

# Defining the Sacred

## *Definiendo lo sagrado*

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### ABSTRACT

How do we define what is sacred architecture? People of all ages are turning away from organized religion, and looking for a more genuine, personal experience of the spiritual. In considering sacred architecture, a distinction is whether architecture itself is sacred or that architecture is an instrument that calls forth the sacred. Distinctions should be drawn between situational versus substantive sacred space. A divine presence is believed to reside in *substantive* sacred space. In situational, anyplace can be sacred depending on the presence, location, and actions of human beings, often acting in community. Edward Anders Sövik was one of the most influential architects in the design of modern churches in the US. Active from the mid-20th-century through the 1970s, Sövik designed mostly Protestant churches and wrote extensively about church design and its liturgical underpinnings. Sövik believed that early Christians perceived themselves as a community of faith unattached to any place. His skepticism about the sacredness of buildings and objects sits squarely within Protestant theology. His religious architecture offers a good model for today, as the definition of sacred architecture is changing.

### KEYWORDS

Sacred Space, Protestant Church Architecture, Emerging Trends, Sövik, Catholic University of America.

### RESUMEN

¿Cómo definimos qué es arquitectura sagrada? Las personas de todas las edades se están alejando de la religión organizada, buscando una experiencia más genuina y personal de lo espiritual. Al hablar de arquitectura sagrada, podríamos discutir si la arquitectura es sagrada en sí misma o si la arquitectura es un instrumento para evocar lo sagrado. Se deben establecer distinciones entre el espacio sagrado situacional y el sustantivo. Se cree que una presencia divina reside en el espacio sagrado *sustantivo*. En el caso situacional, cualquier lugar puede ser sagrado dependiendo de la presencia, ubicación y acciones de los seres humanos, a menudo actuando en comunidad. Edward Anders Sövik fue uno de los arquitectos más influyentes en el diseño de iglesias modernas en los Estados Unidos. Activo desde mediados del siglo XX hasta la década de 1970, Sövik diseñó principalmente iglesias protestantes y escribió mucho sobre el diseño eclesial y sus bases litúrgicas. Sövik creía que los primeros cristianos se percibían a sí mismos como una comunidad de fe independiente de cualquier lugar. Su escepticismo acerca de la sacralidad de los edificios y objetos se encuentra claramente dentro de la teología protestante. Su arquitectura religiosa ofrece un buen modelo para hoy, ya que la definición de arquitectura sagrada está cambiando.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

Espacio sagrado, Arquitectura religiosa protestante, tendencias emergentes, Sövik, Catholic University of America.



Fig. 01. Louis Kahn in the Yale Art Gallery.

## DEFINING THE SACRED

How do we define what is sacred? Can we create sacred architecture, or can we only create an architecture of the sacred? What is the role of the architect in the creation of such spaces? Is there room for a spiritual dimension in architecture that is not for religious purposes? How might we approach such an idea? These questions about sacredness are at the root of how we might think about Protestant worship space.

Today sacred art and architecture are contested territories. Where a century ago the debate for such noted church architects as Ralph Adams Cram or Bertram Goodhue might have turned on the most appropriate stylistic response for a church, the question today is... do we need a building at all to be religious or sacred? Pastor Keith Anderson, a Lutheran minister in Dublin, Pennsylvania, meets members of his congregation in a tavern for «God on Tap». Anderson believes that the Church needs to meet people where they are, in secular places, not exclusively in what we might identify as holy, sacred places.

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.

They are suspicious of the institutional power of all religions, and the corruption that is bound to come with such worldly influence. According to recent surveys by the General Social Survey, the Trinity College «American Religious Identification Survey», and the Pew Research Center, the percent of adults surveyed who said that they are not affiliated with any organized religion, are agnostic or atheist, or described their religious affiliation as *None* has steadily grown. This is the second largest group in these surveys—larger than any single denomination or sect of believers, except for Roman Catholics. The largest demographic group of *Nones* is found in college-aged people. Obviously, the landscape of faith is changing. How are architects the very people who are changing their attitudes about religion the fastest?

