Creating Sacred Space:
A Spiritualist Church

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"From its origins until today the essence and meaning of architecture has not changed. It is first manifested not in the putting up of protective roofs, but in the erection of sacred structures, in the indication of focal points of human activities - the beginning of the city. All building is religious. Architecture - the expression of man himself at once flesh and spirit."

"Architecture dominates space. Dominates it through mass and through emptiness. Dominates space through space."

[1]
Abstract
When contemplating the history of religious architecture several typologies become apparent. There is the refinement of Gothic cathedrals where the volume and use of material not only reinforced the liturgy but gave breath to a tempo of chant. There also is the small New England chapel steeple and modest gable which provide such a compelling image that it has become an icon in American culture. This thesis explores the design of a sacred space independent of traditional symbolism. Rather than attempting to refine an existing typology this design explored what is fundamental in creating a sacred space. A church for a congregation of Spiritualists, who currently are renovating a Methodist church in Georgetown. [2]

This design is centered on a few elements. In response to Spiritualist liturgy which is devoid of an altar there is an exploration of defining void thus creating a focal point by the enclosure of space. The importance of views is emphasized, expressly views to sacred areas that are not actually touched. Layering of transparency is explored which provides a vehicle for information between discrete areas.
From a distance, a tower announces the entrance to the church. The tower becomes a terminus to the descent of 37 Th. Street with an impressive view across the river to Crystal City. This street is a dividing line between Georgetown University and historic row houses. The square that the church surrounds is open to the city, transforming the sidewalk to become part of this square. The entrance sits behind a colonnade; sheltering and receiving. This colonnade is an anteroom allowing for preparation by slowing the speed of movement, and creating a hesitation before entering.
The church is a grid of concrete wall segments; a series of niches and infill. These niches are not penetrated, and openings occur as voids between wall segments. There is a resonance between wall segment and void. "Have respect for walls. The Pompeian did not cut up his wall-spaces: he was devoted to wall-spaces and loved light. Light is intense when it falls between walls which reflect it. The ancients built walls, walls which stretch out and meet to amplify the light. In this way they created volumes, which are the basis of architectural and sensorial feeling." [3]
Upon entering the church there are gently descending stairs. Shallow broad steps encourage a calm, measured pace. Daylight is continually changing in both intensity and color as the progression is made. Because of the width of the stairs a stream of people can be conveyed allowing for individual speed of movement. The broad landings provide natural places for pausing, creating a dance of motion and rest. The stone stairs create the impression of earth being hollowed out; yet at the end of the descent, window views reassure people that they are upon the ground.
The entrance stairs function as a path through a series of spaces. To the side of the landings are small contemplative rooms. The ceiling ties the landings to the threshold of these rooms. Barrel vaults create a constant rhythm and are flattened to allow for easier visual transverse movement. At the bottom of the stairs the volume becomes a cube with a chapel above. Before entering the sanctuary there is a tight row of wall segments. Standing between these towering elements there is a claustrophobic feeling which is released upon entering the Sanctuary.
The stairs up to the Fellowship hall are like the side nave aisle of a gothic cathedral. It is the sensation of passage alongside, of seeing/not seeing. Moving amongst these vertical undulating wall segments is an intense experience. The feeling within the upper gallery is quite different. The ceiling is low and intimate, and the walls form deep niches embracing and receiving activity. At the end of both of these spaces is the entrance to the Fellowship Hall. Wall segments have been removed, replaced by piers which support the roof structure and create a pavilion and a threshold.
Within the sanctuary light filters through a bronze baffle illuminating everything like gold dust. Looking up, there is the radiance of the metal. The light is diffused because it comes from such a great height. This soft light allows for shadows. Handrails repeat the arched forms of the light baffle projecting into the sanctuary. The dominant element of the space is a granite floor. The floor's strong color adds weight, reinforcing the image of a planer two-dimensional expanse. Stone creates a solid footing, seeming part of the ground itself. The sound of feet marks time.
Ethereal white walls radiate with pockets of light in response to the rhythmic row of wall sections. These massive walls and the open passage compliment one another: the very massiveness of the walls is accentuated by the lightness of the sanctuary. The movement down the nave is a progression through planes of structure and light. Columns and beams frame the direction of passage. To help counteract the visual deflection of the beam the lower edge has a recessed underside. This creates a place for electric lighting within the ceiling structure.
Because the window frame is set so deeply, the wall face and the window face are perceived as two independent layers. The window becomes a habitable space, a separate volume. Visual relationship between the load-bearing walls and infill glass is dependent on night and day. Within the deep niches there are small stained glass openings. Placed above head height, yet still within reach, there is colored light within the realm in which people dwell. At night electric light projects up from these windows into niches, creating ribbons of light visible from the road below.
The progression down to the sanctuary is reflected in the terraced ground yet the roof height and placement of window openings remain constant. As the space expands bronze infill panels replace glazing, allowing for light while denying view. Low windows allow for view before entering the Sanctuary. In contrast, the Baptistry tower receives light only from above. Material selection projects an image of permanence. Roof vaults and walls of concrete are juxtaposed with a stone plinth. The infill panels of glass and bronze are less permanent and are visually less dominant.
The garden is primarily a bridge between the Fellowship Hall and the woods beyond. Ramps physically connect these areas, yet most significant is the visual link. The room's walls open to give slots of light and view. These avenues of view are framed by a rhythm of flowering trees.

In order to avoid the homogenization of the landscape, three species of flowering plants are used. The trees are clustered into a pattern of groups, a carefully constructed asymmetrical geometry. However unity is retained when in the spring these small trees bloom together.
In developing this thesis several concepts have remained constant. The church is a grid of wall segments in which the spaces between become transparent. These walls remain unperforated receivers of vault ends while the space in-between receives light and passage. Layering of rooms then allows sight lines to sacred spaces to be reinforced. The niche motif which is repeated and transformed throughout the church creates a series of focal points. The building mass encloses a courtyard, giving to the city a public space at the terminus of thirty-seventh street.
NOTES
   2. The congregation has occupied the structure since 1943, yet it still retains icons of the Methodist faith.
5. Photo page 4 curt. of Cameron and Co. as published in Robert Cameron's *Above Washington*, 1981.
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