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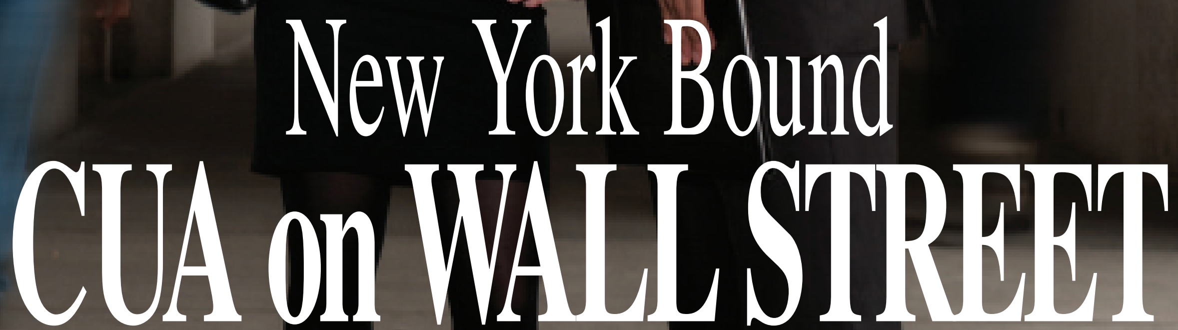


## New York Bound
## CUA on WALL STREET

# Sacred Space

## Creating Sublime Experiences through Architecture

By Patricia Coll Freeman

Afternoon sunlight bathes the sandy limestone walls of the Gothic church, leaving its slate-gray roof in solemn shadow. With a bell tower crowned by parapet and pinnacles, one might think this is Glastonbury Abbey, the legendary resting place of King Arthur come to life from its English ruins.

But this is 21st-century Syon Abbey on a mountaintop in the Blue Ridge Highlands overlooking the patchwork of farms and hills of southwestern Virginia.

The abbey — built between 2002 and 2007 — is one of a growing number of religious buildings across the United States that some architects are reaching back into history to design. There are plans for a 145,000-square foot French Gothic monastery for Carmelite monks in the foothills of Wyoming's Rocky Mountains, and many parishes, especially across the south and southwest, are headed in the new old direction too.

Other architects interpret the sacred by designing places like the Cathedral of Christ the Light in Oakland, Calif., made of steel and glass and shaped like a huge upturned boat, and the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles, a geometrically complex system of plazas and staircases and fortress-like concrete buildings finished in 2002. "In driving by, you wouldn't immediately say that that's a church," says Randall Ott of the iconoclastic structures.

Ott is dean of Catholic University's School of Architecture and Planning and an award-winning chapel designer. Last year, he earned the UNBUILT Award from the Washington, D.C., chapter of the American Institute of Architects for his proposed Salt Chapel, a glass and steel, nondenominational chapel designed on wheels to ride the edge of the shifting shoreline of Utah's Great Salt Lake.

To be sure, there is a "schism" in Christian sacred architecture, Ott observes. And it's so deep that opposing camps rarely converse with each other, adds Julio Bermudez, director of the University's Sacred Space and Cultural Studies (SSCS) concentration and world-class scholar on the design of "sacred space."

In the SSCS concentration — one of just a few in the world where graduate students study and design sacred spaces — Catholic University is helping lead the conversation on how the ethereal is best expressed through the material, according to Michael Crosbie (B.S. 1978, M.Arch 1980, Ph.D. 1983). He is editor in chief of *Faith & Form*, the interfaith journal on religion, art, and architecture; chair and associate professor in the Department of Architecture at the University of Hartford in Connecticut; and a practicing architect.

This was particularly evident, he says, in October 2011 when Catholic University invited practitioners and scholars from around the world and in a range of disciplines, including architecture, philosophy, and social work, to a conference, "Transcending Architecture — Aesthetics and Ethics of the Numinous." They included avant-garde Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa, who was professor in residence at the University last fall, and traditionalist South Bend, Ind., architect Duncan Stroik, who specializes in building and renovating Catholic churches in classical styles.

