

SACRAMENTAL ARCHITECTURE: BODY, TEMPLE, CITY

By Steven J. Schloeder



The present state of Catholic church architecture is both complicated and contentious. The parish building project has become a battleground between “progressives” and “conservatives.” In a recent project interview, one architect suggested that with the intrinsically controversial process of church design, there would inevitably be losses of parishioners, and that such losses were acceptable. Of course, the parish did not choose that firm!

Progressives – those professional clergy and liturgical consultants schooled in 1960s and ‘70s liturgical modernism (the roots of which go back significantly earlier) – advocate a particular liturgico-architectural implementation of “the spirit of Vatican II.” The conservatives are typically the lay folk who don’t understand why a millennia-old liturgical arrangement suddenly changed so radically; who were never enamored with the “litur-tainment” of folk masses and talk-show dynamics; and who find the aniconic atmosphere, displaced tabernacles, and forced “gathering ‘round the altar” as alienating if not manipulative.

One notes that the progressive agenda is promulgated by professional religious and clergy (including several now-lay ex-religious liturgical consultants), and is challenged by educated and devout laity, architects, academics, and journalists. Perhaps in response to the authentic “spirit of Vatican II,” wherein the laity is called into leadership roles, lay folk around the U.S. are becoming more vocal and even aggressive when their places of worship are threatened with “wreckovations,” or when they desire more meaningful, beautiful, and traditional new churches. This ought to give the professionals pause to consider that merely being an expert in liturgy does not make one an expert in how people meet God.

It is now argued that the tired old agenda of the liturgical modernists has failed to engender a vibrant liturgical praxis or a robust architecture. Numerous groups are calling for a “reform of the Reform.”¹ The dream of “full, conscious, active participation” has failed to materialize on the terms the Liturgical Movement promoted. Attempts to engage the faithful through removing altar rails, moving the altar into the nave, theater style and vesica-shaped seating arrangements, the large hot-tub style baptisteries at the entrance, the proud display of the Holy Oils in jewelry shop cases, and the removal of “cluttering,” “conflicting,” or “distracting” items such as the tabernacle and traditional sacred art have proven effete. Much of this furniture rearranging has only cemented the lay faithful backsides into their chairs as spectators waiting to be entertained. Clearly, something has been lost.

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Loss and Recovery

The loss of meaning in church architecture has a complex history, and is beyond the scope of this short article. Issues of iconicity are bound with matters of aesthetics and epistemology; liturgical arrangement with politics, philosophy, and consciousness theory; adaptability and architectural expression with post-war production economics and modern science; and austere liturgical environments with germ theory and modern sanitation. Matters far beyond the strict dictates of liturgy have, for better or worse, significantly affected Catholic church design in the past century. For instance, if the programmatic reduction of the church function to assembly-table-ambo-chair-font treats the sacred building as “a machine for praying in,” it should not be surprising given that Edward Mills’ seminal 1956 book, *The Modern Church*, was preceded by his 1951 *The Modern Factory*.

The sentiments for austere, Spartan, purportedly functional, and centralized worship spaces were best expressed, and strategically advanced, in the 1978 *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* - wherein it is stated that the church need not even look like a church, and all that is needed is “a skin for a liturgical action.”² Now, 25 years hence, those who once promoted that vision are looking for a recovery of memory, imagination, and complex symbolic engagement. When the progressive former archbishop Rembert Weakland openly called into question the liturgical excesses of the post conciliar period,³ when the theme of one of the national liturgical conferences called for a return to “mystery,”⁴ and when *Modern Liturgy* changed its name, began showing traditional churches on its cover, and contained articles on the deep symbol structure of the liturgy,⁵ one might well sense a sea change.

Fr. Richard Vosko, for instance, notes that “Today many Catholics will observe that their churches do not look or feel like churches” and concedes that “the claims that the past has been forsaken...cannot be discounted.” He correctly points out that “If a religious building does not reveal the narrative...one wonders what the purpose of the place is,” and further suggests that “the place of worship should be planned to stir the imagination.”⁶ It is a telling indictment of the 20th-century liturgico-architectural agenda that such concerns must even be raised. Our typical recent church buildings are so devoid of signification that even *Time* magazine is given to ask “What does a church look like?”⁷ A hundred years ago, the question would have drawn quizzical looks.

What Does a Church Look Like?

