Growing Home:
Sacred Space and Contemporary Ecotopia

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Abstract— This study investigates how the built environment might be shaped by an emerging ecocentric worldview. Qualitative research methods were used to gather data on three "ecotopias"—communities built with the intention of harmonizing their built environments with their natural environments. The research aims to unpack each community's significance, shared values, built environment, and the experiences of sacredness among residents. This study ultimately seeks to uncover a notion of sacredness unique to an ecocentric worldview, and describe how this sacredness is fostered by the design of these environments. Moreover, this study seeks to understand how these findings can inform the field of urban design in the creation of contemporary sacred spaces that respond more directly to present-day issues of the human relationship to the natural world. Residents interviewed in the ecotopias typically referred to a sacred experience as a realization of a right relationship, or an outright melding, between the self, community, and the natural world. This sense of sacredness is encouraged by design elements of the ecotopias that facilitate a deepening of these relationships over time.

INTRODUCTION

The impending consequences of the global climate crisis and the rampant destruction of natural environments urgently require a reordering of human activity based around the health of the planet's life-supporting ecosystems. The immensity of these ecological challenges requires not a mere modification of the status quo but an engagement of these crises at all levels. This reordering requires a new worldview, and is as much the work of theologians and philosophers as it is the practitioners of any other discipline. "It is a problem in which all humans are implicated," writes Harvard theologian Gordon Kaufman, "and we are called to do our part in its solution. So the central religious issue confronting humankind today is of a different sort than ever before" (38). Out of this crisis a new ecocentric paradigm is emerging which asserts that if we are to deal with the ecological crisis in its totality humankind cannot be seen as having central importance in the universe but rather must be viewed as only one species in the whole panorama of life (Capra 21).

The built environment will play a crucial role in the emergence of this new ecocentric paradigm. The act of building is essentially a mediation of human ambitions and the natural world. The ways in which people build communities, cities, and homes are therefore an indication of how they perceive the natural world and their position within it—it is an indication of their worldview. The current discord between our urban and natural environments stands as evidence that the anthropocentric worldview, which dominates today, is an insufficient paradigm for the building of cities in an ecologically appropriate manner. So, it is no surprise that advocates of ecocentrism hold little praise for cities. They very legitimately rail against urbanization for its part in the uprooting and separation of humans from nature (Glendinning 39).

But in taking a wider view of the city in history, we see that humans have not always built with such disregard for the natural world, and this can be seen in the layout of the world built for humans. A space for ritual sacrifice is commonly found at the center of many ancient and primitive settlements. These rituals are performed to atone for the separation from nature incurred from building, and perhaps even from the ascent of consciousness itself (Rykwert 174). The placement of this ritual space in the middle of

the settlement shows us something significant about the worldview of the builders—this separation from nature, though it is perhaps something deeply human and unavoidable, can be atoned for. The builders of these settlements believe that there is a larger cosmic order to be reconciled with, and the activity space set aside for this process of reconciliation—sacred space—is given prominence. In this worldview, humans search for a cosmic order in the natural world, and then seek to fit themselves into that order with the environments they create for themselves (Crowe 7).

But today we largely build in a desacralized manner and pay little to no attention to this fitting in. Separation from nature is seen as a triumph, rather than something that calls for atonement. Yet proponents of ecocentrism are revisiting this notion of fitting in as they seek to reframe humankind's place in the universe. In doing so they are renewing a sense of sacredness for the 21st century, one that is inclusive of our contemporary understanding of the universe and empowers us as we face enormous global challenges.

Going further two questions are raised. First, how might the built environment be designed differently were it to be constructed under this emerging ecocentric paradigm? Second, how would such an environment reframe the notion of sacredness and sacred space? This study explores these questions in an on the ground investigation of existing North American ecotopias—communities that aim to strike a balance between the human and natural environment.

THE STUDY

This study uses qualitative research methods to unpack issues of worldview, the built environment, and sacredness in three contemporary ecotopias: Village Homes in Davis, CA; Dancing Rabbit near Rutledge, MO; and Arcosanti near Cordes Junction, AZ. Each ecotopia is situated in a different context and demonstrates a unique approach to harmonizing the built environment with the natural environment. Village Homes is a sub-division located inside city limits, showing an alternative design that exists within a conventional urban/suburban landscape. Dancing Rabbit is an off-the-grid ecovillage in a rural context that seeks to minimize the human impact on the natural environment while still meeting human needs. Arcosanti, on the other hand, seeks to retain the benefits of a distinctly human environment while preserving the natural environment through the creation of a dense, vertical, miniaturized city surrounded by pristine natural landscape in central Arizona. Communities with different approaches to harmonizing the built environment with the natural were intentionally selected for this study. This follows a strategy of case selection in qualitative research called maximum-variation, which asserts that common patterns among distinct and extreme cases show more generalizable conclusions than patterns among cases that are similar to each other (Patton 167-172).