"The recent symposium brought together some of the foremost thinkers in the realm of sacred space," Crosbie says, who "do not think alike." The forum permitted "many, sometimes conflicting, viewpoints to be heard."

Bermudez says talking about the charged issues of sacred space is critical in finding the right designs for tomorrow's churches.

### What Makes Space Sacred?

Historically sacred spaces are those designated for purposes considered sacred by the people building them. They range from churches to temples, though Bermudez also believes "you can find sacred space in spaces that were not intended to be religious."

Sacred spaces begin with a "very clear threshold," he says. In fact, early 20th-century architect Antoni Gaudí, who designed Sagrada Familia Basilica in Barcelona, Spain, once said, "The portal must be large enough…not for the individual man, but for all humanity, because all have a place in the heart of their Creator."

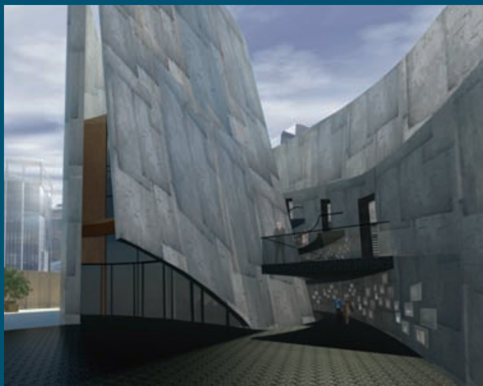
Also, sacred spaces are built with better, longer-lasting materials than those used in ordinary construction, and conditions inside are fundamentally different. Light is treated in a "very particular way," silence is "absolutely essential," and vertical space is "highly altered" — so "you enter the shrine, and your eyes go up" toward heaven, Bermudez explains.

Such features help refocus people distracted by ordinary life — as the Grand Canyon or a vast ocean inspires awe, he says. "It's a dislocation of ordinary life so you could enter in this space of preparedness to listen, to have a conversation with God."

The intangibles weigh more heavily than building materials when Bermudez defines good sacred space. "In the end, it's an experience," he says. "Are people transformed, do they fall into silence? Do they have awe?" Bermudez calls these breathtaking moments "extraordinary architectural experiences." For years, he has conducted research into the phenomenon of how people respond to sacred spaces — work ranging from the study of literature to the use of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) brain scans.

He says that architecturally inspired emotional experiences can come in the ornate, vaulted 800-year-old Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres in France and the 22-year-old Church of Light, a nondenominational Protestant chapel in Osaka, Japan, whose gray concrete walls are bare but for a slim, cross-shaped

*Associate Professor Julio Bermudez (center) with graduate students Patrick Manning and Andrew Baldwin (left) and Ashley Prince and Ashley Marshall (right) and designs from their Sacred Space and Cultural Studies studio. Bermudez co-taught this class with renowned Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa who was the 2011 Walton Critic in residence at CUA. The studio investigated the relationship between culture and spirituality in the context of funerary architecture and emotions. Below are renderings of a burial chapel project completed in the studio by Prince (bottom right) and Marshall. Their project is titled Consoling the Living.*



*Our Lady of Chartres*

*Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut*

*St. Peter's Basilica*

slit cut from floor to ceiling and wall to wall allowing light into the otherwise windowless rectangular room.

But how can two such diverse places be equally effective sacred spaces?

According to Duncan Stroik, the common denominators of good sacred design are the tangible details that architectural and theological predecessors tried and found true, even down to the ways blocks of marble are placed.

Among Stroik's projects is the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in La Crosse, Wis., one of the first major Catholic churches built in a classical style in more than 50 years. Inspired by Italian churches of the Counter Reformation and dedicated in 2008, the shrine has a cruciform or cross-shaped transept, fluted Corinthian pilasters and arches, and domed top.