Formulating an acceptable answer to this question is difficult. John Buscemi argues that while we all need liturgical symbols, the “old” symbol system is cliché, worn-out, and somehow no longer speaks to us. Yet a complex and multivalent sacramental symbol structure cannot be reworked over a weekend. Furthermore, his bizarre proposals for

chthonic holy water fountains evocative of the uterus of the earth mother, and his “birth passage crucifixes” are hardly the stuff of normal Catholic piety.⁸ On the traditionalist side, the proposals for a classical revival advocated by the architecture faculty at Notre Dame University may yield a more humane architecture. Yet one does not sense that stylistic revivalism is a particularly robust response to the vision for the Second Vatican Council to engage the contemporary condition.⁹

In another attempt to recover a meaningful approach to church design, Michael Rose argues for a “natural law” of Catholic architecture (an interesting choice of words for an *artificial* project). Rose’s criteria of verticality, permanence, and iconography is a loose reading of Vitruvius’ *utilitas, firmitas, and venustas*. However, many entirely valid historical Catholic churches do not contain these aspects: Cistercian, Syro-Malabar, and Armenian churches tended to be spare and aniconic; the Norwegian stave churches and 19th-century Carpenter Gothic lack “durable” materials; and smallness and a lack of soaring verticality does not seem to inhibit the sacred qualities of many northern Iberian Mozarabic and Asturian churches. And to the contrary, the new Los Angeles cathedral has all three!

A careful analysis of that cathedral shows it satisfies the majority of Rose’s checklist items – a bell tower; sited as a “city set on a hill”; an entrance atrium/garden and a symbolic and ornamented main portal; the placement of the baptistery with an image of John baptizing Jesus; a cavernous nave; the dedication to the Virgin; the cruciform floor plan with lateral rows of pews; depictive sacred art; traditional alabaster windows; the sanctuary set apart “as the holiest place” with the altar as “the focal point of unity, reverence, and worship”; and a large and realistic crucifix showing the suffering Christ.¹⁰

The building has all these features, yet in Rose’s estimation it still fails as a church and is labeled a “concrete monstrosity, which is not only unidentifiable as a Catholic cathedral but is by objective standards an

ugly building.”¹¹ If it can be argued so strongly that this building fulfils the vast majority of Rose’s criteria, should Rose not reconsider his system? Sacred architecture cannot be reduced to a checklist of items – neither to the functionary altar-ambo-chair-font-assembly of the modernist, nor to Rose’s criteria.

A Sacramental Answer: Body, Temple, City

How then, can we construct an adequate theory of and praxis for contemporary Catholic architecture? Given the space limitations, I will briefly lay out an understanding of Catholic church design that transcends matters of style, that respects the deep traditions, and is yet fully contemporary. I ask the reader’s indulgence to allow a shorthand explication.

The church building is intended to express something of the faith – it is primarily intended to express the *Ecclesia*, the “Church” properly called.¹² Yet, the *Ecclesia* is not a “thing,” it is not an “object” in and of itself. Rather it is a relationship – those “called together” in Christ. How is this relationship best expressed?

This question has been with us from the start of Christianity. Christ used a series of parables, metaphors, and poetic images to explain the Kingdom of God – indeed, the *kingdom* is one such analogical figure. Throughout scripture we find three dominant models for understanding the *Ecclesia* – the body, the temple,¹³ and the city. Each are part of a revealed symbol structure, and each are still found in contemporary documents such as *Lumen Gentium* and the *Rite of Dedication*. These perennial themes predate scripture in the deepest recesses of human religious consciousness, and have been consistently used to explain both the *Ecclesia* and the church building.¹⁴

These three themes are deeply interwoven. The body is a type of house – it is a house for the soul. The house is a shelter, a “sanctuary” safe from the elements, animals, and marauders. This human need for



Photo: Steven J. Schloeder

Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, Los Angeles, nave.

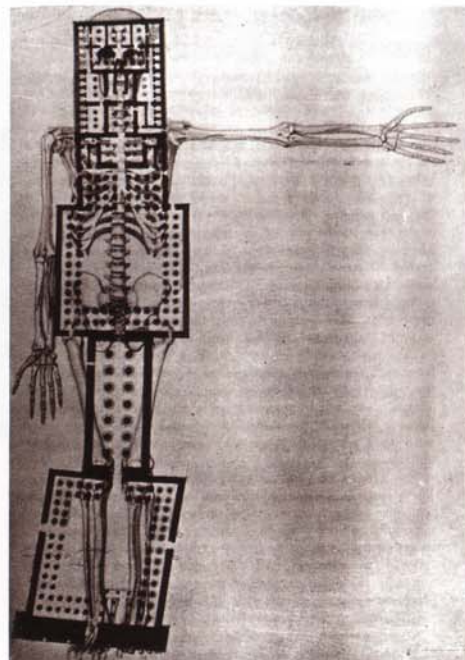


Sleeping Lady

Votive figure, Malta (7000 B.C.) and plan of the Middle Temple at Tarxien.

shelter precedes and even informs religion. Thus, the temple is a type of house, it is a house for the gods; and the primitive house was an intrinsically religious place dedicated to the family religion of ancestor worship.¹⁵ The city is a house writ large, primitively as the house of the tribe, the “body politic.” The king dwelt there, as did the gods. Primitive cities were often both palace-cities and temple-cities, such as Nineveh and Jerusalem.