Because the perspective of the resident is key to this study the main instrument of data collection was the semi-structured

Village Homes

Dancing Rabbit

Arcosanti

interview, which guided all the other forms of data collection. Three major topics were explored through the interview questions: worldview, the built environment, and sacredness. The worldview of residents was explored by asking about the significance of their community, how and why they came to live in the community, and the community's shared values. The built environment was explored by asking residents how the significance and shared values of the community are expressed in the built environment. Finally, the topic of sacredness was explored by asking residents specifically about their own notion of sacredness, sacred feelings, and sacred places both within and outside their community. A total of 24 interviews were conducted. Data was also collected through direct observation by the researcher, which was recorded through photographs, diagramming, and note taking.

Using a basic grounded theory research method, the collected data was coded with qualitative data analysis software (MaxQDA). Emergent data themes were then synthesized, first by individual communities and then by all three communities combined. The synthesized data was then used to extrapolate a theoretical framework that describes how these residents come to view their community as sacred, as well as a compilation of built environment design themes that help to bring about this sense of sacredness.

FINDINGS

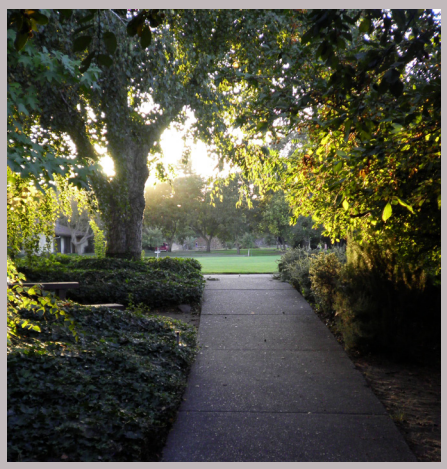
While interviewees generally refrained from speaking for their entire community, there were many shared responses across all three ecotopias. All residents consider their communities to be significant demonstrations of an alternative set of values, which generally fall into three categories: values having to do with individuality, diversity, and freedom; values having to do with community life, closeness with neighbors, and collaboration; and values having to do with respecting and experiencing the natural world. Virtually all of the interviewees stated that they feel nature has intrinsic value.

These three categories of values are clearly reflected in the built environment of the ecotopias. Each community has a variety of unique spaces and structures that reflect a diversity of lifestyles and needs. Community life is encouraged by a large amount of dedicated common space, shared facilities, well-integrated pedestrian networks, and relative density. Social isolation is discouraged by limiting privacy fences, and inhibiting—if not outright prohibiting—the use of automobiles. The natural world is present in each of the communities in a

Residents gather under 'the vaults' at Arcosanti for a morning meeting.

"Freedom is one shared value, that would be the one that unifies people. I think that everyone who comes here has come because they want to not be put in a constrictive environment, and they find a very 'open to everything' environment."

-Arcosanti Resident



A path opens to a park in Village Homes

I tell people I have 250 neighbors...we all consider ourselves neighbors even if we're 4 blocks or 5 blocks away…the sense of neighborhood is just naturally big…somehow there's this mentality that changes when you're here."

-Village Homes Resident

A house made of cob in Dancing Rabbit

variety of ways: trees, gardens, orchards, the use of natural building materials, and view of the surrounding natural landscape.

The sacred experiences described by interviewees generally have to do with a melding between the individual and the community, the individual and the natural world, or the community and the natural world. Though all expressed that this sense of sacredness can be felt outside their community, virtually all of the interviewees conveyed that their community is more conducive to these sacred experiences than conventional urban environments. "Awe," "peace," "confidence," "connection," were words commonly used to describe sacred feelings.

EXTRAPOLATIONS

In brief, the experience of sacredness conveyed by residents has to do with an acute awareness of how the individual or group fits into something larger, be it the wider community, the immediate natural world, or the world on a grand scale. The ecotopias are felt as sacred because they provide more opportunities for such experiences than a conventional urban environment. From the findings, this study extrapolates both a theoretical framework outlining the way in which residents experience ecotopias as sacred space, as well as a list of design themes that describe how the built environments of ecotopias create sacred space.

The following theoretical process of sacralization can be summarized as a movement from a state of rootlessness, fear, and isolation, to a state of peace, belonging, and confidence. It is a restorative process, in which the individual, the human community, and the natural world are felt to be in right relationship. This occurs through a process of expanding the sense of self to include the larger community and natural world. This transformation increases over time. As one gradually builds relationships in a place, they increase their identity with life at different scales. It happens through immediate place, but extends beyond immediate place. Out of the research, four basic phases of this transformative process were determined.

