

Architectural Association London
Academic Year 2012-2013

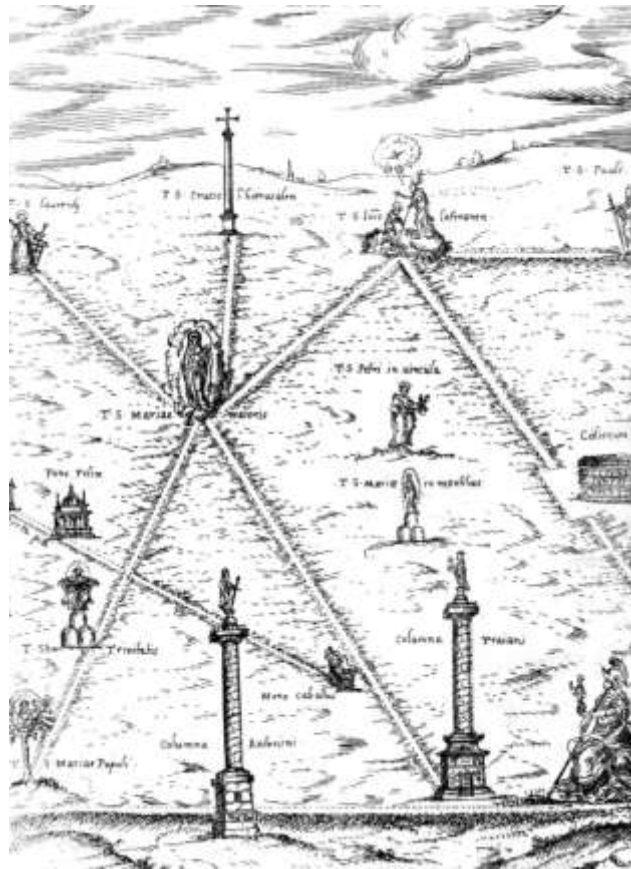
Diploma Unit 14

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The Politics of Sacred Space

Spaces, rituals, architecture.



G. F. Bordino, *Map of Rome*, 1588

I

After decades of neglect within the field of architecture and urbanism, we want to re-open the issue of sacred space. In architecture “sacredness” is either ignored as an irrational sphere, or it is reduced to stereotypes of spirituality and contemplation. In its attempt to reconnect architecture to the political, Diploma 14 propose to investigate the issue of sacred space as one of the most intense manifestations of the political. If the political concerns difference and conflict as collective phenomena, it is within the category of the sacred that this concept acquires its most intense representations. It is possible to speculate that the very origin of the city as political space was precisely the foundation of a sacred space, a *sanctuary*. The sanctuary was a space set apart within an open territory and as such the safe meeting point for different clans or fugitives. The sanctuary was both open to different subjects and parties, and closed in order to preserve its safety and difference towards everything outside itself. The dialectic of openness and exclusion implied in sacred space is thus one of the most ancient manifestations of the political.

Therefore it is precisely by investigating the issue of the sacred that we can trace back many latent conditions that today still affect the city as political body. For example if in the contemporary discourse words such as community, participation and publicness have become clichés, it is within the idea of sacred space that they acquire again an intense meaning. Moreover it is by studying the different forms of worship inherent in each religion that is possible to grasp the ethos of a civilization.

The work of the Unit will depart from an in-depth study of the category of the sacred from ancient to contemporary times. We will pay special attention to theological concepts and forms of worship as foundations for the political and spatial organization of the city. Above all we will study how sacred space highlights the crucial link between architecture and the city. As always Diploma 14 will address the unit project by giving relevance to drawing and writing as fundamental means of design.

II

Carl Schmitt once said that every political category is a secularized version of a religious principle. In the West, before the 17th century theology and politics were one thing. Indeed it was inconceivable to think politics outside the sphere of the sacred. It was Machiavelli, Bodin and Hobbes that proposed a radical secularization of politics. Facing the drama of the religious conflicts and civil wars that plagued Europe between the 16th and 17th century, politics was increasingly disconnected from religion, lay jurists replaced theologians in writing the juridical constitutions of states and kingdoms. Hobbes

imagined the modern state as an artificial machine, a constructed apparatus of government whose sovereignty was completely devoid of any metaphysical content. And yet in order to represent and thus legitimize this construct he used a biblical figure: the leviathan. The core of what was proposed as the most rational way to construct a community of people – the social contract – was represented through the image of a sacred monster. Schmitt commented that Hobbes' use of such image to represent the modern state was an example of the finest English humour, and yet this shows how difficult it has been to remove completely the frame of reference of the sacred from the construction of secular forms of power.

