and consider the fact that a sense of the sacred is not static and unchanging, and that every age needs to ask and try to answer what it is. 

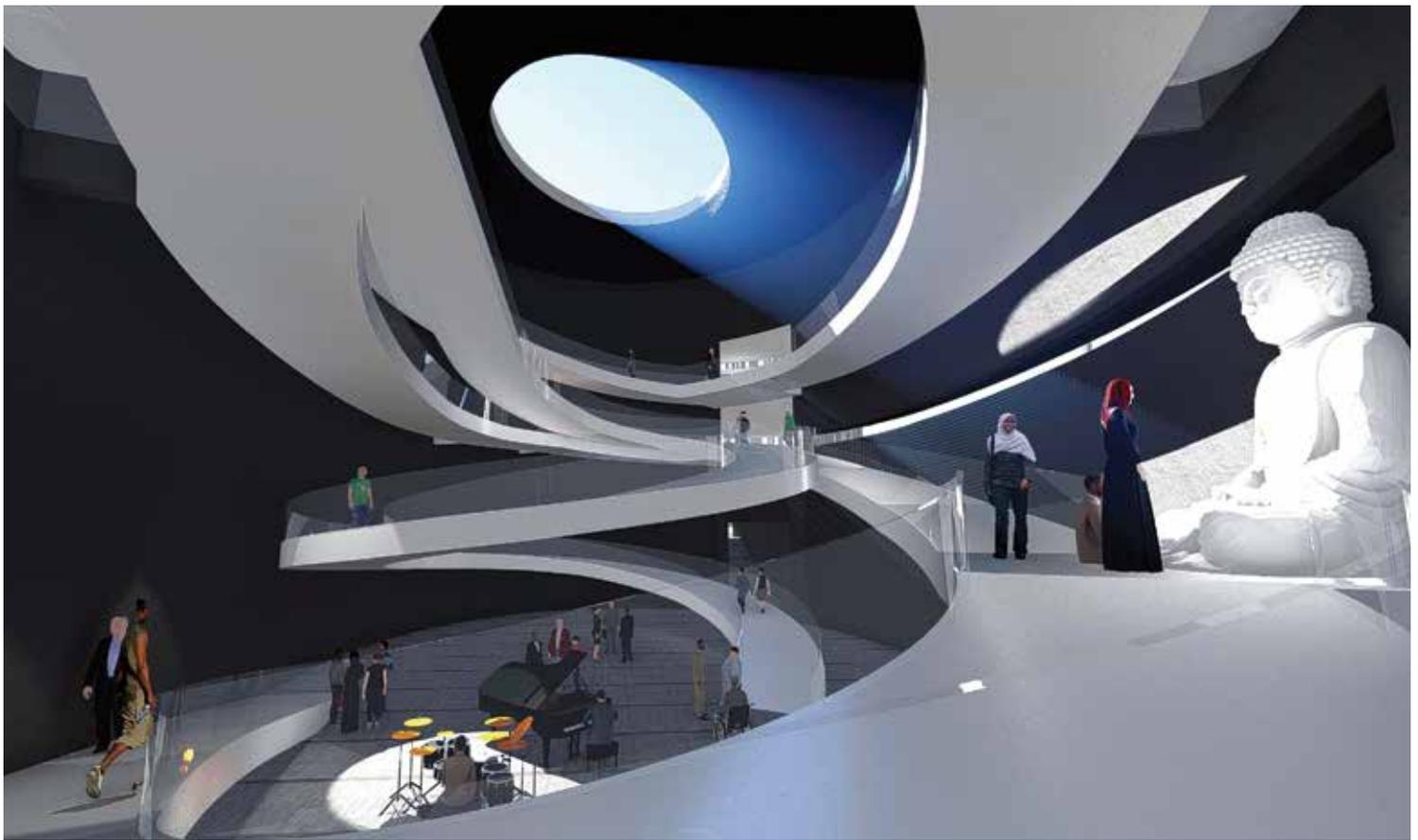
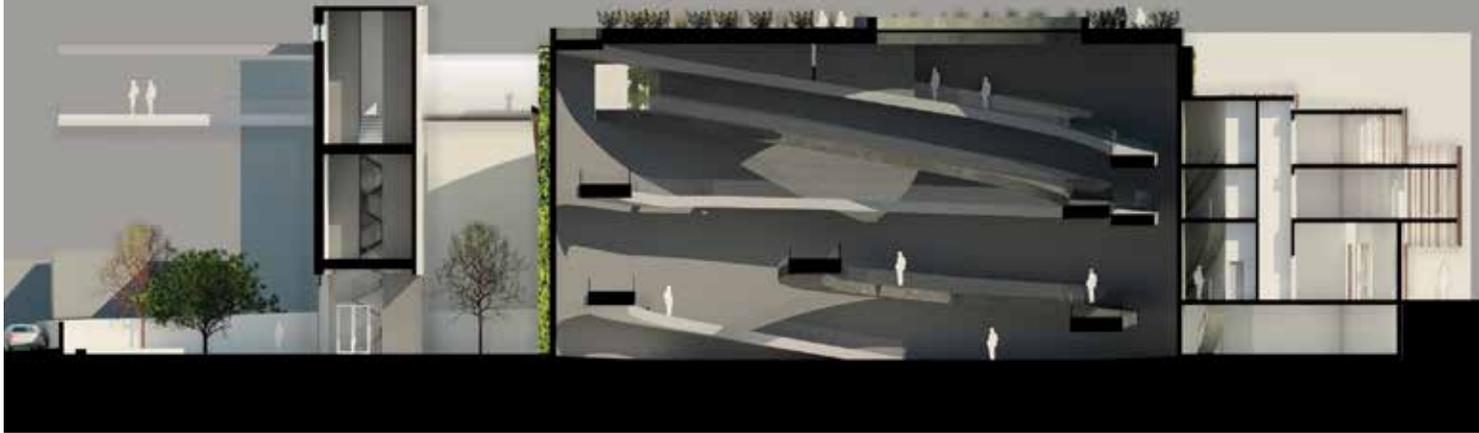


*Long labyrinth paths to foster meditation in Brophy/Wentzell's scheme are bound by walls that at first obscure the destination, which is revealed as one climbs in elevation.*



*The labyrinth in Brophy/Wentzell's design culminates in a sacred space crowned by stained glass.*

*Section of Ugochukwu Nnebue and Sina Moayedí's building shows the central rotunda space. One ramp culminates in a view to the west, toward Washington, D.C.'s National Cathedral; the other ramp terminates on the roof with views to the east.*



*Above: Spiral ramps lit by natural light from above are the heart of the Ugochukwu Nnebue and Sina Moayedí design, which embraces many of the world's religions and takes as its theme 'giving and receiving,' which they note is at the core of human love.*

*Left: Sina Moayedí (standing right) and Ugochukwu Nnebue (standing background) present their project in the final jury.*



Photo: Christopher M. Crosbie

*A 1910 garage was reborn as a new church that fronts West 83<sup>rd</sup> Street in Manhattan, New York.*



# Making A New Inner-city Church

By Timothy Eckersley

Photographs by Norman McGrath

in New York City in 1988, has grown several rental locations have been used for worship, but a constant imperative has been to create purpose-built worship and community centers serving different parts of the city. This church (known as W83) at West 83<sup>rd</sup> Street on Manhattan's Upper West Side is the first, opened in 2012. The organization of this group is not that of a traditional Presbyterian parish. Shared administrative services are housed in a central office space that is separate from the church locations. While worship is at the core of these church sites, equally important is facilitating community fellowship, gospel hospitality, and religious education. The program for the new buildings is therefore a mix between a church and a community center.

## URBAN CONTEXT

West 83<sup>rd</sup> Street between Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues on the Upper West Side of Manhattan is one of the occasional interruptions in the rhythm of the city grid—a commercial side street.

While north-south avenues are all commercial and major cross streets at about 10-block intervals are usually so, almost all east-west side streets are residential in upper Manhattan. However, as this district was built out in the 1880s and '90s, the firehouse and post office (anchors of any traditional neighborhood) were sometimes placed on side street blocks. On this block, parking garages that were annexes of nearby luxury apartment houses on Broadway followed in the 1910s. Today, three parking garages along with tenement houses, a tall storage facility, and small businesses such as a nursery school, a tailor shop, a signmaker, and a gym, join the old firehouse (complete with Dalmatian) and the post office.

After an extended property search, the church settled on this block as an ideal location for its new spiritual base. The parking garage,

**R**edeemer Presbyterian Church is unique in several ways. It is the first new church to be built in Manhattan in over 20 years, and it involved the adaptive re-use of a 1910 parking garage. This new church built in the midst of a dense city and expensive real estate market includes new kinds of social/community spaces helping to make sacred buildings more relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in this case forged by an unusually engaged and youthful congregation.

For its first purpose-built home, this growing congregation of 5,200 had a strong desire to make a gathering place that is not a traditional

church, but a place that reflects a dual aim: to be embedded into its community and also to be readily approachable to the diverse population that the church serves.

The dialogue between the client and our architecture firm produced a design in which we believe these aims are clearly expressed. The public face of the building maintains the feel of the mixed-use street in which it is situated, while also contributing a new modern layer to the neighborhood. Once inside, a dynamic lobby leads to an intimate sanctuary—a calm refuge from the busy city.

As the congregation, which was established

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although an unlikely candidate for re-use, was a practical choice in that its size enabled the inclusion of a large auditorium within its existing volume.

Into the lively mix of the block, the new church façade blends old and new elements. By restoring the fenestration and brickwork of the garage and recreating a simplified cornice and keystones, the base rhythm of the street is maintained. New interventions, such as a double height glazed entry and metal clad attic story, express the new use. The zoning rules allow churches a generous exception to height restrictions. A “House of Worship Tower,” deployed at a corner, incorporates an exposed party wall. After a prolonged debate, a discreet cross was incorporated into the tower design, which rises out of it and is silhouetted against the sky.

