



## SACRED CONTEMPORARY

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### DEBATE

#### New Forms of Conversation

*José Tolentino Mendonça*

What relationship exists between artistic creation and religion in our contemporary era? Why does the space of religion now appear to us, as the American historian and art critic James Elkins writes, a “strange place”?

Religion no longer occupies that hegemonic centrality that made it the dominant system of meaning. The premises of the relationship between art, architecture and religion have changed.

Our societies have become psychically extenuating for individuals, and there appears to be a lack of support in dealing with the difficult eternal questions that return to us with a greater frequency: why me? There is a persistence of the religious in this human suffering, never fully resolved: the paradoxical condition of existence.

The challenge that today’s culture puts before us is no easy one: creativity, in order to forge new works of architecture, capable of learning from what is represented, in its breadth and diversity, by the inalienable physical and spiritual inheritance of our humanity. So let us begin to search for new forms of conversation.

#### The Sacred in Architecture and I. In Dialogue with José Tolentino Mendonça

*Álvaro Siza*

The text is the result of a conversation on the theme of “Sacred Architecture” and “Religious Art,” between Álvaro Siza, Pritzker Architecture Prize 1992, and Cardinal José Tolentino Mendonça, the Portuguese poet, theologian, archivist and librarian at the Vatican.

Motivated by Mendonça, Siza looks to Le Corbusier, beginning with his *Journey to the East*, “as if he had studied a great deal: all the aspects of light, of atmosphere” and the impact of buildings, from Ronchamp to La Tourette, as well as Carthusian monastic life, a mix of isolation and sharing, of intimacy and community, that produced the *Unité d’Habitation* in Marseille. “Le Corbusier is that form of restlessness that introduces contradictions.”

The discourse then shifts to the genesis of the design of the Church of Saint Mary, in Marco di Canaveses, or to the memory of the conservation of the destroyed church in Salemi, Sicily.

A spiritual approach to the design of churches that, as the conversation develops, guides the reasoning behind the relationship between inspiration and mysticism, between the idea of architecture, instinct and mystery.

#### The Sacred in Architecture and in the Secular Society

*João Norton de Matos*

Pointing out the sacred in contemporary architecture, in the secularized societies in which we live, implies returning to the way in which the 20th century phenomenology of religion understood the notion of the sacred, but also overcoming its dichotomous separation from the profane. Louis Kahn’s Salk Institut offers us a good example of how the transcendent dimension of the real manifests itself in secular architecture. The writings on art and architecture by the German theologian Paul Tillich show us that it is the style of architecture in its autonomy, and not the symbols of the sacred, that attributes a transcendent dimension to architecture. Thus, if we resort to examples of religious buildings, it is not as spaces conventionally dedicated to the sacred, but as spaces whose architectural intentionality gives priority to the elements and qualities of an atmosphere conducive to interiority, to encounter, and to availability for the dimension of sacred depth of life.

#### The Mood of the Sacred: Agency and Appropriation in Memorial Architecture

*Sabina Tanović*

The article aims to problematize the notion of contemporary sacred by looking into some of the relevant issues regarding contemporary memorial architecture dedicated to remembering atrocities. The text contextualizes memorial architecture as a relatively recent genre that originated in response to the carnage of the two world wars to stress that the modality of the form is dependent on given socio-cultural and political contexts. In arguing that agency of both designer and the design are essential in the conception of today’s spaces of remembrance, the author discusses appropriation as a process that renders memorial architecture meaningful. The argumentation is supported by a number of examples such as 11M memorial in Madrid and the Namenmonument in Amsterdam that demonstrate a variety of approaches and their consequences for the notion of sacred as a consensus between different stakeholders.

#### Expanses of Darkness and Silence: “Counter-Environments of the Sublime”

*Lidia Decandia*

While referring to an old North Sardinian sub-region characterised by distinct emptiness due to low-density settlement and ubiquitous environmental features, the article reflects on the role this marginal area “full of nature and history” could have today in reconfiguring the actual idea of urbanity. Beginning with the role places of silence have had in other crisis periods in the history of mankind, it examines some signs that reveal new urban interest in

this territory, now completely integrated into the systems of the mind-sets that have shaped the contemporary cosmopolis. It is pointed out that this reserve of darkness could constitute, precisely because of its specific nature, unknown sacred space for the society of action and services now on the verge of triggering infarction of the soul. A sort of counter-environment of the sublime: a place for questioning, where our relationship with the incommensurable can be challenged, the most immortal part of our soul be stirred, and the mediocrity and ordinariness of everyday life be transcended, enabling us once more, under a sky full of stars, to begin to address the great queries regarding our existence in the cosmos.

## RESEARCHES

### Memory, Materiality and Architecture. The Renewal of Blitzed Churches in the United Kingdom

*Lorenzo Grieco*

Soon after the Second World War, the reconstruction of blitzed churches became a major theme, especially in United Kingdom, which registered massive bombings. The contribution aims at illustrating the debate on the rebuilding, restoring, and re-use of damaged churches, while describing some key cases. The mentioned projects hovered the immaterial value of memory, understood as a collective feeling, stressing on the symbolism of ruined churches. The cases are symbolical of a complex approach, based on the exigency of reconstruct, the notion of ruin as the essence of the sacredness of ritual, the belief in the admonishing power of blitzed churches, hence their conversion into war memorials. The brief overview of literary works, restoration practices, and visual evidence demonstrates how the post-war affection for the mortal remains of blitzed churches was in continuity with the tradition picturesque, while creating a new set of transcendental values linked to the mortal remains of sacred buildings.

