Spirituality in Place: Building Connections Between Architecture, Design, and Spiritual Experience

Robert Birch[1], Brian R. Sinclair[2]

[1]University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta
[2]University of Calgary + sinclairstudio inc., Calgary, Alberta

ABSTRACT: Contemporary urban design practice in western society primarily focuses on addressing basic human needs (physical and physiological) without sufficient attention to higher-order needs, which are defined as 'self-transcendence'. Using psychological theory to establish a basis for well-being and health, an argument can be made for gaps in the hierarchy of human needs that current urban design practice does not address. And while contemporary urban design often addresses social aspects of public space it can still lack meaning for users, resulting in places that are not environmentally and socially responsible, and are, to a degree, devoid of elements that create a sense of humanity in place. How then does the built environment, public and private alike, address the more personal, and intimate needs of an individual? How do buildings and streets engage an individual in personal growth, creating a means of contemplation, curiosity and exploration, and knit together ideals and convictions that guide our lives? This project uses the notion of 'spirituality in place' to seek out the qualities of the built environment that contribute to places which, through their physical design, allow users to find greater meaning in their surroundings. Designers and architects often talk about meaning, beauty, poetics, connection, atmosphere and other ethereal, invisible aspects of a place. It is the objective of this research project to make more visible these invisible qualities of the built environment, by exploring the relationship between Buddhism and Taoism and contemporary architectural and urban design practice. This project defines spirituality in the context of the built environment, theorizes a framework for spirituality in place consisting of humanity, sensuality and sustainability, and deploys this framework to identify ways in which spirituality is manifest in the built environment through a critical analysis of select sites.

KEYWORDS: spirituality, sustainability, phenomenology, holism, framework, urban design, Eastern wisdom

INTRODUCTION

> "Not to consider 'I am this', that is freedom."
> The Buddha

In the fields of urban design and architecture, one of the primary goals is the creation of spaces and places that connect in a meaningful way to the user. The practices of the built environment aim to create beautiful places that are easy to understand and, increasingly, minimize environmental impact and maximize social responsibility. Architects and designers frequently talk about meaning, beauty, poetics, connection, atmosphere, and ethereal aspects of places. And while subjective, these facets of design are no less important than more quantifiable elements such as form, space, and order. Arguably, a seamless interface between the ordered, quantitative aspects of design and the qualitative, less tangible aspects prove critical to building successful places. Many treatises exist that adequately and eloquently define the quantitative elements of architecture and urban design. One need not look far to find an abundance of material on methods and theories of architecture|design that suggest numerous approaches to crafting ordered, understandable, and harmonious places. These texts historically achieve this by examining the form, the structure, and the physical elements of the built environment. But it is the subjective aspects of design, the production of beauty, poetics, atmosphere that becomes far harder to define and delineate. This lack of an understanding (definition) of the these elements has, to some degree, contributed to the development of places which are not sustainable, do not have deeper meaning, and do not adequately address the full field of human needs.

This paper and the research commensurate with it put forward an early exploration of the intersection between spirituality and place. What follows is the development and justification of a framework that begins

to coalesce spirituality and place, moving toward a holistic relationship between architecture, people, and the environment. The objective of this paper is to present this framework as a point of departure for further research and to give cause for speculation on how the spiritual qualities of place are manifest. This is not to say that all places should or need to be deeply meaningful or evoke a heightened sense of spirituality, but by investigating and giving more consideration to those places that reach such ends, we as designers can perhaps better understand how places shape, connect to, and engage with a sense of self actualization and personal meaning. One of the primary challenges of this investigation is the inherent subjectivity of the central topic; that is spirituality. The word 'spirituality' holds different meaning for different people and both religious and secular directions. Additionally, a place that holds meaning, that is sacred for one person, will not necessarily hold meaning for someone else. Hence, a conceptual approach, which results in a relevant framework, seems appropriate. Rather than taking a prescriptive approach where A + B + C = a spiritual place, this research argues for the importance of thinking about spirituality and meaning in the context of the built environment and suggests a framework for doing so. The aim is not to determine what meaning should be derived by an individual from a place, but rather how, through the spaces and places an individual inhabits, that meaning is cultivated and hopefully realized. The lens of spirituality and, in particular Buddhist and Taoist philosophy, offers a unique approach of which little has yet been written. By developing a framework that facilitates an understanding of spirituality in the built environment this research makes visible the invisible qualities of space that reside at an intense, meaningful level for the individual user, and in doing so challenges the notion of visibility suggesting that beyond the conventional definition, the idea of visibility constitutes a complete awareness of one's environment and also one's connection to that environment.

