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Godless Pious: Buddhist Sacred Space

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PIOUS

GODLESS
G O D L E S S | P I O U S

Buddhist Sacred Space

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Syracuse University School of Architecture
Thesis Prep 2014
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As the prophecies of 19th and 20th-century secularization thesis are challenged in a sustained period of academic criticism and trenchant religious practices, the role of the contemporary sacred in the contemporary banal must be revised and its architecture recalibrated. The prediction that as society progresses, people will abandon the notion of faith is questioned by the rise of fundamentalism in the U.S. and the Middle East, the growth of Christianity in the global south, and the rapid spread of Eastern religions to the West. Where institutions have secularized, however, and the sacred rite becomes practically irrelevant in the public forum, the logical place for religion for its sustained longevity is in the engagement with the routine and banal as opposed to monumentality and objectification.

The architecture of Buddhism is an ideal vehicle for the investigation of an un-monumental sacred architecture that embraces and operates within the framework of the non-sacred. While the mainstream expansion of Buddhism follows a pattern of dispersed small-scale engagement with the lay-world due to success in conversion rather than any collective collaboration, Buddhist religious buildings have biased doggedly to the grand and removed. The trajectory of Buddhist practice is not matched by the direction of Buddhist religious architecture.

The present dissonance between the practice and architecture of Buddhism can be resolved through the programmatic revision of the sacred complex that prioritizes the interdependence of the sacred, the banal and the profane.
Daijodo Soto Zen Mission
Hawaii, USA
1910

Wat Phra Dhammakaya
Bangkok, Thailand
Great Stupa of Dharwakaya
Colorado, USA
1988

Nan Hoa Temple
Chaleremai Kosi
Bronkhorstspruit, South Africa
1992
Academic and theoretical discourses on contemporary Buddhist architecture are few, but a body of writing exists in the form of analyses on traditional Buddhist structures, documentation of recent projects and interviews with the architects responsible for said projects. The absence of a body of discourse on the topic of contemporary Buddhist architecture may be reason and result of the scant works of.

In addition to explicitly Buddhist resources, projects and writings on general sacred architecture are also consulted, particularly those that address the nature of the sacred program in both empirical and technical terms. The discussion on the evolution of sacred architecture, though much of it deals with the three Abrahamic religions, offers insight into the translative impacts of the Writings on the religious development of Buddhism form the basis for both the investigative and design processes for the distinctly Buddhist sacred space.

Riding the information wave of the 1970’s Buddhism reaped the benefits of a globalization by expanding rapidly to new populations. Although historically Buddhism had spread outside Asia prior to this (ex: Chinese immigrants brought Buddhism to America in the 19th century), the information boom made its doctrines available to a larger audience.

It comprises 7% of the global population - though most Buddhists are located in Asia, it is growing rapidly through immigration and conversion in Europe, North America, Australia and the Middle East.

Because there is no central organization to Buddhism, many practices are rooted in individual practice - the lineage of each practice is traced back to teachers, sages, significant monasteries, and ultimately to Buddha.
The polynucleic organization of Buddhist schools resulted in inumerable schools of Buddhism—they continue to fall in and out of favor with practitioners. Some schools, like Zen in particular, are practiced in several regions but due to highly contextual nature of Buddhist practice, methods of worship can differ widely within the same school.
Christianity_31.5%
Unaffiliated_16.3%
Islam_23.2%
Judaism_0.2%
Other_0.8%
Hinduism_15%
Buddhism_7.1%
Folk Religions_5.9%

Asia_481 million
Europe_1.33 million
North America_3.8 million
Middle East_.5 million
South America_.4 million
Sub-Saharan Africa_.15 million