Such themes as temple as body or city are found in many sacred architectural traditions— notably the Hindu, and these may be seen as adumbrations of the Christian revelation – yet for the Christian, these themes are specifically eschatological. In the great “ecclesiophany”



Temple of Luxor, from Schwaller 1977:23.

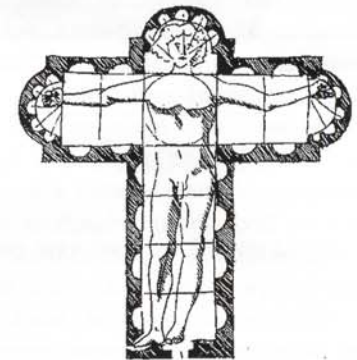
in Revelations 21, these metaphors of body, temple, and city come together symphonically, giving insight for the necessarily multivalent, ambiguous, and complex symbol structure of sacramental architecture as expressive of the Ecclesia.

The body is the primordial symbol – Chauvet calls it the “arch-symbol,” since everything else is built upon this great mystery.¹⁶ I will therefore concentrate on the recovery of this symbol, since the house/tent/temple/basilica and city images are built on it. Some of the earliest specifically religious architecture, such as the Neolithic hypogea in Malta, seem to model closely the contemporaneous fertility votive images such as the Maltese “Sleeping Lady” or the “Venus of Willendorf.” Axiality, procession, differentiation of chambers, symmetry, and proportion all seem to suggest affinities between the body and the early earth temples. R.A. Schwaller’s investigations show similar and intriguing correspondences between the body and temple in ancient Egyptian architecture.¹⁷ Thus, it ought not be surprising that Christ likened his body to the temple, or that St. Paul develops the “Body of Christ” as the central metaphor for the Church. Yet what does this mean architecturally? Are there deeper reasons that, at least since the time of St. Ambrose, churches have been ordered in the shape of the Lord’s crucified body – that the cruciform basilica has pride of place in this sacramental language of church architecture?

Keeping in mind that sacred architecture involves a complex analogy, we need to first recover some basic language of the body in order to understand the “Church as the Body of Christ,” let alone the church building as

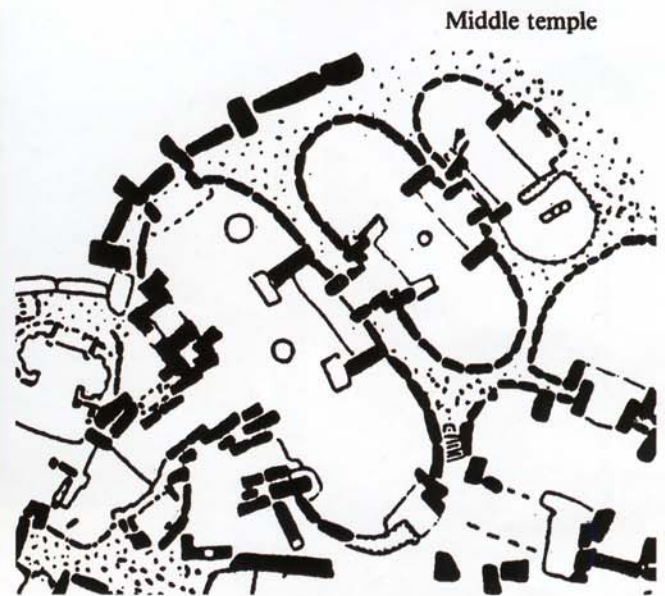
representative of the Ecclesia. To understand the body, we should consider that the body is a unified and identifiable organism – it is “one thing,” yet comprised of many parts.

Each part has its own function, form, location, and meaning: the heart, the hand, the



Church as the Body of Christ (after de Giorgio Martini)

ears, the heel. Each part does its own specific thing, in concert with the entire body, and the function is intrinsically bound with its form or shape, and its location. The hand, for instance, as a complex sense organ and grasping tool, is optimally configured with a large pad with sensitive nerve endings, hinged digits, and opposable thumb. It is also optimally placed at the end of the arm to maximize reach – thus demonstrating a fitting interconnection between function, form, and location. We also naturally ascribe meaning to the body, and poetical language to its diverse parts. We speak of “having spleen,” or of “knuckling under,” or “weak knees,” or a “tongue lashing,” or “carrying the weight of the world on the shoulders.” These are not accidental poetic tropes, but are intrinsically bound into the function, form, and locations of the body parts.



Middle temple



Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, Los Angeles, exterior.