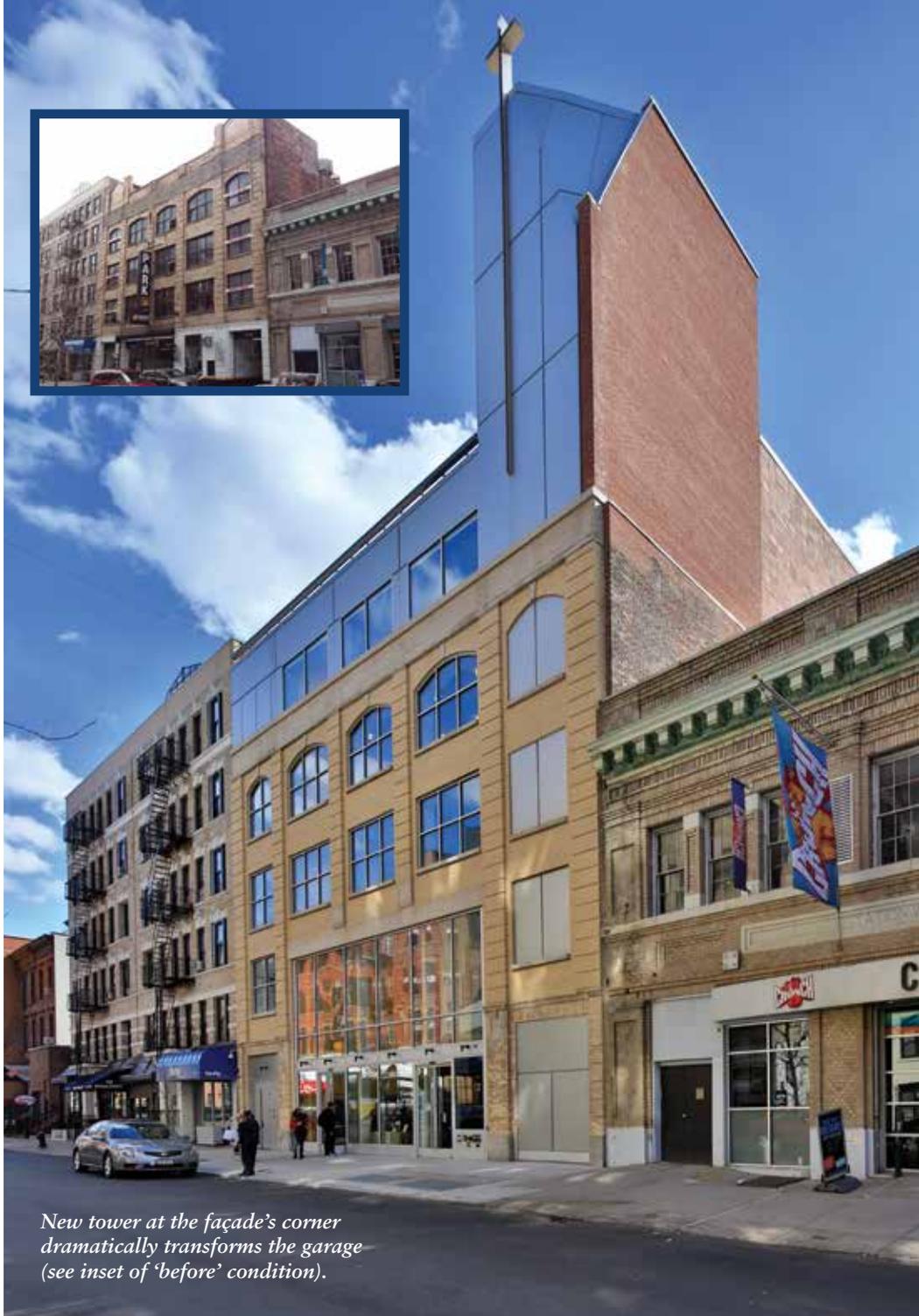
#### PROGRAMMING A “THIRD PLACE”

To initiate the design we asked the congregation, under the leadership of the oversight team, to collect images and words that expressed the congregation’s wishes for the new church. These images were taken from the natural and built world and conveyed an essential aesthetic that was seminal to our architectural concepts. Very few of these images made reference to traditional church buildings, but focused on images of nature and modern secular architecture.

The program for the building is straightforward: a sanctuary for 874, 16 classrooms for children and adults, and a fellowship hall, with multi-purpose functions in many spaces. A new sub-cellar was required for ancillary functions.

One of the primary goals of this project was to connect in a very direct way with the community, both Redeemer congregants and the neighbors. The idea of a “Third Place,” formulated by sociologist and author Ray Oldenburg, was presented to us by Pastor Tim Keller and comes out of the belief that everyone may benefit from having a welcoming, comfortable, and enriching space beyond their home (“First Place”), and workplace (“Second Place”). The Third Place is a gathering space, a meeting place, or a space to be alone. It needs to be directly tied to the life of the street. It is a place to have a cup of coffee, to sit, to contemplate one’s life, to talk with friends and neighbors. It was important that it feel welcoming to the non-believer. It is an urban room that says to the neighborhood, “This is not just *our* place: it is also *your* place.”

Architecturally, we linked the Third Place with the lobby of the building and created a café with tables separated from the street by



*New tower at the façade’s corner dramatically transforms the garage (see inset of ‘before’ condition).*

a two-story glass wall. The main circulation spine of the building is directly off of the Third Place, which links it to all of the functions that define Redeemer’s mission.

The amphitheater worship space, embodying the desire for connectivity among congregants during services, is expressed as a bowl shape that protrudes into the Third Place, thereby signaling its special function to the street.

#### SANCTUARY, LIGHT, AND ACOUSTICS

The industrial quality of the existing building was embraced by the congregation as a way of speaking directly to the urban constituency.

In the public areas of the new building much of the “raw” quality of the old garage is therefore left exposed and highlighted by polished concrete floors, exposed brick, and milled steel metalwork. In contrast, the sanctuary is designed to be an ephemeral object inserted into this industrial shell—a place characterized by the folded plaster surfaces of the walls that catch and hold light and the warm wood of the pews. It is through this contrast of language that the sanctuary is marked as a sacred space—the quiet core of the church and its mission.

Through the intensive programming it was determined that the sanctuary was to reflect

*'Third Place' is a setting for social interaction that reaches out to the neighborhood.*



multiple programmatic requirements, including lighting, symbolism, and acoustics.

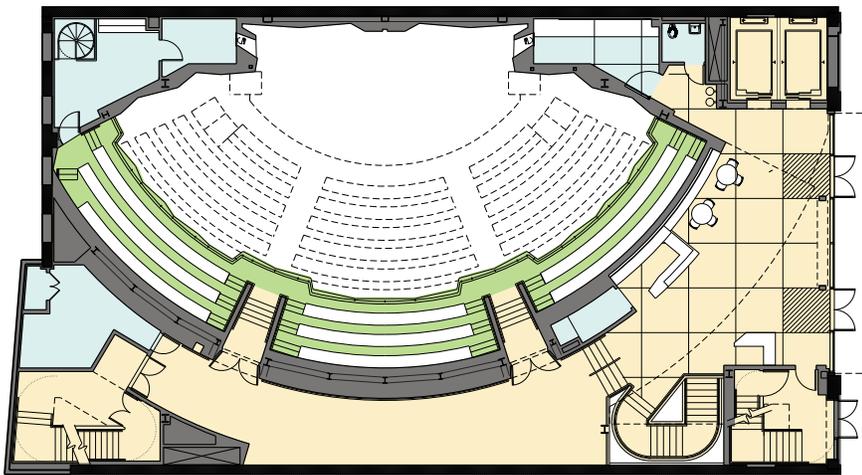
The interplay of light and architecture is both symbolic and practical. As there is little natural light in the sanctuary, it was critical to incorporate artificial light to the most inspiring effect. The design concept focuses on the controlled play of light on the pattern of folded planes in white and off-white textures. These wall and ceiling surfaces envelop the fan shaped form, which is emphasized by the curves of the pews. The lighting is zoned such that it can be darkened for performances or illuminated brightly as needed. Reading is an important activity during a service and the illumination was specifically designed for that task. Stage lighting is also incorporated for performance-specific requirements.

The congregation wanted a sanctuary that is sacred without placing a cross-as-object at the center. The design solution was to have the shape of a cross pressed into the plaster wall behind the dais. Only when illuminated from above is the impression of the cross, with highlights and shadows, visible to the congregation.

The acoustical design achieves a balance between the requirements for both natural and amplified sound. Both aspects are utilized during services. The amphitheater plan, the angled reflective surfaces of walls, ceilings, stage canopy, and balcony rail, together with the placement of absorbent materials, were closely manipulated for their acoustical impact such that music and speech is heard clearly and intimately. A primary objective was to integrate state-of-the-art audio-visual technology with the spatial design, in order to enhance the uncluttered feel of the space.

On the new top floor the building opens up to a 4,000-square-foot loft-like space suffused with natural light from three sides, which leads to a landscaped roof terrace with rooftop views over the neighborhood. This multi-purpose room is used primarily for gatherings after services, with secondary uses as a lecture room for 275 with full AV capability, and as a banquet hall for 230 to accommodate weddings. A full commercial kitchen is adjacent to this space. The room is also used as an exhibition gallery with special lighting.

The historic quality of the finishes is continued into the fellowship hall, with polished concrete floors, milled-steel panels, and large areas of a monolithic acoustical treatment in the ceiling that are lit separately. The room is enlivened with a subtle color change on one accent wall, and with a large-scale geometrical pattern in the curtain that covers the entire south wall.



*First floor plan.*

the notion of one body, one collective brought together for prayer, meditation, and community. To this end, it is just as important for congregants to view other congregants as it is to view the stage. The amphitheater form of the sanctuary reflects this desire. While the predominant image of the sanctuary is of a religious space, the church also wanted it to function as a performance space for both

speech and music. The room is also rented for secular events. Full audio-visual capability includes a large drop-down projection screen mounted inside the stage canopy. Curved wood pews enhance this embracing feel and sight lines were carefully studied, resulting in a steep cantilevered balcony.

Many challenging design considerations were resolved in the effort to accommodate



*Garage space allowed the insertion of a large sanctuary.*

#### ADAPTIVE RE-USE OF GARAGE

Part of the attraction of this site for the church was that the old garage was overbuilt under the current zoning resolution. That space could be captured if 25 percent of the original building floor area was incorporated into the new building. In addition it was the footprint of the existing building that allowed for a volume large enough for a sanctuary with the required seats to fit into the site. It was therefore necessary to keep both the existing shell and two floors of the garage, while a new building was built within. The first issue to resolve was which floors were to be retained?

For ease of access the main worship space in most religious buildings is typically at or near ground level. In this case this arrangement was precluded by another zoning rule: a 23-foot height limit on obstructions in rear yards. The sanctuary with a height of about 36 feet therefore had to be depressed below ground level. The first and second levels of the old building were therefore demolished, and the third and fourth floors retained. These floors are used as classrooms because

of the relatively low floor-to-floor heights. Three rows of old columns had to be removed to provide column-free spaces for the sanctuary and classrooms.

The key to the building construction method was an elaborate shoring procedure that involved 50 different operations. In order to keep the perimeter walls in place, a top-down sequence was used, and in a reversal of typical construction sequencing: excavation for the sub-cellar followed steel erection. First, five-story-tall steel super-columns were erected on mini-caissons, followed by new girders woven into the existing floor framing, in a time-consuming shore-cut-and-reconnect procedure at each of the old columns that were removed. Both the new and existing floors and roof framing were used to brace the perimeter walls.

At the lowest level, a ring made of the existing floor framing and the outermost columns was retained at the first and cellar floors, with a hole in the middle to accommodate the excavation below. With the sub-cellar foundation walls and slabs in place, the demolition of the doughnut was the final step in the shoring

procedures and general construction could then begin.

#### NEW PLANS

The success of the new building in fulfilling the aims of the congregation is highlighted in a recent newsletter from the pastor, who wrote:

“Putting down physical roots in a neighborhood is essential to reach rooted New Yorkers and serve the common good. We have seen how incredible the difference has been for the West Side since opening W83. The building is an asset to the neighborhood; used by schools, community board meetings, film crews, support groups, performing arts, and much more. It greatly enhances the creation of community and friendships among members of the congregation. And we have found it makes us visible and able to reach many New Yorkers with the gospel that were previously inaccessible.”