* Projection based on 7% Buddhist population estimate of 2040 projected global population
The atheist and non-dualist doctrines of Buddhism create a number of paradoxes for its practice that embody the challenges of resolving the architecture of the sacred with the architecture of the banal. Buddhism’s rejection of dualities manifests in the denial of the separation of the sacred from all other things; yet the sites of Buddha’s birth and death, the spaces of teaching and meditation are in practice highly differentiated and protected from the banal and the profane, though there are no such damning segregations in the doctrine. The template for much of contemporary Buddhist architecture remains firmly grounded in the height of Buddhist global political influence, between the 5th century BCE and the 17th (the rise and peak of Buddhism through South India to Southeast Asia, respectively) century, when the monasteries formed sacred sites and expansive monumental complexes. Profoundly flattened and fetishized in both the West and its Asian base, the architecture of Buddhism has largely bypassed the evolutionary benefits of contemporary architectural movements. The practice of Buddhism is expanding through small-scale practices that facilitate flexible movement between collective and individual practices while in contrast a great many of Buddhist architectural projects have focused on sprawling monumental complexes beholden more to a historical aesthetic than to their physical, cultural or doctrinal contexts.
Mahabodhi Mahavihara
Bodhgaya, India
530 BCE

Great Stupa at Sanchi
Commissioned by Ashoka
Madhya Pradesh, India
3rd century BCE
Dhamak Stupa
Sarnath, India
249 BCE

Bhaja Caves
Bhaja, India
2nd century BCE
Sengenji
Heijo, Japan
966

Longmen Grottoes
Luoyang, China
493 - 1127
Jingū-ji
Hiroshima, Japan
1186

Phuktal Monastery
Zanskar, India
12th century
Jingui-ji
Hiroshima, Japan
1186

Maya Devi Temple
Lumbini, Nepal
3rd century BCE - 15th century AD
Young Temple
Beijing, China
1694

Shwenanda Monastery
Mandalay Hill, Myanmar
1880
**Vihara**

The vihara, a word of Indian origin, refers to the temple complex itself - the sacred sites and spaces for meditation and worship. The dominant program of the vihara is the main hall - a large hall for collective practice.

**Mahavihara**

While the vihara is programmed for laity and clergy, the mahavihara exists for the clergy, containing the domestic quarters for the monks as well as the religious spaces. The dominant program of the mahavihara is the scripture hall.
A young monk asked his teacher, "what is the lesson of Zen?"
His teacher, after a short pause, replied: "The appropriate response."

Respond to each situation as it comes, without projecting on one's desires or expectations.

Architectural translation:
An architecture created by and held responsible only to its context.
This eschews the notion of a Buddhist aesthetic - there is no obligation for the architecture of Buddhism to look Japanese, Zen, Indian, Thai, Tibetan, or Buddhist.

The only obligation is for it to respond to its 'situation.'
All things are interdependantly related - all things are empty of any essential nature or identity. Emptiness is the core concept behind the principals of transience and impermanence. Things are empty of meaning except what is projected onto them. No truth is permanent.

Within this premise, the objective of Buddhist practice is not to realize a singular truth but to understand the harmonious interdependance of all things.

Architectural translation:
A harmonious interdependence of all things - what does that look like? How does it work? What are the spatial manifestations of absolute interdependence?

According to Hershock, the concept of emptiness and the essence of Buddhist architecture is embodied in the begging bowl - it is itself transitional, and its contents never stay in the bowl. It is a container of circumstance.

How does one apply this non-containment to architecture?
If you meet Buddha on the road, kill him.

Hold nothing.

If you meet Buddha on the road kill him.
Bound by nothing, you live your life simply as it is.
- Linji

This is one of the more radical teaching of doctrinal non-duality. In projecting the Buddha onto another being, one denies one’s own Buddha-nature and creates false diities. In assigning one entity with sacredness, one assigns all else to profanity (un-sacred). Whatever the conception of the Buddha, it is an image. It is false.

Kill the image and reject dualities

Architectural translation:

This rejection of dualities presents an interesting paradox as it brings to the fore the differences between the doctrines and practices of Buddhism. There is no distinction between the sacred and the profane but spaces of the sacred unquestionably exist. What is a sacred space that eschews its distinction and operates as and within the banal/profane.
The general spectrum of sacred architecture, including but not limited to Buddhist, Christian and pagan works, provide a holistic perspective for distinguished spaces.