1. Longing for connection

Residents move to an ecotopia with a desire to live in a way that is more connected to their immediate social, built, and natural systems. They feel disconnected to these systems in a conventional urban environment.

"Nature is valuable for nature's sake and it's not all about us. I definitely think that's held here…if not held universally I think it's pretty darn close."

- Dancing Rabbit Resident

Residents circle before an evening meal at Dancing Rabbit

I really enjoy this walk here that makes a full circle around the mesa and it really gives a progression of the elevation and the site, from the flat desert up, going through beautiful views, going along the river, so that's really a great experience for me, it connects me back to something primal or a calmer nature of mine… feelings of peace, calmness, knowing that you can do what you need to do to get where you want to get…acceptance of the past…It depends, sometimes sacred means reverence and a little fear, awe understanding of how a little pebble you are, and understanding how life can be."

-Arcosanti Resident

"For me part of sacredness is friends."

-Village Homes Resident

"In a sacred experience the boundaries between 'me' and 'it' soften."

-Dancing Rabbit Resident

A small park serves as a more intimate community space in Village Homes

2. Finding connection

The ecotopias facilitate connections between the individual, the community, and nature. These connections are experienced in a variety of ways, and increase as relationships in the place are established. Feeling connected in these ways underlies sacred experiences of residents.

3. Transcending the individual

Through the connections experienced in the ecotopias residents begin to have experiences where they are acutely aware of how they are part of something larger than themselves. These experiences may go beyond feeling a part of the immediate community and extend to the world at a larger scale.

4. Transforming the sense of self

These experiences may be temporary, but the affects are lasting. They are transformative, both to one's feelings towards the immediate place as well as their feelings toward the world beyond the immediate place. This is why many residents feel that their communities are more than merely sustainable urban alternatives—they are also places that can help to open, deepen, and uplift the person towards a state of harmony with others and the larger world. As one identifies with the larger community or natural world they feel uplifted, a sense of right-relationship, belonging, and peace. They experience a growing sense of home.

The design of the built environment can facilitate or hinder the sacralization process. If sacredness in the ecotopias is experienced through connecting with the wider community and the natural world, then the ecotopias are felt as sacred space in as much as their environments enhance those connections. The following is a list of generalized design themes, compiled from the fieldwork of this study, which outline how the built environment can facilitate such connections.

1. Intentionality, purpose, and transparency

In order for a sense of sacredness to exist, the ecotopia must be seen as a place with special meaning to those who live there while also carrying a wider significance. This results as the community responds deliberately to the unique aspects of place—climate, history, topography, ecology—as well as consideration of larger regional or global issues. Also, finding ways to make the unique aspects of the place accessible to residents and visitors is also a key aspect of creating sacred space.

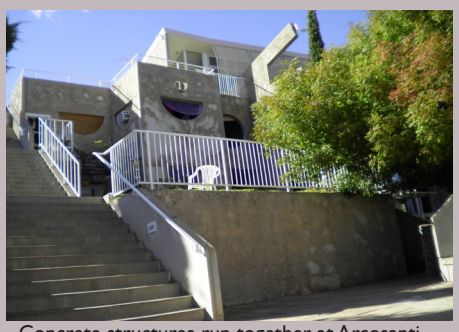
2. Variety and Individuality

Variety is a critical aspect of sacredness because sacredness is felt when individual parts are harmonized into a larger whole. Therefore the built environment must likewise be varied in order

"The other thing I can say about my affection, is that it's kind of nested. I love this house, I love our immediate neighborhood, I love the greater Village Homes neighborhood, and I really love Davis I think it's a wonderful town with tremendous values. I have developed an affection for this bioregion...the area roughly between the foothills and the delta and Mt. Shasta and the Sacramento River. So I feel like I have a nested sense of place at many scales. And this is the epicenter of it. Right here in this living room [it goes out] like a series of concentric donuts, and all of those things move in and out"

-Village Homes Resident

A footpath winds between unique structres at Dancing Rabbit



Concrete structures run together at Arcosanti

to harmonize its various parts into a greater whole. Open spaces will fit together with compressed spaces, private spaces will fit with public spaces, the built structures will fit with the natural. Structures will be unique but share a common language.

3. Connectivity and Propinquity

The unique and varied spaces cannot fit together unless they are reasonably close together and easily accessed through a well-connected movement system. The sense of sacredness is engendered through frequent encounters with many aspects of life in the place. This can only be achieved with at least a modest level of density.

4. Mysteriousness and Discoverability

A varied and well-connected environment creates a sense of mystery and discoverability—variety creates the mystery, and connectedness allows for discovery. This dynamic provokes exploration, instigating a relationship between the subject and the place.