With the experience of creating its first home, the Redeemer Presbyterian Church is now looking to build again in Manhattan. 

# Flesh and Form

## Light and the Sacred at the Chapel Notre-Dame-du-Haut

By Caitlin Turski Watson

*“In building this chapel I wished to create a place of silence, of prayer, of peace, of spiritual joy. A sense of the sacred animated our effort.”*

~Le Corbusier<sup>1</sup>

IN THE 20TH CENTURY, THEOLOGIANs AND philosophers observed a notable decline in the sacredness of religious art running parallel to science’s increasing mechanization of vision. Mircea Eliade writes, “There is a certain symmetry between the perspective of the philosopher and theologian, and that of the modern artist; for one as for the other the “death of God” signifies above all the impossibility of expressing a religious experience in traditional religious language.”<sup>2</sup> The didactic use of symbols and the figurative portrayal of biblical narrative were no longer effective means for conveying divine truth. In the face of a new confidence in human agency and the interpretation of sensory data by a mechanical body, such symbols lost the inherent power formerly attributed to them and sunk to the level of mere representation. Many identified the beginnings of a commodification of the religious image through the mass reproduction of icons following this symbolic reduction.<sup>3</sup>

In the face of the growing crisis, a group of French clergy, the *Commission d’Art Sacré*, recognized the need to reconcile Catholicism with a secular spirituality in order to produce truly sacred art or architecture in modern times. Maurice Denis and George Desvallières pioneered this effort in founding

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the *Ateliers d’Art Sacré* in 1919. While the *Ateliers* exerted very little real influence, the search for renewed spirituality within the work of art gained momentum in postwar France. Marie-Alain Couturier, an artist from the *Ateliers d’Art Sacré*, joined the Dominican Order in 1925 and, beginning in 1937, continued his involvement in the matter as co-editor with Père Pie-Raymond Régamey of *L’Art Sacré*, a review printed to further the discussion and dissemination of religious art.



*Pere Marie-Alain Couturier and Le Corbusier discussing the chapel to be built at Ronchamp.*

Within the articles he wrote for *L’Art Sacré*, Couturier professed that abstract art, in conveying intrinsic beauty, could have religious potential. This belief constituted a significant break from the formerly representative nature of religious art. Couturier maintained close relationships with artists including Georges Braque, Fernand Léger, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, and Georges Rouault, resulting in their commissions for the chapels at Assy, Vence, and Audincourt. This collaboration with both Catholic and non-Catholic artists demonstrated a radical new approach to the creation of sacred art. Influenced by German Romantic notions of artistic genius, Couturier was convinced that the Catholic Church must look outside the faith in order

to attain the truly spiritual. By enlisting the aid of the great masters of modern art, he believed that the Church was actually establishing a more direct connection with God’s divine truth.

According to Couturier, “To be true today, a church should be no more than a flat roof on four walls. But their proportions, their volume, the distribution of light and shadow, could be so pure, so intense, that anyone coming in would feel the spiritual dignity and solemnity of the place. God is glorified not by richness and hugeness but by the perfection of a pure work.”<sup>4</sup> For the reconstruction of the Chapel Notre-Dame-du-Haut at Ronchamp in 1950, Couturier and the *Commission d’Art Sacré* enlisted Le Corbusier to take precisely this approach. The chapel became his first built religious work after the controversy surrounding his design for the Basilica of Sainte-Baume in 1948, which was never completed. Le Corbusier’s selection for the project followed the recommendation of Canon Ledeur, Secretary of the *Besançon Commission d’Art Sacré*, and met with great resistance from leading Church officials. However, he had the full support of the commission, especially Couturier. Although Couturier died just before the chapel’s completion, the artist-priest and architect maintained constant dialogue and developed a close friendship throughout the design. The overlap and synthesis of their ideas regarding modern art, although often overlooked, is clearly etched into the forms of Ronchamp and later carried into the design for the convent Sainte Marie de La Tourette in 1953, also commissioned by Couturier before his death. While many modernists at the time condemned the project as opposing the pursuit of rationalism, Le Corbusier’s acceptance of the Ronchamp commission reveals that for him the aim of modernism was perhaps closer to that professed by Couturier—it sought to reveal the poetic and invisible “flesh of the world” through artistic creation and the unveiling of the pure form, an intention embedded clearly in much of his written work.

During design, Le Corbusier consulted Couturier and various religious art journals—presumably including *L’Art Sacré*—to

Photo: Lucien Hervé, the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2002.R.41)

familiarize himself with the demands of the Catholic liturgy. Studies of his annotations and comments written in his sketchbooks reveal that he exhibited a particular interest in the site's history as a place of pilgrimage and destruction and in the cult of the Virgin Mary, to whom the chapel is dedicated. These interests seem to have paralleled his fascination with alchemy and the union of opposites—especially the meeting of matter and spirit brought about by the Incarnation and historically symbolized in painting through rays of light falling down upon the Virgin. The reintroduction of light as a phenomenon to be experienced in a sensuous manner through built form, then, aligns critically with the ideals of the *Commission d'Art Sacré*. The chapel at Ronchamp presents a unique opportunity to examine the spiritual basis of Le Corbusier's use of light as the material that binds the incorporeal and corporeal, pointing toward the unity of body and soul professed in Catholic doctrine.

In *Towards a New Architecture*, Le Corbusier famously writes, "Architecture is the masterly, correct, and magnificent play of masses brought together in light. Our eyes are made to see forms in light; light and shade reveal these forms..."<sup>25</sup> At Ronchamp in 1950, this play between light and mass becomes central to Le Corbusier's design in a new and meaningful way. Light dematerializes mass, cutting through shadow and making it appear darker—deeper. Shadows trail across gunite walls, textured like sandpaper and, when followed, lead to hidden pockets of densely channeled light full of color carving out and illuminating smaller chapels. Light and shadow provide the media through which Le Corbusier communicates with visitors, immersing them in a fully synaesthetic visual tactility. The use of light at Ronchamp, while often mentioned, has not been discussed with a due level of importance that considers its direct relationship to Couturier's beliefs regarding the work of art and its parallels with the spiritualization of originally secular phenomenological principles. Through an examination of the potential of modern art as defined by Couturier in *L'Art Sacré* and contemporaneous phenomenological discourse in postwar Paris, we will now attempt to open up a reading of light as *objet ambigu* and revealer of form in Le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp.

#### THE POETIC MOMENT AND PURE FORM

The crucial link between Le Corbusier and Couturier's thoughts on the potential power of modern art lies in what the architect refers to as the "poetic moment." He remarks, "Painting, architecture, sculpture, are unique phenomena



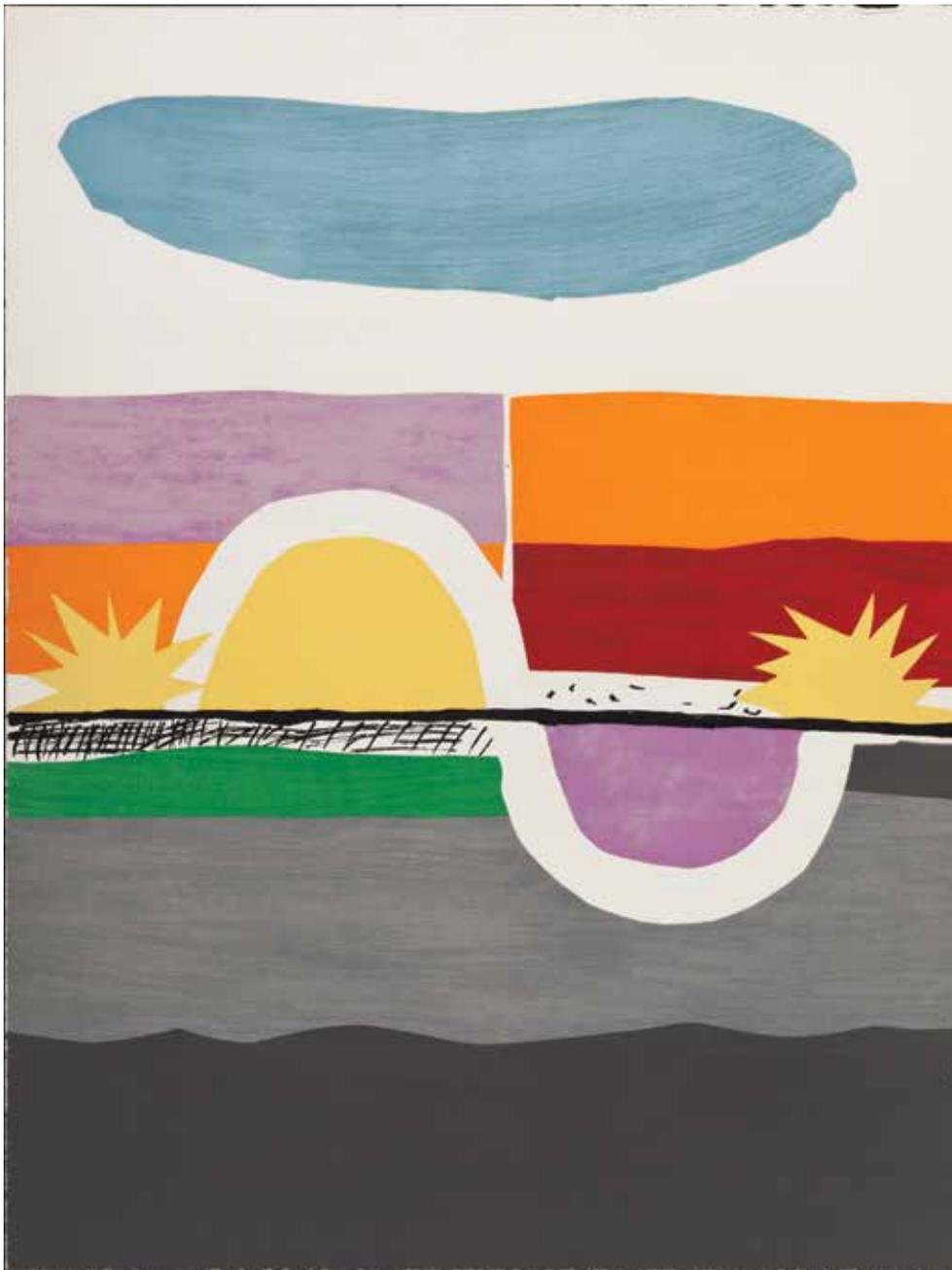
Interior of the south wall at the Chapelle Notre-Dame-du-Haut, Ronchamp.

of plastic nature in the service of poetic research in that they are capable of releasing the poetic moment."<sup>26</sup> The poetic moment links the viewer's experience of the work of art to an act of showing intent and meaning on the part of the artist, and it reveals beauty as figurative religious art formerly revealed divine truths to its beholders. The potential Couturier identifies of renewing sacred art through a secular spirituality rests firmly within this revealing. Architecture allows us to be embedded within the work itself rather than merely viewing it from a distance. Such an understanding of architecture as a plastic art questions the normative subject-object relationship of user and building in favor of intersubjective experience, grounded by the intimacy of enclosure and movement through space. This shift of subjectivity to the work itself establishes the reflexive condition between matter and spirit upheld by the Catholic doctrine of Incarnation.

