Creating Sublime Experiences through Architecture

By Patricia Coll Freeman

Afternoon sunlight bathes the sandy limestone walls of the Gothic church, leaving its slate-gray roof in solemn shadow. With a bell tower crowned by parapet and pinnacles, one might think this is Glastonbury Abbey, the legendary resting place of King Arthur. But this is 21st-century Syon Abbey on a mountaintop in the Blue Ridge Highlands overlooking the patchwork of farms and hills of southwestern Virginia.

The abbey — built between 2002 and 2007 — is one of a growing number of religious buildings across the United States that some architects are reaching back into history to design. There are plans for a 145,000-square-foot French Gothic monastery for Carmelite nuns in the foothills of Wyoming’s Rocky Mountains, and many parishes, especially across the south and southwest, are headed in the new old direction too.

Other architects interpret the sacred by designing places like the Cathedral of Christ the Light in Oakland, Calif., made of steel and glass and shaped like a huge upturned boat, and the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles, a geometrically complex system of plazas and staircases and fortress-like concrete buildings finished in 2002. “In driving by, you wouldn’t immediately say that’s a church,” says Randall Ott of the iconoclastic structures.

Ott is dean of Catholic University’s School of Architecture and Planning and an award-winning chapel designer. Last year he earned the UNBUILT Award from the Washington, D.C., chapter of the American Institute of Architects for his proposed Salt Chapel, a nondenominational Protestant chapel in Osaka, Japan, whose gray concrete walls are bare but for a slim, cross-shaped portal crowned by parapet and pinnacles, one might think this is a church, leaving its slate-gray roof in solemn shadow. With a bell tower, Silence is “absolutely essential,” and vertical space is “highly altered,” so “you enter the shrine, and your eyes go up” toward heaven, Bermudez explains.

Such features help refocus people distracted by ordinary life — such as the Grand Canyon or a vast ocean inspires awe, he says. “It’s a dislocation of ordinary life so you could enter in this space of preparation to listen, to have a conversation with God.” The intangibles weigh more heavily than building materials when Bermudez defines good sacred space. “In the end, it’s an experience,” he says. “Are people transformed, do they fall into silence? Do they have awe?” Bermudez calls these breathtaking moments “extraordinary architectural experiences.” For years, he has conducted research into the phenomenon of how people respond to sacred spaces — work ranging from the study of literature to the use of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) brain scans.

He says that architecturally inspired emotional experiences can come in the ornate, vaulted 800-year-old Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres in France and the 22-year-old Church of Light, a nondenominational Protestant chapel in Osaka, Japan, whose gray concrete walls are bare but for a slim, cross-shaped...
slit cut from floor to ceiling and wall to wall allowing light into the otherwise windowless rectangular room. But how can two such diverse places be equally effective sacred spaces?

According to Duncan Stroik, the common denominators of great sacred design are the tangible details that architectural and theological predecessors tried and found true, even down to the way blocks of marble are placed.

Among Stroik’s projects is the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in La Crosse, Wis., one of the first major Catholic churches built in a classical style in more than 50 years. Inspired by Italian churches of the Counter Reformation and dedicated in 2008, the shrine has a cruciform or cross-shaped transept, fluted Corinthian pilasters and arches, and domed top. When it comes to good Catholic sacred spaces, Stroik believes architects must consider the sacramental nature of the Catholic faith. That is, people receive God’s grace through physical elements, like water in baptism and oil in confirmation. Similarly, “bricks and mortar can be conduits of grace,” he says.

Language Barrier?

So how do today’s architects manage the tension between the trends of minimalism and asymmetry and the history of sacred Christian architecture that values iconography and symmetry? That’s difficult work, Jeff Roberson says, because they are two camps speaking different “languages.” Roberson is a 2002 Catholic University master’s graduate who specialized in sacred space and now works at Division I Architects in Washington, D.C., and has taught architectural history, theory, and design studio classes at CUA. In ages past, “the buildings literally spoke to the people,” he explains. Those who couldn’t read learned about God every time they looked at a church’s stained glass windows or ceiling murals where there were scenes from salvation history — from the creation of Adam to the Final Judgment, as in the Sistine Chapel.

