

THE ARCHITECTURE OF SACRED SPACES

The Architectures of Theology

Historically, the architecture of religious worship has assumed two geometric forms:

First, the linear, in which people face in one direction (usually East) towards a symbolic or iconic presence of a deity: a high altar, a statue, a sacred book. Examples include the basilicas and cathedrals of Europe, synagogues, and many of the temples in India.

Second, the circular, in which people from around are gathered around a fixed central focus, such as fire, a sacrificial altar, or just an empty space. Examples include the kiva of Native Americans, the peristyle temples of ancient Greece, and quaker meeting houses.

Until quite recently the Christian tradition has favored the basilica form in one of its several modifications. This form symbolizes the theology of spiritual growth. The interior of the church is divided into a succession of spaces which mark a path to the high altar, the Holy of Hollies, the abode of the deity... There is a narthex, a transition space from the exterior secular space to the interior sacred space. In many churches one encounters a baptismal front near the entrance which symbolizes both the entrance to the nave and the beginning of an individual's spiritual path. The nave itself is usually a single large space but segmented by a series of pillars or bays symbolically marking stations along life's way.

The first major transition, within the church is between the nave and the chancel, frequently marked by steps and a rood screen, the gate of death to the world. The successive elevations of nave, chancel, and sanctuary symbolizes climbing a holy mountain, a universal symbol of the spiritual path that leads to the deity who dwells on the summit. Passing through the rood screen, climbing the first stairs, entering the chancel one is aware of entering a different and more sacred space. In Anglican churches, the customary choir arrangement in the chancel is antiphonal. This has traditional significance, symbolizing the dialogue between the congregation and God.

Next, elevated another step and separated from the chancel by a rail, is the sanctuary. This has traditionally been a reserve for those celebrating the Eucharist. Within this space is the high altar, the symbolic location of God Transcendent.

In recent years, the circular church form has become more common. This form emphasizes, less the idea of individual spiritual path and more the importance of Christian community. In the center is the Eucharistic table, around which in all quarters are the seats for the congregation. There is no preferred direction and no differences in the interior space. There is the table and the congregation, no barriers between, minimizing the role of the priesthood and supporting the doctrine that all are equal before God. This is not God Transcendent above and beyond, but is God Immanent, Immanuel, God with and within us. There are some, e.g. Joseph Campbell, who feel that this form inculcates a feeling of self-sufficiency and leads to the eventual exclusion

of god altogether. There is no question but that the who forms reflect, if not two distinct theologies, at least a very significant difference of emphasis.

With the placing of a Eucharistic table at the crossing in churches with transepts, a blend of the two modes was affected. The table at the crossing simulated a quasi-circular format and a high altar at the terminus of the apse preserved the linear format. Perhaps the church of the future, in order to meet both the needs of forging community, and enhancing spiritual development, should incorporate both the circular and linear formats. The design should have flexibility, like a stage, allowing one or the other mode to be used as befits the occasion: small number gathered around the eucharistic table, sanctifying the host and partaking of god immanent; or the entire congregation focused on the presence beyond the Holy of Hollies worshipping God Transcendent.

These forms are not only symbolic but affect the attitudes and self-image of those in the church. In the circular form, there is a feeling of equality and community, and also feelings of maturity and self-sufficiency. We have come of age, accountability is upon our shoulders. We are active participants in God's plan. In the linear form, on the other hands, there remains a feeling of dependence and need, we are not self-sufficient, we are still sheep in need of the good Shepard. Bu the linear form posses a dynamic, a sense of movement to a higher potential, to spiritual growth. It is made for processions with their power of movement from space to space to space. This in contrast to the static mood inherent in the circular form. But without the High Altar, the Holy of Hollies, there is no place for God.

Forms and Places of Mystery

Certain forms invite projections onto themselves. And some such forms can accept many projections. For example, the Great Pyramid of Cheops has invited and accepted countless projections on its form, scale, and structure. People have projected onto history and prophecy, mathematical relations, esoteric and practical applications. Similarly, the great cathedrals have invited and accepted projections some of which may have been actually built in by the designers, but others have come into existence only later through the interaction of the cathedral with the mind and feelings of the beholder.