Couturier viewed art as a language whose primary aim was the revelation of beauty through pure forms.<sup>7</sup> In *L'Art Sacré* he wrote, "For beauty, of itself and by itself, is a genuine good: *diffusivium sui* (self-diffusing). Pure forms, just by *being* before our eyes to see, 'tune' us (as a piano is tuned) to their beauty. Like music, they secretly impose their measure and rhythms upon us."<sup>8</sup> Le Corbusier believed that these forms were connected to the mathematical proportion of the Modulor and that the role of the artist-architect was to

perceptibly articulate them in order to communicate their essence through the built work. For both Couturier and Le Corbusier, the ability to perceive the pure form within the world—aligned with the observable nature of the divine in natural philosophy—constitutes the relative directness of the relationship between the master artist as the revealer of these forms and God as their original maker. The poetic moment occurs in the instant at which the pure form articulated by the work reveals itself to the viewer. Le Corbusier's architecture seeks to reveal the pure form largely through the carefully orchestrated play of light and shadow.

He writes, "As you can imagine, I use light freely; light for me is the fundamental basis of architecture. I compose with light."<sup>9</sup> *Le Poème de l'Angle Droit*, a series of poems and paintings composed by the architect between 1947 and 1953 overlapping with his work at Ronchamp, provides an intimate portrayal of his personal beliefs. The overarching theme of *Le Poème* lies in the union of the physical and the spiritual through embodied human perception as defined by the right angle, referring to man's upright posture and its influence on the nature of human experience. This union, for Le Corbusier, is what is truly at stake within any work of art or architecture. Their purpose is to provide a ground for the meeting of spirit and matter to occur through the revelation of the poetic moment. His portrayal of the sun



Milieu A.1 in *Le Poème de l'Angle Droit*, Le Corbusier, 1947-53.

within *Le Poème* addresses how this revelation might occur:

*The sun is the master of our lives  
indifferent far  
He is the visitor—a lord—  
He comes to us (x).<sup>10</sup>*

Le Corbusier characterizes the sun as the keeper of time who comes to us at the right angle (x) of the horizon. He regards time as unrepeatable in that the passage from light to dark varies daily and never reoccurs in exactly the same way. So, light acts as the marker of time through its articulation of this transition from night to day, and it provides a way of understanding time in relation to human

experience, which is also varied and unrepeatable. The fluctuation of light and shadow becomes one agent through which the passage of time enters the perceptible realm. In its ability to make the intangible sensible, light also becomes central to the revelation of meaning through the pure form.

At Ronchamp, our experience of light is intensified, colored, and manipulated. The incoming light itself is not colored or changed. Rather, these changes occur only through its architectural articulation. Ronchamp's light never ceases to be light itself, which is ultimately unchangeable and immaterial. It exists as a pure potentiality of experience, entering the realm of Paul Valéry's *objet ambigu*—"something for which there is no

designation in a Platonic ontology" and which "fails to find a place in the ultimate classification of ancient metaphysics, into the distinction between the natural and the artificial," or that made by God and that made by man.<sup>11</sup> The concept of the *objet ambigu* has significant implications for light—a condensation of matter and spirit that is, in itself, neither of the two. Understood in this way, light goes beyond the representation of the divine or the literal manifestation of the spirit within the corporeal world. Rather, it is the potentiality that makes the meeting of the two perceptible. Le Corbusier, heavily influenced by Valéry's *Eupalinos*, carries the *objet ambigu* further into his own use of the *objet à réaction poétique*.<sup>12</sup>

Le Corbusier's poetic objects bring together touch and vision, with both elements being required to experience them fully. However, his interest in the objects does not seem to have been one of literal formal translation. Rather, it concerns embedding the *quality* of a thing's tactile experience into the perceptible forms of the built work. One example of such an object is the crab shell that inspired Ronchamp's distinctive roof.<sup>13</sup> However, unlike the *objet ambigu*, the *objets à réaction poétique* are grounded in their physicality, and their forms must be sensibly articulated. Light provides the element needed to actualize this articulation. It is used as a tool to reveal the pure forms embedded within the architecture, pointing toward the spirituality sought by Couturier.

#### LIGHT AS FLESH

The potential tactility of vision implied by Le Corbusier's concept of the poetic moment also exists within the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the "flesh of the world." In this, light and vision come together once again. He initially takes up this task in his first major work, *The Structure of Behaviour*, in which he identifies both scientific "real light" and "phenomenal light" as experience. However, paralleling the lack of distinction between the natural and artificial in Valéry's *objet ambigu*, Merleau-Ponty establishes the impossibility of separating our mechanical perception of light from our bodied experience of it.<sup>14</sup> Light simultaneously reenters the realm of the sensible and the extrasensory. In his final work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, he clarifies the relationship between the two. He defines the visible as "an ephemeral modulation of this world" and the invisible as "the tissue that lines [the visible]... and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things."<sup>15</sup>

The connection between Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and Le Corbusier's design for

the chapel at Ronchamp involves the direct spiritualization of originally secular phenomenological ideas, particularly following the Thomist scholars of the Lublin school. Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* carries no necessary spiritual component, however it takes on new and decidedly metaphysical implications when reinterpreted through Catholic theology. It is this reinterpretation that exerts an influence on Le Corbusier's concept of light and its use at Ronchamp. Light as immaterial material architecturally fulfills the role held by the flesh within Merleau-Ponty's ontology. It is the *latency* of the visible—a pure potentiality that is not itself color or form but is inextricably tied to the coming into vision of either and of everything. The poetic moment, then, is the touching that occurs when this light as flesh fully comes into contact with our own thinking and sensing flesh. We see this light only as it is articulated architecturally by its other side, shadow, and thus experience it as a contrast—as its simultaneous presence and lack of presence, both of which are necessary to constitute its being there.

This concept of light as flesh aligns with the intentions expressed by Couturier and the *Commission d'Art Sacré* in that it admits the necessary presence of something beyond the visible that is also sensible within it as the invisible, as with a corporeal experience of the divine. Within this tactile world in which all sensing becomes a dimension of touch extended, there is an opening of the real possibility for the bodied experience of spiritual things through a visual encounter with the flesh, of which light becomes a primary component. For Le Corbusier, light becomes the means through which form, color, and proportion are revealed.

Photo: Caitlin Turski Watson



*Light cast across gunite walls and framed by shadow at the southeast end of the chapel.*

#### LE CORBUSIER'S LANGUAGE OF LIGHT

In his book on Ronchamp, Le Corbusier writes, "The key is light/ and light illuminates shapes/ and shapes have an emotional power."<sup>16</sup> For Merleau-Ponty the reality of light lies wholly in its contingency to the sensible. Le Corbusier achieves this reality of light at Ronchamp through the careful manipulation of color and shadow. The articulation of light through architecture and of architecture through light becomes a way of pulling the visible and the invisible into a singular experience to be engaged by the thinking and sensing body. In the chapel this becomes most evident in the relationship between interior and exterior, the symbolism regarding the Incarnation, and the use of color and shadow in articulating an architectural void.

In his discussions with Le Corbusier,

Couturier emphasized the importance of Ronchamp as a site of pilgrimage. This stemmed from his own beliefs concerning the restoration of true spirituality made possible through the renewal of ritual: "In rural France the people still cherish these traditional sites: once or twice a year a ceremony from the past, a pilgrimage restored, would be enough to revive some degree of genuine life, and this would save them."<sup>17</sup> The chapel at Ronchamp remained an important destination for thousands of pilgrims on the Feast of the Assumption, August 15, and Mary's birthday, September 8, and as such provided a stronghold for the preservation of the pilgrimage tradition. Le Corbusier celebrates the ritual of the pilgrimage as a procession by expanding

the chapel to encompass the entire site and sequence of approach. He blurs the distinction between interior and exterior while collapsing experience and perception into an act of movement through the work as it reveals itself. This collapse of experience and perception opens up the possibility for a direct meeting of the corporeal and psychological, matter and spirit, which carries over into Le Corbusier's use of light as material.

From a distance, the chapel's protruding light towers rise up above the surrounding landscape, and the form of the building continues to unfold itself slowly upon approach, changing slightly with every step to reveal a new curve or surface. At the top of the hill, the east wall opens up into the outdoor pilgrimage



*The outdoor pilgrims' sanctuary, oriented toward the sunrise.*

chapel—a sanctuary to both the sky and the view to the horizon from the space of the altar (the right angle, x). This is a chapel flooded by intense natural light from all sides in a celebration of the sun marked by the stepped pyramid at its furthest edge, which recalls ancient monuments to pagan sun gods. The altar sits below the overhang of the sloping crab-shell roof whose shadow slowly moves across the exterior of the east wall, marking the passage of time from one moment to the next.

This marking of time is doubled on the interior by the east and west tower chapels, which use the changing light to frame the sun's movement through the sky as it passes from sunrise to sunset. We are reminded of the sun's depiction in *Le Poème de l'Angle Droit*. In his notes Le Corbusier writes, "Inside, alone with yourself. Outside, 10,000 pilgrims in front of the altar."<sup>18</sup> The open-air sanctuary exists as an autonomous space while maintaining a clear connection to the indoor sanctuary. The rotating niche housing the Statue of the Virgin to which Notre-Dame-du-Haut is dedicated acts as a link between the two spaces—one

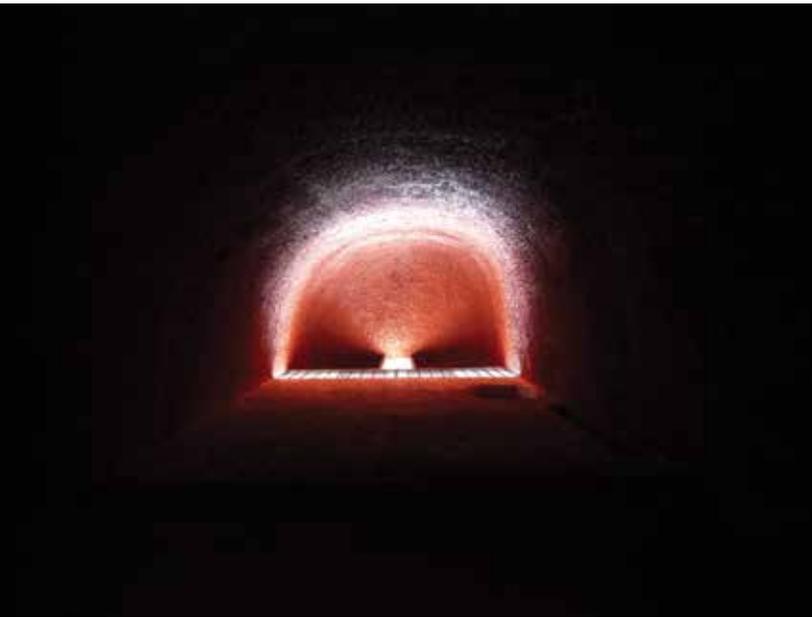
articulated by the penetration of the light coming from outside and the other by shadows cast by the building from within itself. The architecture, designed for the passage of pilgrims across the site, frames both the body of the chapel, through movement and space, and the body of the divine, through light. In this, the meeting of the interior and exterior sanctuaries constitutes the meeting of corporeal and spiritual bodies.