“Everyone could understand what the building was saying,” Roberson believes. “We don’t speak that same language today.” For the modern person, he argues, modern abstraction — with its geometric forms and modulated light — is the best means to represent God, who is “almost impossible to grasp.” Roberson points to features in an office building he helped design that control light and shadow and produce an emotive response. Those elements convey the “sacred,” he says, “even if it’s not being spoken about directly.”

Sheila Lee, a 2010 graduate of the Sacred Spaces Program, also believes in modern aesthetics for sacred spaces. Now an architect in the northern hemisphere. That poses a big challenge to the modernist “everything should be a white cube tipped up on a corner” architectural philosophy that originated in Northern Europe, Dean Ott adds.

Instead Prince expects color, texture, and flourishes in form — even reminiscent of the Baroque period — to return to church design in years ahead. This is further spurred by a demographic shift under way, she adds. As Catholics of the southern hemisphere rise in number and influence, their vibrant styles will appear in church buildings in the northern hemisphere. That poses a big challenge to the modernist “everything should be a white cube tipped up on a corner” architectural philosophy that originated in Northern Europe, Dean Ott adds.

Prince is excited about the prospect of “less abstraction and more actuality” in Catholic architecture, but she hesitates to label a new style. She hopes only that these buildings are something more, something that translates “the grandess of God and how you, through your humble services of designing, could help others to enter in communion with him — which is very important — but you begin to question your own vocation, your own beliefs, your own standing, and your own responsibilities,” he says. Echoing the Past

Ashley Prince says her Catholic faith inspires her work as a master’s degree student in the SSCS concentration. She thinks it is critical to understand how Catholics practice their faith and how ethnic cultures within the Church influence church architecture. So what does this mean for the 21st century? Prince believes Catholic churches yet to be built will increasingly reflect their ancient architectural ancestors. “We will have churches that feel more like the 17th century,” Prince says, but “without copying them.”

This anticipated architectural shift reflects a move toward traditional practice by young Catholics, Prince observes. “There’s so much more orthodoxy that is coming back to the Catholic Church,” especially among 20-something Catholics, she says — many of whom have grown up in the plain walls of modern churches.

“When you look at St. Peter’s, I think you’re drawn to it because there are things you want to reach out and touch,” says the 25-year-old. “In contrast, When you experience certain modernist buildings, they are so beautiful because they are so pure, but if you sit in them long enough, you’ll want to move away from,” she explains. Instead Prince expects color, texture, and flourishes in form — even reminiscent of the Baroque period — to return to church design in years ahead.

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Prince’s vision is one synthesis of ancient and new ways that Bermudez encourages his students to find. “The new generation has to answer these things, and we can help, but it’s they who need to look into it.” Finding sublime designs is a challenging job, he says, “Sometimes the one that ‘won’t happen unless we talk to each other.’”

**Conversation of Faith**

At Catholic University, Bermudez hopes to foster conversation among burgeoning architects so they appreciate these positions and can search for increasingly effective ways to design sacred space.

In SSCS students learn the secular and religious architectural standards, from Old Testament times to the post-modern. “You cannot write poetry before you learn grammar,” Bermudez explains. And there are courses and studio work in architectural space, materials, function, context, engineering, and sustainability — but according to Bermudez, “always related to the question of architecture as an instrument for entering some sort of conversation with something mystical, the immaterial, or the immeasurable.”

In a corollary program called Spirit of Place/Space of Design, students study the culture, history, and ecology of a community abroad and then design and construct a sacred space to fit. Those range from a reflection chapel in Mayo County, Ireland, to an ancient memorial for Buddhist villagers of Namje and Thumki in Nepal.

The first student-designed building at CUA is a memorial for Buddhist villagers of Namje and Thumki in Nepal. The students must delve into the mysteries of their own faith, Bermudez adds. “When you begin to ask these questions about God and how you, through your humble services of designing, could help others to enter in communion with him — which is very important — but you begin to question your own vocation, your own beliefs, your own standing, and your own responsibilities,” he says. Echoing the Past

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