1.0 SPIRITUALITY AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

1.1. Why spirituality?
To situate the investigation of spirituality in place, Maslow's hierarchy of human needs provides a unique and valuable starting point. The five basic needs that Maslow originally identified were physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. He determined that these needs are hierarchical and that as one need is "fairly well satisfied, the next prepotent ('higher') need emerges, in turn to dominate the conscious life" (Maslow 1943, 395). Nearly three decades later, Maslow determined that a sixth motivational level was required, above self-actualization, which results from an individual having "peak experiences" (Maslow 1961). Recent research into Maslow's journals has defined this sixth level as self-transcendence, characteristic of individuals that strive to further a goal beyond the self which

> may involve service to others, devotion to an ideal (e.g. truth, art) or a cause (e.g. social justice, environmentalism, the pursuit of science, a religious faith) and/or a desire to be united with what is perceived as transcendent or divine (Koltko-Rivera 2006, 303).

Indeed, Maslow's hierarchy and his consideration of self-actualization and self-transcendence provide compelling arguments for the committed pursuit of the 'spiritual' in design. Investigations into the "growing trend of place-breaking" due in part to climate change and political/civil strife have led others to suggest that

> it may indeed prove both valuable and timely to engage in critical conversations around the potential for the spiritual to inform and inspire city planning, architectural design, place-making, and space-making (Sinclair 2011, 4).

In the modern world the places we inhabit, be they private or public, are the vessels through which our needs as humans are nurtured and satisfied. It is fairly easy to see how cities can meet physiological and safety needs, and proponents of greater attention to the social of life cities, such as Jane Jacobs, argue for cities that meet the needs of love and esteem. The ways in which the built environment address the needs of self-actualization and self-transcendence becomes much harder to identify, operationalize, and address. The inherent subjectivity and abstruse nature of spirituality, particularly in the context of modern design leads to a challenging, controversial discussion, but it is exactly these qualities and challenges that the author's contend make the discussion worthwhile.

1.2. A definition of spirituality
In order to develop an approach to the spiritual nature of design it is first useful to define what we mean by spirituality, in particular the spiritual experience vis-à-vis the built environment. Although one could turn to a nearly infinite number of sources from literature, art, and music to sacred texts and philosophical treatises, there have in fact been a number of psychological investigations into what constitutes a 'spiritual experience' (Maslow 1961; Pahnke and Richards 1966). Maslow identified 15 characteristics of people who were motivated by peak experience as it related to self-transcendence (Maslow 1961):

> Feelings of integration, unity, whole, organized
> Feeling fused with the world; becoming ego-less
> Using all capacities at their best and fullest; fully functioning
> Effortlessness in functioning (flow, 'in the groove')
> Feeling responsible, active, being the creating centre of activities; being a prime mover, self-determined

Feeling free of blocks, inhibitions, cautions, fears, doubts, controls, reservations and self-criticisms
Spontaneous, expressive, innocently behaving (guileless, naive, honest, candid, ingenuous, childlike), more natural (simple, relaxed, unhesitant, unaffected, immediate), more controlled and freely flowing outward
Creative
Uniqueness, individuality, idiosyncratic
Here now; free of the past and future
 Being a "pure-psyche" living under ones own laws; less of thing of the world and more a pure self
 Non-striving, non-needing
 Expression and communication become poetic, mythical and rhapsodic
 A Sense of completeness, authenticity, catharsis
 Gratitude towards a higher power, humility, feeling fortunate

With these characteristics in mind it is possible to develop an idea of what a 'spiritual experience' might look like for someone engaging in their surroundings. The question then becomes: How does architecture and urban design connect to an individual in a way that facilitates and/or compliments peak experiences, thereby fulfilling the higher order human need of self-transcendence?