The work of architects and scholars that have contributed significantly to the discussion on sacred architecture and its contemporary manifestations are consulted specifically to a similar end - the unifying characteristic requirements for the sacred experience.
All of our buildings represent the whole world repeating its genesis. The ground beneath them is the surface of the earth, the homeland of men; the space above is a world rich in life, and both are limited by the firmament...All that lies on this side, in the worldly space, can be painted by a painter, built by a builder. It is also possible to plan a threshold and a window towards the beyond, but that is equally where their art reaches the end. They will never step into the other world.

The fourth dimension is the moment of limitless escape evoked by an exceptionally just consonance of the plastic means employed. It is not the effect of the subject chosen; it is a victory of proportion in everything - the anatomy of the work as well as the carrying out of the artist’s intentions whether consciously controlled or not...Then a boundless depth opens up, effaces the walls, drives away contingent presences, accomplishes the miracle of ineffable space. I am not conscious of the miracle of faith, but I often live that of ineffable space, the consummation of plastic emotion.

The main thing was that there is no altar (in the Bruder Klaus chapel), so it is not a space for the church. To seek to make a new, a tiny little space in a field that in the end expresses hopes about human existence. Sorry, this is a little bit pathetic...I asked that this should be completely contemporary, so that at the beginning there was all sorts of stuff about solar cells and stuff like that. And it boiled down over the years to the pure essential. All of these things fell off. At the end it was the chapel and the material and the water and whatever...It has this abstract goal, which is obviously a very stupid goal.

Monastery design has to provide an environment for this very structured everyday life, but it must also create a context for specifically sacred acts. These rituals have prescribed forms that must be accommodated, but the spaces in which they are performed should also be about something bigger, less quantifiable and less definable - something that means we don’t need to see the altar and the tabernacle to know we are in a sacred place.

Collectively these cultural moments may be described as a marginal counter-history - that is a historical trajectory which emphasizes forms that give expression to the spirit and which often stand in a complex dialogue with the emphasis on rationality and functionalism which governed much of the evolution of modern architecture...Indeed, the religious building type has often been a locus for advancement and innovation in modern architectural design....We may now be entering into a fresh moment of engagement between sacred space and urban form - encouraged in part by a more open acknowledgement of modern life’s religious roots and a public awareness of the distinctiveness fostered by religious communities.

[My] approach is like the Zen art of ‘direct seeing.’

Direct seeing: open and undefiled, free of fabrication, grasping or fear, beyond effort and dualistic concept, the recognition of the original face.
The question of contemporary Buddhist sacred space is considered from four angles.

1. Analysis of the historic trajectory focuses on identifying spatial patterns of Buddhist practice, programmatic elements and context (architectural and historic).

2. Documentation of the images and motifs accompany the study of historic Buddhist structures. As with other religions with an extensive body of lore, Buddhism’s language of symbolic images and visual allegory is highly developed and prominently displayed through its architecture. The body of visual metaphors are documented, understood, and reconsidered for their architectural translations.

3. Documentation of the ritual practices of Buddhism. From the daily schedule of the monks, individual and collective practices of the

4. The study of contemporary architectural precedents include those that have successfully reconceptualized and executed Buddhist sacred spaces as well as those of other faiths or non-faiths. The primary interest in these precedents is the translative process from the traditional structure and language to the contemporary.

5. Program and site, selected for their relevance to the primary program. Both options for the sites in Oxford are in urban blocks, presenting a challenge for both the programmatic development and its spatial organization.

METHODOLOGY
Early Buddhist buildings, beginning with the stupas and rock-cut caves of India, are examined for the basic spatial relationships they construct. Further on, sacred complexes, temples and monasteries show the elaborate spatial rituals developed after the death of Buddha. The analysis looks at prevalent organizing strategies as well as the distinct and articulate programs of the monastery.