### Lightness Rests Upon the Earth, Weight Is Suspended. On the Sentient Use of the Braga Chapels

*Joaquim Félix de Carvalho*

Three chapels received the distinction of “religious building with the best architecture of the year”: “Árvore da Vida,” in 2011; “Imaculada” and “Cheia de Graça,” in 2019, located in Braga, Portugal. They were designed by Cerejeira Fontes Architects. Internationally known and described in their objective architectural properties, this article seeks to develop an essay, written in poetic language, evoking a cultural background, from Portuguese poetry to the filmography of Tarkovsky, in a line of appeal to the multisensory experience (according to the critical thinking by Juhani Pallasmaa). A para-liturgical processional narrative is privileged. The chapels are part of the post-MRAR (Movimento de Renovação da Arte Religiosa) and assert themselves as a cultural

“movement,” ethical epiphany, refined denudation and practices of hope. They were born from the generous and critical cooperation of the Cerejeira Fontes Architects and a host of artists: Asbjørn Andresen, Lisa Sigfridsson, Lourdes Castro, Ilda David’, Manuel Rosa, Helena Cardoso; and of excellent craftsmen and a theologian. Frédéric Debuyst, Crispino Valenziano and others highlighted their architectural and liturgical values.

### Social Sacredness. The Church of San Giacomo the Apostle, in Ferrara

*Federica Morgia*

Consecrated in October 2021, the church of San Giacomo in Ferrara is the result of a design competition, in 2011, organized by the Italian Bishops’ Conference and won by Benedetta Tagliabue (EMBT). The project aimed to provide the city with a new parish complex to replace the existing building with the aim of promoting shared values and the involvement of the community. Tagliabue describes her work as “a humble hut, made of reeds and rough concrete” where the sacred is mixed with the social life of the parish to transform a marginal place into a new public space. The church was conceived as a hot air balloon resting on the ground. The building was placed in the center of the site giving rise to a space that runs diagonally from the main entrance. Along the same trajectory, arranged in a fan shape, are the buildings of the parish center. The complex, by virtue of the evocative matrix, establishes an empathetic relationship with the site. Tagliabue collaborated on the artistic design with Enzo Cucchi Don and Roberto Tagliaferri who advised on all liturgy aspects. The design of San Giacomo church seems to capture the elusive signs of Social Sacredness and provides the entire surrounding area with a sense of community.

### The Village, the Crossroads, the House, the Church, the Cross. Parish Church Complex of Santa Chiara in Sini

*Carlo Atzeni, Silvia Mocci*

The project for the Church of Santa Chiara in Sini arises from the community’s need for a new place of worship to replace the existing structure, built at the end of the 1960s on the area of another historical church which had previously been demolished, which has become all but unfit for use.

The demand for a new design comes at the end of a substantial modification process that inadequately affected the features of the traditional fabric of the local architectural heritage, which was still partially well preserved.

The small village of Sini is located in a remarkable landscape context, at the foot of the Giarra di Gesturi (one of the most important naturalistic and archaeological sites of Sardinia) and in a vantage point overlooking the rural plain of the historical region of Marmilla.

Located in a plot that housed the village church for at least five centuries, and embedded inside a traditional fabric of courtyard houses, the new ecclesiastical complex interprets through a complete formal abstraction its long-lasting relationship with the historical settlement and territory.

## “Reassuring” Models. The Church of Buon Ladrone, in Bologna

*Jacopo Gresleri*

The CEI introduces participation in the design of sacred space. In light of the example analyzed here, the novelty appears as a “reassuring” attempt to bring the community closer to the liturgy and the church, understood also as a physical place. The poor (design) quality of the majority of the new church spaces has made it more than necessary to verify the way in which these works are realized, but participation has historically proven to be a complex and delicate issue to manage, especially with regard to the set of skills, contributions and decision-making responsibilities shared between designers, clients and users. It is too early to evaluate the outcomes of this engaging collective process, but the proposal (clearly derived from the experiences of housing and urban regeneration of the last fifty years) suggests interesting prospects for the sacred contemporary, as long as it is well guided. There remains, in fact, the suspicion (and the regret) of a weakening of the experimental will – too often confused with forms of forced “originality” of design – that constituted the driving force of the realizations born from the Cardinal Lercaro’s reforming will during the years of the unrepeatably Bolognese context.

## A Diverse Notion of the Sacred. The Santuario Señor de Tula in Jojutla de Juárez and the Open Chapels

*Maria Argenti*

This essay analyses a selection of small capillas abiertas, recalling the examples designed in Mexico by Félix Candela in Lomas de Cuernavaca and by Luis Barragán in the Parque de las Estrellas in Guadalajara. From the Santuario del Señor de Tula by Derek Dellakamp and Jachen Schleich, to Saint Bernard’s Chapel in La Playosa, Argentina, designed by Nicolás Campodonico, from the small Capela Da Fazenda Veneza by Decio Tozzi in Valinhos, São Paulo, Brazil, to the Chapel of the Earth, in the Yucatán, Mexico, designed by Cabrera Arqs.