The rise of modernity can be indeed explained as the increasing secularization of politics. If within the sphere of the sacred, the political retained its nature of unresolvable conflict (as for example the conflict between good and evil, which was the ultimate ground of any political struggle), within modernity the political has been increasingly absorbed by the sphere of economy. Unlike the sacred, economy requires a radical relativism of *values*. Indeed a fundamental issue that has kept busy many political theorists from the 17th to the 20th century, from Hobbes to Max Weber, has been the search for something to ground politics on when all the fundamental ideological values of society are gone.

Within the sphere of economy, politics becomes administration, management, governance. The object of political power is no longer *what* to govern, but *how* to govern. In other words what is at stake within modern forms of power is no longer ideological belief, but the administration of life. The shift from the representation of a belief to the management of life is the fundamental crux of modernity and had a profound impact on the development of man's environment, not least architecture and urban space. Within the development of the city the progressive secularization of politics has caused the urban space to become an infrastructure relying more on housing and circulation rather than monuments and spaces for public gathering. The rise of the generic as the main ethos of the modern city can be understood as the consequence of the secularization of politics and its gradual transformation into an administrative apparatus. And yet it is precisely this condition that has triggered a periodical resurgence of the sacred, often in violent and disruptive social and political forms that within our bourgeois and cosmopolitan sensibility we tend to consider as "fundamentalist". At the same time the experience of extreme uprootedness that is typical of modern and contemporary life, is often compensated by a search for identity and authenticity which often borders with the mythical and the irrational. For this reason the disconnection between the political and the sacred rather than making the former more rational and "human" has often triggered the opposite scenario in which all kinds of beliefs are left floating, devoid of any sense of grounding or common understanding.

Rather than indulging into a sociological enquiry on the role of religion within society, we aim to understand contemporary issue such as participation, community and conflict through the lens of political theology. A fundamental focus of our research will be the definition of different conceptions of space (also in the terms of physical space) according to different religions. We are interested in understanding in which way the sacred is still present in our perception of the city as artifact and as *community* of people. We assume sacred space as the space in which the relationship between physical space and political space becomes legible. Of course space (whether physical or social) is always political. Every moment of our existence is spent in spaces that are deeply political, from the house we inhabit to the park where we stroll, to our daily means of communication. The political does not need to be searched outside our daily experience, it does not need to be made exotic by identifying it in all kinds of extreme conditions celebrated by media. Yet it is within sacred space that the political acquires a terse legibility. This legibility is twofold: on one hand sacred space makes clear the administrative apparatus that every community or society necessarily imply, and on the other it casts a retrospective light on the origin of many of the categories that define the issue of government. Above all it is within sacred space that architecture is charged with a form that is irreducible to the value-free form making that has characterized architecture in the last three century. Yet a word of warning on this point is necessary. We believe that the value-free form making of architecture (and art) is not to be dismissed. We are not recuperating the idea of sacred space in order to give back architecture its profound “meaning”. On the contrary we believe that there is no meaning that can be resurrected in a world that is made of urbanization. At the same time sacred space introduces a force that exceed the secular dimension of the modern city. We want to understand this force trough architecture, that is through the translation of the sacred into the finite material dimension of urban and architectural form.

III

An important aspect of the studio will be devoted to situate the emergence of sacred space within the city. We are very interested in the analysis of the politics of sacred space within the politics of the city itself. The studio will not be limited to the design of mere architectural objects. On the contrary we will produce architecture by means of a deep understanding of the anatomy of the city. In the studio we will maintain that architectural form is always a conjecture about the city and the only way to understand architecture is to understand the way it is placed within the city. The studio will pay attention to the way

the city is organized spatially and how the sacred can be considered a latent anchor or frame of references for this spatial organization. A canonical example of this is the so called “Pope Sixtus V’s plan for Rome”. Celebrated by Giedion as the birth of the modern city, the road network that linked the Basilicas and other monuments of the city was not design as a “plan”. Domenico Fontana, the architect working for Pope Sixtus, simply highlighted the role of the ancient Basilicas within the urban form of Rome. The Basilicas were both clearly legible urban forms, but also symbolic forms. Pope Sixtus V and Fontana understood the power of Basilicas not as self-referential monuments, but as constellation of places that would make sense only when connected through a legible path. In doing this they cleverly overlapped economic interests (the road system would place Sixtus’s villa at the core of the new city), religious belief (the new road network made accessible basilicas to the pilgrims), and political reasons (the new road system bypassed the feudal control of the city center exercises by the most powerful families of the city). As in this case, sacred space can become a sphere that highlights and makes legible the way urban form becomes an instrument of both sovereignty and government. In the studio the students will research case studies like this one in which the manifestation of a specific sacred space becomes the anatomy of the city and its further development. We are especially interested in the way sacred space interferes, obstructs, or support economic interests. Moreover we are interested to map the way conflicts related to religion can be seen not only as a regressive force, but as positive although controversial moment of urban and cultural formation.