I have noticed that most of us architects can become somewhat uncomfortable when the whole idea of the sacred in architecture—how we define it, how we imagine we can create it—is presented. We tend to veer away from a discussion of personal belief and the role of a sense of the sacred in architecture, particularly as a human experience. The discussion of *the sacred* is kept at a safe, intellectual distance. As architects we tend to be far more comfortable theorizing about the role of architecture itself as a *sacred*



Fig. 02. Transcendent light in Peter Zumthor's Bruder Klaus Field Chapel.

object that should be worshipped and revered. In fact, we architects, theorists, and professors use a different vocabulary. We are more comfortable speaking of architecture as *immeasurable*, *ineffable*, *oceanic*, *possessing absence*, as a *void*, or a *vanishing point*, and far less comfortable about focusing on the liturgical needs that serves a religious belief system, such as a Roman Catholic Easter Mass. Can architectural space itself be sacred, or is it only through its setting as a place of gathering for worship, contemplation, prayer, meditation, or fellowship that architecture can become sacred? One could argue that the very instrumental nature of architecture — its liturgical functional aspect — helps to call forth the sacred, rather than the belief on the part of many of us architects in the power of design itself to create potent sacred space.

Architectural theory rarely, if ever, ventures into the *sacred* as it is understood as an expression of religious belief or spirituality. Instead, what may be considered *sacred* in architecture, which is part of the indoctrination of architectural education, has to do with beliefs, rituals, figures, and practices of what could be termed the *religion of architecture*. For example, the architectural canon recognizes certain architects, such as Louis Kahn, who have obtained

a certain sainthood in the creation of architecture, revered by many of us (Fig. 01). Also, we recognize architects who are currently practicing whose work takes on certain spiritual overtones (one thinks of Peter Zumthor, Santiago Calatrava, and Tadao Ando). Many of these architects have designed sacred spaces and talk about their work in its spiritual dimensions, yet the discussion of spirituality tends to stay in the realm of the *religion of architecture*, not a spirituality that exists outside of architecture (Fig. 02).

Frank Lloyd Wright is perhaps the best example of an architect who saw his architecture as sacred, and was not shy about it (Fig. 03). In her book on Wright's design of religious buildings, professor and historian Anat Geva notes that, «Wright considered all of his architecture as sacred» (2012, 4). For Wright, it was an expression of a living spirit that builds, and that the act of building was a sacred act, creating a sacred place. Nature, first and foremost, was for Wright a way to express the sanctity of God's creation (Fig. 04). Essentially, the experience of nature was a way to experience God, and this is why he included nature in many of his buildings, religious or not, and described their design as *organic* (Geva 2012).

The important distinction here is that the *sacred* for many of these architects is the architectural creation itself. Le Corbusier famously used the term *ineffable space* to describe the highest experiential quality that architecture may provoke — something that he equated with the phenomenon of faith and therefore at the level of the sacred. In an interview about his work at the monastery at La Tourette in Evieux, France, Corbusier said that this quality of *ineffable space* is attained when a work of architecture «reaches a maximum of intensity, when it has the best proportions and has been made with the best quality of execution, when it has reached perfection» (Britton 2010, 13). When this happens, Corbusier explained, the work starts to *radiate*, and gives the space a quality that «does not depend on dimensions but on the quality of its perfection. It belongs to the domain of the ineffable, of that which cannot be said» (Britton 2010, 13).

Le Corbusier went one step further to strengthen the importance of architecture in creating what for

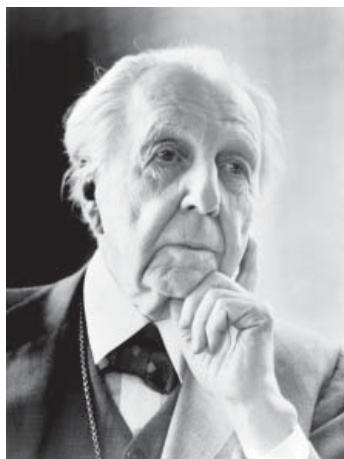


Fig. 03. Frank Lloyd Wright believed that all his architecture was sacred.

Fig. 04. Wright's Fallingwater house expresses the divine through nature.

him could be described as a sense of the sacred when he wrote, in a different context, «I am not conscious of the miracle of faith, but I often live that of ineffable space, the consummation of plastic emotion» (Le Corbusier 1948, 8). Corbusier suggests that the sense of the sacred (the *ineffable*) is provided or created by the architecture itself, a product of its material design, its proportions, harmony, and craft, attained through the architect's creative capacity to call it into being. This creative power of the architect sanctifies the space, makes it sacred.

Now, many have observed that certain architects tend to have a *God complex*, but it is probably more accurate to describe such architects as priests in the *religion of architecture*. They believe that they have certain powers to create sacred places through the architecture that they divine. In this sense, the architect functions as a shaman, a high priest that imparts through creativity, vision, and determination an aura of holiness to the building. Reading Corbusier, it is hard not to think that certain architects are capable of a kind of secular trans-substantiation, turning mere concrete, steel, and glass into sacred objects that *radiate* in the canon of architecture, and can exert their power to make places sacred.