This meeting is reiterated liturgically and architecturally in the symbolism surrounding the Virgin Mary. Within Catholic tradition, Mary serves as the mediator between God and humanity, establishing a direct link between the spiritual and the physical through her Immaculate Conception, Assumption into Heaven, and subsequent role as intercessor. In 1950, the year of the chapel's commission, Pope Pius XII officially adopted Mary's Assumption into Catholic doctrine, solidifying her place within the Church's teaching. Le Corbusier's murals on the enameled south door, which functions as the main entry, evidence the importance of Mary within Ronchamp's

iconography. The outer panel of the door depicts the Annunciation, in which the angel Gabriel comes to visit Mary and she conceives Christ, and the inner panel represents the Assumption of her body into heaven.<sup>19</sup> The Annunciation and Incarnation constitute the spiritual concretely entering the realm of the physical, and the Assumption completes this as the physical then passes into the realm of the spirit. A ray of light had traditionally symbolized the descent of the divine into the human world within depictions of the Immaculate Conception. Le Corbusier makes strong connections to this representational tradition within the chapel.

His personal ties to the cult of Mary stem from a 1911 trip to Mount Athos in Greece, where he attended the festival of the Virgin at the Monastery of Iviron:

*Morbid meditations.  
During a festive night...  
A fantastic vision of the sanctuary of  
the Virgin...  
In a dark apse behind the iconostasis.*



*East and west towers in late afternoon sunlight.*

*After a year of darkness the iconostasis is ablaze with brilliant golds rekindled by the fiery torch of offerings burning in the chancel... Finally, closing my eyes, I have a vision of a black shroud covered with golden stars. In fact I am in the shroud, but a stranger to the stars!<sup>20</sup>*

The image of Mary as a female deity imprinted itself strongly on the young architect. Her role as the Woman of the Apocalypse—“clothed in the sun, the moon at her feet,” as Le Corbusier noted in his sketchbook—bears strong alchemical overtones in the union of opposites: sun and moon, male and female, matter and spirit.<sup>21</sup> At Ronchamp, he drew particularly on the duality of Mary as both Virgin and Magdalene as represented in the statue niche, which is half in shadow and half in light and can be rotated to face either the illuminated outdoor sanctuary or the shadowy interior.

The union of immaculate purity and transgression find their perceptible manifestation in the way light penetrates the building’s openings as it invades and impregnates the sacred space of the inner sanctuary. According to Flora Samuel in her book *Le Corbusier: Architect and Feminist*, the handle of the east door connecting the inner and outer sanctuaries, shaped in plan like a pair of breasts, and the cockleshell imprinted above it assign the passage a feminine role. She goes on to argue that the presumably male visitor is then encouraged to engage with the building sensually through the act of touch upon grasping the handle.<sup>22</sup> However, we should consider the alchemical designation of the sun as a male entity and

traditional Catholic iconography linking sunlight to the sensible presence of God. In this context, the relationship between the shadowy interior and the luminous exterior sanctuaries reveals itself anew, and we might interpret that the light flooding in through the opening of the southeast corner around the door actually assumes the role of male divinity as it penetrates the virgin threshold. The south wall is transformed by light. It is no longer purely concrete or static—the roof is lifted and made weightless. We see it in its moment of becoming. The southeast corner, entirely dematerialized at the highest point of the sloping roof, assumes the critical moment at which the corporeal and incorporeal become one, and it spills its light across the altar where this joining will be re-enacted through the transubstantiation of the host during the celebration of the Eucharist, overlooked by the Statue of the Virgin also immersed in eastern light.

In this, the incoming light establishes the hierarchical space of the altar as the site where the ritual of the Mass is celebrated. Here we can recognize that Le Corbusier has not created an architecture of envelope. He has designed the void and treated the experience of the interior space as the form rather than the negative. The use of light as a positive compositional element intensifies this. As flesh, it acts as the potentiality that brings the void into the realm of the sensual. However, as observed by Merleau-Ponty, the flesh itself is only made perceptible through its sensible articulation. Le Corbusier uses color at specific moments within the chapel to serve as the actualization of perceptible light and form. On the exterior, he selectively reserves color for the interior of the niche for the Statue of the Virgin, the main

entry door on the south wall, and the two service doors on the north wall. On the interior, we also see this color picked up in the painted *vitrages* inset in the south wall, the tabernacle, and the east chapel tower. Each of these dashes of color denotes a moment of threshold—a point of entry into the chapel for either corporeal humans, as with the doors, or incorporeal spirit, as with the *vitrages* and the tabernacle. Le Corbusier writes, “Sometimes there is a door: one opens it—enters—one is in another realm, the realm of the gods, the room which holds the key to the great systems. These doors are the doors of the miracles.”<sup>23</sup> At Ronchamp, these doors are the doors of penetration and incarnation. The meeting of spirit and matter within them appears in the articulation constituted by their color appearing in light.

Similarly, the architect sculpts shadow as the other side of light rather than its absence. He remarks, “Observe the play of shadows, learn the game.”<sup>24</sup> Outside, the form of the building reveals itself through the shifting emergence of shadows as a visitor moves around it. The curves of the walls and crevices captured by the roof expose the shadowy interior that is the other side of the sunlight pilgrim’s sanctuary—even the painted *vitrages* appear as black holes punched into the south wall. The skin of the building gathers shadow into itself in the textured relief of the sprayed gunite finish. These shadows dance across the chapel, marking time as the sun proceeds on its own pilgrimage through the sky. The interior, already immersed in a cool darkness, takes in the colored shadows cast by sunlight piercing through the *vitrages*. Thus, the pure form reveals itself through the architectural articulation and movement of light.



Photo: Caitlin Turski Watson

*Light pouring into the sanctuary through the southeast corner and statue niche.*

### MODERN ART AND SECULAR SPIRITUALITY

In *The Meaning of Modern Art*, Karsten Harries argues, “In a more self-conscious [modern] age, religious art can no longer be imitative in the traditional sense.”<sup>25</sup> In this, figurative representations of the divine no longer constitute a direct sensuous relationship between matter and spirit. For Marie-Alain Couturier, abstract and transcendental modern art had the potential to go around the issue of figurative representation and the loss of power granted to the mimetic image in order to create

sensuous works that make emotional appeals through the portrayal of the “really true” rather than the strictly corporeal. It turns the visible upon itself, using it to represent the invisible without trying to picture it literally.

Le Corbusier captures this potential within architecture as a plastic art by using light to bridge the gap between vision and experience, revealing the pure form at the meeting point of the visible and the invisible. This revealing restores the tactile component bound up in the experience of seeing. In *Le Poème de l’Angle Droit*, Le Corbusier proposes that the right angle is an act of solidarity with nature of perceiving the world upright with both the body and the eyes.<sup>26</sup> In this, seeing becomes an act that is necessarily bodied.

Frances C. Lonna writes that “meaningful architecture depends on a realization that visible form and language refer to something other, recognized only when the dominant sense of vision is mediated by the body’s primary tactile and synaesthetic understanding.”<sup>27</sup> Le Corbusier’s Chapel Notre Dame du Haut achieves this by allowing us to meet its incoming light with our bodies rather than our eyes. The passage of light and shadow through the space conveys the mystery of the Incarnation as defined by the Catholic Church, and it points toward the sanctity sought by the *Commission d’Art Sacré*, renewing the capacity of the plastic work to move us emotionally and spiritually. It challenges the role of the building as a static object, opening up instead a reflexive connection between the user and the work through the revelation of the poetic moment. Of Ronchamp Couturier writes, “A truly sacred edifice is not a secular one made sacred by a rite of consecration or by the eventual use to which it is put; it is sacred in its very substance, made so by the quality of its forms.”<sup>28</sup> 

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*Old Round Church as seen from the town approach.*

## CHURCHES FOR CHANGE

# New England Meetinghouses as Sacred/Secular Prototypes

By Howard Hebel, AIA • Photographs by Graham Hebel

**N**EW ENGLAND'S MEETINGHOUSE churches constitute a diverse and distinctly American architecture of community and change. Born in turbulent times, these churches resonate powerfully with contemporary discussions of multi-faith and sacred/secular models. The Old Round Church in Richmond, Vermont, and the South Solon Meeting House in Solon, Maine exemplify these compact, eloquent structures and the range of architectural and artistic treasures they preserve in out-of-the-way places. In addition to possessing a striking, stoic beauty, these miniature masterpieces embody design

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THE AUTHOR, AN ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL OF NEWMAN ARCHITECTS IN NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT, EXPLORES RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE AS A PERSONAL PASSION. NEW YORK CITY PHOTOGRAPHER GRAHAM HEBEL COLLABORATES WITH HIS FATHER, HOWARD, ON DOCUMENTING AND PRESENTING RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE.

principles of potential use for today's architects and builders who again seek to invent places that welcome, uplift, and inspire people facing rapid change.

### CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

These compelling little buildings sprang up in frontier towns, often without architects, during the country's post-revolutionary northward expansion. Their designs responded to the civic and spiritual yearnings of a young, ambitious, seeker nation, inventing itself on the go amid intense religious ferment and socio-political experimentation. There, they provided some of the first built expressions of community and centers for community life.

Conceived for multi-purpose service and often shared by different faiths, meetinghouses ennobled sacred and secular gatherings equally well. Far from separating Church and State, they reflected a tolerant, iconoclastic

environment in which congregation and polity coincided. Along the way, meetinghouses helped nurture community, launch new denominations, promote political participation, and broadcast the Great Awakening's call for spiritual and intellectual individualism.

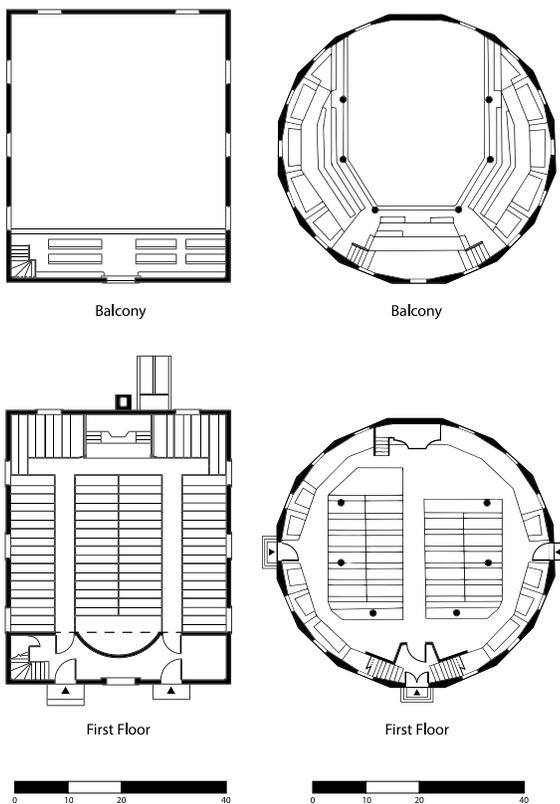
Sacred and secular aspects of life eventually differentiated in these communities, building separate homes. As this process unfolded, these resilient buildings' flexible, adaptable forms allowed them to adopt new uses gracefully. In the two centuries since their construction, many have changed programs several times in changing communities to remain relevant, useful, and loved.