2.0 AN EASTERN PERSPECTIVE
It is not difficult to see the parallels between Maslow's description of peak experience and Buddhist and Taoist thinking. The idea of "letting one's mind alone and trusting it to follow its own nature" (Watts 1989, 89) speaks of spontaneous, childlike, more natural behavior. Zen Buddhists often speak of transcendence (Sasaki 1954) and concepts such as unity and agelessness (Maslow 1961, 255) are reiterated within the Buddhist idea of "subjective isolation" where

the knower no longer feels himself to be independent of the known; the experiencer no longer feels himself to stand apart from the experience (Watts 1989, 120).

This Eastern line of thinking, however, also has implications for the physical world. Beyond the psychogenic connection between a person and their environment, there are concepts that provide insights for the built environment. Concepts such as unity, organization, creativity, uniqueness, expression, poetry, and authenticity are just as easily related to the physical realm as they are to peak experience and transcendence. Certainly, balance, harmony, and nature can be associated with form, space, and order. Zen rock gardens provide one example of the physical manifestations of Buddhist and Taoist thought. The relationship between Eastern thought and aesthetics, design, architecture is not a new line of inquiry (Tanizaki 1977; Koren 2008). By appertaining to the idea of self-transcendence (spirituality) and having implications for the design of the built environment, Buddhism and Taoism provide a unique and valuable approach in connecting the two.

The following subsections explore a few central concepts drawn from Buddhist and Taoist thought, that the authors believe have implications for design and spirituality. By no means exhaustive, this list provides a starting point for connecting spirituality and place and helps to lay the groundwork for developing a framework.

Figures 1 + 2: Rock garden and temple garden, Kyoto, Japan. Source: (Birch, 2005)

2.1. Impermanence
The Buddhist concept of impermanence (anitya) suggests that change and flow are a natural part of the world around us, and to resist this change is like chasing "one's own shadow, the faster one pursues it, the faster it flees" (Watts 1989, 46). It evokes the "transiency" of Pahnke's mythical consciousness (Pahnke and Richards 1966, 8) as

to the mind which lets go and moves with the flow of change, which becomes, in Zen Buddhist imagery, like a ball in a mountain stream, the sense of transience or emptiness becomes a kind of ecstasy (Watts 1989, 42).

The implications impermanence has for the built environment could manifest in various ways. For example, the use of lighting and shadow evoke a kind of ephemeral connection to fleeting nature of sunlight. As is described, the mythical, poetic quality of a space often "depends on a variation of shadows, heavy shadows against light shadows - it has nothing else" (Tanizaki 1977, 29). There are also social implications derived from the concept of impermanence. Flexibility in program of space (i.e. supporting a variety of uses) or encouraging user engagement in design also echoes a certain impermanent quality.

Figure 3: Floating village in Vietnam evokes a sense of impermanence, flexibility, and adaptability in its design. Source: (Birch, 2006)

2.2. The Way (Tao)
Arguably a difficult concept to define, the Tao nevertheless has significant implications for the world of design, particularly in the context of nature and sustainability. As Watts defines it

the Taoist mentality makes, or forces, nothing but 'grows' everything. When human reason is seen to be an expression of the same spontaneous balance of yang and yin as the natural universe, man's action upon his environment is not felt as a conflict (Watts 1989, 176).