But doesn't the architect need to share some sense of the sacred with the people whom the architecture will serve, and how does the architect respond when the sense of the sacred is not shared? Rafael Moneo addressed this very dilemma openly and with humility in his design of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles (Fig. 05). In beginning the project, Moneo found himself questioning how to proceed with a building of such religious and cultural significance in an age when the sense of the sacred has become more a personal belief than one dictated by an institution. «The architect, facing the challenge of building a church or a temple, cannot rely on a vision of the sacred shared by those who will use the building», Moneo explains, «but instead must risk offering his or her version of sacred space» (Britton 2010, 159). The architect thus must use the only means available to him or her as the creative agent: the shaping of space, the manipulation of light and sound, the expression of materials, textures, colors, and religious symbols.

Yet Moneo sensed that the architect's reliance on marshaling the materials of architecture in an effort to create something sacred might fall short. He confesses that he did not feel «capable of projecting a transcendent space able to incite a sensory



Fig. 05. Interior of Rafael Moneo's Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels.

experience in the individual (...) nor did I expect to build a perfect machine like those (...) from the cathedral builders of the Middle Ages. The alternative was to design the cathedral conscious of those spaces which could be understood as metaphors of religious experience» (Britton 2010, 159). Moneo here expresses his awareness of the limitations of architecture to *create* the sacred, and of his own personal crisis of confidence to be able to design a space that becomes sacred through the sheer power of the architecture. What he can offer honestly as a designer is the creation of a setting, a space that suggests or recalls the images of sacred places throughout history, as metaphors that might allow or invite the believer to enter into a state, personally and in the shared presence of others, through which the sacred can be experienced—not defined, or contained, or quantified. The elusive nature of the sacred thus can never be captured and held, like a firefly in a jar on a summer's night.

What Moneo describes is how architecture can provide a setting for the sacred to transpire, but it cannot create the sacred through an arrangement of architectural elements. Such an idea might be anathema to certain architects who see their role as conjurers. The creation of sacred architecture, in

which the building itself is the sacrament, can only take place within the *religion of architecture*. In such a belief system, which is instilled in architecture school and tended by the high priests of the profession, architecture can and often does — through the skillful manipulation of light, sound, materials, texture, color, water, flame, and shadow—become transcendent. Human experience of such spaces can take us out of our quotidian existence, transport us to another state of being. But does the architecture actually make a place sacred, does it sanctify it? Is the sacredness of a space dependent upon the mystical combination of elements that the architect has mastered?

This does not mean that architecture does not have an important role in creating a place where we can experience the holy. Indeed, the entire history of the greatest works of architecture is mostly about the creation of sacred space. The important distinction is whether the architecture itself is sacred (or actually makes a place sacred, or is of the sacred) versus the idea that architecture is an instrument that calls forth the sacred, beckons it. These are two different conditions. In the first it is the very matter of the architecture—its presence—that is sacral. In the second condition, the architecture creates a space, a

mood, a physical setting that helps people to experience the sacred, deeply inside or outside themselves. It is like the difference between a musical instrument and music. The horn is not music. But the horn (through its careful design and construction) allows human breath to fill it, and music is made. Maybe it is the human element that makes a place sacred.

Religion scholar Diana Eck notes that architecture functions as a frame to help us experience — on a personal level and in community — the sacred, not to create the sacred itself. Architecture is often the lens through which we are able to orient ourselves to the grandeur of the sacred, the *numinous* (to use the theologian Rudolf Otto's word for it). «It is through the windows», explains Eck, «that we are able to see in ways our unfettered gaze cannot comprehend. Architects do not, in that sense, construct the sacred. But they do enable us to see it, and in that sense architecture is a revelatory art» (Britton 2010, 113).

In her book *Sacred Power, Sacred Space*, Jeanne Halgren Kilde articulates the notion of *situational* versus *substantive* sacred space. Substantive sacred space is that in which a divine presence is believed to reside, and which in turn makes the space *sacred*. Mircea Eliade, the noted historian of religion, describes it as a place that connects heaven, earth, and the underworld, with an *axis mundi* extending vertically through these realms, separating the sacred from the profane. This view posits sacredness inherent in the very objects used in worship, including buildings: sacred architecture. But another perspective describes the sacred as *situational*: anyplace can be sacred depending on the presence, location, and actions of human beings, often acting in community, such as a rural tent revival meeting from the 1930s. It is this kind of sacred space that seems to be described by Christ himself who, according to scripture, said: «For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them» (Matthew 18:20). This verse from Matthew describes a relational aspect of the sacred among people in community. This means that virtually any place can be sacred or holy, depending on the situation.