### RATES OF CHANGE

The two churches' histories represent two typical transition sequences experienced by these flexible, adaptable buildings as different sacred and secular constituencies adopted



View from the pulpit of Old Round Church.



Plans of the meetinghouses drawn at the same scale. Round church courtesy of Udo Riga; rectangle church courtesy of Mills Whitaker Architects, LLC.

them over time. The Old Round Church's use evolved steadily through continuous inhabitation, leaving its original interior architecture intact. The Church began as a cooperative venture of six fledgling organizations constructing a shared meeting place: five Protestant congregations, from Baptist to Universalist, and the secular town government. Town meeting minutes of the time recorded that "no preference is to be given to anyone on account of his Religious tenets... in buying or paying for pews but to be equally free for every denomination." The original land-donation presumed availability for secular use. Lacking a resident preacher, the group turned to an experienced builder to create a design without an architect and to raise building funds by selling family boxes. His polygonal design circumscribed a conventional plan in an unusual, unifying form that emphasized commonalities of gathering and galvanized community. Its original seating plan intermixed charter families of all five congregations. Its 1812-13 construction united professionals and volunteers.

The facility's unifying effect has endured, due partly to its design and partly to the culture of shared use that created it and that it helped sustain. Early-19<sup>th</sup>-century Vermont's scarcity of preachers often led to universal attendance, with doctrinal strictures relaxed. Harvest banquets and other social gatherings complemented secular governance between liturgical activities. Over the years, the congregations gradually built their own churches, the last departing in the 1880s. Richmond developed away from this site yet never disconnected, continuing to meet and conduct community business including meetings and voting there until the 1970s. Little needed to change in the church's physical configuration to support over 160 years of evolving civic use. When the dire need for restoration at last mandated intervention, the town



*South Solon Meeting House beside its rural crossroads.*

finally ceased civic use and deeded the property to its historical society to facilitate placement on the National Register of Historic Places and pursuit of preservation grants. The popular, restored building now hosts a variety of public and private events, including weddings, history days, and the annual “pilgrimage service” hosted by current members of the sole surviving original congregation, while providing a pristine touchstone to a period of profound change in the nation’s early history.

By contrast, the South Solon Meeting House’s use changed discontinuously through interrupted inhabitation, dramatically altering its interior character. This Church began as the aspiration of a single Congregational congregation to provide for community life at a key rural crossroads. As in Richmond, the land-gift deed to the “South Solon Free Meeting House Society” presumed availability for secular use. Here, a resident preacher led from the start, similarly turning to an experienced builder without an architect for design and fundraising through family-box sales. His simple yet striking conventional, rectangular design unified a fractious congregation and galvanized it into action, with construction in 1841-42 uniting professionals and volunteers as in Richmond.

The design’s drawing power has attracted a variety of constituencies over time despite misfortunes. In the beginning, community gatherings like meetings, church socials, and harvest festivals complemented liturgy. The town soon developed elsewhere, however, and then failed. The church stood alone while in use, and then ceased use altogether by 1904. The abandoned structure deteriorated until a 1930s revival led by the local Cummings family whose members also helped found the nearby Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in the ‘40s. More dramatic rebirth came with the School’s 1950s adoption of the

again-unused structure as home for a fresco-painting project to display Renaissance techniques revived by faculty. This project’s well-publicized design competition drew significant artists who transformed the plain original interior into an extraordinary and little-known national treasure, an accidental time capsule of 1950s American artistic ferment with competing abstraction and representation, while its basic building restoration reversed long decline. The building joined the National Register of Historic Places in the ‘80’s after again being forgotten for a time. A recent restoration has once again refreshed structure and envelope, equipping the building for renewed service as an active community-events venue and art destination.

Today, both buildings function as secular venues that welcome occasional sacred uses, both formal and informal.

#### PRINCIPLES AND MEANINGS

What can these buildings teach us about designing for change, not merely surviving change but adapting to it gracefully and even promoting it? Five characteristics have allowed them to remain vital and vibrant while vigorously serving a changing mix of sacred and secular inhabitants and programs.

*Formal Simplicity:* Simple, unitary forms make these buildings visually arresting and give their main spaces power to unify. Single building forms enclose single interior volumes. At Solon the form consists of a simple, gable-roofed rectangular solid with a finial-crested belfry, while in Richmond a near-cylindrical polygonal volume (16 facets outside, 32 inside) rises to a cupola-topped, polygonal conical roof. Both have pews that face front and center with a singular focus. Interestingly, the Old Round Church’s plan did not fully realize this form’s geometric potential



*View toward the pulpit of South Solon Meeting House.*



*Simple detailing around pulpit and pews in South Solon Meeting House.*



*Simple detail in Old Round Church, such as classical columns turned from a single timber.*

for concentric pews facing an in-the-round central objective, though outer and balcony pew boxes do face inward. This simplicity gives the resulting buildings the power of clarity and directness. Diminutive size and fine, human scale add an inviting intimacy.

**Programmatic Changelessness:** Emphasizing meeting unchanging human needs over accommodating specialized or changeable programming keeps these buildings timeless and relevant. Despite change, people continue to need shelter, community, privacy, ceremony, reflection, wonder, and delight, especially in changing times. A minimum of fixed interior conditions and hierarchical subdivisions allows these buildings to accommodate a wide variety of changing constituencies and activities, as well as to accept a range of physical changes without losing fundamental identity. Both buildings feature simple, open spaces, multipurpose seating, and singular, raised presentation platforms that gracefully welcome human gatherings and only loosely configure their evolving interactions. Neither space is as flexible as those completely without fixed seating or directional orientation (like some contemporary multi-faith centers), yet both have proven themselves nimble adopters of changing roles over time.

**Symbolic Neutrality:** Freedom from tradition-specific vocabulary and iconography allows these buildings to meet needs of multiple and changing constituencies without violating the prohibitions of any. Relief from architectural and liturgical conventions leaves room for individual groups to express themselves, to articulate their own concerns and aspirations in their own ways, to find their own voices. The Old Round Church's plain walls and ceilings and simple pew boxes serve as a stage for their human protagonists. In Solon, once-plain walls and ceilings provided blank canvases on which one constituency visualized traditional mythologies and insights in vivid and compelling new terms that still surprise, provoke, and inspire without dictating.

**Thematic Universality:** Universal themes engage all comers, suggesting common ground in humanity's shared search for meaning and purpose. Timeless place-making principles such as overarching forms, classical motifs, and armatures of portal, path, and place; Platonic geometries of circle, square, rectangle, and triangle; and universal iconographies of daylight, views of natural beauty, wood, stone, and human gatherings connect to all traditions and resonate with all constituencies.

**Economy of Means:** Frugality of construction, locally sourced materials, and architecturally limited palettes give these buildings authentic and unpretentious character, making them approachable and welcoming, as well as easy to modify. They evoke many of architecture's great dictums on the subject: Vitruvius's firmness, commodity, and delight;

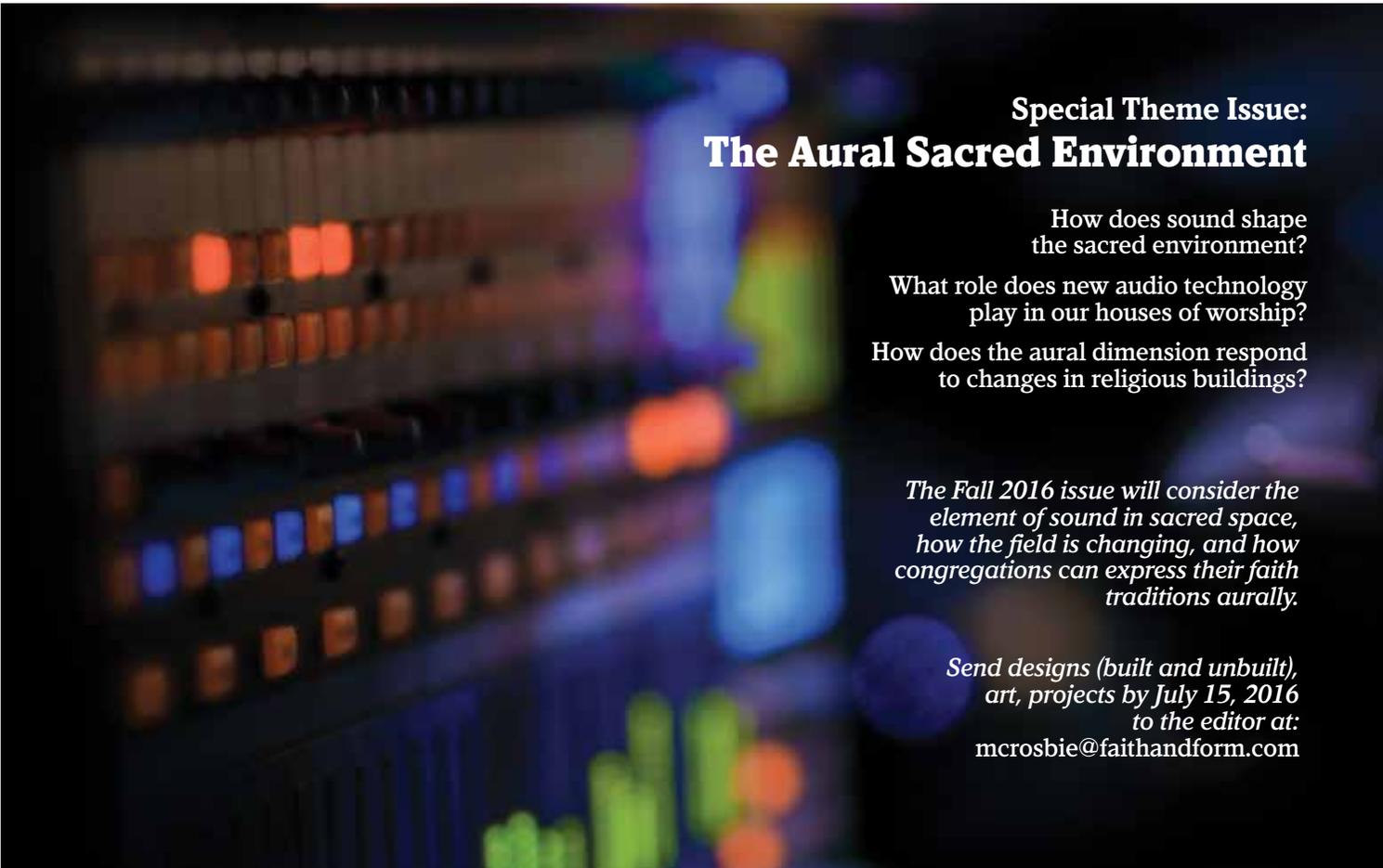
Sullivan's form follows function; and Mies' less is more. The resulting environments allow users to concentrate on strengthening community and growing personally in ways of their own choosing, freed from distraction and preconception.

