

Architecture, Culture, Spirituality 7: Nature and the Ordinary

Architecture, Culture, Spirituality (ACS) members Julio Bermudez (Catholic University of America, Washington DC), Norman Crowe (Professor Emeritus, Notre Dame School of Architecture), and Paul Tesar (North Carolina State University) co-chaired and organized the 2015 ACS symposium, which explored nature and the otherwise ordinary that form the spiritual foundations of architecture and culture. The symposium was held at Ghost Ranch, Abiquiu, NM, from June 18-21. Past ACS symposia have focused on various themes revolving around the ideas of creating and understanding sacred places.

This year's focus allowed researchers to discuss and critique nature's important role and unraveling what has become "ordinary" as captured by Jalal al-Din Rumi's quote: "Things are such, that someone lifting a cup, or watching

the rain, petting a dog or singing, just singing – could be doing as much for this universe as anyone.” Of the fifty abstracts submitted, twenty-three made it through the blind peer-review process for presentation. Intentionally, ACS symposia have remained small in order to allow the formation of an intimate community of presenters, keynote speakers, and a small number of non-presenting attendees.

Set in the remote and idyllic New Mexico desert, Ghost Ranch, formerly the residence of renowned artist Georgia O’Keeffe, the inspirational and sacral landscape of mesa filled, red-ochre desert was entirely conducive to understanding and sharing reflections on the sacred. Local spaces including a mosque, madrasa (Islamic school), pueblo, and churches were visited as well.

As this symposium focused on understanding the relationships of the sacred to space and design, the religious beliefs of various faiths, including Islam, were covered. However, the symposium’s plural and inclusive content enabled another contextual understanding of Islamic spaces, one that may not have been discussed or disseminated in an exclusively themed conference.

Presentations of the first day focused on The Spirituality of Rooted Culture. Nader Ardalan (Harvard University GSD) presented “Mud and Mirror,” which focused on the Great Kavir of Yazd in Iran; Linda Berry presented “Water as Doorway to Spirit”; and Hyejung Chang (Clemson University, SC) presented “Community as Virtue: Returning to our Native Spirit.” In the following session, The Spirituality of Landscape viewed through the Lens of Art, Rebecca Krinke (University of Minnesota) presented “The Lightning Field”; Dennis Alan Winters (Tales of the Earth: Landscape Architects, Toronto) analyzed “Georgia O’Keefe and Spirituality of the Sexually Charged Landscape”; and Katherine Bambrick Ambroziak (University of Tennessee) discussed “Environments of the Found Object: Revealing Value through a Process of Seeking and Making.”

Norman Crowe, the first keynote speaker, reflected upon “Science, Spirituality, and Nature: A View from New Mexico.” He talked about the region’s sacred history and the shadows of ancient wisdom and spiritual sense as found in Pueblos’ settlements. The lecture aptly prepared everyone for the following day’s field trips.

The two sessions and a keynote speaker fittingly set the tone for the symposium: the intimate and collective contemplation of ideas of dualities of traditional and principles highlighted in the first session, and the concepts of heightening perception of nature, ritual, and people from the second session. In addition, it prepared the group for considering the important local sites to be visited the following day and establishing the groundwork for a continuous

conversation of what the sacred, in all its layers of ephemeral and concrete, can mean.

Field trips to experience local spaces of sacred interest are a tradition of ACS symposia. This year, the group explored the mosque and madrasa designed by the late Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy at Dar al-Islam, his only project in North America.¹ These structures were built using the design approaches of mud architecture for which he was renowned and which he adapted to the New Mexico desert. The entire complex was part of the first Islamic community in the United States; the buildings were completed in 1982. The group toured both buildings, discussed their construction and creation with a local Muslim who had participated in the entire process. Today, Dar al-Islam serves as an educational retreat space about Islam. Following this the group went to visit Taos Pueblo, a living Native American community that has existed on the site for over one thousand years and is constructed out of adobe. On its return to Abiquiu, the group visited the adobe church of San Francisco de Asís Mission Church in Ranchos de Taos.

That evening the second keynote speaker, Rina Swentzell (renowned artist, author, and scholar on Puebloan culture, values, and philosophy) presented “Being in Place: Architecture and Spirituality in the Pueblo World.” She reflected on both her personal experiences of living in a Pueblo and on the world-views, cosmologies, and spaces of Pueblo culture.