Nearly all religions locate the creation of the sacred in the actions of people drawn to celebrate

and share belief. Yale philosopher Karsten Harries describes the sacred as the function of people gathered to remember: «Architecture is properly sacred», Harries suggests, «only as a site of sacred memory» (Britton 2010, 64). Harries believes that such sacred memory helps to define identity, it is communal, and it expresses a concern for the future, what we might also describe as an afterlife. Harries' description suggests that sacred architecture needs to fulfill a certain function, provide a space for human action to transpire, through which sacredness might be achieved. If this is the case, we can see the careful attention to how the built environment accommodates ritual, or its function as a place of prayer, meditation, or solace, as the highest calling in architecture's service to the sacred.

None other than Eliade himself, who has been described as a chief proponent of the view that the sacred is primarily substantive—it resides in a place that joins heaven and earth—makes a case that sacredness can be situational. In his most famous work, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade writes that «when we orient ourselves in the world, we are in fact reproducing or re-enacting the work of the gods» (Eliade 1959, 29). Establishing place, organizing it, inhabiting it, in effect are all sacred acts of creation, according to Eliade, replicas of the universe created and inhabited by the gods. In fact, as Eliade describes place-making: every existential decision to situate ourselves in space «constitutes a religious decision» (Eliade 1959, 65). Such acts are sanctified because they replicate the work of the gods. What is the primary work of the architect? It is to situate other human beings in space. From this perspective, one might argue that the act of design is always a religious act—one that sanctifies, because it replicates the work of the gods. Through design, architects create a rationale world from chaos.

## EDWARD ANDERS SÖVIK

In considering what direction the design of contemporary sacred space might take, I want to turn next to the work of one of the most influential architects in the design of modern Protestant churches: Edward Anders Sövik (Fig. 06). Although his prac-



Fig. 06. Architect Edward Anders Sövik in 1956.

tice centered in the Midwest region of the United States, Sövik nonetheless established a national reputation. Active from the mid-20th-century up through the 1970s, Sövik designed mostly Protestant churches and wrote extensively about church design and its liturgical underpinnings. His most important treatise was the book, *Architecture for Worship*, which appeared in 1973 and coalesced many of the theories that he formulated from the late 1940s onward. The historian Gretchen Buggeln (2016, 30), who has written extensively on post-war church design, describes Sövik as a «theologian of space». She notes that more than any other American Protestant architect, Sövik shaped discussions about church architecture in the last half of the 20th century (Buggeln 2016).

Sövik was born in 1918 in China, to parents who were Norwegian-Lutheran missionaries. His early education took place in China, and he studied art and English at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, graduating in 1939. Afterward, he studied at the Luther Theological Seminary for three semesters, and considered missionary work back in China. After Pearl Harbor was attacked he joined the U.S. Marine Corps and flew as a fighter pilot in the Pacific. After the war he enrolled in the Yale School of Architecture and graduated in 1949, with an interest in church architecture and design (he designed a chapel for his thesis project at Yale). He returned to Northfield and began his practice, forming an office with two colleagues in 1953.

According to Buggeln, Sövik quickly established a reputation for designing modern religious buildings, in fact he refused to design neo-Gothic or classical churches (Fig. 07). Sövik was guided by a very strong, articulate theological view. Unlike many architects who design religious buildings, Sövik focused on the theological implications of his designs, and how they would fulfill his view of a new role of architecture in shaping worship (Buggeln 2016). As an architect, Sövik had fairly radical ideas about sacred architecture and the role of church buildings. It's important to note that Sövik studied at a Lutheran seminary before he studied architecture. His ideas about religious architecture were very strong and articulate, based in theology and liturgy, and he carried them through his work with what could be described as a missionary zeal. In fact, Buggeln (2016) notes that Sövik had a strong sense of his vocation in the Church.

As an architect, Sövik believed that the Christian Church lost its way in the 3rd century of the Common Era when it began to build places specifically dedicated to worship. He argued that the dichotomy between *sacred* places and *secular* places (Eliade would call them *profane* places) was not only false, it was a pre-Christian, pagan view of the world. In a 1972 article in *Faith & Form* (the journal that he helped create), Sövik writes that, «Christian theology has generally recovered in the last decades a concept of the relationship between secular and sacred which

ties us back to the pre-Constantinian church. This perception is affecting the life of the church in many areas; it is also revolutionizing the approach to providing places for worship» (Sövik 1972, 13).

