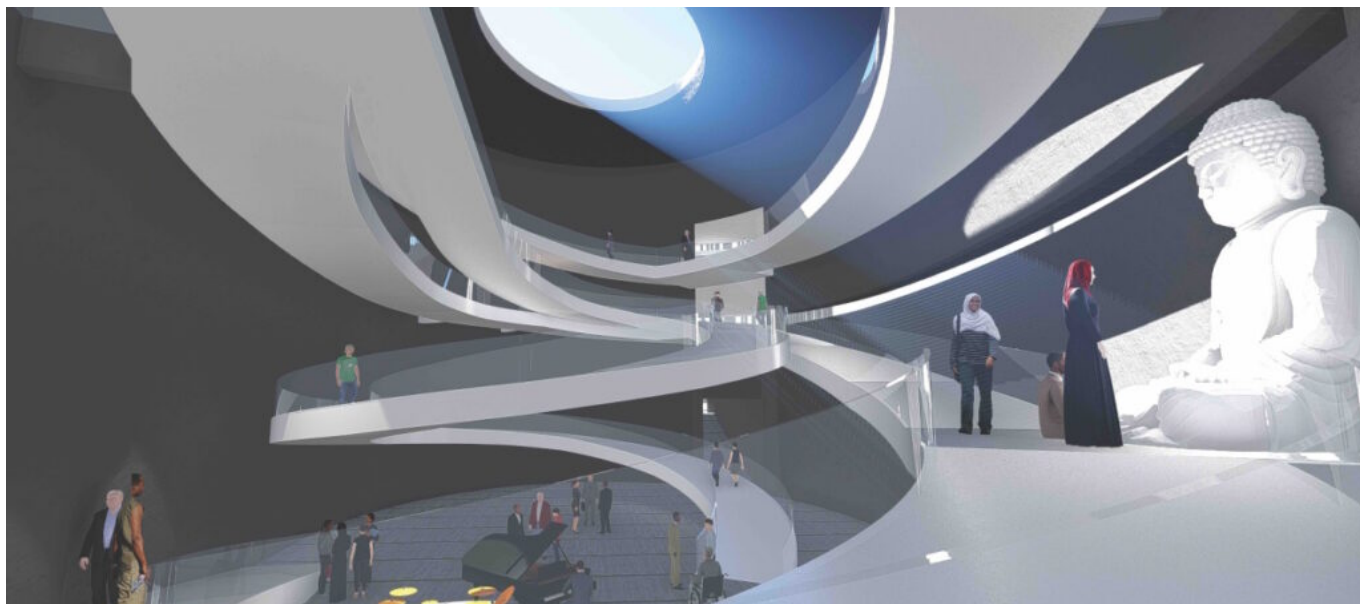




Journey to the 'Forbidden Zone'

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What appears to some as an 'off-limits' realm of architectural education is at its heart

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The question is provocative: Which role can the sacred play in the teaching of architecture today? How can sacred space shape architectural pedagogy? **Some might question whether sacred place should play a role at all**, if one considers the past sins of organized religion in the panoply of humankind's miseries. An atheist social critic such as the late Christopher Hitchens might take such a stance. However, we live in a time (I am reflecting on social conditions in North America) **when young people question the role of organized religion**, but do not necessarily believe that sacredness and spirituality have no place in their lives. **The single largest group of young men and women**—those same people who are students in our design studios—describe themselves as “**spiritual but not religious**.” They are at the forefront of changes in the way people today think of religion or being religious. **Many young people now see organized religion as the problem, not the solution**—a force in the world that divides people, that is intolerant, that builds walls around ideological camps at war with

each other.

Surveys from such respected research organizations as Pew, Gallup, and Trinity College **all show a precipitous drop in the percentage of young people who are members of an organized religion.** Yet, the number is growing of those who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. They are looking for ways to be spiritual that value dialogue, understanding, empathy, and authenticity.

These are very good motivations for architecture students. They have come to suspect an architectural agenda that reduces the creation of the built environment to formalistic exercises of compositional aesthetics, to creating buildings that do not transcend their programmatic requirements, molded by but not questioning economic drivers and societal “givens.”

But **tenured professors of architecture**, being older, **are typically not in the same headspace as their students.** The exploration of spiritual architecture and sacred place in architecture school is often met with **veiled hostility** by faculty and administration (it is a veritable “forbidden zone” in many programs).