Emphasising the spontaneous, natural, balanced approach to the world, this description echoes the characteristics of the peak experience. In this way, using the concept of Tao, design upon the built environment should not be forced, should fit within the larger social, cultural, environmental contexts, and should respect the natural landscape rather than exploit it. The value of finding a path of harmony and balance, in a gentle and receptive manner, as opposed to forcing issues, is paramount.

2.3. Wabi-sabi
Another concept, equally hard to define, that has significant implications for design is that of wabi-sabi. 'Rustic' is the closest representation of wabi-sabi in a single word, but a larger explanation defines it as

a 'comprehensive' aesthetic system...It provides an integrated approach to the ultimate nature of existence (metaphysics), sacred knowledge (spirituality), emotional well-being (state of mind), behavior (morality), and the look and feel of things (materiality) (Koren 2008, 41).

Fundamentally the concept of wabi-sabi embodies the imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete nature of the world and appreciates a close attention to the natural order of things. In this way wabi-sabi consolidates many of the preceding (and following) concepts as they relate to design. It serves to bring the spiritual element of consciousness and tune it to the material, aesthetic, world. The allowance for imperfection and authenticity in the design of places begins to evoke spiritual experiences as users are permitted to relate in a unique, individual, and idiosyncratic way. In our modern world the artificial and contrived often overshadow the genuine and the authentic – the authors argue for a more meaningful resonance with user needs and greater willingness to embrace the unrefined, the unpolished and the imperfect.

Figure 4: The imperfections and rustic quality of the material are evocative of wabi-sabi. Source: (Birch, 2005)

3.0 A FRAMEWORK FOR EXPLORING SPIRITUALITY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Referring to the characteristics of peak experience and considering how specific concepts of Buddhism and Taoism have implications for design, we identify three conceptual areas which serve to facilitate the built environment in addressing self-transcendence, and provide some examples of each. Our framework evolves from an idea of connecting an individual to his/her environment (sustainability), his/her social/cultural world (humanity), and to his/her intimate self (sensuality). It is hoped that by addressing these three inter-related areas architecture, planning, and design can facilitate more meaningful experiences. We use the framework to consider how elements of the built environment (i.e., architecture, public space, landscape, program) contribute to various experiences characteristic of spiritual engagement through the concepts of humanity, sensuality, and sustainability. Figure 4 offers a graphic representation of our framework.
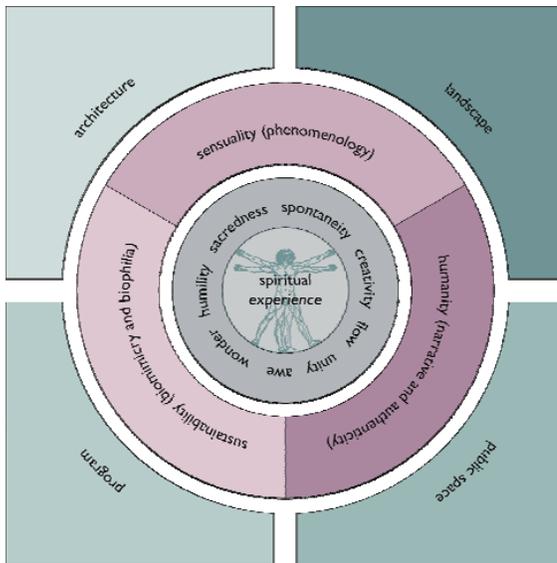

Figure 5: Framework for Spirituality in Place

3.1. Humanity (narrative and authenticity)

The places and spaces we inhabit as users communicate – they live, talk, and interact. Our challenge is to listen. They speak a language that tells us how we are meant to engage with a site; they relate a history and allow us to place ourselves as individuals within in that history; they convey the social and cultural context through which we experience that place; and they reflect a set of values and ideals that may or may not align with our own. When these places and spaces connect to us successfully on such levels, when the