Sövik points out that the multitude of deities in the Roman Empire each had their own shrines, temples, altars, and holy places. He argues that, in sharp contrast to this, the early Christians «saw themselves uniquely as a community of faith unattached to any place» (Sövik 1972, 13). But after Constantine, places take precedence, Sövik argues. He writes in *Architecture for Worship*: «The conception of people as the Temple of God was replaced by the notion of holy places. The house of the church became the house of God. The idea of holy things eclipsed the idea of holy people and holy acts» (Sövik 1972, 18).

Sövik's skepticism of the holiness or sacredness of buildings and objects for worship sits squarely within Protestant theology. According to Protestant church architecture historian James White, *The Westminster Directory of 1644* —the traditional standard for Presbyterian worship— stated that «no place is capable of any holiness» (White 1964, 31). White elaborates further that, to a Protestant, there is nothing sacred about a pulpit or a font, «but there is definitely something sacred in preaching or baptism, the acts for which these objects are employed» (White 1964, 32).

Sövik echoes this Protestant view of the sacred when he writes: «the liturgical event depends not on objects but on people, on actions rather than on things. The erection of elaborate and imposing altars or pulpits or crosses as foci for devotion are inimical. The holiest things in the place of worship are the people—not the objects or symbols» (1972, 14) (Fig. 08).

If there is no division between the sacred and the secular, how does one proceed as a church architect? Sövik argued that we should no longer think of churches as distinctively *holy* places, but that they should be «fully secular in character» (1972, 13). In fact, the whole notion of ecclesiastical architecture disturbed him. Writing in *Faith & Form*, Sövik states: «the structures we build to shelter our



Fig. 07. Sövik's St. Leo Catholic Church in Pipestone (Minnesota, USA), 1969.

assemblies should not seek to be different in style or general appearance, in the use of materials, or in the detailing from other good structures we design. A church building should not 'look like a church'» (1972, 13-14).

Sövik believed that such buildings should not be used exclusively or specifically for worship, but that they should be flexible enough to accommodate a number of uses, all geared to the needs of the community (Fig. 09). He used the term *non-church* to describe these religious structures, and their multiple functions had precedent in the Congregationalists' construction of meetinghouses, which were used for secular as well as religious purposes. In *Architecture for Worship*, Sövik writes that to include facilities not only for worship and teaching «but for social,



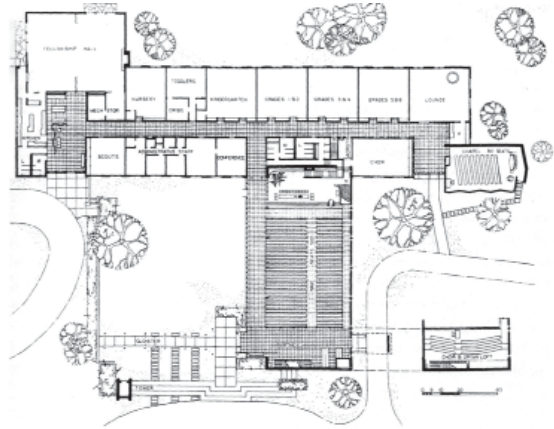


Fig. 08. First Baptist Church in Bloomington (Indiana, USA), 1957.  
Fig. 09. Sövik's plan of First Baptist Church.  
Fig. 10. Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd,  
Bloomington (Minnesota, USA) 1967.  
Fig. 11. Lounge in Olivet Lutheran Church,  
Fargo (North Dakota, USA), 1965.

care centers, clinics, and more recently housing for the elderly, indicates that church members are more and more seeing the Christian role as the role of servanthood» (Sövik 1973, 38). For Sövik, these *non-churches* were the sincerest forms of Christian architecture: «An architectural work can be called Christian», Sövik believed, «only inasmuch as it serves the work of the church, which is its ministry, and communicates faithfully the vision of the church, which is its mission» (1973, 52).

