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# INFORMAL SPIRITUAL SPACE

## 非正式精神空间

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### ABSTRACT

Inspired by Pope Francis's third encyclical letter "*Laudato Si*," this paper analyses the significance of spiritual spaces, as well as the main causes and difficulties of the declining spiritual environment in modern society. As an architectural response to Pope Francis's concern for the diminished role of spiritual places, this paper presents a theoretical study of the concept of "informal spiritual space" and proposes that formal spiritual space is not the only venue in which people may practice contemplation, and that an informal spiritual space can also build a symbolic connection with God, which represents God's infinite beauty and goodness.

### SPIRITUAL SPACE: CONTEMPLATION AND ITS ARCHITECTURAL PREDICAMENT

As the primary type of spiritual space, religious buildings are amongst the most impressive and permanent forms of monumental architecture from the past to the present. Since the origins of mankind, people have sought to define spiritual space by developing sacred architecture with distinct aesthetic atmospheres and in different cultural forms, apart from the daily spaces which serve consistently secular functions and purposes. All these sacred buildings, such as churches, mosques and temples exert continuous influence and preserve great significance for the social, political, cultural and philosophical values of human life. As centres of worship, prayer and meditation, religious architecture not only expresses the human imagination of miracles, myths and the nature of divinity, such as the Chinese concept of the *Penglai* (蓬莱) paradise (Lie, p. 149) and the Biblical Garden of Eden, but also builds "a break in the homogeneity of space," opening the path to three cosmic levels: earth, heaven, and the underworld (Eliade, 1959, p. 37). Providing the possibility of crossing from one cosmic region to another, such a sacred space can only be located at the very centre of the universe, with the whole of the habitable world extending around it.

A religious person thus perceives spiritual space as a reflection of significant and revered religious principles that restore a proper relationship with the divine and transcendental world. Medieval Abbot Suger, for example, famously discussed the importance of the spiritual space of his Abbey Church of St.-Denis. He stated, "...the loveliness of the many coloured gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, ...by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner" (Abbot Suger, 1946, pp. 63-65). Spiritual space separates a religious person from regular buildings, detaching their body and mind from secular pursuits and the surrounding environment, to establish a purified space for contemplation. From an architectural perspective, the essence of a spiritual space provides people a sensory experience that is suffused with spiritual meanings, a physical embodiment of divinity, connecting earth and heaven.

Unfortunately, these traditional spiritual places are becoming less visible and accessible in modern cities. In the early 1960s, Mircea Eliade, a religious historian and philosopher, rightly argued that people no longer regard architecture as imitating the paradigmatic creation of God, but as an object, a "machine to live in"<sup>1</sup>, which caused a "desacralization" of buildings as such (Eliade, 1987, pp. 56-57). The progress of science and technology had made life more convenient, but material enrichment makes people lose not only the fantasy of the past, of Wonderland, but also the care of ideal spiritual spaces for their hearts. Skyscrapers that modern people desire and create have become the alternative miracle of contemporary architecture. After the Industrial Revolution new types of buildings, such as mass residential houses and high-rise commercial buildings occupy the centres and skylines of megacities.

1 The phrase of "machine to live in" originates from modern architect Le Corbusier's iconic statement "A house is a machine for living in" in his manifesto book, *Towards a New Architecture*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. (1986), p. 95 (republishing of the original title, issued in 1931, by London: John Rodker.)

Under the influence of modern architect Le Corbusier's city planning model, "*Ville Radieuse*" (1930), in his book *The City of Tomorrow and Its Planning* (1987), many cities in the world were designed to look very similar without local identity. Architects treated modern architecture as an industrial machine inhabited by human beings, while cities became a collection of lived machines. Following his idea that "a city made for speed is made for success," here in the city composed of high-rise residential blocks, with speedy traffic and designated spaces for human needs, life, work, rest and entertainment are supposed to be satisfied effectively and efficiently (pp. 163-170). More importantly, as the city's brain, centrally located skyscrapers perform the highest functions to "dominate an ordered world," a role once filled by religious architecture, the original centres of cities (pp. 185-187).

