

Creating places of prayer

JOSEPH PAUL CASSAR

interviews Prof. Richard England about his latest book *Transfigurations: Places of Prayer*, published by *Edizioni Libria* which focuses on the concept of the private chapel space in the home.

JPC: You define architecture in the book as a "servient art". How does this apply to this book which concentrates specifically on the creation of sacred spaces?

RE: Architecture is servient art because architecture cannot be born unless there is a particular objective or problem. Every building is the answer to a particular need of what the client and the building require.

When an architect is commissioned to build a church or a sacred space, the function is extended from a purely materialistic one to one which is on a spiritual level, and this makes it all the more difficult. In the creation of sacred spaces, the architect is faced with perhaps the most arduous of tasks: how is it that the architect loses his normal professional skills to transcend or transfigure, (hence the title of the book), a space which is a materialistic space into a space which does something to the spirit?

This is why I think Antonio Gaudi, the designer of perhaps the most exuberant and ebullient religious structure of the 20th century, *The Sagrada Família* in Barcelona, Spain, had said: "The greatest challenge for the architect remains the church."

In my view, here the architect is primarily concerned with the creation of a place, which is to serve as a refuge for the soul. It was Axel Munthe who reminded us that "the soul needs more space than the body".

The major problem, I think, remains the question discussed by many architects, whether in order to create a sacred space you need a tool, which is beyond your normal functional professional tools, which I call the tool of faith.

Faith is a gift. Other architects, say Le Corbusier says that this is not necessary and yet he created one of the most wonderful churches of the 20th century. As a spiritual person I think that in order for an architect to create this space which has significance in terms of its spiritual contents, I personally believe that he needs this added input of credibility of faith.

I believe, as my mentor and teacher Gio Ponti had taught me in my student days, that "religious architecture is not a matter of architecture, but a matter of religion." In order to produce a house in which man meets God in communion, it is, I am convinced, necessary for the architect to annexe to his secular architectural tools, not only the poetic, but more so the sacred tool of faith.

It is through the passage of prayer that this faith is reached. "If the Lord is not helping the builders, then the building of a house is to no purpose." (Psalm 127:1)

JPC: Can you give a brief outline of the book? And to what extent can it be considered as a continuation of some of your previous publications such as *In Search of Silent Spaces*, where you lay down your beliefs on architecture?

RE: Yes, in a way this publication is an offspring of *In Search of Silent Spaces*. Even the book *Sacri Luogi*, which was a publication of drawings which I had done of various places



which I consider to be sacred, offers some connection.

This book though was born through the support of my wife Myriam who is the coordinator of the Malta Chapter of Magnificat. She suggested the idea of writing a book together with Linda Schubert, an American woman of prayer who wanted to see some of the spaces which I had designed.

Linda has visited many chapels in countless countries but she felt that these were spaces that helped her to establish a dialogue with the creator more than any other place she had seen. The book consists of an introduction by my wife as to how this thing came together, followed by Linda's prayers.

I write about my concepts of sacred spaces and how, unlike the big churches, these are far more intimate and conducive to dialogue with God, including chapels of repose. In the end there is an afterword by Robert Faricy who is a professor of theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

Linda recorded her personal reactions to the private prayer places: simple words of hope. It is an exercise of lifting our hearts and minds to God in the sanctuary of our spirits.

The object of this publication is to put these prayer arenas to the test by having Linda Schubert in her capacity as a woman of prayer, not only to experience these spaces and documenting her reactions, but also providing to the reader her personal prayers inspired in her moments of silence within these *loci*.

The book is a record of a one-day

journey expedition I had with Linda Schubert of seven sacred spaces that I had created.

JPC: How did Malta's rich heritage of the megalithic temples and churches help you to come to your own solutions of sacred spaces?

RE: No doubt these two golden periods you are referring to are fundamental in my development, not just for the architect of sacred spaces, but as an architect in general.

Malta's rich megalithic temples reflect how these people thought about the deity. These were people at peace with the earth, their god and with themselves. Their architectural solutions are formidable enough as they are great achievements of engineering, but they differ from Stonehenge, which is a series of stones standing in space.

Here, a series of stones actually define internal space and are very clear examples of architecture. It is an architectural achievement in terms of the hierarchy of spaces, in the way of how people move through these spaces.

It is an architecture of thresholds. You cannot actually move from a profane space to a sacred space without a series of preparations. It cannot be an instantaneous blink. There is the need for a transitory sequence.

There is a meditative bridge in the form of a pathway of preparation for arrival, which is in itself a process of ritual for eventual communication between humans and the transcendent.

If faith is the ultimate tool in the manifestation of a sacred place, honesty,

simplicity and reverence are the stepping stones to manifest this belief in built-form. This I have utilised in my work by a series of steps, a little corridor as in the chapel of my daughter's house, where there is a prayer mat made of a series of local stone slabs which are separated from the external space by rough pebbles so that when you physically walk you will suddenly realise that something is happening in terms of the new space.