When it comes to good Catholic sacred places, Stroik believes architects must consider the sacramental nature of the Catholic faith. That is, people receive God's grace through physical elements, like water in baptism and oil in confirmation. Similarly, "bricks and stone can be conduits of grace," he says.

Churches should present Christ, he explains. The foundation and steps leading up to a church are akin to feet; the church rising upward shows the upright body; and the dome is like the head or crown.

Even columns have meaning. Just as a neighbor might be described as a "pillar in the community," Stroik says, columns represent saints, the "pillars who uphold the church." That anthropomorphism is evident in the columned, semi-circular portico that stretches out from St. Peter's Basilica. In the 1600s, architect Gian Lorenzo Bernini said it "had to give an open-armed, maternal welcome" to pilgrims and nonbelievers alike.

Elements like columns, proportion, and verticality have stood the test of time, which many architects agree is a measure of good architecture. Those features are found in some form in churches from the earliest days of Christianity through the middle of the 20th century — when several societal movements converged, breaking that architectural continuity into asymmetrical pieces.

After World War II, Americans flooded into the suburbs, spurring faster and cheaper building practices. Meanwhile, secular architecture was trending away from classical forms and materials and toward abstraction and mass-produced metal, concrete, and plate glass. At the same time, some theologians were agitating to shift the focus of worship from the altar to the congregation. The result: Church designers turned from the vertical and processional to the horizontal and "communal," says Bermudez.

The exemplar of those times could be the Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, France. Designed by the late Swiss modern architect Le Corbusier, the chapel is made of reinforced concrete, its thick, rough masonry walls whitewashed with sprayed concrete and punctuated by small and large square glass windows. Fixed on the same, low plane, the simple altar and nearby pews share the focus.

## Language Barrier?

So how do today's architects manage the tension between the trends of minimalism and asymmetry and the history of sacred Christian architecture that values iconography and symmetry?

That's difficult work, Jeff Roberson says, because they are two camps speaking different "languages." Roberson is a 2002 Catholic University master's graduate who specialized in sacred space and now works at Division 1 Architects in Washington, D.C., and has taught architectural history, theory, and design studio classes at CUA.

In ages past, "the buildings literally spoke to the people," he explains. Those who couldn't read learned about God every time they looked at a church's stained glass windows or ceiling murals where there were scenes from salvation history — from the creation of Adam to the Final Judgment, as in the Sistine Chapel. "Everyone could understand what the building was saying."

But Roberson believes "we don't speak that same language today." For the modern person, he argues, modern abstraction — with its geometric forms and modulated light — is the best means to represent God, who is "almost impossible to grasp." Roberson points to features in an office building he helped design that control light and shadow and produce an emotive response. Those elements convey the "sacred," he says, "even if it's not being spoken about directly."

Sheila Lee, a 2010 graduate of the Sacred Spaces Program, also believes in modern aesthetics for sacred spaces. Now an architect in Paris, Lee has helped design a massive mosque, museum, and cultural center in Tirana, Albania. She says that "good Christian sacred architecture does not need to have iconography and symmetry. That would be simply following history."

On the other hand, Stroik believes the modern faithful don't need a new architectural "language" because they're not much different from their counterparts of the past. Religious tenets — at least of the monotheistic faiths — haven't changed across the years, he explains.

Since its beginning in 33 A.D., the Catholic Church has never mandated a particular type of architecture for churches. The Second Vatican Council document *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states that church designers should "strive after noble beauty rather than

John Blaustein
*Cathedral of Christ the Light*

*Our Lady of Chartres*

John Blaustein
*Cathedral of Christ the Light*

mere sumptuous display." And according to the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, the guidelines for the celebration of liturgies, church décor should aim toward "noble simplicity rather than to ostentation" — with some experts tracing the use of the term "noble simplicity" to descriptions of the artwork of classical Greece.

