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Carmine Gambardella

XXIV INTERNATIONAL FORUM

Le Vie dei Mercanti



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Carmine Gambardella
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WORLD HERITAGE and FUTURE AS AN ETERNAL PRESENT
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WORLD HERITAGE and AFRICA: LESS IS MORE
WORLD HERITAGE and FUTURE AS EN ETERNAL PRESENT

Le Vie dei Mercanti_XXIV International Forum

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Searching for the spatial commons of human rituals, existence and evolution in times: what do we convey to the future?

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Abstract
Pallasmaa argues that we create our living environments detached from existential meanings, and are undergoing a progressive Dehumanization of Architecture. We are adding more and more technical knowledge to our expertise but first we need to establish or re-establish the fundamentals of human tasks, needs and cultural meanings. The importance of exploring the evolution of existential meanings of building traditions, and cultural landscapes in times stands at this point. In returning to the origins of architectural experience, sacred space appears as the first and most fundamental spatial manifestation. While its formal expressions evolve across epochs, persistent human constants remain - above all, the need to externalize inner experience and existential meaning through space. This paper explores the evolution of the spatial principles and archetypal qualities of sacred space - the earliest space shaped by human intention - through to the present.

Keywords: Sacred Space, Interiors, Archetype

1. Introduction
James J. Gibson (1904–1980) developed the concept of "affordances" in the late 1960s and 1970s, formally introducing it in his 1979 book "The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception" [1]. He defined affordances as the actionable properties between an object or environment and an actor. Recently Ruzzon [2] interpreted the concept of human affordances with its neuroscientific dimensions clarifying how the beginnings of architecture were coupled with kinematic patterns formerly associated with natural settings. Contemporary urbanization, accelerated by technology, has progressively severed the primordial bond between human beings, the environment, and the archetypal structure of the psyche, distancing architecture from the deep matrices of human experience. In recent years, Pallasmaa has addressed what he defines as the Dehumanization of Architecture [3].
It is therefore appropriate to reconsider certain spatial typologies with a powerful archetypal significance in this sense: foremost among them, sacred spaces.

2. Searching for the spatial commons of human existence and evolution
At this point Gobeklitepe archaeological site in Turkey built 12.000 years ago stands as a source of inspiration demonstrating the creative human genius of these early (Pre-Pottery Neolithic) societies [4]. Gobeklitepe is the oldest example of a stone temple in the world, whose construction began 11,500 years ago. This site demonstrates that spiritual gathering was the cause and starting point of residential organizations. The characteristic T-shaped pillars are carved with images of wild animals, providing information on the way of life and beliefs of the populations living in upper Mesopotamia about 11,500 years ago.



Fig. 1: Illustration of Göbekli Tepe,(https://www.zmescience.com/science)

In this site, we are in the summit of a hill, we see a circular plan with a double ring of walls_ a path to follow, creating a ritual gradually detaching people from the outer world, from the external reality as it is built to be a sacred space. Then it leads to a threshold, the entrance to the main space and finally to the benches to rest their bodies. These aspects all respond to human affordances such as a hill to climb, to go to upper level, a path to follow, an opening to enter, a bench to sit. A space to run a ritual in relation to their beliefs for what they lean on what they find sacred and important. We see how it is linked to the human experience, to rituals and to existential meaning.
In essence, it represents the spatial translation of a progressively more intimate interiority, one that is pursued, achieved, and safeguarded.



Fig. 2: Gobeklitepe Site view (whc.unesco.org/en/documents/165845)

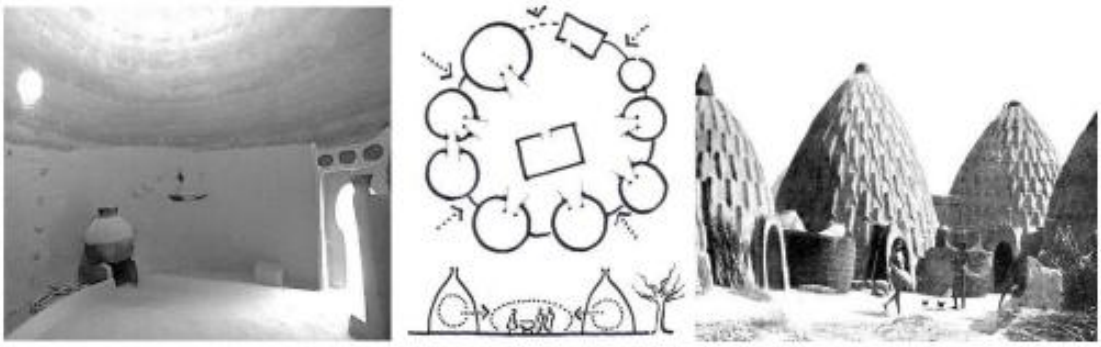


Fig. 3: The African houses of Mousgoum people in Cameroon, Chad and Nigeria called" teleukaka" are dominated by the family structure and their relations.

