



Sacred Design Now

Anne-Marie Willis

To cite this article: Anne-Marie Willis (2010) Sacred Design Now, Design Philosophy Papers, 8:1, 1-6

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/144871310X13968744282638>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 19



View related articles [↗](#)

EDITORIAL

Sacred Design Now

Anne-Marie Willis

This is what we invited people to consider in the call for papers:

How can the sacred be thought beyond existing ways in which it is engaged by design? How do we think the sacred in relation to contemporary beliefs, symbols, needs, economic and social structures? Should we understand those fundamental things that sustain us in body and mind as sacred? What can we discover from past or existing traditions and beliefs that could inform the designation of the sacred for today and the future? In what ways could the sacred be understood as designed?

We had many offers of papers on the design of churches, temples and other places of worship. We rejected these because our aim has been to take the sacred beyond where it's conventionally considered to be located. What follows are brief descriptions of the papers we've chosen to publish. Below that are some reflections on the need for the sacred now and the obstacles to re-thinking it in a secular context.

Karsten Harries in 'On the Need for Sacred Architecture: 12 Observations' argues why the sacred needs architecture and why architecture needs the sacred, at the same time advocating a re-invigorated sacred that engages both sensuousness and "being bound".

Nilay Ozlu's 'Modernity and the Demise of the Sacred' is a historical interrogation and post-structuralist reading of Hagia Sophia, the oldest sacred monument of Istanbul, which, over the course of centuries has been the bearer of vastly different symbolic meanings – a palpable site of struggle over the meaning of the sacred. The endurance of this monument and its capacity to bear a diverse range of symbolic sacred meanings perhaps resonates with the reciprocal relation between architecture and the sacred of which Karsten Harries speaks.

Soumitri Varadarajan in 'On How the Sacred Could Be a Framework for Sustainable Design Practice' begins with personal reflections on encounters with the sacred in India and Australia, then puts forward a four-part definition of the sacred with an eye to design.

Tony Fry in 'Re-turning: Sacred Design III' reflects upon essays he published in the early 1990s on sacred design, considering the changed context of now, while re-asserting "... sustainment ... is that value which we can all, no matter our differences, share. ... Given a particularity by design, it has the potential to be the embodiment of that higher order of thing that is sacred, around which a commonality of belief can accumulate and be held."

Samer Akkach, co-editor of this issue, in 'The Presence of Absence: Sacred Design Now' discusses the philosophical and historical context of the emergence of the idea of the sacred, arguing for "a renewed understanding of its nature and fresh intellectual investment in its significance" given the resurgence of the religious, especially in non-Western societies, which is not a revival of pre-modern understandings but a new hybrid that blends the sacred with a strategic instrumental rationality. He asks: "Can the sacred be divorced from, or thought of outside, the religious without losing its efficacy and inviolability and being transformed into something else? Is it possible to re-invest the inviolable necessity of the symbolic function, the essence of sacred, as it were, in a whole new spectrum of things and actions?"

Sacred Belief

Is nothing sacred anymore?

Well ... no, nothing really. The relentless grind of rationalist thinking as it has shaped the modern world, strips everything down to a factuality that has no need of spiritual explanations or sacred rites.

Is it an anachronism then, to talk of sacred design?

Especially given that design, as both a servant and agent of modernization and of the market economy, has been a major force of secularization, displacing ‘visions of heaven and hell’ with imaginaries of material rewards that can be had in this earthly life – just for the price of a car, a house, a new outfit, a holiday, or anything else you might desire. When reason via science technology has harnessed and processed the bounty of nature – plant, animal, mineral – for the benefit of human beings, what need is there to offer sacrifices to gods for a plentiful harvest, to ward off flood, famine, or other threats to the people’s well-being and flourishing?

Such comments may seem reductive: as if, at the level of the subject, the shift from the pre-modern to the modern, was based upon a kind of calculus, a cost-benefit analysis of the soul. But that’s not the intention – what is being gestured to, is the larger, longer and slower shift from sacred to secular societies. For, as will be discussed below, the sacred always operates communally.