IV

At the beginning of the year every student will be asked to re-brief his or her own individual project. The re-brief will consist in the choice of a specific city and a religious community that will become the target of the thesis. Initially, students will have the opportunity to work collectively investigating the relationship between theology, politics and space relative to the religion they have chosen. This first phase of analysis will lead to an in-depth understanding of the character of the community you will work with and will be conducted looking at two different scales: the very character of the sacred spaces specific to the chosen religion (and their link to liturgy, ritual, spatial tectonics, iconography, forms of representation), and the interaction between urban context and sacred spaces (distribution and hierarchy of these spaces, historical evolution, relationship with urban tissue, dynamics of inclusion and exclusion). The analysis will be conducted through the collection, rereading and

redrawing of case studies, as well as through extensive readings and the composition of a written essay which will become part of the portfolio.

After this first enquiry in the nature of the religion which will be the theme of the project, every student will individually develop an urban study of the chosen city, focusing in particular on how the specific selected religion has influenced the form, the history and the life of the city through the physical positioning of sacred spaces. For each individual proposal, the end product of this study will be an 'analogous map' of the city seen through sacred spaces, a strategic portrait of the city in the vein of Bordino's representation of Sixtus V's plan, which will be presented at the end of Term 1 and will constitute the canvas on which the architectural projects of Term 2 will be situated.

The choice of city and religion is anything but neutral and it will have to be argued and sustained consistently; it will be in fact the very start of the project, and for this reason it is crucial to choose cases where the bond between the two is particularly relevant. We are not only after interesting instances of interference between sacred space and urban space – we are also looking for communities that have an impact on the city, either because they are historically established and their practices are deeply embedded in the place, or because they are emerging and looking forward to defining their presence.

As the general historical analysis will have uncovered, the link between power and theology is very strong when it comes to the urban dynamics of sacred space. These dynamics often spark conflict between different communities, and they always entail the definition of boundaries and hierarchies. We suggest also to take into account these aspects while choosing how to re-brief your thesis: sacred space is not only the space of spirituality and seclusion, but often a contested ground or a symbolic placeholder that marks a cultural – even, sometimes, factual – battlefield. In this sense, we advise you to direct your choice towards a context where sacred space has a political and strategic edge; also, possibly, a context that you can experience firsthand and whose ethos, mentality and habits you can properly understand and interpret. We are not after exotic, quaint, new age, marginal or bizarre examples. We are after real cases of contemporary spaces where religion and politics come together to redefine the form of the city.

The understanding of the urban and theological context will become the basis to develop, during Term 2, an architectural proposal targeting one specific place which will become part of the 'analogous map', interacting with the existing dynamic you will have analyzed in Term 1. We expect to develop together a fully designed architectural project through the drafting of plans, sections, elevations and axonometric drawings. The project will have an urban ambition, but it will also be detailed in terms of spatial qualities, everyday functioning, material characteristic, and especially structural tectonics. Depending on the positioning and on the overall analysis, you will be responsible for the definition of a

specific program; ritual and prayer spaces can be complemented with spaces that serve the community, depending both on the specific character of the chosen religion, and the particular peculiarities of the target site. Monasteries, charity shelters, cultural centres, museums, archives, libraries, youth centres, temporary accommodations, offices, ritual baths, graveyards can be added to the main sacred space following the specific grammar you will have studied in Term 1 as well as the real necessities of your chosen community.

The architectural proposal will not simply be a mere solution to a problem, but a thesis – in the form of drawing – on the relationship between sacred space, city, and power. It will also be a paradigmatic project for a specific city, an urban fact able to interact and influence the wider context of the ‘analogous map’. These strategic and conceptual reflections will be carried on through the means of drawing, of drafting precise architectural plans.

We will dedicate Term 3 to representation, developing both a reflection on the iconographic apparatus – or lack thereof – that your project implies, and preparing images that will express all the aspects of space that will be more or less latent in the line drawings. In particular, we will focus on the experience of the subject in space and the relationship between a spatial condition and a specific ethos – that is to say the values and beliefs that guide our understanding of the physical world.

As in previous years, our approach seeks to reclaim architecture not simply as a practice but as a form of knowledge. The work will be developed through drawing and writing as quintessential means for the formulation of a project.

V

The technical aspects of building are often seen nowadays either in terms of aesthetics, or of sustainability – be it ecological, social, or financial. But there are ethical, behavioural, experiential, representational and symbolic aspects to the *making* of architecture that cannot be reduced to mere aesthetical or practical considerations (the ‘beautiful’ and the ‘effective’). If these aspects are hardly ever addressed in our everyday practice, they cannot but become the focus of any project that targets a sacred space.