With urban expansion spreading to the suburbs, the commercialization of buildings and the radical shrinking of public spaces, the continuous rise of land value and the breakthrough of digital and construction technologies have become primary concerns in today's architecture. Meanwhile, the lack of preservation and restoration of ancient buildings as well as the uninspired replicas of ancient temples and church buildings become a huge challenge and predicament for designing urban architecture. One famous discussion of losing humanity's spiritual spaces is Japanese architect Toyo Ito's exhibition entitled *Dreams* (1992), wherein different images were edited and accumulated on laser-discs to show the formality, chaos, and overwhelming pressures and solemnity of Tokyo, a colourful and bustling megacity. All such East Asian megacities actually hold a thoroughly homogeneous atmosphere, which filled with vacant brightness, guide human beings to step into a territory closed in upon itself (Ito, pp. 51-52). By living in the formal atmosphere dominated by modern high-rise towers, people tend to identify the self with the assigned social role in formal architectural spaces, while lacking the peaceful and inspirational space for personal contemplation and connecting with God.

INFORMAL SPIRITUAL SPACE:  
AN ARCHITECTURAL RESPONSE TO  
*LAUDATO SI'*

Following Pope Francis's concern about the global deterioration of the urban environment, especially the symbolic loss of a spiritual home, people are becoming aware of the negative impact of industrialization and consumerism on urban spaces. More attention should be paid to the relationship between urban environment and spiritual space, representing humanity and divinity, more than an intellectual ideal of efficiency or an economic calculus (Pope Francis, 2015, para. 10, paras. 148-150). After losing the sense of identity and collective memory mediated to us by religious architecture and spiritual spaces, the integral relationship between contemplation, meditation, residence and architecture is torn apart by an exclusive focus on technology and commercial benefits.

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According to Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'*, "There is also a need to protect those common areas, visual landmarks and urban landscapes which increase our sense of belonging, of rootedness, of 'feeling at home' within a city which includes us and brings us together" (para. 151). Protecting and concerning our urban environment not only creates a better community for one's living, but also shows care for a higher spiritual calling. From the act of caring, one's acknowledgement of and relationship with a higher being, is exemplified in such things as feeling God's presence. "Through the greatness and the beauty of creatures one comes to know by analogy their maker" (Wisdom

13:5) (Pope Francis, para. 12). Remembrance, care, and preservation represent a more personal possession and materialization of events into objects, and their loss is doomed to be forgotten from this world. When people lose concern for the spatial quality of architecture and interest in our common home, they will lose concern for the external environment and the internal pursuit of truth. By caring for mankind's common home, people can metaphorically rebuild the connection with divinity, receiving the strength to live on a daily basis from spiritual practice.

When an urban environment is disorderly, chaotic or saturated with noise and ugliness, it is very difficult to find a peaceful space for personal spiritual practice. Thus, Pope Francis proposed that people should actively respond to the environmental crisis, by alleviating its adverse effects and relearning to live their lives humanely and faithfully in a disordered and uncertain environment (para. 148). His suggestion, translated architecturally, is that the solution to the decline of urban spiritual space is to care for the environment of the city. Exercising ethical responsibility in architectural work thus becomes an essential response of one's faith, involving the creation of spiritual retreats, monastic cloisters, gardens, ritual teahouses, even primitive huts as typically depicted in Chinese landscape paintings. These seemingly informal spiritual spaces represent better the harmony between an individual person and nature and are more flexibly built for an individual's spiritual needs. Informal spiritual space is decentralized and can be found in every corner of urban areas. It continuously provides a retreat for poetical discovery and enlightening contemplation. Meditation and rituals in formal spiritual spaces are not the only way for humans to reconnect with divinity. Creating informal spiritual spaces can build an intimate connection with God, allowing people to retreat into informal moments of heightened awareness.

