

sacred space and urban space

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the parish centre in podersdorf

liturgy and language

the liturgy is a complex mediatorial system that consists of actions, gestures, signs, symbols, images ... *things*. liturgy is a language that speaks to us of the divinity; it allows us live our religious experience and, put in concrete terms, is the linking element between heaven and earth.

the language of space is part of the sacred language. the sacred-religious event takes place in space. the language of the architecture models the sacred space. the language of architecture's task in the formation of sacred space is to develop spirituality among those attending the religious service, to allow them experience intimations of the supernatural by the use of spatial components and to bring them closer to god in harmony with themselves.

what kind of concept of sacred space can provide a basis for this kind of architecture? using what kind of spatial ideas can designers respond to a contemporary concept of a "sacred space"?

the post-conciliar reforms in the roman catholic church devoted "new" attention to sacred space. in order to prevent the *place* of worship itself being excessively sanctified it moved the relationship between the celebrant and the faithful more emphatically into the centre of the liturgy. it thus gave the altar back its original meaning that relates to the shared last supper and the divine sacrifice.

subsequently, atypical solutions to christian worship were favoured that led to the building of so-called "sacred garages". this is how father david maria turoldo described the majority of church buildings erected after the second vatican council.

church and liturgy are, however, closely related to the physical place, they are "on site" in order to bring people at a specific place closer to the path and the light and, at the same time, to form a specific sacred place. the revelation of the sacred place is an existential value for people, the place "unveils" itself to them when they can orient themselves within it.

this orientation is the "meaning" that leads us from one point to another in a landscape, from a street to a square in a city and, in our inner being, from the darkness to the light, from the profane to the sacred. the orientation is a world of *things* in which objects forms, volumes, surfaces, spaces, materials and symbols enter into relationships with each other to guide us. a world of *things* that present themselves to us in terms of their character, their mentality and their identity and as a whole provide the meaning for our identification with a place and our sense of belonging to it.

sacred architecture achieves an identity when it does not merely represent the aesthetic value of the sacred representation but constructs a concrete place in which the community can orient itself towards god. " *a building, a greek temple leaves everything open, it is simply there on a rocky slope. the building conceals the image of its divinity and in this act of concealing unveils it, as it displays the image inside its sacred shell that is reached by traversing the open portico. the god is present in the temple by means of the temple.....*"¹

urban integration

the parish centre is concretely woven into an existing urban mesh that is characterised by uniform axial directions, uniform blocks and buildings arranged beside each other facing in the same direction.

the church takes up the symbol of an obsessive horizontal orientation that characterises the building structure of podersdorf and, through the simplicity with which it adapts to the plain architectural and structural characteristics of the existing development; it

almost becomes a provocation in terms of constructing a religious building. through its orientation the new church connects and completes the urban mesh. it expresses a readiness to depict an architectural path that leads from the darkness of the human condition by creating an order in the urban structure. *"...for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am i in the midst of them..."*²

orientation and direction

the house of god integrates itself in the block out of which the mother church rises. this old church is laid out entirely according to the liturgical rules of sacred-geographic orientation and forms a complete contrast to the planned urban structure of its surroundings. it is a special element in the otherwise homogeneous texture of the development of podersdorf. in the context of the existing axially of the urban context the old church is "swivelled" in plan, which means that it becomes a challenging symbol of a modern spirit, a deconstructive element amidst an otherwise consolidated urban context. it is there, at this point, in this "strangely angled" way to show passers-by the way to the sacred and to invite them to enter the almost level forecourt that extends within the block connecting the new and the old churches with the street and the town. the parish centre takes on the task of balancing the differences between the urban order and the rules of the liturgy. it is incorporated in a way that strictly aligns it with the existing urban mesh. by means of the contrast between the orientation of the two churches, one ancient, one new, a new coherent complex is created.

the architectural experience of the sacred is not, as is so often the case, produced here by means of "unusual" building forms but by means of an "exceptional" solution of the chosen form of urban expression.

the volumes of the buildings develop from a *horizontal* composition derived from the horizontal components of the urban context, a *horizontal* that, in the language of religious architecture, often describes man's path on earth to attending the sacred rite. as a result of the contrast the force of the horizontal strengthens the vertical striving of the mother church towards the heavens and even accentuates the old church's individual, swivelled position. it modulates the building volumes of the project that, together with the existing urban and architectural elements on site, define a path that leads from the street to the sacred centre of the town.

the parish centre in principle excludes the arbitrary use of a banal architectural language or effusively symbolic or imperious forms. on the contrary it suggests a solution that seeks the sacred using elements that are most closely linked with the real profane foundation of the place, i.e. the structure of the town and its development including the typical building materials used there. in terms of composition the solution is based on the representation of the sacred with the help of "worldly" forms developed from the existing urban and human pool of elements that are the actual memory for the building of religious forms in the present day.

identity

churches are often built as monuments and often in an ill-proportioned relationship to the scale of the surrounding development.

in podersdorf the aim is to give the sacred place an identity by interpreting the morphological characteristics of the town in such a way that the urban centre is reconfigured and a spiritual centre is created.

