
The art of making Sacred Space

by R. Gary Black

I entered the main gate of Tofukuji temple in the summer of 1983. Traveling through a series of precincts, each one more sacred than the previous, I was led to the threshold of an interior garden. Sitting down, my attention was suddenly drawn to a dragonfly — a splash of ultramarine hovering above a tiny pond. Transfixed by this creature from the cretaceous I became more aware of my surroundings; a small waterfall tumbling through ferns into a pool harboring ancient carp, a rough stone and wood colonnade flanking the garden's southern border, and the earthen walls to my back.

Seven hundred years earlier, Buddhist monks had created this temple compound. The granite bench on which I now perched had been carefully cut and placed in just this position next to the pond. From here I could look across a verdant pool, through columns of an arcade into a larger garden beyond. To my north, stood a plaster and heavy-timber wall of the monk's sleeping chambers. It had been sized and positioned to protect the garden without overpowering it. This place, fashioned by human hands, had arranged for me a sacred moment as it brought me face to face with this most beautiful of insects, observing it twist and turn, changing color with every new angle.

The built environment of parking lots and buildings, courtyards and paths, walls and ceilings, structure and light ... all work to create space. These spaces affect us. They influence our psychology and impact our minds. Sir Winston Churchill put it most eloquently when he said, "we shape our buildings, and then our buildings shape us." It may be surprising then, that all too often, these elements create left over, downbeat space like the no mans zone between parking lot and building entrance, or the windowless hallway leading from a sanctuary to an education wing. Rarely do these elements create space that is sacred — space in which the simple everyday acts of walking, sharing, or learning become an occasion for reflection, contemplation, and understanding.

At this point one might be tempted to ask why. Why are so many spaces — from the strip mall to the most recent church buildings — uninspiring and lifeless? It is more to the point, however, to ask how. How can one make a sacred place? To which the unexpected answer is; you have

to engage in a *process* of building that is fundamentally sacred. Such a process values the creation of life in the built environment above all other concerns. In this process each and every decision matters, and only those that create the most life are chosen. Let us take an example.

Suppose a congregation, working with an architect, is trying to locate the parking lot and entrance to the sanctuary or narthex. The typical process will focus on perceived functional needs, city engineering requirements, and code specifications. Creating life in this environment will be secondary if considered at all. The parking will first address the needs of the car. It will be located right off the road with easy access and splendid visibility. Next it will address the building codes. The proper base rock will be specified and handicapped stalls will be placed closest to the building's entrance, in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, (ADA). Finally, the process will consider functionality. The building itself will be located in close proximity to the cars and in most cases parishioners will enter through a door that faces directly onto the parking lot. The result, one which we have come to expect, will create an environment that is lifeless — an endless sea of asphalt with a building sitting roughly in the middle. In a last ditch effort to soften the brutality of the design a few scraggly trees will be planted inside islands that are too small for their roots to grow.

Now let us consider an entirely different process, one which has as its basic premise, the creation of life in the environment. Like many things sacred, the process begins with humility. Instead of knowing the answers, you ask to be shown them. Instead of acting willfully, you act respectfully. A profound consideration for the particular piece of land and specific group of people is paramount. Current design approaches rely on topographic maps in lieu of spending time on the land. While this approach may be efficient, it cannot create life in the environment. Likewise, reliance on architectural program in lieu of face-to-face interviews and discussions with the users is inadequate.

With a respectful posture the building committee and design team are ready to engage in two crucial acts — walking the land, and holding interviews. In the first of these

each person is given two or three stakes and are asked to walk around the land. Using their intuition they are asked to mark the best places, that is, places where they truly want to be. In general these places will have the best winter sun and summer shade, the most comfortable breezes, and take advantage of the best views. But that is not all. They will be the places on the land where you *feel* most free and most alive. The team will also locate the worst areas, places that are cold or muggy, places having poor view and air circulation... areas which need repair. It is not easy to identify the relevant areas, and you cannot rush through this step. It takes time, and it requires a calm mind. But if you are patient and humble the land will speak. It will tell you everything you need to know. Once the stakes have been set, they will drive much of the rest of the design.