**PART I: HISTORIC FORMS**
The stupa is the elementary Buddhist form, and the generator of the architecture of collective worship. Modeled on the Indian burial mound, it was formalized to represent the shrine for the Buddha, and later became a diagram for the meditating Buddha or bodhisattva. As the spatial practice around the stupa became more evolved - developing from object to shrine to a destination for circumambulation and walking meditation - it generated enclosures at increasing scales. As Buddhism passed from India north and east, the stupa form mutated into the pagoda, its program into a repository for sacred texts as opposed to relics.
GREAT STUPA OF DHARMAKAYA

STUPA-SHRINE OF SAILARWADI (LEFT) KARAD (MIDDLE) AND KUDA (RIGHT)
Holy site in Sanchi including the great stupa and the monastery.
Buddhist iconography is as complex and elaborate, displayed in a manner similar to those seen in churches and synagogues. This section curates symbols that are particularly prominent, as well as their spatial manifestations.

PART II: IMAGERY
Mandala

A nine-square grid used to organize paintings and spaces in Buddhist as well as Hindu and Mughal architecture. Representative of perfection.
The clockwise and counter-clockwise swastikas indicate infinity, oneness, interdependence of all thing, etc., at times representing the heart of Buddha. It also manifests as spatial patterns, specifically at the gates of a stupa.
Cardinal Points

The gates of the early stupas and major monasteries oriented themselves along such coordinates. Cosmologically precise orientation indicated an awareness and connection to the universe.
A sectional distinction of this idea can be seen in the lifted roofs over altars and the chatri of stupas - the Buddha is the center of the world at the moment of nirvana.
Bruderklause Chapel
Mechernich, Germany
Peter Zumthor
2007

Section
Church of Saint-Pierre

Firmé, France

Le Corbusier

1963/2003
Wheel of Law

Representative of the infinite cycle of birth and rebirth; often replaces the swastika on Buddha’s chest. According to Buddhist lore, Buddha set the wheel in motion.
Rare, but celebrated in its usage, the act of touching the ground is seen in a number of representations of Buddha. At the moment of enlightenment, Buddha touched the ground, making it resonate with the globe. In statues and paintings, it is usually portrayed hovering above the ground, the moment before touching the ground.
The Mountain

The center of the world and the cosmos according to Buddhist lore is a mountain named Meru. The early temples of southern India aspire to the mountainous aesthetic.
PART III: RITUAL

Though many rituals are specific to individual schools and monasteries, a general outline of a monk’s daily practices, basic practices for the laity, and a yearly calendar of holy days and major ceremonies can be recognized.

The uses of a space, conditions required for these spaces and the patterns of movements for daily and distinguished ceremony is the basis for the creation of Buddhist sacred architecture.
4AM, WAKING CEREMONY
MEDITATION/ MORNING PRAYER

7AM, BREAKFAST
MAKING OF BLESSINGS/ PRAYER

TEMPLE CHORES
LAST MEAL OF THE DAY

1 PM, CLASSES BEGIN

SOME MONKS MAY ATTEND CLASS OUTSIDE THE TEMPLE
TEMPLE CHORES

6 PM, EVENING PRAYER

8 PM, MONKS RETIRE FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDY

9.30, REST/ LIGHTS TURNED OFF

MONKS’ ROUTINE

LAY SEQUENCE
The following Modern and contemporary examples of Buddhist and Christian architecture are chosen for their deft translation of ritual spaces and their interpretation of varying elements of their respective archetypes.

Projects dating from the 1950’s to as recent as 2009 are documented for their experiments in form and program. The Kuhonji Temple in Nagasaki and the Chapelle de Notre-Dame du Haut in Ronchamp are of primary interest due to their radical reinterpretation of a historic type.
On the site of the current temple, there was an old temple that had fallen into disrepair. The temple was at the top of a hill, and at the foot of this hill was an ossuary.

Both the ossuary and the temple began to exhibit structural problems. The new building would have to hold back the hill.

The ossuary is compacted into a long, thin volume that is proportionally a wall. The unornamented surface and the central location of the ‘gate’ recreates the entrance sequence of historical Japanese Buddhist complexes. Square grid is repeated several times after: the first at the top of the landing of the ceremonial stair, the second at the entrance of the temple, and third as the southern wall in the main hall.