In the baroque, you have the expression of the greatness of God. St John's Co-Cathedral for instance is a very simple architectural barrel vault with side chapels, but it became baroque with all the interventions of Mattia Preti, most of all where there isn't one square inch of space which isn't covered, always as a glorification and exalting the magnificence of God.

In the baroque the stones of Malta have a monochromatic effect; but then these contrast with the festas, the boats, the interiors of the churches – a kind of pop art which allows you a palette from which to choose.

JPC: I feel that this book is essentially a definition of the architectural concepts of Richard England. In creating places of prayer, you put to use all your baggage of how spaces and places are to be transformed. Do you agree?

RE: It is certainly a very large part of Richard England. The sheer difficulty of creating a sacred space, which in return does something to your spirit, fascinates me. My body of work of religious spaces spreads over four decades and may be divided into three categories comprising private prayer spaces, houses for the dead and public prayer arenas.

In all these, the challenge focuses on the manifestation of space as "sacred" and its transition and distinction from surrounding "secular" areas. I have noted with particular interest that, as these spaces are transfigured into prayer places, they also become arenas, which forge the transfiguration of their users. As more prayer is offered within their walls, the spaces become more conducive to and accessible vehicles for future acts of prayer.

A small space is far more amenable to what I believe God is today. Today God is not so much a God of law and power, an old man with a beard ready to punish, but he is God of love.

Every generation and period in history has built its sacred spaces in response to the methodology of the way they were thinking God was at that time. The Gothic cathedral is a reflection of man's fear of God as power. Today the concept is completely different, where you can sit in front of God and have a dialogue with him.

In the older churches, the people were spectators. Today they are part and parcel of the enactment of the miracle of the Eucharist – the celebration on the altar table, they are part of a congregation that shares. This I call "the voices of the site".

The church of the third millennium must therefore primarily read as a place of welcome and convocation. The new prayer spaces are not to be conceived as houses of God, nor as some pre-echo of heaven, but more tangibly, as places of convergence and dialogue between God and man.

The sacred spaces I design are not houses of God; they are houses of man, where man meets in congregation to be able to pay his respects to God.

JPC: *Manikata* today has become an icon of contemporary church design. Looking back, how do you consider this project done in your youth?

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Vision of a personal sacred place

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RE: If I had to design Manikata today, it will be a completely different church, bearing in mind the problems at that particular time and the solutions I came up with.

It is one of the buildings which has transcended itself in time. In it one finds features which were later established by Vatican II, such as no pulpit, no sense of hierarchy, the people were no longer spectators but participants, the space between the sanctuary and the community is almost equal, the altar facing the community. It belongs very well to the site, although probably today I would not choose the top of the hill.

This was the work of a very daring young architect. When you are younger you think differently and you're bolder.

JPC: *The book is based on your belief that the human species has a need for a sacred space in the house. Why is this so?*

RE: The house of today is not only a dwelling place but, due to recent technological advances, it is also fast becoming man's working arena. While we allocate spaces for each of our human activities with great care, little or no attention is given to spaces for the rejuvenation of the spirit.

Surely in today's fast-moving mechanised world it is time that the habitat of man encompasses meditative healing spaces and some form of a sacred space. These would help in providing solace and quiet-time for the soul to catch up with the body.

Since the sacred is thought of as the most intimate part of man, surely he should have it readily available and close at hand within his normal everyday ambience. Initially, the concept of personal meditative prayer spaces may be looked upon as a luxury.

With their repeated use, however, and the solace they donate, they gradually transcend themselves into a need and eventually to a necessity, for inside each

person lurks a yearning for and a vision of a personal sacred place. Concealed under the turmoil of daily concerns this basic necessity manifests itself as the vital aspiration for replenishment and healing of contemporary man's physical and spiritual aspects.

I was always amazed and also disappointed that whenever anybody comes to me as a client to build a house, they know exactly what they want in terms of their particular lifestyle. We certainly know where to put our television set, we also know how high a table should be, how far the refrigerator should be from the cooker, the relation of the sink to other utensils of the kitchen, and these are all now set down in books, manuals with data sheets.

But I don't think anybody came along saying I want a space for my soul, for my spirit, irrespective of whether they are believers or not. It is ordinary acceptance for the eastern philosophy in Japan that you have a space where you can meditate, give time to yourself to allow your soul to catch up with your body.

Locating a sacred space in one's house helps, above all, to give the house a soul. It will also give to the life of the people who dwell within its walls meaning, solace and a sense of wholeness, essential qualities in the fragmented patterns of our confused contemporary style of living.

These areas transform themselves into spaces of spiritual regeneration. In the case of a believer, as I am, then I would think that the space should be dedicated to a spiritual caller where you can not only come to terms with yourself, but also hopefully come to terms with your creator.

The architect, therefore, in creating private prayer spaces, must conceive these environments as places in which one can stop and pause; places where one must be silent and unspoken to.

I hope that people, after reading this book, will give a sense of priority to a sacred space in their homes.