#### CONCLUSIONS FOR TODAY

Challenges and opportunities facing today's designers and builders of religious structures, including demands for multi-faith and sacred/secular collaboration, are not new. Earlier builders addressed them, leaving a legacy of potential models for consideration. In the US, New England meetinghouses represent this resource particularly well, commissioned for multi-purpose roles hosting mixed programs and multiple faiths. While some have been abandoned, many still support and enrich their communities in new and evolving ways. This important genre of America's architectural heritage offers powerful principles and prototypes for consideration by contemporary designers reinventing places for religious activities, and the place of religious experience in 21<sup>st</sup>-century life. Formal simplicity, programmatic changelessness, symbolic neutrality, thematic universality, and economy of means can help today's community buildings attract people of diverse points of view to gather and share the sacred and secular work of continuously renewing themselves for life in changing times—and to continue doing so while change continues to accelerate—as these two meetinghouses have done so fruitfully for so long. 

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## Special Theme Issue: The Aural Sacred Environment

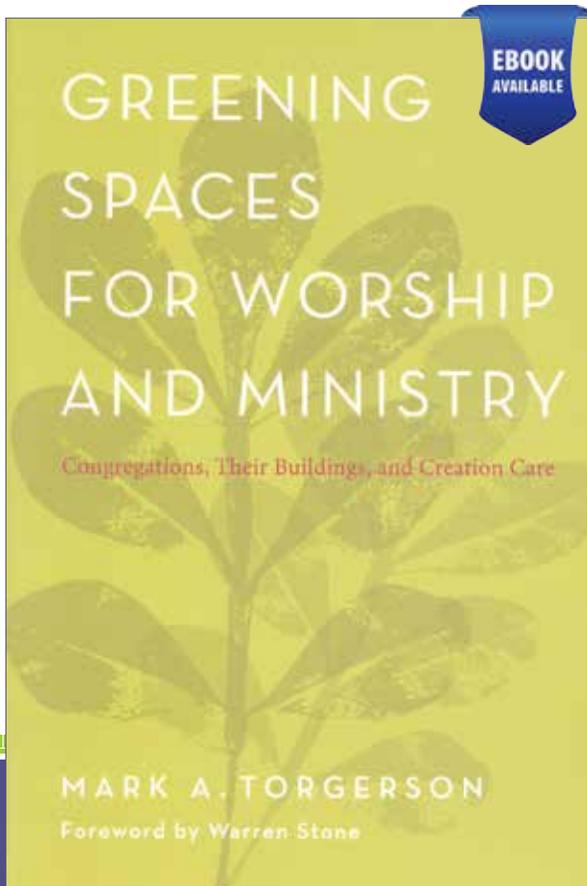
How does sound shape  
the sacred environment?

What role does new audio technology  
play in our houses of worship?

How does the aural dimension respond  
to changes in religious buildings?

*The Fall 2016 issue will consider the  
element of sound in sacred space,  
how the field is changing, and how  
congregations can express their faith  
traditions aurally.*

*Send designs (built and unbuilt),  
art, projects by July 15, 2016  
to the editor at:  
mcrosbie@faithandform.com*



In *Greening Spaces for Worship and Ministry*, Mark Torgerson asserts that greening the built environment of a congregation is a powerful way to achieve and model a commitment to creation care. Green building involves designing and constructing in ways that are environmentally, economically, and socially responsible. The approach considers dimensions of a project from its inception to its re-use or demise, through both initial design choices and gradual, systematic upgrades to existing facilities.

Alban Institute/Rowman & Littlefield, 2012

[worship.calvin.edu](http://worship.calvin.edu)

CALVIN INSTITUTE OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

# EVOLVING STAINED GLASS

By Amy DiGregorio

TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE HAVE MADE A SIGNIFICANT SHIFT away from the aesthetics we associate with the sanctuaries of the 19th and 20th centuries. Many new houses of worship are foregoing ornate design and traditional liturgical architecture. This shift can be credited to a number of factors, including limited budgets for liturgical art, ornamental motifs, and decoration, as well as the necessity for modern sound and lighting technologies used in worship services. Unfortunately, all of this has contributed to what some suggest as the demise of stained glass.

The stained glass industry must now adapt to such an aesthetic shift by focusing on new ways to handle the materials and viewing stained glass in a different light. According to stained-glass studio Willet Hauser's director of art development, Kathy Jordan, and Melissa Janda, senior glass painter and the studio's art



*Example of lamination panel; left image shows a Mark Khaisman design as a model for a lamination fabrication (on right) that contains no lead, only lamination materials and paint.*

*Below left, 'Painting with Light' technique positions glass pieces in a clam-shell kiln to be fired to create a 'slider.' At right, the result of the 'Painting with Light' firing, which can be used as one large piece or cut into smaller 'selected' glass pieces.*



department director, glass artists are re-thinking design and how glass is held together by the constraints that traditional lead lines pose.

Studios are discovering new ways to fabricate panels that don't involve lead, such as lamination and fused glass or a combination of the two. Glass lamination is a form of bonded art glass. This method allows for the creation of stained glass on a large scale without the use of lead. The advanced process uses Verifix 2K silicone to bond art glass to modern architectural substrates such as safety glass, float glass, insulated units, or more art glass. The art glass is carefully laid onto the silicone layer following the approved design. The silicone sets solid in 12 hours and is fully cured in 72 hours. The Verifix 2K silicone technique has been proven for 20 years to be structurally permanent, UV and weather resistant, and non-yellowing. Design possibilities utilizing this method of art glass range from glass etching and enameling to glass edges lit with fiber optics or LED lights.

International painter and glass artist Narcissus Quagliata is known for his innovative commissions of painted and large-scale fused glass. According to Janda, Quagliata "... has been pushing the boundaries of traditional glass work since the 1970s and early 1980s, doing exciting things with leading and plate glass, pushing the limits of glass shapes within the lines." She sees this as a natural progression to do away with lead altogether.

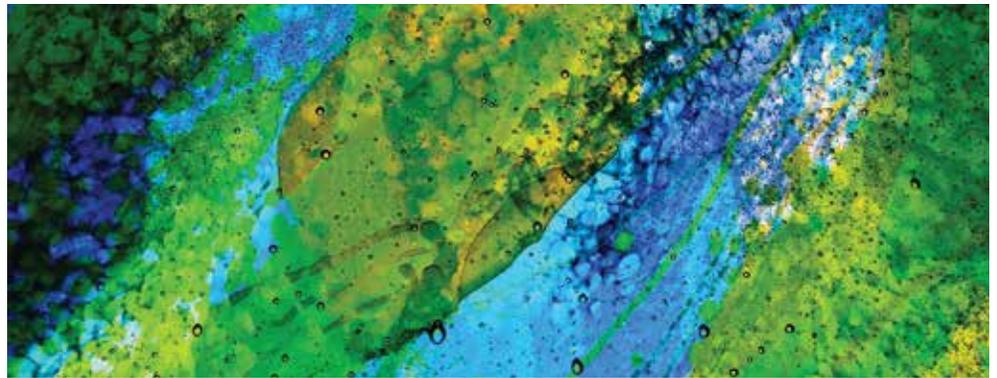
Quagliata continues to explore two techniques he developed: "Painting with Light" and enamels. In the "Painting with Light" process, developed in 1993, kiln-fused glass panels are positioned in a clam-shell kiln and fired to create what Quagliata refers to as "sliders." The pieces are positioned on an 11-degree slope, a detail specific to this technique. Firing at an angle allows the glass to slowly slide and fuse together. The end result is a unified sheet of glass that is thicker at one end, similar to a

Norman Slab. At this point the artist can continue to develop the glass, either by painting with a high-fire enamel that will withstand fusing temperatures, adding more slider layers, or a combination of the two. Quagliata also uses enamels on industrial glass, achieving a 3D holographic image by layering painted glass panels in front of one another.

Another technique marries the familiar world of glass painting to the technique of glass fusing. The process of glass fusing involves fusing multiple layers of glass together by melting them at a high temperature in a glass kiln. Commercial glass grinding machines grind glass to a variety of grades, ranging from large chunks to fine powders, which are used in vitreous powder painting in advanced glass fusing.

A future direction is to bridge between the flat glass (stained glass) community and the hot glass (fusing) community. The result can be work that isn't hindered or weighed down by lead or the heavy epoxy of faceted glass, while remaining economical and efficient. Advanced glass fusing utilizing vitreous painting has been done well in the world of small gallery work. Large-scale work exists within the industry of liturgical architectural glass but for the most part is devoid of highly skilled vitreous painting.

According to Jordan, "Rather than viewing stained glass as a sanctuary adornment it should be viewed as an architectural element of the building. Architects and stained glass artists aren't in dialogue early enough in a project. Often stained glass is viewed as an afterthought when it should be viewed as the fabric of the building." Jordan adds that it's necessary to understand the appropriate technique for the space as well as building and construction codes, such as seismic codes and hurricane-resistant measures, all of which play a large role in planning and fabrication of stained glass. 



THE AUTHOR IS THE ART COLLECTION MANAGER AND SENIOR RESEARCH LIBRARIAN FOR WILLET HAUSER ARCHITECTURAL GLASS.

## NOTES & COMMENTS

### THE SPIRIT UNBOUND

*Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality*, Thomas Barrie, Julio Bermudez, and Phillip James Tabb, editors, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited), 2015.

This intriguing volume of essays addressing the spiritual in the built environment evolves out of four recent symposia organized by the Forum for Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality (ACS). Since its 2007 inception, ACS has offered an academical venue for considering how built works, the communal aspects of culture, and contemporary spirituality juxtapose. The editors note how until recently such conversation in design schools has been largely taboo—its adherents forced underground, where discourse became progressively impoverished. Still today, as one of the volume's authors notes, only carefully veiled references to the "S-word" (spiritual or sacred) are openly made. Thus, one thrust of this volume is of necessity simply definitional, centering around parsing anew the term spirituality and its now once-again expanding offshoots—transcendence, community, aura, the ineffable, beauty, the home, caring, the environment, and so forth. This alone makes for some captivating and quite timely reading, but the volume's goals extend far beyond that.

The emphasis is on the contemporary—the book makes no pretense to being a historical or ethnographic account of sacred space-making. The essays are divided into five topical areas that could broadly be characterized as phenomenology, sacred definitions, symbolism, landscapes, and built manifestations. Brought together here are many newly promising as well as recognized voices, all of whom share a passionate belief that the built environment's meaning has suffered degradation under our contemporary regime of rationalized technologies, art-for-art's-sake aesthetics, and immediate cost/benefit analyses. Spatial design, they argue, can regain a crucial role of awakening sacred realizations, and thus help resuscitate religious awareness more broadly across human affairs.