The temple itself is a steel and concrete reimaging of the Japanese Buddhist halls. The raised roof above the altar is reminiscent of Tibetan Buddhist temples. The covered outdoor space that allows for the circumambulation of the main hall is recreated on the second floor - the red walls hover the floor, and when protection from the elements becomes necessary, sliding doors built into the walls close off the inner space from the terrace.
64. — La Haute-Saône historique

BAIERSFELD — Château de Nieul-Château du Riez, vue prise à l'ouest de Baysberg

La mort de la Vigne, vue prise du château. 7) Maison en bois, construite pour la première fois en 1647, sur une base de bois qui a été remplacée par un autre bois en 1655, et enfin par une base en béton préfabriqué. Les matériaux naturels de Baysberg ont été transformés en béton préfabriqué.
White Temple
Kyoto, Japan
Yamaguchi & Associates, 2000
PART V: SITE AND PROGRAM

The site for the Buddhist space must firstly be based on an existing demand. This existing lay demographic must include converts - in other words, the demographic must be actively expanding. As a personal preference, I have looked outside the traditional Buddhist bases in Asia, as there the historical aesthetics and the political tensions of the Southeast Asian region presents a backward-looking and overtly institutional contexts respectively.

According to a 2013 report by the UK House of Commons, Buddhism is the fastest growing religion of Britain in the last 11 years, expanding at a rate of 73%. By 2030, it is predicted to be the third largest religion in the UK, after a declining Christian population and Islam, having overtaken Hinduism. Buddhism has found receptive communities in London as well as its smaller cities, and is growing primarily through conversions.

The program is comprised of the basic elements of a traditional monastery, with some elements consolidated in order to make for a more compact overall program and reconsider the programmatic logics of historical models.
The contemporary Buddhist space must be urban. The mountain retreat has been relegated to relicdom and irrelevance in Asia; a retreat encourages isolation and fetishization. Its removal from the everydayness of collective human dwellings is counter-conducive to the growth patterns of Buddhist populations. The ascetism inherent in Buddhist doctrine can be accommodated within the enclosure of a monastery or temple in an urban environment; the explicit and paradoxical non-separation between the profane and the sacred (the doctrinal notion that anyone can become Buddha) can be most intensely explored in a city with an abundance of the worldly.

The city of Oxford is ideal in three ways:
1. A large community of scholars, students and educated adults with access to physical and digital forms of various liturgical information.
2. A dense city center and a collegiate morphology that provides programmatic vibrance and formal analogy to the monastic program.
3. Its proximity to Spring Hill prison, one of 3 open prisons in operation in England and the site of England’s oldest established Buddhist chaplaincy.
Boroughs of Oxford
Areas of major population growth
Built areas
City center and bounding motorways

City center
Major roads
Railroads
Space-making buildings
Shopping district

146 147
BROAD STREET 1,142 SQ FT
Secondary shopping front
Shared border between commercial and academic properties
Broad Street is used for markets and festivals throughout the year
Urban courtyard inside the block (Saunders Passage) shared with adjacent businesses
Preexisting meditation center on site

HIGH STREET 1,676 SQ FT
Primary shopping front
Block shared by commercial and academic programs
High Street is the main commercial thoroughfare
Proximity to main intersection (Carfax Tower)
Commercial public spaces

Zoned commercial buildings

Academic greens

Civic and cultural landmarks
PROGRAM: URBAN

Monastery

A complex for the individual and collective practices of both the clergy and laity.

The programs are derived from the basic requirements of the Buddhist monastery, as well as the additive requirements of engagement with the public and the unfamiliar.

The scale of the programs are kept relatively small, in keeping with the scale of the majority of the commercial buildings in central Oxford.