Many churches designed by Sövik, especially the later ones, are hard to distinguish from schools, libraries, or other civic buildings (Fig. 10). They are elegantly spare in their planning and decoration, which the architect believed made the buildings themselves Christlike: accommodating, simple, hospitable, genuine, servant-like. The space for worship in a Sövik church is typically one large room, without division between clergy and laity, so it could accommodate *the priesthood of believers*, as Sövik described it in Protestant parlance. They are not monumental or awe-inspiring; rather, they strive for a domestic quality, which Sövik linked to the places where early Christians first gathered for worship: their homes (Fig. 11). Their materials and construction needed to be contemporary. Sövik believed that religious architecture ought to express a commitment to the real and the true, eschewing «imitations of historical styles, the use of imitation materials, the falsifying of structure, the incrustation of buildings with archaic and meaningless symbols» (1967, 9).

The characteristic of beauty was also important to Sövik in these non-church buildings. He saw beauty as a part of the experience of the sacred. In *Architecture for Worship*, Sövik writes: «Since there are no boundaries between the sacred and the secular in the life and architecture of the Christian, all of experience having been seen to be potentially sacred, then all things beautiful may be seen as portals to the transcendent and many works which include no specifically ecclesiastical image may illuminate the religious consciousness» (1973, 64).

Sövik's writings and his architecture have come in for their share of criticism, especially from writers and architects with a particular Roman Catholic slant,

albeit years after the Sövik was active. Architect and theologian Steven Schloeder faults Sövik's romantic view of the *house church* as scripturally suspect. Michael Rose's argument against Sövik's architecture was that it was *ugly*, didn't look like a church, and lacked a transcendent aura. In 1999, architect Duncan Stroik criticized the Catholic Church's 1978 guide, *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, which he found worthy of «the 'non-church' promoted by Protestant architect Anders Sövik» (Stroik 1999). Each of these critics writes from a Roman Catholic perspective that has been highly critical of the reforms of Vatican II, and posits that the sacred resides in the architecture and art of church buildings.

In contrast, Sövik wrote and designed from a Protestant viewpoint. He emphasizes liturgy, the purpose of gathering, and how the environment can support that gathering. He does not see architecture as precious, as holy in itself, which is a very hard idea for many of us architects to get our heads around, because we tend to view the practice of architecture in religious terms, and the results of these holy acts, our actions as architects, and holy places, imbued with sacredness.

## WHAT MIGHT FUTURE HOUSES OF WORSHIP LOOK LIKE?

I believe that the architecture of Edward Sövik offers a good model for us to consider today, as the definition of the sacred and sacred architecture is changing. Sövik's emphasis on the secular and the sacred, together, is prescient regarding the current state of religion and spirituality in contemporary culture. As I touched upon earlier, over the past several years in North America and Europe there has been a shift away from organized religion to a more *personal spirituality*. The Pew Center for Research 2012 study saw the category of *Nones* (people without any connection to organized religion) climb to 20 percent of the general population. Demographically, *Nones* account for 32 percent of people aged 18-29, the largest share of any of the five age brackets in the study, and of course this is the group that includes college students. It is important to note that *Nones* are not necessarily atheists or believe in God, 58



Fig. 12. Perspective view of Hoffman and Pisseri's design.  
Fig. 13. Hoffman and Pisseri's scheme includes a sacred garden.  
Fig. 14. O'Loughlin and Gregory's place for the spiritually underserved.  
Fig. 15. Light and tall spaces are used for circulation.  
Fig. 16. Joseph Barrick and Ari Cerritelli designed a large plaza with digital screen for their sacred space.  
Fig. 17. A double-sided wall allows neighbors to share prayers in Barrick and Cerritelli's design.



percent say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth, 37 percent describe themselves as *spiritual* but not *religious*, while 21 percent say they pray every day (Pew Research Center 2012). How do these trends portend a change in how the sacred is defined, and how is that definition changing when considered by Millennials (those born between 1980 and 2000)?

People of this generation are searching for an expression that spirituality and its attendant sacredness. The idea of that you need a building or a space as the place to practice your religion or to be spiritual is being questioned. More people are finding the sacred in the secular, as Sövik urged. What does this mean for religious architecture and sacred space when you ask questions, such as: 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?

My colleague, Professor Julio Bermudez at The Catholic University of America, and myself had an opportunity to interrogate these issues when we taught a graduate architecture studio together. I served as a visiting professor for a graduate design studio at the Catholic University School of Architecture and Planning's Sacred Space and Cultural Studies concentration. A nearly semester-long studio design project provided a way for us to enter into a dialogue with students about their own spirituality, and in light of their own belief systems how they defined the sacred. How did those definitions compare with how architecture faculty, who sat in on design reviews, perceive the sacred and how it is expressed in architecture?