What is it in certain forms that invite and allow projections to be accepted? What is it that makes certain forms and places psychologically powerful and mysterious? Is it

- Their history? Have past events stored their energies in the place or form. For example, does a library in some sense contain the presence of all who have written about it in the books on its shelves, or is some spirit present in the words themselves? Or on a battle field is an essence of all who have sacrificed themselves there somehow forever present?
- Time? Does time by itself encrust a form or place with spiritual essences. Does just being ancient make a form or place assume magic and mystery?

- Place itself? Are some locations per say energy centers? Are there special places on the earth having properties that are found nowhere else? Sacred mountains, rocks, groves, rivers...
- Complexity? Are some forms intriguing because they are puzzles, their complexity inviting exploration in the hope of finding a hidden key, a secret treasure?
- That they liberate us? Do some forms and places have the power to free us from the prison of the mundane? After we have been there, we somehow know that our lives will forever be different.
- Ambiguity? The form can take on many aspects, and it cannot be reduced to one meaning, on interpretation. Its nature forbids an unequivocal categorization. This intrigues and challenges us.

Which, if any or all, explain the power of these forms to entertain our projections? Perhaps such forms are mirrors, they reflect some part of ourselves back to us. We **recognize** something in the form that we already know because it is in us. Or perhaps such forms have “frequencies”, with which we **resonate**. Both recognition and resonance are aspects of projection. Lastly, we may say that a mystery permits no orthodoxy, and consequently there can be no heresies.

On Architectural Forms of Worship

Historically, communal worship has assumed two geometric forms: **First**, the circular, in which people, considered as equals, are gathered around a central focus, an Arche, such as a fire, sacrificial altar, Eucharistic table, or empty space. Historical examples include the kiva, peristyle temples, quaker meeting houses. Good modern examples are churches such as All Souls, Schenecatady, NY (Edward Durell Stone), St James, the Fisherman, Wellfleet, MA (Olav Hammarstrom). This form is increasingly favored by monastic orders.

Second, the Linear, in which people face in one direction (usually east) towards the Holy of Hollies, a symbolic or iconic presence of a deity: a high altar, a statue, a painting, a sacred book. In this form there are usually divisions in the building in the form of steps, rails, screens, doors, indicating a sequence of increasing sanctity as the Holy of Hollies is approached—the garden, the narthex, the nave, the chancel, the sanctuary. Examples of this hierarchical form are found from the temples and shrines of Japan and India to the basilicas and cathedral of Europe. Modern examples, employing a “post Gothic” format, in which the beam structure of the roof reinforces the symbolic steps, include the Wayfarers Chapel, Palos Verdes, CA (Lloyd Wright), Thorncrown Chapel, Eureka Springs, AR (E. Fay Jones)

With the introduction of transepts, the Gothic cathedral effected a blend of the two modes. A eucharistic table at the crossing simulated a quasi-circular format (celtic cross) and a high altar at the terminus of the apse preserved the linear format. A second approach to having both the eucharistic table and the high altar is in the semi-circular form. An excellent example is St. Matthew’s, Pacific Palisades, CA (Charles Moore).

Perhaps to meet the needs of both forging community and enhancing spiritual development, a church should incorporate both the circular and linear formats. A possible future approach to this need would be a design based on a temporal pattern. That is, the design should have flexibility, like a stage allowing one or the other mode to be used as befits the occasion; small numbers gathered around the eucharistic table, sanctifying the host and partaking of God immanent; or the entire congregation focused on the presence beyond the Holy of Hollies, praising and worshiping God Transcendent.

But architectural forms are not only symbolic, they affect the attitudes of the participants. In the circular form, there is a feeling of equality and community, but also a feeling of maturity with its derivative feeling of self-sufficiency, "we are coming of age, we are no longer sheep". In the linear form, there remains a feeling of dependence and need, "we shall never be completely self-sufficient, we are still the children of a loving parent". But the linear form possesses a dynamic, especially when enhanced with procession, that vividly symbolizes the process of spiritual growth. This in contrast to the more static mood of the circular form.

But whatever the form, without the High Altar, the Holy of Hollies, God is ultimately displaced from the church.