These open chapels explore another approach with respect to the more common enclosure of sacred space. Here, the space dedicated to the liturgy, albeit delimited, remains open; and while paradigmatic, it renounces the pretext of containing, or even concentrating, the alpha and the omega of transcendence.

This space, defined though not separated, alludes to an ethereal and fleeting perimeter, in some cases close, in others distant: the line of the horizon. We are dealing with a different way of defining and protecting the isolation required by sacred space; demonstrating that its separation (intrinsic to the etymology of the term) does not mean separating architecture from life, nor even from place, but on the contrary exalting within this space all that gives meaning to life and consecrates a community.

## Architectures of Memory in Latin America

*Gianpaola Spirito*

Among the architectures whose task is to remember dramatic past events or commemorate victims – the me-

morials – a specific typology is becoming increasingly popular, that of memory museums.

This article deals with those built in recent years in Latin America to shed light on the dramatic events that took place during the dictatorial regimes that have come to power since the 1970s; some of which have recently come to an end, others are still in progress.

The proximity in time of these events determines the fundamental role they play in making the truth known, thanks to the long work of commissions that have collected the documentation and testimonies of the surviving victims and those of the families of the deceased. These have played a central role not only in the reconstruction of the facts, but also in the planning and construction process to enable them to reconcile with their past.

The museums described are: the Museum of Memory and Human Rights (MMHR) in Santiago de Chile designed by Estudio America (2007-2010), the Centre for Memory, Peace and Reconciliation in Bogotá by Juan Pablo Otis Architects (2009-2015) and the Lugar de la Memoria in Lima by Barclay and Crousse (2010-2015). Especially the last two engage processes of community participation, establish a deep connection with the memory of the places in which they are inserted, and shape narrative spaces that involve the visitor emotionally and lead him to reflection.

## A Church and a Landscape in the Cordillera del Litoral, Venezuela

*Roberto Pasini*

The article analyzes the construction of the church of San Juan María Vianney in La Media Legua on the Cordillera del Litoral of Venezuela. Through this small implementation, the Caracas-based studio Enlace Arquitectura was involved in a long process of participatory planning and self-construction along with a small rural community. The realization is analyzed in relation to the tectonic and constructive circumstances that have produced it, the sober compositional aspirations that qualify it, the context of economic and political crisis that grips the country, and the long-duration terrestrial and human landscape that surrounds it. The design action of Enlace Arquitectura is interpreted as activism aimed at improving the living conditions of the communities most exposed to the rigors of this crisis. The landscape of the mountain range is read in its geographical and human continuity throughout history.

## The Sacredness of the Everyday. The Bait ur Rouf Mosque in Dhaka

*Maura Percoco*

The story of Bait ur Rouf mosque in Dhaka is uncommon. At first, the mosque was a votive building thought by Sufia Khatun, grandmother of Bangladeshi architect Marina Tabassum. She donated a plot of land in the suburban quarter of Faydabad to design a space for Islamic cult and religious instruction. Secondly, its realisation, which took several years (2006-2012), is the expression of a shared commitment and the outcome of a choral work. It was made possible by the support of builders, master artisans, and all those who, in some form, have provided their economic contribution or skills and expertise to complete a commu-

nity place to celebrate the sacred spirit of living together, of nature and of the Divine. Finally, the poetic dimension that identifies the mosque is the product of the awareness of Tabassum to capture the essence of things and show it with simplicity through her works. Such as the Bait ur Rouf mosque, where the evocative quality of space, the realism of materials, the accuracy of details, and the richness of light modulations tell about the authentic value of Bangladeshi culture and the self-determination community's ability to reveal the extraordinary, hidden in the everyday things.

### On the Threshold of the Elsewhere. The Mayor Mohammad Hanif Jummah Mosque

*Francesca Sarno*

The passage from earthly to spiritual life is the metaphor that dominates the design of the Mayor Mohammad Hanif Jummah Mosque. Built in Dhaka in 2018,

it is the work of Rafiq Azam, a Bengali architect who leads the design studio "Shatotto Architecture for the green living."

The mosque is located adjacent to the Azipur cemetery in the old city of Dhaka; positioned on the eastern edge of the cemetery, the mosque seems to subtract a part of the land from the site destined to the dead in order to delegate it to meditation and prayer. The place of worship, thus, assumes the role of a material tool to endorse the faith in immaterial eternity.

The architectural elaboration responds to meanings and rituals of the Islamic religion but elaborated in a contemporary key. The contribution focuses on three key elements of the project and of this worship – water, light and nature – which, according to Rafiq Azam vision, correspond to the elements that guarantee vital balance in Bangladesh as well. Through the analysis of them, however, it is underlined how the mosque, despite being the space for prayer, reaffirms the intimacy of faith which does not need a place to be lived and professed.