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Karsten Harries

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On the Need for Sacred Architecture

12 Observations

Karsten Harries

Karsten Harries is Brooks and Suzanne Ragen Professor of Philosophy, and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Philosophy at Yale University. He has published widely on the philosophy of architecture over many years, his major books including *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (MIT, 1997) and *Infinity of Perspective* (MIT, 2001).

Well aware of its untimeliness, I want to insist on the continued need for sacred architecture and this indeed in a twofold sense:

- 1) The sacred continues to need architecture if it is not to wither;
- 2) Architecture needs the sacred if it is not to wither.

Both claims invite challenge. To turn to the first: in just what sense does the sacred need architecture? Has modern spirituality with its emphasis on inwardness not left art, and more especially architecture behind? And, to turn to my second claim: is it not sufficient to create a work that succeeds both in meeting whatever function it is expected to serve and as an aesthetic object to let us judge it a successful work of architecture? That function may be religious. But it certainly need not be. Most significant works of architecture have not been religious in nature for over two centuries. What need does architecture have for the sacred?

Our built environment speaks of a culture that has banished the sacred to the periphery of our modern

lives. Just compare the way medieval cities were dominated by churches and cathedrals with the way religious buildings are usually dwarfed in our cities by other structures. Ever since the Enlightenment church and temple have ceased to be a leading building task, which does not deny the obvious fact that churches, some of them architecturally significant, continued and continue to be built. Quite a number of contemporary churches are also significant works of architecture. It is not difficult to come up with examples. Tadao Ando, Mario Botta, Meinhard von Gerkan, Steve Holl, Juha Leiviskä, Richard Meier, Peter Zumthor – these are just a few of the names that come to mind.

But just what is it that allows us to speak here of “sacred architecture”?

There is a ready answer: if “sacred” is defined, as it often is, as “dedicated to or set apart for the worship of a deity” there would seem to be no problem. But that definition invites us to look for what makes a certain building sacred – not to the material object, but the use to which it is put. So understood there would be no very significant relationship between the sensible qualities of a structure and the sacred. What renders some material object sacred, on this understanding, is only the religious practice it serves, not the object itself. The simplest shed, serving a few people assembled around the Lord’s table, is rendered sacred by the activity. When I here speak of “sacred architecture” I am using “sacred” differently: we call an entity “sacred” when we experience it as an incarnation of spirit in matter that places and orients us and directs our freedom. We experience a work of architecture as sacred when we experience it as such an incarnation.

But does our modern reality still have room for such incarnations of spirit in matter? What need do we have for the sacred? What need does this age of the decorated shed have for sacred architecture? But what lets me call our modern epoch “the age of the decorated shed”? What I have in mind is more than the obvious fact that most of the important buildings rising today all over the world, many of them designed by the same small number of star architects, all of whom have developed a truly global practice, invite appreciation as functional buildings meant to succeed also as aesthetic objects: work of architecture = building + aesthetic addendum. And why call into question that time-honored understanding? One reason is because aesthetic objects are supposed to be experienced as self-sufficient wholes. As such they can stand in no essential relationship to their outside. Aesthetic objects, so understood, are essentially mobile. Thus mobile, they lack the power to place us.

But when I describe our age as the age of the decorated shed, I am thinking of something more essential than the fact that “decorated shed” describes what works of architecture have to become in an age that understands works of architecture first of all as functional buildings that are to be appreciated also as aesthetic objects. Our

modern world, I would like to suggest, including many of its religious practices, invite understanding in the image of a decorated shed. Our sense of reality has been shaped by the demand for objectivity that is a presupposition of our science and technology. It is of course easy to insist that the objectified world-picture of science should not be confused with our life-world. But the correctness of this observation should not lead us to forget the extent to which our life-world is ever more decisively being transformed by technology and thus by science. That transformation threatens to split the human being into object and subject, into human material, available to technological organization just like any other material and into a subject that has to consider all material, including its own body and psyche as mere material to be shaped or played with as we see fit and our power permits. To the extent that our modern world has to transform us in the image of the Cartesian subject, it will make us ever more free, ever less bound to particular places, but that means also ever more mobile, rootless, and ghostly. Does such a subject still need architecture in the traditional sense? Was one function of such architecture not to grant a sense of place that we moderns have come to recognize to be at odds with freedom? And does such a subject still need work that will assign it its place and keep freedom responsible? But altogether unbound, freedom faces a mute, meaningless world.

Religion and experiences of the sacred have long bound freedom. Although the etymology that ties the word “religion” to the Latin “religare,” to bind again, is no longer generally accepted, must a religious person not experience his or her freedom as bound by and to what is taken to matter unconditionally and most profoundly, bound, we can say, by what is experienced as sacred? Science can know nothing of such a reality. Any genuine encounter with another person, on the other hand, binds freedom. In such experiences the sacred possesses a last refuge. Think of falling in love.

What makes life meaningful must be sought outside reality as it can be understood by science. And do not aesthetic objects furnish us moderns with just such an outside, presenting themselves as being just as they should be? Aesthetic production so understood presents itself as the decoration of a world rendered mute by our science and technology, as a dressing up of an ultimately meaningless reality with inherited finery. But is that which is needed not something very different? Not a covering up or escape from reality, but a window to what transcends our modern world building – a window to the sacred?

But does the sacred today still need art or, more specifically architecture? Anyone familiar with the history of art and architecture know that art’s claim to autonomy and its separation from the sacred did not always characterize it. At one time they were even indistinguishable. Should we say that the modern period has

witnessed the emancipation of the aesthetic object from what is extrinsic to it? Did art, by breaking the bond that tied it to religion, not purify itself? What need does art have for the sacred? And art here includes architecture.

And religion, too, had reason to welcome that break. Religion may thus be said to have purified itself of art. From its very beginning Biblical religion is shadowed by iconoclasm. That the marriage of art and Christian faith should have been an uneasy one from the very beginning is to be expected, given Christianity's emphasis on the spirit, on the one invisible God, who suffered no other gods. And yet, this God incarnated Himself and thus closed the gap between spirit and body. Must we understand the Incarnation with Asterius of Amasia as a humiliation? Should we not understand it rather as a mysterious necessity, demanded by both body and soul, sensuousness and spirit? And if so, should we not join those who appealed to the Incarnation to defend art, this human incarnation? But modernity has difficulty accepting the Incarnation, as it has difficulty making sense of talk of incarnations of spirit in matter. Even Christians today tend to relegate the Incarnation to a past that lies behind us. Christianity has become the religion of the no longer present, the dead God, the religion of a spiritual and increasingly empty transcendence.

Religious experience is open to transcendence. But how should "transcendence" be understood? Just what is being transcended? Temporal reality? Reason? The dynamism of religious transcendence, especially when one adds the attribute "infinite," carries with it the danger of a radicalization of transcendence that threatens to so empty it and therefore also God of all meaning that mysticism and atheism come to coincide. But must transcendence be thought in opposition to time, to sensuousness? I would question the link of transcendence to both eternity and disembodied spirit. What I do want to insist on is this: to the extent that spirit is privileged at the expense of sensuousness, it will be impossible to arrive at a full self-affirmation. The descent of the transcendent into the visible, into the community, is necessary. Sacred architecture is one site of such a descent. Such descent wrests from space a sacred place. That is why the sacred continues to need architecture if it is not to wither.

I want to underscore the word "place" here. Architecture may be understood as the art of wresting place from space, thus providing not just the body, but the soul with shelter. Aesthetic objects are incapable of providing such shelter. That would require a binding back of the aesthetic to the sacred. That is why architecture needs the sacred if it is not to wither.