The space of worship has always embodied, across different historical and geographical context, the most extreme tectonic representation of the civilizations it belonged to. In the space of worship there is no distinction between program and spatial organization; space is directly informed by liturgy, by the rituals and the actions performed in it, turning it into the very materialization not only of a theological principle, but of the entire ethos of a culture. For this reason this year Technical Studies will be a fundamental part of the work of the unit from the very beginning of the year, when we will analyze in depth the structural elements used in different sacred spaces and their spatial, tectonic, and symbolic implications. Starting with the initial research, we will put forward specific theses on the use of different structural systems which we will study first in historical terms, and secondly in their contemporary technical possibilities, using the project as a test ground for radical applications of the chosen structural paradigm.

In sacred space, function cannot be reduced to form – as liturgy requires precise spaces – and yet form cannot fully be reduced to function, as the representational and symbolic apparatus can never be disjointed from a place of worship. Therefore, structural and material choices relate with the meaning and intended use of the building with a directness that is seldom seen in other types – think, for instance, of the ambition to permanence of gothic cathedrals against the celebration of the ephemeral expressed in Taoist temples. In this sense, the TS portfolio will mainly start with a thorough work on structure and on the possibilities presented by one specific chosen structural system. However, as light and environmental conditions play a fundamental part, particular attention will also be given to the choice of materials and their performance – again, the relationship of the building with aging and time, decay, and transformation are all deeply linked both with its political instrumentality and its symbolic meaning.

If we were to make an example of how structural systems and forms of worship are inextricably linked in the construction of a specific spatial culture, perhaps the clearest instance would be the difference between Greek and Roman architecture. It is not by chance that Roman architecture is an architecture of walls, and Greek architecture is an architecture of post-and-lintel and plinths; these structural predilections have deep roots in the cultural and religious practices of the respective civilizations. In Ancient Greece, where religion was based on the transmission of a complex set of myths, temples were conceived as sculptural backdrops for forms of worship that were mainly carried forth in the open space of the city. For this reason, the tectonics of the sacred space in Greece have produced two main spatial paradigms: on the one hand the post-lintel system, which underlines the heroic presence of the temple as the archetypal building, pedagogic in the clarity of its structure, and on the other hand the landscaped steps and plinths of theatres, which with their earthworks purely represent the setting of a common, sacred, and protected space where conflict is ritualized and therefore controlled. The post-lintel

system gives to the temples – which were never accessed by laymen – their finite quality, it makes them rational understandable objects, complete in themselves, subject to their own logic: a scene rather than a container, they are all *outside*. In the same manner, the steps of the theatre also put forward a scene, a defined space that is nevertheless still an *outside* connected to nature. The tectonics of these two archetypes – the temple and the theatre – are both an expression of the technical and formal choices of the Greeks, as well as a direct embodiment of their religion and values which were the expression of a rich oral culture in which the very idea of narrative, the narrative word, became a shared, collective, and cathartic means to constantly renegotiate the state of life between chaos and harmony. For this reason architecture becomes in Greece a backdrop, a frame for a constantly changing human action.

Very differently from what happened in Greece, Roman religion was entirely based on elaborated rituals and superstitions in which narrative played little or no part, and in which on the contrary the repetition of prefixed sets of actions was the prerequisite to keep the universe in static balance and continuity. These rituals were virtually meaningless, what counted was the consistency with which they were performed through time and for this reason space –the fixity of space as a container of preordained gestures – acquired in Roman religion an importance that was alien to the Greek examples. In Roman religion what counts is the *interior*, the sequence of interiors that describe the complex choreography of rites that were carried forward for centuries without variation.

The tectonic form that best responded to this need to generate defined interiors is the wall-and-arch system that can be found not only in all the main Roman sanctuaries, but that also became a paradigm of Roman urban space in general. Also in this case, the technique and structural possibilities of the wall-and-arch respond not only to the practical abilities of the Romans, but also to the very peculiar, ritual use of space that their religion had embedded in their everyday practice.

The two structural systems are the manifestation of cultures that gave very different meanings to categories such as conflict, beauty, time, collectivity, evil, and human individual life itself. These themes are readable through the very technical decisions operated; it is with such an awareness that we encourage the unit's participants to undertake their TS research, carrying forward a radical approach that sees all parts of the process of architecture as equally meaningful – the thesis will ultimately be expressed through the urban strategy, the architectural design, the written essay, but also through the choice and elaboration of the structural system.

PRELIMINARY READINGS

Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic, 1987).

Renata Hejduk, Jim Williamson (edited by), *The Religious Imagination in Modern and Contemporary Architecture: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2011).

Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the concept of sovereignty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

In the course of the year, we will hold a series of seminars, conducted both by us and by external experts; linked to this seminars, the unit's participants will receive detailed bibliographies dedicated to specific aspects – in-depth analysis of religions, history of religions, and political history. However, we believe that these readings provide a general framework that can be useful to all students regardless of the actual subject of their thesis.