

Holy

Sacred architecture
through non-religious eyes

Nothing

Oliver Bingham
Oxford Brookes University

Introduction

Sacred architecture manifests as focal points for faiths around the world, but is also a place a place which should prompt us to ask existential questions about how we live, what we value and what we most fundamentally think is true. A place which pushes beyond beauty, of living traditions and practice, and unravels its loaded, layered history all in the moment you are there. Sacred architecture is not merely an archaeological site or a place of worship and prayer, but a confluence of time, people and history.

Methodology

The research strategy consists of investigating three paradigms in order to delineate the preconceptions of sacred space to interrogate connections and comprehend this phenomena from a non-religious position, and thus a methodology can be deployed with which to understand the experience of the spatial dimension of sacred architecture.

Seeking sacred: the nonhomogeneity of space

Firstly, religious phenomenology is a field in which the experience of sacrality is assessed. This research challenges the work of religious phenomenologist Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) who argued sacrality is only accessible to religious man, and overtly states that non-religious man leading a profane life experiences all space as homogenous (Eliade, 1957). I will use Eliade's revered work to argue the significance of sacred architecture to non-religious man.

The hermeneutics of sacred architecture

Other key literature includes research into reflective hermeneutics after philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002). This will be used to assess how sacred space conveys its meaning, as "hermeneutical reflection arises from the encounter with otherness or strangeness... distant meanings are brought close, the seemingly absurd begins to 'make sense'" (Jones, 2000). This will brush against its wider philosophical background of phenomenology, and its relevance will be comparatively assessed to place Eliade's highly regarded work.

Microcosm in the macrocosm: patterns of dwelling in a vernacular society

Secondly, the ways in which vernacular societies elsewhere in the world identify with the sacred through architecture is assessed. It is in the dwellings of vernacular societies in which this practice remains evident, a way in which a microcosm can be formed in the macrocosm of the universe, because "human life cannot take place anywhere; it presupposes a space which is really a cosmos, a system of meaningful spaces" (Christian Norberg-Schultz, 1986). In the present study I have compared three different types of traditional dwellings: the yurts of Mongolian nomads (Fig. 1), the tipi in North America and and the maloca longhouses of native South Americans. For these vernacular societies, the dwelling is the heart of all aspects of life. The focus, the meaning, the answer: it is all communicated through the way in which they identify with their built environment, and is a powerful tool in communicating with the divine and placing themselves within the cosmos.

Entering the theatre of faith

There is a multivalence to the experience of sacred space, and this will be revealed through the third paradigm: my own deployment of religious hermeneutics. This involves an interview with a priest of the Catholic Church and, on the contrary, a sample study of non-religious eyes in the context of different churches. This data, alongside the deep engagement with literature on the study of hermeneutics and the history of tribal dwellings, should provide a coherent cross analysis of what it means for a space to be considered sacred and how the non-believer can connect with this, if at all. The present study is analysing the public experience and connection within monotheistic sacred places, and involves a responsive provocation (Fig. 2) on a sample group of n=12 interfaith (individuals who belongs to a different religion) and non-religious people at three case study buildings in Oxford, UK (Fig. 3). This interrogates whether the non-religious or interfaith can spiritually experience the sacred.



Fig. 1: Mongolian yurt.



Fig. 3: 'Divine Light' in Christchurch Cathedral, Oxford.

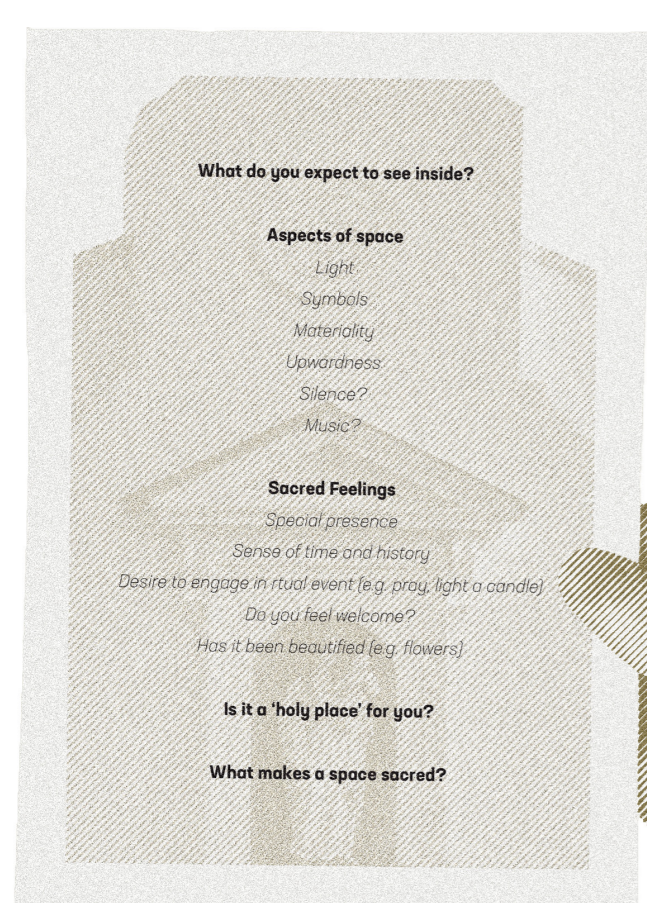


Fig. 2: Provocation given to participants.

Conclusion

Through this paper, the hypothesis set out by Eliade is tested, which the initial research outcomes in the present study have proved to reject. Following qualitative analysis of these case studies, in order to shed light on non-religious man's position within sacred architecture. This is vital in not only understanding why people connect with sacred architecture, but should also benefit architects, designers, conservationists and policy makers in responding to sacred architecture, and its evolving role in contemporary society.

Bibliography & Image References

Norberg-Schulz, C. (1986) *Meaning in Western Architecture*. Rev. edn. London, UK: Cassell.

Jones, L. (2000) *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*. Cambridge, MA: Distr. by Harvard University Press for the Harvard University Centre for the Study of World Religions.

Eliade, M. (1957) *The Sacred and the Profane*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Fig. 1: Mongolian Yurt.
Accessed via: http://www.solaripedia.com/13/318/3695/yurt_covering.html // Date accessed: 25/10/2018
Fig. 2: Provocation given to participants.
Artwork by author.
Fig. 3: 'Divine Light' in Christchurch Cathedral, Oxford.
Photograph by author.