values they convey align with our own, and when we are knowledgeable of and recognize our place in the larger social context, the built environment attunes to a sense of humanity. It is through a legible and accessible narrative that this sense of humanity is conveyed. Drawing on some of the characteristics of Maslow's peak experiences and Pahnke's mythical consciousness, humanity in this sense is evocative of a sense of completeness, authenticity, sacredness, and conjures awe and wonder within a person. The sacredness of a place derives from the significance attached to it through history, which ties intimately to the sense of authenticity of that place. Truth plays an important role in design as Robert Grudin postulates "because our designs convey solid meaning, and because they interface between us and the world, they must tell us the truth about the world and the world the truth about us" (Grudin 2010, 9). This statement embodies the essence of a connection to the world and to ourselves and suggests that these connections are 'two-way'. We must connect to the world and the world must connect to us. Expanding on this notion we can add that not only must design convey truth about the world, but truth about ourselves. The truths we understand, as conveyed to us through the built environment, relate to habitation, occupation, activity, and places in which we conduct our lives, and these truths will speak profoundly upon the nature of our journey, our spirituality, and our essence. Additionally, design conveying a truth about us to the world has implications for sustainability and our recognition of our impact upon the world. Our place in the world can be honest or dishonest, living harmoniously with nature or working to exploit it.

A building's narrative and its perceived authenticity can be conveyed through many channels. For example the use of weathered material (or material that will weather over time), implies a certain history or narrative of time as people observe and experience that material. Monuments provide another way in which a narrative is communicated to the user. Providing that monuments act as significant references to particular social and cultural phenomena, they contribute to the narrative of a place and add depth and richness to the language that places speak. Buddhist stupas are one example of significant monuments that serve to remind a person of their place in the social and cultural fabric to which they belong. It would be worthwhile to consider what monuments we in the west have which comparatively act (not necessarily from a religious perspective) to remind us of our place within the world.
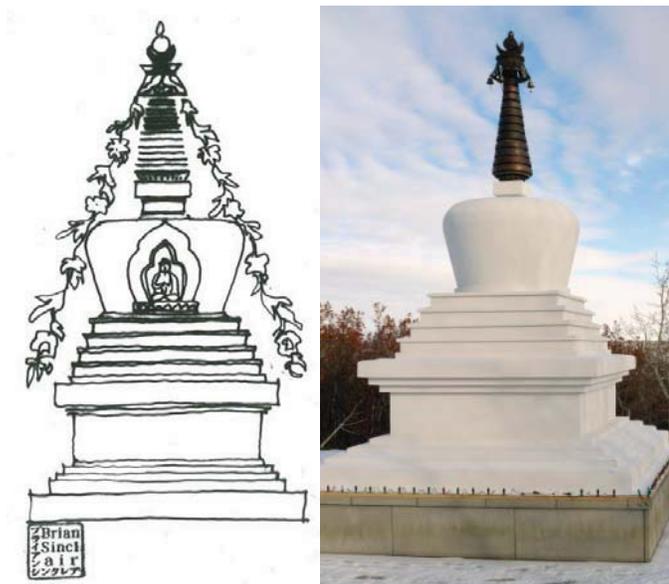
Figures 6 + 7: Stupa 'monument' as symbol, signifier & narrative of place. Source: (Sinclair, 2013)

3.2. Sensuality (phenomenology)

Juhani Pallasmaa in his book, The Eyes of the Skin, alluded to an historical, anthropological context for focus on hearing, smelling, touching, tasting, and oral communication. The disconnect between a person and his/her surroundings that Pallasmaa refers to when he speaks of the "hegemony of the eye" (Pallasmaa 2005, 25) gives reason for a focus on the senses and their potentially profound impact on the spiritual experience. This reinforces the need for spirituality in our built environment and reiterates the pertinence of engaging all of the senses in re-establishing those connections evident in Maslow's description of the individual that is

> fully functioning… using all of his capacities at their best and fullest… feels more intelligent, more perceptive, wittier, stronger, more graceful than at other times (Maslow 1961, 255-256)