Facing the challenge of spiritually impoverished local communities, in order to build a modern spiritual space in urban environments, architects need to learn how to make ephemeral or temporary architecture a permanent

dimension of those environments (Ito, p. 52). Different from the formal spatial experience in traditional religious architecture, informal spiritual space allows people to move away from the hierarchical order of society and seek religious freedom and enlightenment afforded by participation in an “informal” architectural moment. These informal spiritual spaces provide a moment for the longing soul to be home and free from the oppressive utilitarianism of formal architecture. Informal spiritual spaces, such as the Zen Buddhist retreat in the painting of “The Garden for Solitary Enjoyment” (*Duleyuan* 独乐园) (Figure 1), allowed people to pay more attention to the purpose of changing their way of observing themselves and the surrounding environment, with the natural rise and fall of

thoughts reconnecting with divinity in an informal but intimate atmosphere. As a space for observing and meditating, informal spiritual space provides not only a metaphorical location separating us from the mundane household, but also a place to care for a person’s spiritual needs, resonant with the “care for our common home” proclaimed by Pope Francis in *Laudato si’*.

#### A DESIGN CONCEPT OF INFORMAL SPIRITUAL SPACE

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Without rigorous schedules and formal rituals, informal spiritual spaces can create a free and easily accessible atmosphere for pursuing spiritual enlightenment. It allows people to re-examine the relationship between human existence and the spiritual world.



Figure 1. The painting of “the Garden for Solitary Enjoyment” (*Duleyuan* 独乐园) (partial view) depicts the Song-dynasty scholar Sima Guang’s 司马光 contemplation in an informal spiritual space. Painted by Qiu Ying 仇英, 1515-52. Collected by the Cleveland Museum of Art.

existence and the spiritual world. More importantly, the rustic and natural elements of informal spiritual space offer a place for humans to feel the charm of nature and reflect on the fundamental relationship among human beings, nature and the urban environment.

How to design informal structures for contemplation? Here is my own suggestion for it: (1) Establish a variable and flexible structural system whose spatial scale can be close to the human body; this is intended to resist the inhuman scale and homogeneous impression of urban mega-structural buildings; (2) Create a simple and repetitive hand-crafted logic of modular structure, like the traditional craft of tenon-and-mortise joints (*sunmao* 榫卯) in Chinese classic architecture, to build an intimate spatial dialogue between the human body and its environment for activities of free strolling, ecstatic viewing, contemplating, and poetical reciting as in Chinese literati gardens; (3) The building structure should be detachable, and the space for meditation could metaphorically and symbolically exist as ephemeral as a cloud.<sup>2</sup> After its use and being disassembled, the informal structure can easily be rebuilt and adapted to other places for specific spiritual needs in a

<sup>2</sup> For the symbolic meaning of clouds in Chinese gardens and Jesuit architecture, see Hui Zou (2015), "The Jesuit Theater of Memory in China," *Montreal Architectural Review*, v. 2.

different time and space; (4) The design concept follows and develops the craftsmanship beauty of the tenon-and-mortise joint in Chinese classical timber architecture. This proposed design concept of informal spiritual space seeks to build a poetical architectural language which can critically engage both architectural history and our own reality, inspiring us to "care for our common home."

After a series of model tests, the basic unit was designed as an assembly of standard wood sticks with tenon-and-mortise joints, forming a cubic unit of 1m x 1m x 1m in three dimensions (Figure 2). The cubic units are connected to each other without any nail or metal fitting to form a free-standing pavilion space for meditation. The pavilion can be constructed on an existing site such as in a garden, a field in wilderness or ruins, an urban park, or an urban public plaza, and will be built and dismantled according to the needs of seasonal and spiritual activities. The structure can be formed easily into different shapes and its lightweight and magic play of light and shadows makes it appear like a floating cloud. The spatial circulation in the pavilion provides multiple possibilities for observing nature through the frame of varied combinations of cubic units and stimulates a go-or-pause moment for folding and unfolding the awakening mind (Figure 3):