Those parameters and precedents are as understandable today as they were yesterday — and an important part of sacred design, says CUA alumnus John-Paul Mikolajczyk, who earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy in 2006 and a master's degree in architecture in 2010. He works at AECOM, an international firm that designs a wide range of facilities, from office buildings to desalination plants.

While a graduate student, he and classmate Ryan Mullen won a competition to design the altar for the papal Mass at Nationals Park during Pope Benedict XVI's 2008 visit to Washington, D.C. The two reviewed Church documents on the liturgy and Church guidelines on the substance and proportion of altars. They studied altars at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Their winning design incorporated those standards and ancient Christian symbols, like a fisherman's net and cross.

While Mikolajczyk believes abstract design works in secular buildings, when it comes to sacred spaces, he is cautious. A crucifix with a corpus can be stylized, he explains, but "fundamentally it still needs to be human…because our Lord was human and divine." Such symbols, he says, "communicate to us and also help us to then respond to what we do not yet see, but we all hope to see."

## Conversation of Faith

At Catholic University, Bermudez hopes to foster conversation among burgeoning architects so they appreciate these positions and can search for increasingly effective ways to design sacred space.

In the SSCS students learn the secular and religious architectural standards, from Old Testament times to the post-modern. "You cannot write poetry before you learn grammar," Bermudez explains. And there are courses and studio work in architectural space, materials, function, context, engineering, and sustainability — but according to Bermudez, "always related to the question of architecture as an instrument for entering some sort of conversation with something mystical, the immaterial, or the immeasurable."

In a corollary program called Spirit of Place/Spirit of Design, students study the culture, history, and ecology of a community abroad and then design and construct a sacred space to fit. Those range from a reflection chapel in Mayo County, Ireland, to an ancestral memorial for Buddhist villagers of Namje and Thumki in Nepal.

The students also must delve into the mysteries of their own faith, Bermudez adds. "When you begin to ask these questions about God and how you, through your humble services of designing, could help others to enter in communion with him — which is very important — you begin to question your own vocation, your own beliefs, your own standing, and your own responsibilities," he says.

## Echoing the Past

Ashley Prince says her Catholic faith inspires her work as a master's degree student in the SSCS concentration. She thinks it is critical to understand how Catholics practice their faith and how ethnic cultures within the Church influence church architecture. So what does this mean for the 21st century? Prince believes Catholic churches yet to be built will increasingly reflect their ancient architectural ancestors. "We will have churches that feel more like the 17th century," Prince says, but "without copying them."

This anticipated architectural shift reflects a move toward traditional practice by young Catholics, Prince observes. "There's so much more orthodoxy that's coming back to the Catholic Church," especially among 20-something Catholics, she says — many of whom have grown up in the plain walls of modern churches.

"When you look at St. Peter's, I think you're drawn to it because there are things you want to reach out and touch," says the 25-year-old. In contrast, "When you experience certain modernist buildings, they are so beautiful because they are so pure, but if you sit in them long enough, you're left wanting," she explains.

Instead Prince expects color, texture, and flourishes in form — even reminiscent of the Baroque period — to return to church design in years ahead.

This is further spurred by a demographic shift under way, she adds. As Catholics of the southern hemisphere rise in number and influence, their vibrant styles will appear in church buildings in the northern hemisphere. That poses a big challenge to the modernist "everything should be a white cube tipped up on a corner" architectural philosophy that originated in Northern Europe, Dean Ott adds.

Prince is excited about the prospect of "less abstraction and more actualness" in Catholic architecture, but she hesitates to label a new style. She hopes only that these buildings are something more, something that translates "the grandness of God or the way he speaks to us in the darkness."

Prince's vision is one synthesis of ancient and new ways that Bermudez encourages his students to find. "The new generation has to answer these things, and we can help, but it's they that need to look into it." Finding sublime designs is a challenging job, he tells them, and one that "won't happen unless we talk to each other." CUA