The studio's dozen graduate students 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. Professor Bermudez and I shared with the students statistical data on people's changing attitudes toward organized religion, how these changes are expressed in personal ideas an affect on the creation of sacred space. In the context of these cultural develop-

ments 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). We assigned a multi-month design problem focused on defining the sacred, and then creating a sacred place outside of the conventional notions of a *religious* building. The project was set within an evolving, thriving urban neighborhood.

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. Specifically because they were Millennials, 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 the sacred?

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 in space through 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

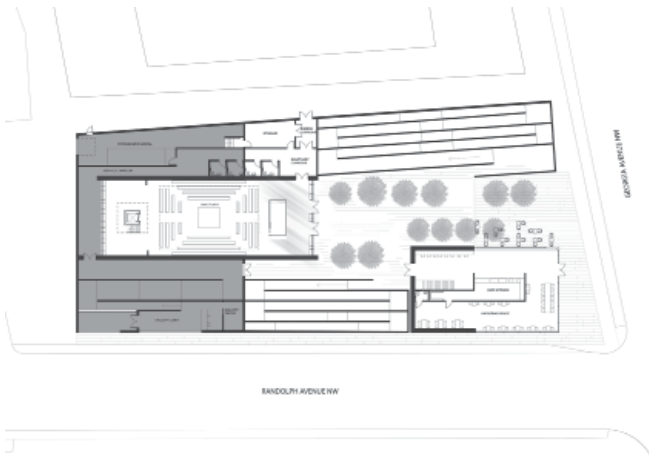


Fig. 18. Plan of Devon Brophy and Madeline Wentzell's design for a labyrinth-like building.

Fig. 19. Brophy and Wentzell's sacred space is punctuated by stained glass.

Fig. 20. Ugochukwu Nnebue and Sina Moayedí designed a ramp that rotates through sacred space.

Fig. 21. Section through Nnebue and Moayedí's new kind of sacred space.

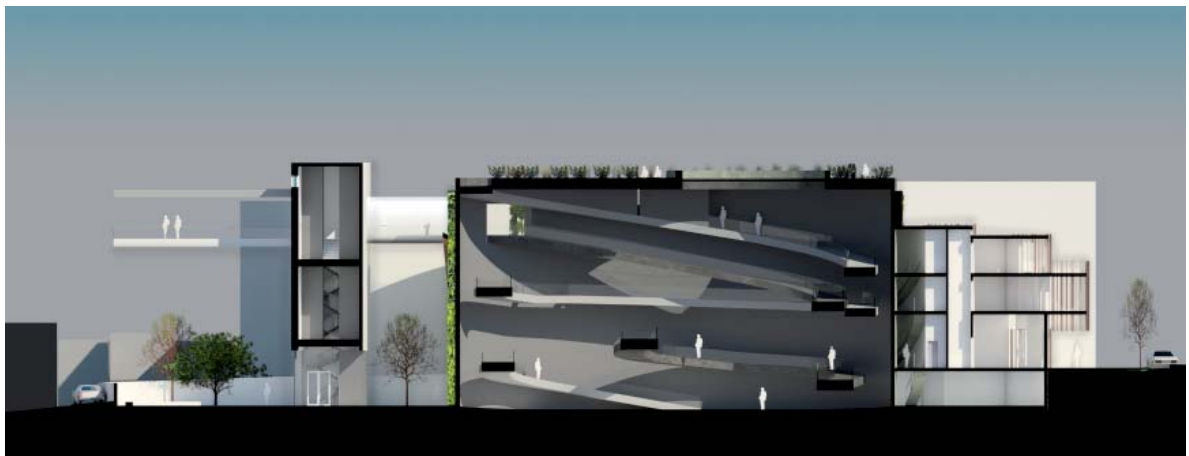
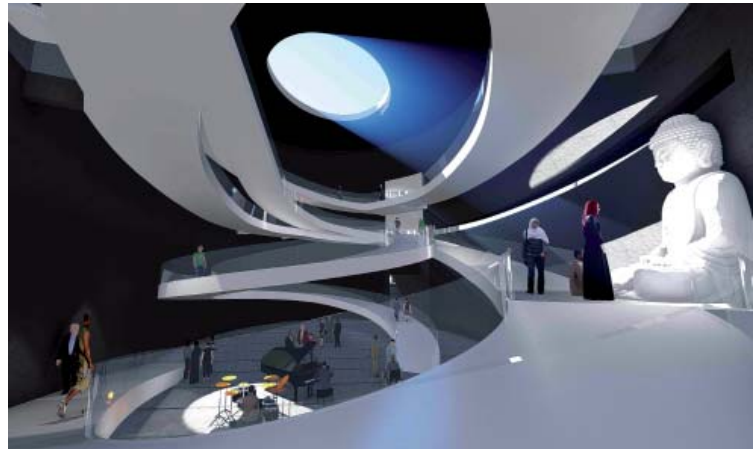




Fig. 22. Nnebue and Moayedí present their project at Catholic University of America.