But why do we want to talk of sacred design? The implication of our call-for-papers is that the sacred is a powerful idea, an idea with efficacy, a means, perhaps, of valuing, protecting, conserving, enhancing that which sustains or that which has sustaining power. Historically, that which was sacred, was given special status – it was something that could not be defiled or destroyed.

How, in a secular society could such a status be re-invented?

Perhaps we begin by trying to understand the meaning of ‘sacred’. What is its essence? What are some commonplace understandings of the sacred? Here are some sketchy thoughts.

The sacred says: do not violate; always respect. The sacred is not fleeting, ephemeral. It endures over time, beyond the span of a human life. It is not for simple practical purposes that the sacred is valued, respected and paid homage to. Yet the sacred is often invested in everyday practices and ordinary things – as in care of the body or the preparation of food. This is one aspect discussed in Soumitri Varadarajan’s paper.

The sacred, then, is this ‘something more’, something beyond mere appearance and functionality. It is invested with a degree of mystery. It is simultaneously fragile (vulnerable to violation) and powerful (it is the locus of forces that can punish those who violate it and reward those who venerate it).

The sacred is not self-evident. One has to be inducted into its prohibitions, initiated into its special practices and rituals. In fact, says Caillois, the sacred in everyday life is nearly always manifested as prohibitions, but, he emphasizes, the sacred has another side: the ferment and excess of festival, a time in which taboos are broken and the normal order of things is overturned, reversed.¹ His claim is that, paradoxically, or perhaps dialectically, the continuity of the group is ensured by periodic, communal transgressions against its norms.

While the sacred is associated with a range of emotions – fear, awe, love – it is not dependent upon the emotional disposition of individual subjects in order to be maintained as sacred. Begrudging compliance serves the sacred as effectively as love and devotion. That is so, if we regard the sacred sociologically.

However, the sacred is always an object of belief. And it is always communal. When a community of believers no longer believe that something is sacred, it **is** no longer sacred. The community may move on to venerate something else, or they may be ‘converted’ to another faith with different sacred objects and practices (between these two moments lies the whole history of colonialism). To mention colonialism is to return to the point about reason conquering the world, here not via Enlightenment, but by violence that is both genocidal (killing bodies, populations) and ethnocidal (shattering systems of belief). The blast from a gun kills not only the warrior but also the sacred powers he invokes.

When the sacred works, when it resonates with the circumstances of a community, it will remain sacred. When circumstances change suddenly, dramatically, it no longer resonates, it becomes a meaningless thing, a dead thing: its sacredness is annihilated. The sacred is thus sustained by that which sustains the community of believers that hold something to be sacred. At the same time, the sacred acts to protect the sustaining power of that which sustains the community. A virtuous circle. Yet to speak of the sacred in this way indicates a paradox: the sacred can never be merely functional, yet, at another level, it is. The sacred (as Jean Luc Nancy observed and as discussed in Tony Fry’s essay) is that which draws people together as a community of belief. The function of the sacred, then, is the creation of community.

This is a long way from community today, which no longer names a socio-economic-cultural totality, but shifting functional and strategic associations without a centre or continuity.

The sacred is predicated upon belief, yet belief is the most fragile of things. Where it rests entirely on having been instilled, or on faith alone, it is vulnerable to challenge. The converse is so: belief based solely on reason is vulnerable too, for it is ever skeptical, it can never trust, never settle, nothing for it is permanent, nothing sacred. Perhaps for belief to be strong (and thus able to engender a sacred that is resilient) there has to be an element of giving over, giving way: a leaping over the grind and tyranny of calculative reason that demands empirical proof that something is of such absolute value that it be called sacred.

The obstacles to sacred design are many. The sacred is associated with religion, with myth, with modes of explaining the world that held sway before ‘the age of reason’. You cannot simply re-install an idea that reason has pulverized. Belief in the sacred cannot simply be willed into being. To believe in the sacred now would seem to be to turn one’s back on reason.