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By employing full sensual engagement in design, the built environment encourages a focus on the present, a "here-now" mindset, "free of past and future… most all there in experience" (Maslow 1961, 256) reminiscent of the Buddhist concept of mindfulness. Creating through design a fuller, richer sensual experience creates an awareness (conscious or subconscious) of one's surroundings and takes steps along a path toward an awakening (satori) (Watts 1989, 83). The connection between the senses, the physical (built) realm, and the spiritual experience are echoed by the idea that "human experience is determined as much by the nature of the mind and the structure of its senses as by the external objects whose presence the mind reveals" (Watts 1989, 119). As architect Peter Zumthor suggests it's not enough to simply engage the senses and use materials, textures, light at a base level, but to do so in a way that is authentic and truthful to the observer.

> The sense that I try to instill into materials is beyond all rules of composition, and their tangibility, smell, and acoustic qualities are merely elements of the language that we are obliged to use. Sense emerges when I succeed in bringing out the specific meanings of certain materials in my buildings, meanings that can only be perceived in just this way in this one building (Zumthor 2010, 10)

Figures 8 + 9: Source: (Birch, 2006)

3.3. Sustainability (biophilia and biomimicry)
The concept of biomimicry uses nature as a "mentor", nature as a "measure", and nature as a "model" (Benyus 1998). Through authentic or truthful replication or integration of natural harmony and order, the built environment has an opportunity to appeal to the feelings of being integrated, unified, organized, and whole that is characteristic of peak experience. Biomimicry presents a unique channel through which an individual can sense fusion with the world and move toward an egoless, self-transcendent perspective. This oneness with the world echoes the sentiments of both peak experience and the expression of the Tao is working in tune with the natural world rather than exploiting it. The concept of biophilia argues that human beings have an inherent need to be close to and integrated with nature (Kellert and Wilson 1993). It therefore seems intuitive that both biophilia and biomimicry would be important in establishing an experience of feeling unified and whole. Biophilia also plays a role in engaging all the senses as part of the experience of place as

> biophilic cities seek to counterbalance the ocular or visual bias by emphasizing the importance of sounds and hearing in the city… as modes of connection with the natural world and as therapeutic and pleasurable aspects of urban living (Beatley 2011).

The humility displayed in biophilia and biomimicry by harnessing the wisdom of the natural world echoes of feelings of gratitude and humility that are characteristic of peak experience.

Figures 10 + 11: Sacred space in both landscape and architecture. Source: left (Birch, 2005) right (Birch, 2004)

CONCLUSION

> "The task contemporary architecture confronts is how to escape from binomial oppositions and dualism to allow regional and international, past and present,
> and the identities of topos and the universe to exist in symbiosis."
> Kisho Kurokawa

As the world today struggles with the consequences brought about by climate change, political conflict, population growth and other means by which people are displaced, and urban settings are built and re-built, it becomes increasingly important to consider how we, as designers, architects, and planners might infuse places with richer meaning, poetics, atmosphere and strive for the spiritual essence of space. By establishing a definition derived from characteristics of peak experience, we can begin to translate the ethereal notion of spirituality to a form that has demonstrable implications for the built environment. The concepts rooted in Buddhist and Taoist philosophy, having connotations in both the spiritual and aesthetic realm, provide a unique and valuable vehicle through which this translation can be made. The result is a unique framework, which offers an approach to design that considers elements of humanity, sensuality, and sustainability and how they might engender a more meaningful, thoughtful and intense spiritual experience of place. Our framework is by no means concrete and definitive --there are many associated concepts, such as memory and monument, which, though not elaborately discussed here, would hopefully find relevance within the notions of humanity, sensuality, or sustainability. Recommendations for future work in this area would consider a more detailed and rigorous application of the framework to real-world examples in addition to further elaboration of the three facets of the framework. As a starting point, the framework lays the groundwork for considering spirituality in place and offers opportunity for exceptional, challenging and long overdue dialogue around this timely topic.

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