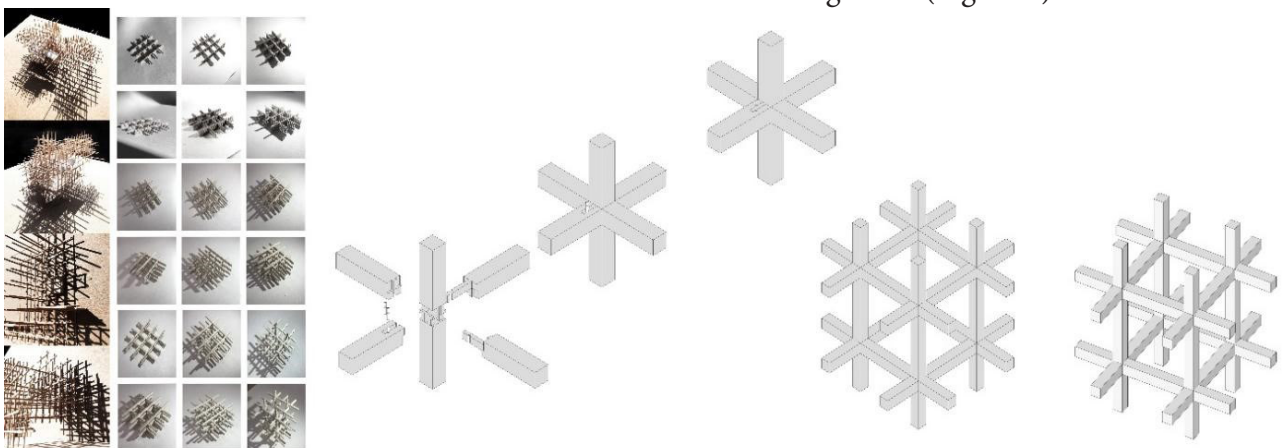


Figure 2. The tenon-and-mortise joints, a series of material and digital model studies for the basic structural elements and possible spatial compositions towards informal spiritual space. Designed, constructed, and digitally drawn by author, 2019.



Figure 3. The Cloud Pavilion, an informal spiritual space in the Garden of the Summer Palace (*Yiheyuan* 颐和园), Beijing. Designed, materially modeled, and digitally drawn by author, 2019

The design concept of informal spiritual space can also be developed by alluding to historical allegories of religious symbolism. Three iconic Daoist symbolisms in Chinese culture: “Debate on the Happiness of Fish” (*yule* 鱼乐), “Hermit in Between” (*zhongyin* 中隐)<sup>3</sup>, and “Peripateticism” (*xiaoyaoyou* 逍遥游) (Zhuangzi, p. 13, pp. 268-269; Yang, pp. 38-39), for example, can be chosen as historical allusions for designing architectural gestures of contemplation: “gazing at a scene,” “sitting in silence” and “wandering in absolute freedom.” Alluding to the three Daoist symbolisms, the structure of informal spiritual space acts like a labyrinth, providing multiple possibilities for gazing, sitting, strolling, and meditating, the so-called moment of the “condensation of mind”

3 See Tang-dynasty poet Bai Juyi’s 白居易 concept of “*zhongyin* 中隐” in Xiaoshan Yang (2003), *Metamorphosis of the Private Sphere: Gardens and Objects in Tang-Song Poetry*, Harvard East Asian Monographs, Book 225. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, pp. 38-39.

(*ningshen* 凝神) in the Daoist sage Zhuangzi’s sense (Zou, *A Jesuit Garden*, p. 99).<sup>4</sup> The designed informal spiritual space provides an evocative architectural space for contemplation through flexible, variable and ecstatic spatial configurations and transformations in a specific environmental and social context, just as the mind in meditation folds and unfolds in mental spaces, striving for spiritual depth and light.

## CONCLUSION

Facing the global environmental crisis, the human world especially the increasingly mechanized cities need informal spiritual spaces to reconnect the body and mind with divinity through poetical perception and enlightening

4 According to Hui Zou’s book (2011), *A Jesuit Garden in Beijing and Early Modern Chinese Culture*, p. 99-100, the focal point of linear perspective was understood by European Jesuits as “God’s eye” but was interpreted by Chinese scholars in the 18th century as the oneness of cosmic infinity in Daoism.

contemplation. Compared with formal and ritualized religious buildings, an informal contemplation space can act with more freedom and flexibility than the sacred institutional space and thus returns contemplation behaviour to the scale of interpersonal community and the human body. Modern architecture creates miracles of fancy skyscrapers and robust institutional buildings, but “informally” constructed spaces may provide a better home for spiritual contemplation.



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