But is that really so? What is the relation between reason and belief? We might like to think, for example, that we as citizens, believe that human-produced greenhouse gas emissions are a threat to the earth's atmosphere and climate, because we have been convinced by the scientific evidence. Yet how many people are in a position to verify the evidence for themselves? The scientific evidence is mediated via mass media, it arrives from voices vested with authority, and in a politicized context. This goes for a good deal of the complex factors in play in contemporary life. Believing something to be true never arrives through the exercise of reason alone. Belief is complex – it comes about through a combination of credibility, congruence with existing explanatory models, authority, connections to other believers, context, persuasion, rhetoric, desire, disavowal and much else. And, of course, action doesn't necessarily follow belief. Aristotle, a long time ago, identified this contradiction and named it *akrasia* – knowing that one should act in a certain way, but not doing so.² Perhaps the sacred inhabits this gap between knowing and doing, and could thus be a powerful counterforce to *akrasia*.

The language of the climate change debate has theological overtones – there are 'climate change skeptics' and there are 'believers' in human-induced climate change.

So, if this defining issue of our age appears in the garb of science and reason but is not contained by it; if it is already bound up with systems of values and pre-existing beliefs, is there an inchoate sacred lurking underneath that could be brought to the surface? What could this be? Could it be named as the sacredness of all human and non-human life? Or is the sacred that which sustains and allows for the continuity and flourishing of life? The sacred eludes precise or final definition. It must be sensed, felt, as well as thought. Belief in the sacred now requires a leap of faith. This, in turn, requires an enriched, post-rationalist understanding of belief.

What, of value, have human beings ever achieved without belief? Belief in the face of obstacles and seeming impossibilities?

To believe in the possibility of the arising and gathering momentum of a new, powerful sacred – a post-secular sacred as Sam Akkach alludes to in his essay – might seem like a replay of rationalist humanist hubris – a contradiction because it is the antithesis of the mystery and power of the sacred which traditionally emanates from elsewhere – gods, spirits, ancestors, dreamtime. The extent of its powers, especially its destructive powers were never fully known – the sacred was feared and appeased through sacrifice (the two words come from the same root).

So how could a contemporary re-invented sacred not be a pale simulacrum, a pathetic thing paid lip-service to; a mission statement for the soul? It would not be such as long as it recognized the limits of reason and the fiction that human beings are in control of all they have designed and made (and the concomitant uncritical belief in

the saving power of the technofix). Today, so much of what was once unproblematically celebrated as progress is no more than the unfolding and playing out of the inherent logics at macro and micro levels of economic and technological systems that were initiated long ago. This is what Tony Fry has called defuturing, and why he insists that defuturing names both an historical process and a method for interrogating that history.³ There is much that is unknown, there is much to fear: not the wrath of gods or malevolent spirits but that which issues from our own making. No one really knows the extent of global climatic havoc that will ensue within the next sixty odd years if global warming creeps to the upper levels of the projected temperature range. Neither does anyone know how to stem the accelerating 'economic development' that is driving global warming. We have unleashed destructive and world transformative powers of unknown limits. The power of the sacred is what could be thrown across this path.

Universal agreement on that which is sacred is unlikely. Thus the sacred is inseparable from the political. What then, as the clock ticks down to midnight, is its appropriate means? An answer springs to mind: declare a holy war on the unsustainable. Not a war fought with weapons, but with thinking, with powerful ideas. Its targets are many: instrumentalist (un)thinking, commodity-centred individualism, technocentrism, ethnocentrism, liberal pluralism, cynicism.

Above all, the sacred is serious business.

The obstacles of disenchantment and secularism (see Samer Akkash on Weber) are to be overcome not via the window-dressing of sacred kitsch. A re-invented sacred would not even appear as such. A spark of revelation igniting a slow burn of resoluteness. This would be the mood of sacred design now.

Anne-Marie Willis
August 2010

Notes

1. Roger Caillois, 'Festival' in Denis Hollier (ed.) *The College of Sociology 1937–39*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, pp. 279–303.
2. See Susan Stewart and Jacqueline Lorber-Kasunic, 'Akrasia, ethics and design education' *Design Philosophy Papers* 4/2006 www.desphilosophy.com
3. Tony Fry, *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1999, pp. 2–13.