Like a body, a properly designed church also has an identifiable unity, while being comprised of many individual parts: narthex, nave, sanctuary, campanile, baptistery, baldacchino, pulpit, chantry chapel, tomb, side aisle, ambulatory, sacristy, roof, walls and columns, floor, doors, and windows. The baptistery is optimally placed at the entrance; the apse as the place of glory is the traditional seat of the bishop, and the altar is traditionally appointed with a civity or tester. It was only with the modernist vision for undifferentiated “universal space,” and the 1960s fascination with “multi-functionality,” that the church has been gutted of specified and articulated spaces expressive of the wondrous “unity in diversity” that the Church contains.

Other concerns come to mind when we consider the relationship between the body and the church-as-body, and we can appreciate failed experiments in respect to these concerns. For instance, the body is axial, symmetrical, hierarchical, and proportioned. When these determinants are neglected, the church building suffers. One reason why the various experiments with centralized churches fail iconically is their form is more akin to amoebae and paramecia than the human body. The Body of Christ is not best represented by a protoplasmic one-celled organism.

Another key issue is the quality of frontality – the body has a face, and it is primarily through the face that we know the person. I would submit that churches that don’t “look like churches,” such as the L.A. cathedral, probably fail on this essential account. Our Lady of the Angels lacks a significant façade through which the pilgrim or passerby is engaged. The cathedral designers failed in this most essential semiotic category, to present a “face” to the city by which it can be known as a church, and so it is variously described as looking like a performing arts center, a shopping mall, or a government building.

The loss of architectural significance has been devastating in the past century. We have now been through the radical changes of philosophical, liturgical, and architectural modernism. Whether or not we are really in a “postmodern” era is not germane. What is central for the Catholic (and those of other apostolic and liturgical communions), is to engage in the deep sacramentality of church building. We are providentially supplied with this traditional and even revealed vocabulary of body, temple, and city. Today, we need to re-appropriate these terms, and find new ways to express this reality of the Ecclesia in our contemporary situations. In this way we may achieve an architecture that is, in the words of Augustine, “ever ancient, ever new.”¹⁶

¹ Witness the counter movements such as Society for Catholic Liturgy, Adoremus, and Centre Internationale d’Etudes Liturgiques (CIEL).

² EACW 42. A more responsible implementation of EACW would have included a concern for the fully engaged human person (5, 35), including aspects of memory, imagination, and traditionally received forms (5, 10, 33), the preservation of historic treasures (8), working against the reductionism and aesthetic of efficiency (14, 16), the necessarily hierarchical aspect of the liturgical assembly (37), and an appreciation for the manner in which past architectural forms accomplished the goals of the document (50, thinking of the baldacchino).

³ Weakland, R.G. “Liturgy and the Common Ground” in America (20 November 1999).

⁴ Form/Reform 1995. San Diego, California. Sponsored by Georgetown Center for Liturgy.

⁵ E.g., Yeater, R. “Cycles of Life and Light: the Cosmic Origins of Liturgy and Architecture” in Ministry and Liturgy (May 2000).

⁶ Vosko, R. “A House for the Church: Structures for Public Worship in a New Millennium” in Worship 74.3 (May 2000): 194-212. Also Vosko, R. 1996. Designing Future Worship Spaces. Meeting House Essays No. 8. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications; and Vosko, R. 1998. “Contributions to Religious Art and Architecture: Looking through a Rear View Mirror” in Finding Voice to Give God Praise. K. Hughes, ed. Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press: 14-22.

⁷ Time (2 September 2002): 64-66

⁸ Buscemi, J. 1993. Places for Devotion. Meeting House Essays No. 4. Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications.

⁹ Stroik, D. Statement on Church Architecture, Draft 2: 5 November 1997. Also, cf. Catholic Dossier May-June 1997.

¹⁰ Rose, M. 2001. Ugly as Sin. Manchester NH: Sophia Institute Press. Chap 2-3.

¹¹ Rose 2001: 202.

¹² Without getting into the tendentious, unscholarly, and unnecessary hairsplitting of the modern liturgist about the church building as domus Dei versus domus ecclesiae, we should all be in agreement that the building should somehow symbolize the “Church.”

¹³ This includes the house, the tent, and the basilica.

¹⁴ E.g., by Eusebius, Hugh of St.-Victor, and Durandus of Mende.

¹⁵ Cf. Fustel de Coulanges, N.-D. 1874. The Ancient City. Boston: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard; and Rykwert, J. 1972 On Adam’s House in Paradise. New York: Museum of Modern Art; and Rykwert, J. 1976. The Idea of a Town. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹⁶ Chauvet, L.-M. 1995. Symbol and Sacrament. translation by Patrick Madigan, SJ. Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press.

¹⁷ Schwaller de Lubicz, R.A. 1999. The Temple in Man: The Secrets Of Ancient Egypt. Brookline MA: Autumn Press.