Both scholars and practitioners are represented. The authors exhibit considerable multidisciplinary breadth—with essays drawn from architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, comparative religion, painting, sustainability, and publishing. Particularly valuable is the global diversity assembled here, including perspectives originating out of Iran, South Africa, Argentina, India, Korea, Israel, Japan, and Austria—as well as from wide-ranging regions of the US. Given this, the volume offers extensive scholarly citation

on sacrality from international literatures not often encountered together. And even where the essays necessarily overlap in treating similar issues or sources, a fascination attends how this wide panoply of authors variously tackles what they share. The range of subject matter is similarly invigorating: Mexican pyramids, Bahá'i Temples, nursing, Plato's cave, integrated agriculture, Delphi, synecdoches, Jung's house, Petra, the infinito, Walden Pond, mountainous outcrops, Japanese gardens, yoga, Avebury's monoliths, Tibetan shrines, Brazil's Iguazu Falls, the forests of the Canadian Shield, and even Santa's Village. This may seem at first a collection far too glancing, but all these disparate domains are here rigorously juxtaposed with contemporary theories of "spirituality"—what Alberto Pérez-Gómez in the volume's foreword characterizes as the *spiritus*, the invisible dimension of the sacred always present to a degree, even in day-to-day experience.

A focus on the transcendent possibilities within the day-to-day is what conceptually distinguishes this volume, overall, from other related publications. The grand works or pronouncements of "star" architects—those who have become involved recently in a resurgence of religious architecture nationally and internationally—have little presence here. Over and over the authors return to the core, foundational experiences of the sacred, suggesting that these today must first be examined and adjudicated afresh before taking on more organized, ostentatious, and ritually enhanced religious manifestations. The volume does not criticize the recent parade of hurried, "star" creations, but just cautions that since we have spent nearly a century devaluing architectural sacrality, it may be best to begin this journey of rediscovery in a more grounded gear.

For example, consciousness within sacral experiences receives numerous treatments. Light is given copious study—as a dynamic and numinous harbinger from above. Anthropological versus directly faith-based tensions are discussed. Regarding symbols, several authors argue for, and offer pointers toward, multivalency of meaning. We also learn how the "not-so-perfect" in architecture can help engage and involve the viewer, suggesting that purity and wholeness may now have actually become deterrents in invoking the sacred. The importance of dislocation—a commonplace of pilgrimages—receives extended commentary. Several essays take up how human relations, rather than tectonic or aesthetic ones, are central to an appearance of the spiritual. Even so, the central role of silence or solitude in sacral design is mentioned again and again.

This penchant for solitude today is particularly revealing. With this, the book identifies but intentionally leaves unresolved a crucial tension: of the "public" versus the "private" within contemporary sacral experience. Even amidst this volume's great diversity of global and multidisciplinary perspectives, precisely this issue resounds throughout, and echoes. Only vague hints emerge here regarding what has to be the most substantive challenge anyone would face in hoping to revive what has traditionally been understood as a broad, integrating, societal religious architecture. Modernity's assault on communal values strikes directly at the word "culture" lying at the center of the ACS organization's very name. Despite having rightly defined "culture" as essentially a communal experience, quite a number of these ACS essays openly acknowledge that we must first begin with each person's discrete consciousness and move somehow from there in fostering a broader religiosity. More than once it is ruefully noted that today's spiritual experiences are largely realized individually and, due to this, often resist easy conveyance to others. The potential for self-indulgence underlying this religiously rather lonely and splintering realization is directly acknowledged. The sacred spaces most valorized today promote hushed introspection (think of Le Corbusier's Ronchamp, for example). This volume's multiple treatments on how an individual's home might offer the best hope of, and ontological guidance toward, the sacred today—and thus help us examine the pervasive sensation of homelessness underlying modernity—seem related to this public versus private quandary. The editors note with satisfaction the continued resilience of the spiritual today despite the "devastating blows" initiated by the Enlightenment. But they also note the widespread absence of deeper religious presence across our contemporary "public" arena.

One noticeable gap in this volume's varied coverage offers, perhaps, an oblique commentary on exactly this. The book's many authors take virtually no interest in suburban megachurches or other robustly communal developments like the resurgence of wide-open storefront congregations along revitalizing city avenues. Gospels or hymnals clapped rhythmically within hands are the antithesis, obviously, of rarified solitude, as are staged multimedia performances. Somehow, we in the academy just cannot go there today conceptually—even though such direct, bottom-up manifestations offer the communal in abundance. Moveable metal chairs or recliner seating still remain non-starters within design projects at most

schools, whether amenable to the “S-word” or not. Perhaps what these popularized spaces offer is too much of the originating root term—the “common”—within the word communal (the French word “commune” derives from the Latin *communis*, “things held in common”). Such quotidian commonality

may cut against our deeply attuned esoteric knowledge as designers and thus tends to drive us away. If so, a hard irony born of goodly over-sophistication inheres in this.  
— *Randall Ott, AIA*

*The author is dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.*

#### ARCHITECTURES OF LIGHT

The monastery of Bose in Northern Italy is a well-known place in the South European Catholic world. Its charismatic leader Enzo Bianchi founded the community in the days and in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. Brothers and sisters work and pray, inspired by older classical monastic traditions in the East and West, some come also from Protestant and Orthodox confessions. At present the community is under observation by the Vatican to be confirmed as an official order.

The monastery arranges regularly international spring conferences about the connection of arts, architecture, and liturgy and in autumn about orthodox spirituality. The XIIIth conference, which was co-arranged with the National Office for the Church’s Cultural Heritage of the Italian Bishops’ Conference and the Italian National Council of Architects, took place in June 2015 in order to explore the theme of “Architectures of Light.”

Liturgical theologians, architects, artists, and art historians from Italy, Germany, France, Portugal, and Scandinavia offered an exciting diversity of perspectives and more than 200 guests, among them many practicing architects, followed the discussions intensely.

Andrea Dall’Asta, SJ, director of the Galleria San Fedele in Milano, offered a rich walk through the ages of history where light has been used in many different ways to express how the Invisible becomes visible on Earth. Italian theologian Paolo Tomatis suggested a careful phenomenological approach to liturgy rather than a dogmatically defined symbolics. Italian architect Donatella Forconi opened my eyes by displaying clips from an Italian classical black and white movie from the 1930s on the screen while talking at the same time. Why, certainly! It is the genre of movies, bodily movement in spaces and places, that liturgy as well as architecture has much to learn from. Korean artist Kim en Joong, OP attended the event but let a French art historian interpret his breathtaking stained-glass works where modernist and Daoist calligraphic methods

are used to let color and form reveal unseen mysteries. My own contribution mined the deep difference of natural light in the South and North of Europe, and explored three different Nordic architects with regard to their entanglement of natural and built light.

Star architect Santiago Calatrava Valls answered the expectations by presenting drawings of sacred buildings from his biography and his two ongoing projects close to the World Trade Center memorial in New York. One can wonder if it is the train station with its wide, curved roof that opens for the sacred rather than the traditionally designed Orthodox Church in shiningly white marble.

Unfortunately, distinguished Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza Vieira could not partake in person, but his compellingly exciting, experimental Santa Maria Church from 1996 in Marco de Canavezes was presented in detail to the conference.

I left the conference, which took place in a summerly warm, harmonious, and peaceful landscape below the snow-covered Alps, with ambiguous feelings and thoughts. On the one hand it was encouraging to become part of the strong and stable focus on the significance of architecture for faith, and to support the strong energy of the community to get things moving in the stolid Italian Catholic Church. On the other hand, many Italian theologians and clerics still seem to live in a world where so much still seems to be a given. Nevertheless the intense concentration of so many committed and skilled participants and speakers created a unique communicative atmosphere of openness, awareness, and frankness. Hopefully this series of conferences will continue to cultivate the dialogue and also inspire architects, artists, and theologians in other countries. For the future I would wish that one might focus also on the (ethically and politically) critical dimension of sacred architecture.

—*Sigurd Bergmann*

*The author is Professor in Religious Studies, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, initiator of the European Forum for the Study of Religion and the Environment, and the author and editor of numerous books and articles on religious architecture and the environment.*



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**W**e are a nostalgic people, in part because the past can be known, judged, and the “good parts” can be repeated. There is little risk in replicating from the past what today is deemed “traditional.” Tradition is comfortable. We can snuggle down in it. Tradition and comfort ask nothing of us but to be appreciated. We don’t even have to think...ahh...zzzzzz...where’s my blankie?

Stop right there. Wake up. An ideology grounded in nostalgia, which suggests that the “old way” is superior to anything new is an obstructionist stance intended to discourage the creative, often divinely inspired impulse.

One of the primary goals of sacred art and architecture is to challenge the faithful to enter into a deeper understanding of our relationship with God, our fellow human beings, and all of creation. Should we shrug off progress and accept that everything we need to know has already been done, and there is no place for something new? (Isaiah 43:19)

In the prologue of her terrific book, *Sanctifying Art: Inviting Conversations Between Artists, Theologians, and the Church* (Cascade Books, 2013, published as part of its “Art for Faith’s Sake” series) author Deborah Sokolove reminds us: “Much of what can be known about the Church, as well as society at large, in earlier eras is available only through the medium of the arts.”

Indeed, the study of sacred art and architecture is a textbook of Church history. For example, over more than 2,000 years in Christianity, worship spaces progress from the simple house church to the basilica to the fortress, and tell the parallel tales of the elevation of Christ’s divinity and that of the hierarchy, and the subtle occlusion of Jesus’ humanity and the diminished role of the laity. In the same way that the inspired

authors of sacred scripture addressed a particular group of believers who were living through a specific historical event, artists and architects of religious art and architecture have responded to the needs of believers, the Church, and that era’s particular view of the world.

There is a strong movement in some religious art circles to limit the creation of sacred art to replications of “traditional” work; this is the historical lens through which the present is viewed. But in truth, what is being replicated is only the appearance of historic architecture, not the craftsmanship—an inauthenticity that includes returning the laity to their pews, where some might say they belong. What took skilled craftspeople centuries to build and years to sculpt, paint, and weave cannot be replicated in vinyl, fiberglass, and artificial stone. What the Holy Spirit has ignited in the hearts of the lay faithful—their active role in the liturgy and life of the Church—cannot be doused or returned to the nave.

Returning to Sokolove’s quote, I wonder what this “traditionalist” movement, which copies what has already been done and effectively restricts the involvement of laity, says about us as a culture. Will historians conclude from our return to the past that we lacked faith in the future? Must contemporary architects and liturgical artists limit themselves to reproducing the art and thought of the classicists? Or can artists carry fresh interpretations of history forward in ways that inspire new, evolving, and expansive experiences of worship? 

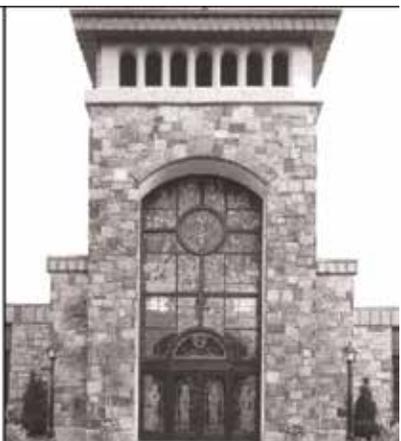
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