Visiting these important local sites as a collective and within the framework of the symposium theme served to underscore the event’s tone with reflections on the relationship of sacred to nature and the everyday and grounded what could have become very academic notions with palpable and shared tactile experiences.

On the third day, Anat Geva (Texas A&M University) explored Spirituality in Architectural Experience in her “Nature as the Spiritual Foundation of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Sacred Architecture: Earth, Sky, Light, and Water.” Lindy Weston (University of Kent, Canterbury, UK) spoke on “Gothic Architecture and the Liturgy of Construction.” In the fourth session, Body, Time, and Movement in Relation to Spirituality, Brandon Ro (VCBO Architecture, Salt Lake City) presented “Sacred Time as One Eternal Round: Understanding the Chiastic Pattern of Temple, Cosmos, History”; Jody Rosenblatt (Ball State University, IN) analyzed “Heidegger’s Path”; and Galen Cranz (University of California) focused on “The Body as a Site of Spiritual Practice: Can Architecture Help?” In session five, Sources of Place and Spirituality, Tom Bender discussed “Life-Force Energy: The Sacred Root of Place, Architecture, and Community”; Elizabeth Deveraux (Deveraux Architectural Glass, Cali-

ifornia) presented “Spiritual and Artistic Inspiration of Nature”; and Chelsea Rushton (University of Calgary, Canada) talked about “Motherland: Making Space for the Sacred, Creating Sacred Space.”

In the sixth session, *The Aural in Sacred Space*, Mark Baechler and Tammy Gaber (Laurentian University, Canada) presented “The Voice of Abraham’s House,” a study of sound from a mosque, church, and synagogue. Trent Smith (University of Utah) presented “Enhancing Contemporary Acapella and Sacred Harp Workshop: Variations on spatial Arrangement and Hierarchy.”

In the day’s final session, *Quotidian Environments and the Sacred*, Michael Crosbie (Faith & Form magazine and University of Hartford) and Suzanne Bott (University of Arizona) explored “Discovering the Sacred Within the Quotidian: The Role of ‘Spirit of Place’ in Creating Sacred Environments”; Christopher Domain (University of Arizona) focused on “Judith Chafee: Art and Daily Life”; and Jill Bambury (University of Cambridge, UK) reflected upon “The Sacred in the Street: Care Giving and Community Building as Everyday Spiritual Practice.”

The third and final keynote speaker, Eliana Bormida (Bormida & Yanzon Arquitectos) and Eduardo Vera (Eduardo Vera Paisajes & Jardin) both from Mendoza, Argentina, used their joint “Connecting Man, Culture, and Nature: Wine Landscape and Architecture In Mendoza, Argentina” to reflect on the sacred role that nature, context, and ritual play in their designs.

The symposium’s densest day – five sessions – proved to be well laid out due to the appropriate grouping of papers. This is a credit to the event’s organizers, as the original proposal was intentionally broad themed and did not further dictate the sub-themes to be covered. Rather, the selected papers were carefully considered and grouped with the “finer grained thesis” that emerged from them.

On the last morning, “Environment and Spirituality as Reflected in the Written Word,” Ben Jacks (Miami University, Oxford, OH) explored “Sacred and Real: Instrumental and Transcendent Writing about Architecture and the Built Environment”; Tom Barrie (North Carolina State University) spoke on “Modernism and the Domestic”; and Clive Knights (Portland State University) presented “The Crisis of Expectations: Recovering the Figurative in Architecture.”

ACS 7 closed with the annual membership meeting, during which plans for future symposia and the development of ACS discussed. The final session encapsulated the tone of the entire symposia – the ideas presented went beyond the extended abstracts and elaborated upon in the presentations. Each author shared in an open and dynamic manner. The sharing of academic

ideas, field trips, keynote lectures and the sublime context of Ghost Ranch all created a unique experience that heightened not only awareness of the topic academically, but personally as well. For those interested, the extended abstracts of all presentations are available online at <http://www.acsforum.org/symposium2015/papers.htm>.

The Forum for Architecture, Culture, Spirituality is an international scholarly group established in 2007 “to advance the development and dissemination of architecture and interdisciplinary scholarship, research, practice and education on the significance, experience and meaning of the built environment.” For information on ACS and previous symposia, visit www.acsforum.org.

Endnote

1. Please see Tammy Gaber, “A Moment in the American Desert: Hassan Fathy’s Dar al-Islam,” *AJISS* 32, no. 4 (fall 2015), 127-31.

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