

The Sacred in Art and Architecture: The Light Within and Beyond Form

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1. Introduction

In a previous paper,¹ I suggested that the question of “*How are Healthy and Healing Places to be created and sustained?*”, leads naturally into a deeper question of “*How is Authenticity to be attained?*”, and thence to an even more subtle question: “*How can the Sacred be invested in Art and Architecture?*”. The qualities that are sought must be striven for, but can only be received through Grace.

The theory and practice of Sacred Architecture is therefore primarily spiritual activity; and a way of practicing that activity is through attending towards ‘Meaning Beyond Meaning’. This provides a means of identifying those parts of the architectural process where spiritual activity is called for, and the nature of that activity. On scanning a field of inquiry, attention is paid to localized ‘hot-spots’ of inner cohesion and resonance, of latent ambience, which on inspection reveal significant depths to experience and meaning that far exceed the immediate concerns of the mundane process. This leads into contact with the deeper reality that underlies phenomenal manifestation, and which embraces the diverse localized instances of the mundane world. By openness and responsiveness to that essential reality, and by participation with it, one may receive closer contact with the Divine.

So that it is in the quietening of the will, and in its surrender to the ‘Will of God’, through contemplation and prayer, that a way is opened for meaning to be received, as an act of Grace. Meaningful architecture is therefore best attained by proper remembrance of the Divine.

The critical point to the approach of Meaning Beyond Meaning is that the essence lies beyond the form, and beyond formal manipulation. It lies deeper within. It is towards that essence that one attends. One’s path lies in discovering the ‘Will of God’ - both in creating, and in apprehending and appreciating the Sacred Art-work. An introduction to, and

overview of that subtle and profound process, as tentatively explored in the author's dissertation, is presented in a companion paper.²

So it is to the light within and beyond form that one attends, in the penetration into essence. This has been beautifully expressed:³

*'The light, as one, penetrates into space,
And yet adapts itself to every form;
So the inmost self of all beings dwells*

Enwrapped in every form, and yet remains outside.'

One therefore follows the inner life, the inner light - because it exists, and as an act of faith. This is not done to 'Sacralize' one's efforts; nor is it done in the expectation or hope of rewards, or from fear; one seeks only to surrender to the 'Will of God'.

The pathway of surrender is truly strewn with obstacles: the glorification of the way at the cost of progress; the glorification of progress at the expense of proper attending towards the Godhead; always the dogma that must be freed, the excessive freedom that must be disciplined; and ever the blanketing of the Godhead, concealed by one's noisy constructs...

This is not to abandon the realm of form, but to situate it in its proper perspective. Schuon states:

*'If it is necessary to base oneself a priori on the formal elements of tradition, that is because it is not possible to pass beyond the world of forms without finding some point of support on the formal plane itself; none come to the "Father" except by the "Son", as the Gospel puts it. The sannyasi abandons rites, certainly, but he abandons them ritually and does not propose that anyone so choosing should abandon them just anyhow; the sannyasi is casteless, and is able to take no account of castes, but he does not dream of preaching their abolition.'*⁴

In the composition and appreciation of Sacred Art and Architecture, it is to the Sacred essence within, and the Sacred context within which that product and process occurs, that one attends. In the geometric sense, as explored in the author's dissertation,⁵ the essence within might be approached through the Center,⁶ as crystallized into two profound forms: the regular Star, and its counterform, the Polar Zonagon Mandala, which I believe to have been widely used in Islamic sacred architecture, particularly in the three-dimensional development, and surface articulation and decoration, of the traditional dome. (A similar

structural geometry clearly informs Norman Foster's secular Swiss Re building in London, and is also explored in Steve Baer's zonahedral investigations)⁷. The Sacred context within which the approach takes place could be considered the Projective Harmonic Field, within which the Center emerges. In another sense, the essence is taken to be Gnosis, and the context Tradition. Again, it is Tradition that one blessedly discerns within essence, and Gnosis through which the context is realized.

Whilst Gnosis is the fruit of the Tree of Tradition, it is from that Sacred seed that the Tree is replenished. The failing of the modern view in general, and of the perspective of the modern architect in particular, is precisely the want of an adequate Metaphysic. That only proceeds from Tradition; but Tradition in the West is sadly neglected. What is required, firstly, is to drink deeply from those Traditions that survive – which include the Vedic, Buddhist, Sufi, and Taoist scriptures and schools – together with the Christian Tradition, in particular, Mediaeval Scholasticism and Christian Mysticism. Secondly, one is required to discover afresh and anew the living Truth that alone '*sets one free*'.

The need is therefore recognized for this work to be situated within an adequate Metaphysic. In the immediate absence of an available Tradition, the dissertation then proceeds to propose a speculative model of a harmonic cosmogony and cosmology – within which the place and purpose of the Sacred art-object and work of architecture, together with their creation and contemplation, may be described. That is the subject matter of a future paper, in this related series of papers.

4. References

- ¹ Robert C. Meurant, *The Sacred in Art and Architecture: how are healthy and healing places to be created and sustained?* EDRA44 Providence: Healthy and Healing Places, ..., 2013.
- ² Robert C. Meurant, *Towards a Sacred Aesthetic: Laying the Ground*. EDRA45 New Orleans: Building with Change, ..., 2014.
- ³ *Kathaka Upanishad V.9-11*, quoted in Paul Deussen, *Philosophy of the Upanishads*. Dover Publishers, New York, 1966, p.166.
- ⁴ Frithjof Schuon, *Gnosis – Divine Wisdom*, Perennial Books, Middlesex, 1959, p.60.
- ⁵ Robert C. Meurant, *The Aesthetics of the Sacred*, PhD thesis, University of Auckland: School of Architecture, 1984. Subsequently published as: *The Aesthetics of the Sacred: A Harmonic Geometry of Consciousness and Philosophy of Sacred Architecture* (3rd Edn.), The Opoutere Press, Boulder and Auckland, 1989 (available from the author).

⁶ For a masterly consideration of the symbolism of the centre, and its fundamental importance in relation to Sacred space, see Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane - the Nature of Religion*. Harcourt, Brace and World, New York, 1959.

⁷ Steve Baer, *Zome Primer: Elements of Zonohedra Geometry*. Zomeworks Corporation, Albuquerque, 1970.