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.

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 fast food restaurant 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.

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 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. The program was flexible in the sense that the students had to address eight spaces/places from the program list. Here is the program.

In the list there are four items (3, 6, 9, 11) that were required in every design, and four program items were chosen by the students from the rest of the list.

The Program List is as follows:

1. A place to pray, to leave a prayer and to take a prayer.
2. A place to serve meals to those in need.
- 3. An outdoor space that has some privacy.**
4. A place devoted just to view the moon and stars.
5. A place for target shooting.
- 6. A traditional worship space.**
7. A place where items and non-perishable food can be deposited by neighbors for those in need.
8. A place to cry and grieve a loss.
- 9. A program element that is «Your Thing».**
10. A place where one can obtain information and guidance on health and nutrition.
- 11. A pub or coffeehouse, with a place for groups to share conversation on spirituality/religion.**
12. A place to slow down and appreciate the wonders of nature.
13. A place where art can be made, displayed, and performed.
14. A place to find, experience, and practice silence.
15. A place to house or attend those in (you define) need.
16. A spiritual home for those feeling spiritually homeless.
17. A place to give or receive.

It was up to the student designers to decide how much space these program elements should occupy to successfully serve their 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 offered opportunities to design *in cathedral*. The term *in cathedral* was coined by author and educator Elizabeth Drescher and explored by Pastor Keith Anderson in his book, *The Digital Cathedral*. 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 that I talked about earlier. Petworth Place presented opportunities to design a *situational* sacred space, one that I believe would have been recognized by Ed Sövik. The search for the sacred through the design studio assignment of Petworth Place resulted in what we think are some provocative, challenging schemes.

We start with students Matthew Hoffman and Lisa Pisseri (Fig. 12). In this scheme, Matthew and Lisa used the garden metaphor to create sacred place for the Pentworth community, giving the neighborhood a green space. The slab structure is a chapel. The interior of the chapel space incorporates colors and tracery suggest the tree of life (Fig. 13). A private garden behind the chapel allows a connection with nature, signifying the biblical location of humans' first encounter with the Creator.

Next is a design by Emily O'Loughlin and Megan Gregory (Fig. 14). Emily and Megan'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, a domestic sphere (Fig. 15). Circulation space in the scheme provides a sense of journey and gracious welcome with its high ceiling and natural light.

Students Joseph Barrick and Ari Cerritelli conceived of this new sacred space as a place where you could go to interact with the people around the globe, through a variety of media, such as a large screen visible from an open plaza (Fig. 16). Within the building are large and small spaces where people from the neighborhood can share, learn, and celebrate with one another (Fig. 17). A double wailing wall in this design allows local Petworth residents to take a prayer and leave a prayer through moveable drawers.

Next is a scheme Devin Brophy and Madeline Wentzell (Fig. 18). Pilgrimage as a way of discovering the sacred is at the heart of Devin and Maddie'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. Long paths to foster meditation are bound by walls that at first obscure the destination, which is revealed as one climbs in elevation (Fig. 19). The labyrinth that is the heart of the design culminates in a sacred space contained by stained glass.

Finally, there is Ugochukwu Nnebue and Sina Moayedí (Fig. 20). Spiral ramps lit by natural light from above is central to Ugo and Sina's 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 (Fig. 21). A section of the design 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. At night, the rotunda offers views of stars and moonlit icons and effigies from the world's religions.

What did we learn as professors for this studio? (Fig. 22). Throughout the semester the design process seemed at times very 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 made it difficult to provide guidance the students to move forward.

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. The reviewers had a more *traditional* sense of the sacred, that it was more *substantive*, while the students presented schemes that seemed much more situational in their sacredness. Most of the schemes focused on creating sacred space through which people could explore relationships and build community.

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 definition of the sacred is not static and unchanging.

The Protestant Reformation called into question the nature of the sacred. The work of Edward Anders Sövik and other architects pushed the boundaries of what a church could be. Our work with our students revealed that we are living through a time when the whole notion of the sacred is open to speculation. Every generation needs to ask and try to answer what it is. The result might be architecture, secular as well as sacred, that is more expressive of, and responsive to, the full range of human experience.

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## CREDITS

All illustrations provided by the author.