

Introduction: The Layout of Sacred Places

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The idea of sacred place is linked to man's quest for an identity and role within the cosmic mystery. Humans have used all their senses to search for places where divine beings manifest their power. Several such stories are mentioned in ancient mythologies. According to the *Bible*, Abraham and Isaac built altars where the Lord appeared to them — these places became holy ground. The idea of sacred places appears to be as old as life itself. In the oldest Sumerian epic, dating ca. 3000 B.C.E., the hero Gilgamesh and his cohorts are described approaching a sacred group of cedar trees (Swan, 1990, 33). At about the same time, Vedic myths mention the making of sacred places by divinities from heaven. The building of a Vedic sacrificial altar is connected to the transformation of energy from heaven to the earth: "I am Heaven, thou art Earth" (*Brihadâranya Upanishad*, IV.4.3). A place thus is transformed into a sacred place, showing how a macrocosm can be transformed into a mesocosm, and further reflected into the human body (microcosm). This process of transformation may be called sacralization. Eliade writes that

"Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane" (1959, 11).

He designates this act as the *act of manifestation* of the sacred (i.e. *hierophany*). It makes a space become something else, while continuing to remain itself and also continuing to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu. A sacred space's spatial structure is visible in its archetypal layout, where metaphysical prototypes and heavenly patterns of material things meet. Walter writes that

"any sacred space is a specific environment of phenomena that are expected to support the imagination, nourish religious experience, and convey religious truth" (1988, 75).

That is how a sacred place is both an environment of sensory phenomena and a moral environment.

Lane (1988, 15) suggested four axioms associated to the character and layout of sacred places; they are particularly useful in understanding the relationship between human beings and environment — the aim of *Architecture & Behaviour*. These four axioms are: 1) a sacred place is not chosen, it chooses; 2) a sacred place is an ordinary place, ritually made extraordinary; 3) a sacred place can be tread upon without being entered; and 4) the impulse of a sacred place is both centripetal and centrifugal, local and universal. Within a broad conceptual framework, these axioms can be used at different levels to interpret the layout of sacred places.

A sacred place is a place that symbolically represents the world; ultimately it reflects order and wholeness and is like a mystic web of the cosmos: its very own layout encloses a world and to man, it becomes, at a deeply sensual level, the cosmos. What I mean to suggest is that the quality of a sacred place depends upon the human context that has been shaped by it, with respect to memories, experiences, miracles and expectations. All these aspects are governed by rules of action or customary forms that maintain continuity over a long span of time. A sacred place is a central place of hierophany, where a divine or transcendent dimension breaks through into everyday life. In the Hindu tradition, sacred places are called *tūrthas* (literally "crossings"), i.e. they are places where one crosses over to far shores or crosses up to the realm of heaven.

Sacred places may be broadly categorized into three groups (Swan, 1990, 35-36): a) human-crafted buildings associated with the uniqueness of a specific locality that has become a special place for religious reasons; b) archetypal-symbolic space where a larger whole has become condensed into a limited space, maintaining a sense of order and displaying a harmonious relationship between human life and the cosmos, and c) a place in nature that bears no special making, except perhaps for a well-worn footpath, and that is far more commonly found among tribal people. Churches, shrines and temples are examples of the first category, while mandalic cities like Varanasi (Benares), Madurai, Beijing and Kyoto belong to the second category and Mount Fuji, Mount Sinai, the Ganges river, Mount Kailash, Mount Kilimanjaro, etc. belong to the third.

Probably the most popular of all forms of tourism is the pilgrimage to a sacred place; however, it is little understood. One of the functions of pilgrimage is that it allows us to understand our cultural heritage while searching for a harmonious relationship between man and the sacrality of a given place (cf. Singh, 1993).

Three broad areas of research need to be emphasized in the study of sacred places: a) the ritual-spatial context of sacred place at various levels of social organization — individual, family, society and cultural group — and in different contexts and ways, b) the growth of meanings and feelings attached to sacred places, taking history as a means to elucidate the sequence of their existence, continuity and maintenance, and c) a typology of sacred places in terms of contrasts, similarities and degrees of manifest powers (cf. Lawrence 1992, 228-229). This issue of *Architecture & Behaviour* is an attempt at presenting a glimpse of on-going researches on sacred places.

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