5. Dynamic Harmony—Participation at Three Levels of Identity

A more comprehensive sense of sacredness is not achieved by connecting self, community, and nature all in a single experience. Rather, it is achieved by making a variety of these connections over time. To do this the built environment must facilitate participation with place in multiple ways—individual participation with nature, individual participation with community, and community participation with nature.

DISCUSSION

This study only begins to investigate how an ecocentric worldview might manifest in the built environment, and furthermore how ecocentric thought may be reinventing a sense of sacred space for the 21st century. Like many examples of sacred space in the past, the notion of sacred space described in this study aims to restore the broken relationship of humankind with the natural world. Here, the built environment no longer isolates humans from nature, but on the contrary, it is designed to enhance relationships between all lives—human and non-human—that share space together. By these relationships one grows their sense of belonging, their sense of being, and their sense of self, beginning in immediate space and expanding outward.

This study proposes that this 'self-expanding' potential of space, articulated by the ecotopias, should be the basis for a reinvented view sacred space that speaks directly to contemporary ecological issues. This is a wholly different conception of space than what is held by the currently dominant paradigm. Instead of a view of space

Houses side by side in Village Homes

"What you've got in an environment like this is more experiences than an orange has sides."

- Village Homes Resident

A clear distinction between the built environment and the natural at Arcosanti.

"A lot of people watch the sunset, watch stars. Here you really notice the difference between a full moon and a new moon. The birds. One of the interesting things about these buildings and the mesa is that even though you are inside, you are in and out of buildings all the time. In a city a lot of times you'll disappear into a building and be there for the day. Here you go from building to building to building. You are always in and out. There is always the breeze, some line of sight. You always know what the weather is like. The air is good up here, there is that feeling of a natural state. Where we are sitting right now we can look across and see the mesa and the trees and rocks and basalt. I personally find that to be terrifically rewarding."

- Arcosanti Resident

that is rooted in geometry—quantified, measured, and even—here space is viewed foremost as a medium for connectivity. This view of space is relational, connective, participatory, and rooting. Like the ancient view of space, it is "not homogenous" (Eliade 20). It gives priority to local and the immediate, serving as a vehicle to identify with the larger.

Urban designers, architects, planners, developers, and the like who are proponents of ecocentrism are tasked with designing according to this different view of space. Rather than focusing on the limits of space—lot lines, overlay districts, precincts, redevelopment areas, land-use zones, etc—the connective potential of space should be given the utmost attention. Hard lines should be blurred. The bolstering of relationships between the self, the community, and the natural world should be the focus. Designing with this approach will result in built landscapes that act to bind life together, creating the conditions for residents to practice growing beyond their own life and into life at a larger scale.

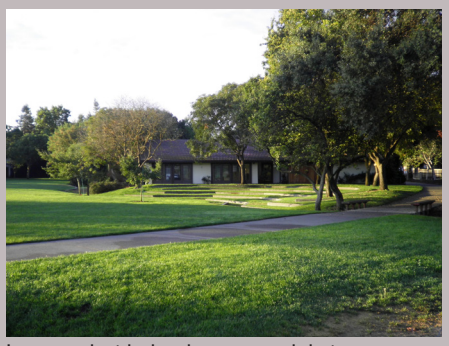
There is a great need for a reinvented conception of sacred space that empowers us to face our enormous present-day ecological challenges at a deeper level. This notion of sacredness must go beyond the focus on wilderness experience, critical as it is, for sacred space encapsulates more than just wilderness. Sacred space is about human communities trying to fit back into the larger cosmic order after having taken some kind of disruptive action. Therefore, contemporary attempts to redefine sacred space also need to give considerable attention to the built environment and find ways to reconcile it with the whole panorama of life. It is the builders who have enabled the break with nature, and the builders who must play an essential role in atoning for that break.

"Dancing Rabbit a place where I think that a lot of human spirit is lifted, and that has the makings for a sacred place I think"

-Dancing Rabbit Resident

"You can look at a community in its nested bioregional niches as soil where roots can go down and grab. So emotionally this is nice loamy soil, you live in this place and boy your roots can go down pretty easily. I think without this place, without this specific place I wouldn't feel rooted to this bigger ecosystem. I don't think I've ever articulated that explanation to anybody before this...I would have to say that without the centroid, without the taproot, there wouldn't be the other roots."

-Village Homes Resident



Integrated with the above-ground drainage system, the community center sits at the edge of the largest park in Village Homes

NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Andrew G. Gingerich is a currently a GIS Analyst at the Mid-Region Council of Governments of New Mexico (Albuquerque, NM, USA) and recent graduate of the Community and Regional Planning program at the University of New Mexico's School of Architecture and Planning. He can be contacted through email at agingerich@mrcog-nm.gov. This paper is a summary of his master's thesis, which can be downloaded at http://repository.unm.edu/handle/1928/22001.

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