Building activities will occur in the areas needing repair, and building masses will be organized around the most beautiful areas to preserve and embellish them. No buildings or cars will be placed on the special spots. Places that were beautiful prior to construction will be made more beautiful, more whole, and more full of life after construction. Areas that were less desirable will be repaired by the placement of buildings. In this first act, that of walking the land, the process directs you to identify the areas having the most life, and then demands that all subsequent acts improve on that life. Just as each piece of land is unique, with its own particular attributes, so each congregation is unique with their own special qualities. To create life in the environment of the church

these special qualities have to be expressed and understood. While one goal of the interview process is to determine programmatic needs, a higher aim is to reach an understanding of the congregation's dreams, aspirations, and beliefs. Only then will it be possible for the architecture to respond to who they are as a congregation and be a reflection of their faith. A discussion about parking lots and building entrances will take on a completely different tenor in this process. Instead of focusing on codes, cars and proximity the discussion will focus on the human and social experience associated with arriving and leaving. Through this process one would discover, for instance, that the act of arrival and exiting is an important event in the life of the congregation. It is important for at least two reasons. First, people need to be able to adjust from the isolated and impersonal world of



the car to the communal and intimate world of worship. The adjustment cannot be forced and it cannot be made abruptly. To make a smooth emotional transition, the individual needs a transition space in which to make it. You cannot step out of your car, cross a plane of asphalt, and enter directly into a building without bringing a bit of impersonality with you. Consider an alternate arrangement which has the central goal of giving you the opportunity to exchange the public face you wore in the car for an intimate face appropriate for the inside of a sanctuary.

After leaving your car you are led into a garden. The path to the church exists out of a corner of this garden affording you a change in direction. As you step upon the path your view is re-directed along a narrow way. This way leads to the building and you catch a glimpse of it as you

proceed. Traveling a short distance, you arrive at a forecourt framed by building and colonnade. As you move under cover of a portal, the main entrance lies ahead. The whole transition can take seconds or minutes depending on the actual circumstances. The key feature is that you are given the chance to pause, and be in touch with life, thus allowing you to become more alive yourself.

A proper interview process will also uncover that the coming and going impacts the life of the community. The arrival and exiting sequence creates opportunities for members of the congregation to run into each other, and catch up on each other's lives. These moments aren't just casual niceties, they are important to the functioning of the church group. They provide the social glue

that binds a congregation together. Architecture that seeks to create sacred space, will naturally support these interchanges. It will provide places for them. Depending on the lay of the land, one good place for them to occur is in a sequence of spaces organized along a zone from car to building. These spaces are well suited because they tend to be informal and unconfined, allowing people the option of striking up a conversation or remaining alone in thought.

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At the end of these first two steps the congregation and design team will have accomplished two things. They will have a map of the land highlighting the most important places, and they will have an understanding of an arrival and exiting sequence. If the design addresses these with vigor, that is if the architect can organize the building masses to embellish the best places and can organize the parking to address the congregation's emotional needs for arriving and leaving, then these very first steps will begin to create more life in the environment and consequently in the parishioners.

From the discussion above it may appear that engineering, budgets, and code requirements aren't important and don't need to be considered. On the contrary, by putting these issues into proper perspective the designers and members of a building committee can address them much more effectively. Instead of addressing engineering issues per say, engineering knowledge can be wielded to address the environmental concerns. Instead of just preparing a budget of construction costs, the building committee will be in a position to make value judgments about how to best spend the available resources. Finally, code requirements need not be followed blindly. An easy accessible route from car to building along the lines of the one described above, far exceeds code requirements of the ADA. It redefines accessibility.

The previous example illustrates use of the process during the planning stages prior to construction. However, sacred architecture is not just designed, or planned, it is *made*. Therefore a process capable of making sacred space must operate at the making stages, that is, during the construction. To address this we engage in a process of continuous design. Like the process described above continuous design seeks to create more life in the environment, but it does so by continuing design decisions into and through all of the construction stages. Drawings are useful tools but they can never substitute for the actual building. Hence, many design decisions need to be saved until the construction phases when they can be made in concert with the character of the emerging building. Final floor heights, for example, should be determined during the course of setting the foundation boards because the relationship of the floor height to the land is sensitive and important. Likewise, dimensions and locations of windows need to be determined on site, standing in the framing of the actual room, observing the real light and looking at the real view. This way one can make the light in the room truly beautiful and place the openings to capture and frame the most important views of the surrounding land. Colors should always be mocked up on the actual building full size to determine the right hues. We use this process because it is the only way to make space sacred. You cannot make the right decisions about the light in a room and the windows that will produce it

while working at a drafting table. You cannot accurately imagine the view from a second story, and you cannot pick out the correct colors looking at paint chips.

Sacred space is not some fixed idea that one can dissect. It is not something that can be added, like spice to a casserole. It cannot be derived from an image, ancient or modern. It has nothing to do with style. Sacred space can only be created – and the process of its creation must be fundamentally sacred.

This article has given a brief introduction into the issues that one needs to confront in a new building design or renovation if the result is to be something that we might call sacred architecture. The process described will help one create sacred space, because it insures that each transformation results in a more holistic environment. If one earnestly follows this process they will be on their way toward creating the kind of environment that may someday attract a dragonfly — an outcome that in paraphrasing Robert Frost, “will have made all the difference.”