4810 SQ FT

VIHARA

City residents
Lay worshippers
University students
Monks
Visitors

MAHAVIHARA

Monks
Lay volunteers
Spring Hill is an interesting site for the project in a variety of ways. It is the site of the first established Buddha Grove (an outdoor Buddhist worship space in UK prisons) and the facility with England’s first branch of the Angulimala Prison Chaplaincy program. Its further history includes a beginning as a private residence, a temporary MI6 headquarters and then a MI6 operative training facility, and eventually England’s first open prison.

Open prisons operate on a remarkable degree of trust between the inmates and the managers. No bounding walls enclose the prison grounds, and the prisoners have their own rooms with keys. Most of the inmates in open prisons are transfers from other, higher-security establishments - after serving some of their sentences, inmates can apply to be transferred to an open prison given a history of good behavior.

As an open prison, Spring Hill also operates as a transitional zone for the inmates - most are serving long-term sentences, and a number of educational and vocational programs assist the inmates with reintegration.
Temple

A space for collective and individual practice within the prison. The aim is to create a space for Buddhist practice differentiated from the individual cells, and to provide enclosure without confining tightly.

PROGRAM: PRISON

Inmates

Security Guards

Chaplains

Chaplaincy Volunteers

935 SQ FT
Program Designations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Square Feet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chaplain's Office</td>
<td>60 sq ft</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapels (5)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Hall</td>
<td>200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking Meditation</td>
<td>600</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Vihara
Chapels dominated by the main hall

Mahavihara
Cells dominated by the scripture hall

South Indian model
The threshold between the two halves is negotiated by a collective void

East Asian model
The threshold between the two halves is negotiated by a collective enclosure
The historical model is characterized by a clear separation of the laity from the clergy. A blurring of the distinction, or a thickening of the transitional zone may be appropriate for the contemporary model.
BiBliograPhy


Collection of essays that expand on the tensions present in sacred spaces. A number of authors ranging from Zaha Hadid to Vincent Scully address the question “what is sacred today?” with a number of precedents, from the Temple of Hera at Paestum to Le Corbusier’s monastery of La Tourette.


Discourse on successful contemporary sacred projects and the impact of the sacred on contemporary architecture and vice versa, the contemporary sacred is discussed through the modern ecclesiastical buildings.


Arthology of writings on the spreading and consequent mutations of Buddhist practices. Essays cover methods of transmission, types of translation and resulting transformations. The latter focuses on EcoBuddhism and Buddhists’ responses to environmental crises — the first two sections will be used to investigate changing practices and resulting spatial alterations that may inspire or require.


Studies on the sacred and the profane, as concept and experience. Research will focus on the sacred experience, space, object and time - however, the text will be considered with some exception as Eliade distinguishes the sacred as a ‘wholly other’ while Buddhist is (doctrinally) atheistic in the sense that it draws no distinction between the sacred and the profane.
Study of Buddhist architecture through the lens of Buddhist religious concepts, including the ‘emptiness’ of Buddhist architecture (as relating to the concept of transience and non-permanence) and the relationship between the Buddhist practice and its architecture.

Jeaneret, Pierre, “Ineffable Space.”

Le Corbusier’s essay on sacred space. He writes at length about the nature of the sacred space and experience as the result of a transcendental perfection, though not necessarily as a result of grandeur.


Explains the meaning behind the motifs frequently used in Buddhist art and architecture - a sort of dictionary for meaning in imagery, ornament and form.


A discussion of ‘Buddhist Modernism,’ a term coined by McHahn, citing writings of historic and contemporary Buddhist scholars. A reference for Protestant and “Western” Buddhism and changes in Buddhist practice and practitioners in the West and East.


Introduction to basic concepts of Buddhism and its history, written by practicing Buddhists. Will be used to understand the basic practices that must be housed in a Buddhist monastery as well as the metaphoric requirements of the architecture.


Research dedicated to Le Corbusier’s religious projects and their social, theological and political contexts, as well as his sacred ideals. The book covers the Catholic church in the 20th century and Le Corbusier’s influence on later sacred architecture.


An examination of sacred space of the religious and secular types, from cathedrals to stadia. Useful investigation into the spaces of meaning and sacred experience, in both historical and contemporary senses.