While much discourse has focused on curved and organic geometries in architecture, the circle remains a primary symbol of centrality, repose, protection, and equilibrium. Remarkably, this spatial archetype emerges repeatedly in built forms that are geographically remote and chronologically distant from one another. Even today, there remains an inherent human inclination toward organic forms [5].

In this African village of Mousgoum, both individual units and the entire setting are centrally organized, and the circular organization is perfect in creating unity and equality. Actually - although the sacred dimension in Musgum settlements is not expressed through monumental temples or explicitly religious symbols - their circular spatial organization does carry cosmological, social, and symbolic meanings that can be interpreted as sacred in a broader anthropological sense.

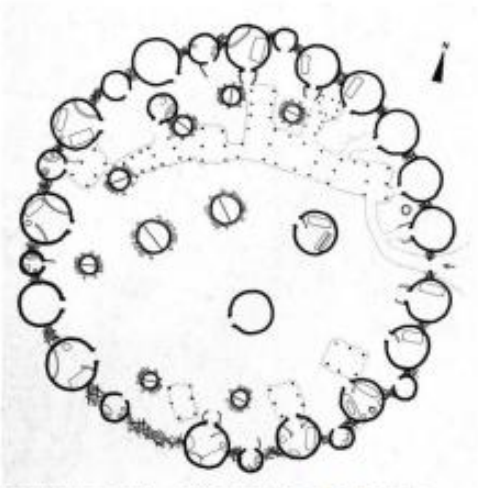


Fig. 4: The African houses of Mousgoum people, settlement for a big family.

However, the character of interiors in relation to human beliefs and rituals is always more legible in spaces of worship. Figure 5 shows how interior space changed in time. In the Mycenaean palace the interior environment follows geometric forms but without focus on axiality or symmetry. The interior proportions are near to human scale, but when we move to egyptian temple monumental effect becomes the starting point and therefore axial and symmetric space becomes dominant. Sacredness increases as space becomes smaller. The Greek temple comes to embody a refined modular system of proportions, monumental and axial, where sacred order is expressed through measured harmony and calibrated relationships, rather than interior immersion.