But students have continued to push this design agenda forward, often in resistance to studio critics who feel threatened to consider architecture in a theoretical framework other than a secular or abstract one, which discounts or ignores the transcendent power of architecture. The architectural phenomenologist Juhani Pallasmaa warns that this attitude results in a “flattening” of architecture to one dimension that leaves no room for the cosmic, the spiritual—essentially a denial that architecture is part of the human condition.

If we approach our task as architects from this alternative direction it becomes clear **that anything we design**—whether it is to be used for an explicit sacred purpose (such as a church, a temple, a mosque), or a library, a home, a place of healing, a place to be alone, a place to play, a place to work, a place to share a meal, a place in which we celebrate with others—**can be spiritual architecture.** In fact, it has a responsibility to be so. We should focus our pedagogy on this goal.

An architect colleague who also has a background in theology once told me that he believes **we are not human beings trying to discover how to be spiritual**; we are spiritual beings striving to understand how to be human. This search should be fundamental to us as architects and as teachers of architecture—to discover how architecture can guide us as spiritual beings in pursuit of our humanity.

Some questions about the role of the spiritual in architectural education

So, here are **some questions** about the role of the spiritual in architectural education that **we might reflect upon and inquire of each other** when we are with our students, especially when we are in a design studio together.

How do considerations of the spiritual by both students and faculty enrich their education and their role as future architects? How does the contemplation of such issues in design help us as students and as architects to respond to the full range of human experiences? What experiences in teaching and learning to create spirituality and a culture resonate in architecture? How have those experiences changed you—not only as an architect or a student, but as a human being? If there is a driving hunger inside of each of us to enfold the spiritual into our work, what does that say about the place and the time we live in? As an architect and a teacher, how do we create a space for students and our colleagues to inhabit this realm, to traverse the forbidden zone? How can we create a welcoming place in which discussion, deliberation, and exploration of the spiritual in architecture are promoted and celebrated? And how do we approach the spiritual and sacred dimension of architecture in our own work? These questions **are challenging** (some might even describe them as “difficult”). Immersing yourself in such inquiry often pushes you out of your own comfort zone. **But isn't that the point of any kind of education?**

Learning from the students

I have discovered **opportunities to engage students in questions such as these**. In visiting architecture programs in North America and abroad, I have found some that have created places where questions such as these can be entertained and explored. Perhaps the most engaging has been Catholic University in Washington, DC, which has a **graduate studio specifically dedicated to exploring spirituality in architecture**. I have learned much from students there.

One student, **Emily**, told me that she chose to study here because she wanted to focus on how architecture shapes human experience—what emotions and perceptions can be elicited by the spiritual in architecture? **She was interested in exploring how the spiritual in architecture helps build community**. Making a bridge between the merely functional and the spiritual imparts architecture with a timeless yet existential dimension. She described her

studio work this way: “Our projects are our journeys.”

Another student, **Lisa**, admitted to me that, as awkward and challenging as these journeys might be, “sometimes it is good to be in an uncomfortable area, because it can push you a little bit more. You can see how spirituality influences your design.”

Andrew came to the realization that architecture is not just about bricks and mortar. Nor is it only about utility. He discovered that part of an architect’s role is to create environments that can help one to transcend the “everyday.” He explained it to me this way: The buildings we create can have more powerful dimensions beyond their physicality that can change one’s life.

Sina was an older student who decided to go to grad school 30 years after graduating with his bachelor’s degree and working in the field. Returning, he found an intellectual and spiritual oasis where he could think and talk about things that at first appeared totally unrelated to what he did in practice every day, but which turned out to be central to his life as an architect. It reminded him why he wanted to be an architect: to create places that give a person a momentary pause, perhaps a private haven in which to reflect. Such realms invite us to do something else with our lives, maybe to become someone else, just for a little while—to leave one’s form and space behind and to occupy another. To transform. To transcend. Sina told me that his graduate work had led him to conclude that it is architecture’s fundamental purpose to do just this: to transform, to transcend.

It has the same purpose as spirituality itself.

Image caption: spiral ramps lit by natural light from above are the heart of a design by Ugochukwu and Sina Moayed for a studio project at Catholic University, for which the author was visiting design critic. The spiral embraces many of the world’s religions and takes as its theme ‘giving and receiving,’ which the designers note is at the core of human love.

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