: *"... it is not a temple for you, if it is not directed towards the centre: every temple starts from the centre..."*³

the meaning of the sacred in architecture is sought by an informed handling of pure geometric forms that play with light and shadow and by realising the idea of a shell that, through the emphatically epidermal character of its surfaces, more strongly determines the building volume than the mere extent of the volumes themselves.

the architects have here created a house of god, fully conscious that this place should attract, accommodate, unify and enclose the community.
the typological solution selected contributes to achieving this sacred identity.

the church as an "aula", a solution that reinterprets the archetype of all churches and that applies the idea of the original sacred space, which is able to convey anew the archaic perception of the meaning of religion.

the parish centre is one stage on a path lined by a number of modern examples that have begun to reflect on the tradition of the old sacred architecture and that relate to archaic models. such models are capable of conveying an original spiritual simplicity by means of sacred space designed as a *place* of gathering, as a surrounding enclosure, as an "aula" or as a central space in the early christian sense which, later given a slight orientation, forms the origin of the judaic-christian house of god.

the architecture of the church pursues these ideas directly and forms a simple hall a foursquare prism inside which the community comes together in a "*holy circle*"⁴ that opens towards the altar in order to leave the direction of the liturgical path free.

architectural composition

it is not a solid wall that separates the church from the two streets, the square and the garden, but a semi-transparent structure that is made of a metal frame and gleaming glass panels that symbolically represents enclosure. this enclosure is a surface, a skin that allows one feel the breath of god through the excerpts from sacred scripture printed on the panes and, in a kind of "osmotic" process, allows the members of the community to diffuse from outside into the interior. the enclosure is a *limit* that must be crossed, "a between" in heidegger's sense, which describes things that are both separate and united and in which "the true takes place", the sacred that is formed at the moment in which two things meet, the church and the town, the sacred and the profane.

*"a boundary is not a limit at which something ceases, but, as the ancient greeks knew, a limit at which a new awareness arises."*⁵

laid out at right angles across the site and extending to the boundary to the neighbouring site, the entire religious complex becomes a "between" that is formed between the streets at either side, the square and the garden, while at the same time forming a new centre.

in the interior of the enclosure the complex is broken up into the church and the parish hall, which are separated from each other by the atrium. the two volumes in pure white take up the purity of the walls of the mother church thus establishing a connection to local symbols and materials. an architectural interplay arises in the linear combination of the old church, the place and the new church as a timeless continuum, as an infinity that is intended to express the wish to ascend into heaven.

the metal grid surrounds the buildings, it overlays them and, through its light and geometry, it dissolves the architectural surface. in this way the cartesian three-dimensionality is overcome, by means of a "cubist" play of different planes the church enters into the fourth dimension between space and time.

timeless, ascetic monochrome, the sacred experience of space explored through time: the necessity of the converse, becoming consciousness of the supernatural through the experience of materials. the entire morphology of this architectural language results from approaching the sacred through the use of material.

on two sides of the church the walls are detached from the floor by a long incision. light streams inside through this slit making the vertical surfaces appear to lift off from their base – despite the laws of gravity.

the floor in the "aula" runs towards the closed white wall that rises behind the altar and in a continuum it folds and becomes itself a wall that reaches to the roof, showing the way to heaven. further incisions at the top and the sides detach the central wall from the

roof and from the vertical elements beside it. the light entering through the slits reveals its naked surface relieved only by the image of christ.

the game of dematerialisation of the building mass and the dissolution of the volume with the help of light and shade creates the impression of undisturbed, free and still space, the threshold to the sacred: "...this is not emptiness; this is stillness. and in stillness is god..."⁶

the interior of the church follows the theories of rudolf schwarz: architectural simplicity is linked with a composition of surfaces that are kept plain without any sculpting and are given fine light incisions along the lines where the different planes meet. they allow us experience the dimensions of the space and adapt the emptiness of the interior to the prism of the building volume. an emptiness in which we can perceive that which fills up everything, a stillness that allows us hear the word and a pure white that allows us see the light.

is this the suggestion of a liturgy without architecture?

no. it is the "pure" space that wishes to present its sacred nature by means of a reduction of architectural symbols that tends towards an ascetic minimalism. it is an architectural response in the spirit of charity, which the community is called upon to exercise, to involve themselves and to participate in the religious experience according to the principles of the post-conciliar church. here the sacred is not made manifest through richness of ornament that distracts from the feeling of being in the midst of a community, instead the church is simply a gathering space that accommodates the members and encloses them and gives the community the opportunity to participate without restrictions, without the crushing constraints of imperious forms, under the sole impression of the "...energy of being accepted and the experience of being one together..."⁷

¹ M.Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, Stuttgart 1960, S.41, quoted from C.Norberg-Schulz, *Louis I.Kahn idea e immagine*, officina, Rom, 1980, p.19.

² Gospel acc. Matthew, XVIII, 20

³ M.Cacciari, *Ecclesia*, Casabella 640-641, p.4, 1997

⁴ According to Rudolf Schwarz' scheme in the book *Vom Bau der Kirche*, 1938

⁵ M. Heidegger, *Costruire, abitare, pensare*, p.103

⁶ R. Guardini, *Die Schildgenossen*, aXI, n.3, 1930-31, Casabella 640-641, p.40, 1997

⁷ M. Cacciari, *ibidem*.