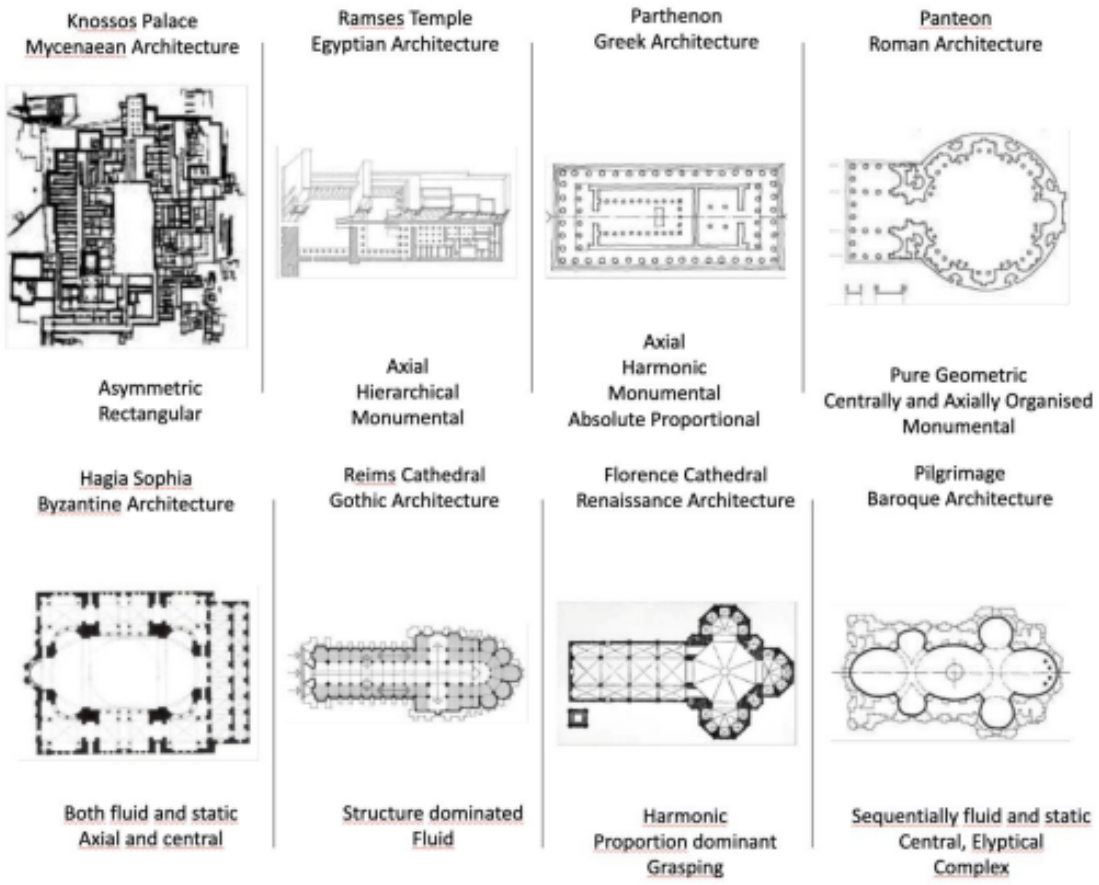


Fig. 5: The evolution of sacred spaces across historical periods and cultures

The Roman temple advances this spatial logic by shaping pure and geometrically perfected interiors. With Byzantine architecture, and particularly in Hagia Sophia, sacred interiority reaches a new intensity. The vast space unfolding beneath the immense dome transforms the interior into a cosmic sphere where structural equilibrium becomes a metaphor for spiritual transcendence. The sacred is no longer merely represented; it is experientially enveloping.
The Gothic cathedral further radicalizes this condition.
The Renaissance restores harmonic proportion and equilibrium, exemplified by Brunelleschi's dome, where a renewed balance between human scale and cosmic order is achieved.
Finally, the Baroque church introduces complex geometries and fluid spatial sequences, generating a dynamic and emotionally charged interior. Sacredness here unfolds through movement, curvature, and spatial continuity.

1.3 Contemporary Sacredness: A New Spatial Interiority and Continuity Over Time

Religious space is but one expression of sacred space. The century of secularization has, in fact, transferred the model of this type of space into new contexts, while surprisingly preserving its intimate and sacred character.
One may consider the *Mundaneum* designed by Le Corbusier at the end of the 1920s: a museum becomes a celebration not only of the centrally planned temple but also of its enduring centrality within the innermost space (the "Sacrarium") where the constant soul of humanity resides, untouched by the transformations of the surface.

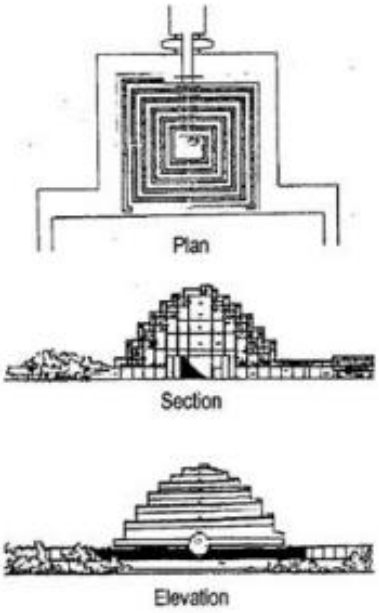


Fig. 6: The *Mundaneum* designed by Le Corbusier (1929)

What spatial forms today embody sacredness, what are the contemporary spaces of the soul? Which contemporary functions assume the role once held by religious rituals, and request interiority? Personal Rituals of Withdrawal are probably the most similar, often closely connected with nature. These may represent a renewed search for "sacred" interiority through enclosure, centrality, ritualized movement, silence.

In this sense, certain contemporary wellness and meditation environments may be understood as secular rearticulations of sacred space. The yoga studio designed by Invisible Studio for The Newt (Somerset) integrates into the landscape and creates an atmosphere of protection and silence. The interior, enclosed and top-lit, generates a sheltered and intimate condition that fosters interiority and bodily awareness. Through material density, enclosure, and controlled light, the space reactivates in secular form the archetypal qualities of sacred space, particularly those of centrality and protection..

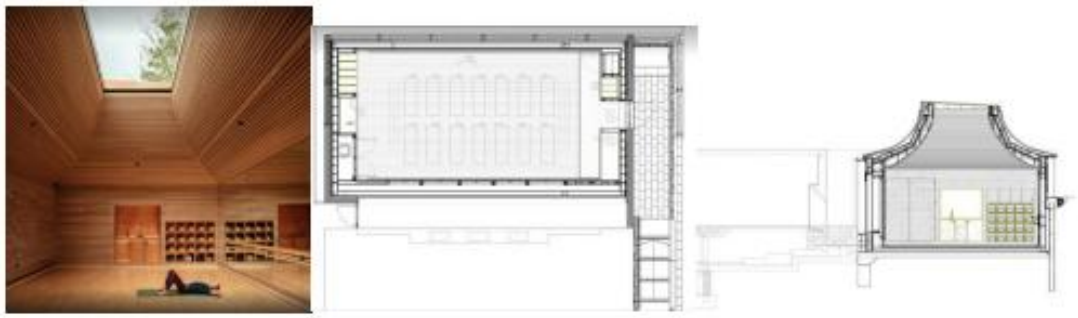


Fig. 6: Invisible Studio, The Newt Yoga room, Somerset, 2023

1.3 Conclusions

Across time and place, architecture preserves fundamental human needs and enduring constants. Spatial qualities generating interiority consistently reappear. What endures is not the temple as a typology, but the human need for spaces that enable an encounter with depth - with memory, with transcendence, or with the self.

Remarkably, across millennia, the spatial configurations that give form to these fundamental human needs have remained archetypally consistent. Such persistence suggests that they are rooted in deep anthropological structures — enduring patterns embedded in collective memory — and we may therefore assume that they will continue to manifest, albeit in transformed expressions, in the future.

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