

White Paper

The Built Environment and Spirituality

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Proposal

This white paper proposes the creation of a University wide scholarly/research cluster composed of individuals interested in the relationship between the built environment and spirituality. This is not a “religious” approach, but rather a “higher intentional” approach to informing the built environment in which we live and work. The contemporary global cultural and academic context as well as growing public, political, scientific, humanistic, and artistic interests suggest support for such efforts. The timing is therefore right to develop opportunities to support interdisciplinary scholarship, research, practice, and education on this important subject area. Presently there are many faculty already involved in this general area of inquiry and their efforts could be elevated through a more organized research structure.

Background

During the past fifteen years a number of conferences dedicated to the subject area of the cultural significance, ritual use and meaning of sacred places and religious architecture have been held. These have included the “Multidisciplinary Symposium on the Definition and Design of Sacred Space,” (Miami University, 1993); “Making Sacred Places,” Built Form and Culture Research Conference, (University of Cincinnati, 1997); “Pilgrimage and Complexity,” (Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, 1997); “Space, Place & Spirituality in the Built Environment,” (Ball State University, 1999); and “Evangelical Worship and Church Architecture” (Judson College, 2001). Presently an ACS (Architecture, Culture and Spirituality) Inaugural Symposium has been organized and will be held in March 2009 at the Mt. Angel Monastery, Oregon.

Scholarship on the built environment and its relationship to spirituality, offers significant opportunities for interdisciplinary studies. For example, insights and methods can come from many disciplines including comparative religion, cultural studies, anthropology, environmental theories (sustainability), geography, building technology, phenomenology, aesthetics, creativity, alternative medicine, psychology, philosophy, neuroscience, history, theology, psychoanalysis, art criticism, anthropology, hermeneutics, and spiritual traditions. The current scientific and professional interest in the study of the mind and brain suggests potent interdisciplinary collaboration and cross-fertilization.

In the College of Architecture individual faculty have been involved in projects and courses in this subject area. Topics, such as, healing gardens, philosophy walks, sacred places, sacred art, the technology of sacred buildings, placemaking, and medieval cathedrals have consistently been offered to students across the University. More and more research students and final studies projects are focusing on these areas. College of Architecture faculty who are teaching in this area include: Dr. Frances Downing (ARCH), Dr. Jose Fernandez-Solis (COSC), Dr. Anat Geva (ARCH) Dr. Chang-Shan Huang (LAUP), Dr. Kevin Glowacki (ARCH), Professor Jody Nedari (LAUP), Dr. Vivian Paul (ARCH), and Dr. Phillip Tabb (ARCH).

Goals

The goal of a research cluster for scholarship and discussion of spirituality and meaning in the built environment is to support ongoing research in this subject area and its implications regarding interdisciplinary studies, architectural/design education and professional practice. Four immediate objectives are (1) the building of a university wide community of interested individuals, (2) the creation of a more organized cluster and presence within the College/University, (3) initiate scholarly peer-reviewed publication(s), initiate original research and education in this area, and (4) engage in actual projects that will serve the community at large.

1. Community Building

Most of the coursework and research efforts are presently done independently within the College. By building a community of scholars, it will be possible to collaborate and create greater synergy across the University. This research area affords the possibility of inclusion of many disciplines housed at Texas A&M University.

2. Cluster Presence

It is important to cluster the research and scholarly work within the context of a physical place within the College/University. This might include a simple place to meet, a small library of related books and papers. Students and faculty across the University will have a place and point of reference for this research.

3. Scholarship

There are opportunities for collaborative research and scholarly work on selected topics. Eventually a scholarly journal may emerge from these efforts. At present Dr. Phillip Tabb and Dr. Anat Geva are on the program planning committee for the Mt. Angel Symposium being held in Oregon next spring.

4. Projects

There are opportunities of collaborative work in selected research projects, within studio projects or with actual architectural and construction projects. This white paper establishes a working group who may be able to support projects of this nature.

Benefit

The creation of a cluster surrounding research with the relationship between the built environment and spirituality suggests that considerations which effect the planning, design, construction, and maintaining of the environments in which we dwell, work and sustain our contemporary existence can be informed by higher principles that include health, sustainability, integrity and the achievement of excellence brought into the very way we live. This is a roadmap that is certainly aligned with the objectives of Vision 2020 that can elevate participating faculty, can improve study programs, can increase awareness of diversity and globalization, and can contribute to the quality of space. The Built Environment and Spirituality by its very nature brings an elevated quality to our work here at Texas A&M University.