

# Aesthetic and Educational Aspects in Religious Architecture

Subjects: Architecture And Design

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The major importance in the process of human development involves personal, individual and group experiences of meetings in various areas of religious architecture that operate with the language of signs and symbols, modern artistic forms, single-space harmony, and atmosphere—an invisible order of things. In recent years, a number of studies have been carried out that attempted to define what makes the place of sacrum sufficiently meaningful, mysterious, and still necessary in order to establish a spiritual relationship with the community of believers and with God, which is relevant in one's transition to adulthood.

Keywords: Beauty ; Religious ; Architecture

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## 1. Introduction

It is important to take the form of a reflection on the relationship between humans and architecture in their perceptual experience. It addresses the question of seeking the values of truth and beauty in the contemporary sacral space and their relationship with the spiritual development of an individual. Architectural and urban solutions of Christian temples may influence or inhibit human spiritual development ([Welter and Geddes 2002](#)). Spiritual development is understood here as an important aspect of personal development, as is moral development ([Steć and Kulik 2021](#)). Aesthetic development and the related spiritual development can be supported through contact with art, including the art of architecture. Moreover, architecture, being present in the space of every person's life, can have the greatest impact on their sensitivity. Famous British art theorist, Herbert Read, already mentioned the importance of communing with art, including architecture, from the point of view of the overall development of an individual ([Keel 1969](#)). This seems to be especially clear in the case of sacral architecture, which is intended to emphasize the values of faith. It can therefore be considered as a tool to support the spiritual development of an individual.

The specificity of contemporary theory and practice of religious architecture is characterized by the language of modern architecture, which is open to the directions of the newest culture, and which reflects the contemporary interpretation of religion. It most willingly speaks through the dynamics of the structure, and the expression of the outer form and is not always in harmony with the traditional canon of beauty ([Vidiella 2012](#)). It benefits from philosophical determinants (sign, symbol, and metaphor), combining them with modern material determinants (structure, natural and artificial light) and aesthetic determinants (architectural structure, plan, spatial layout, design, and ambiance of the interior, compliance with the urban context). All of these aspects can have a significant impact on designing an impact on an individual's impression and thus on their spiritual development.

Each religion has its values and manifests itself with a form of religious architecture placed in the context of urbanized space ([Yilmazer and Acun 2018](#); [Aulet and Vidal 2018](#)). Today's architecture is characterized by the plurality of forms and diversity of spatial solutions. This is the result of creative freedom offered by investors and modern technology. The leaders of various Christian communities, leaving the creators free and completely abandoning the use of rigid schemes, canons, or patterns, are also part of this pattern of change. This state of affairs proves that the spirit of contemporary times is characterized by the current opinions, which require individual reflection. As a result of such wide-ranging limits of creative freedom, the sacral architecture again searches for its spiritual identity and forms of dialogue with the world, using the language understood as the modern language of architecture and art, constantly adapting to the changes and new challenges of the modern world ([Aulet and Vidal 2018](#)).

## 2. Beauty and Truth in Religious Architecture in the Process of Fostering Spiritual Development—The Educational Aspect of Contact with Religious

# | Architecture

The values of truth, goodness, and beauty are considered to be the transcendentals, according to the view prevailing in classical Christian metaphysics that every being is consistent, knowable, and located in the structure of reality. Transcendentals are special values shared by all entities. They are properties of being and seem to be transferable to each other. Beauty presupposes truth and truth presupposes beauty, especially if these values are justified by God. Recognizing truth, goodness, and beauty as transcendentals comes from the Christian concept of reality as God's work and the embodiment of God's will. In this approach, all three values are interrelated. One cannot speak on any of them without taking into account the others. The concept of transcendentals was explored, e.g., by Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus ([Aertsen 1996](#)).

Research on beauty and the issues of aesthetics has been conducted since the beginnings of human thought. The architecture was characterized by the desire for beauty, which was linked to spirituality and, at the same time, to a high level of moral development ([Welter and Geddes 2002](#)). According to ancient Greeks, the concept of good and beauty was inextricably linked (Plato, Aristotle), which was also a kind of principle, an idea that was highly endorsed and even desirable ([Rzevski and Syngellakis 2018](#)). For the ancient Greeks, the link between good and beauty was referred to as *kalokagathos* ([Preus 2015](#)) and was also presented as a model for civic education (*paideia*). This can be considered as the beginning of intuition, saying that shaping a person is not just about a moral aspect but also an aesthetic one, and maybe even more, as through the aesthetic influence one can make spiritual and personal changes in the individual. The old intuition is today confirmed by scientific research, which shows the correlation between activation of very similar brain areas during moral and aesthetic judgment, for example, the medial orbitofrontal cortex and ventromedial prefrontal cortex ([Dietrich and Knieper 2021](#)). This may indicate that the human reactions towards something beautiful and something morally desirable can be very similar in terms of neurobiology. Perhaps it is about mediating both situations through strong emotional involvement, which in turn must involve subcortical processing at the same time as the reaction of cortical areas.

Philosophical reflection on architecture is a reflection on the essence and the way architecture exists as a work of art and a work of construction embedded in the world of humans ([Michalski 2015](#)). The aim is to design and develop space aesthetically. The beauty in architecture is a positive aesthetic property resulting from the preservation of good proportions, the harmony of colors and sounds, appropriateness, moderation, and utility, perceived by the senses. According to Hegel, beauty is not only connected to balance as a sole result, but also to the tension that leads to this result. The harmony which, as a result, negates the tension that is created in it, changes into something disturbing, false, or even dissonant ([Najdek 2021](#)). Therefore, sacred architecture is related to the value of beauty in a special way. The beauty it represents is not only meant to serve humans and meet their subjective needs but also to be a testimony of the divinity itself. Thus, beauty in sacred architecture eludes its particular interpretations and refers to a higher, more objective order, e.g., harmony. In this way, beauty corresponds to the value of truth ([Battaino 2020](#)). The more objective it is, the truer it is. At this point, one can speak of true beauty that is intersubjective, indisputable, and divine.

In the theory of classic architecture, there are concepts and principles that are considered important in achieving the harmony and order of the structures, which serve the value of truth. It emphasizes the balance between different parts of a structure, symmetry, the principle of "golden" proportions, and the concept of purpose. The maintenance of a good proportion is the principal property on which architectural composition is based and is understood as a system of interdependencies between certain parts, which exposes the importance of a building ([Monestirol 2004](#)). Just as the work of God is harmonious, the architecture devoted to him is to emphasize this harmony. In the universe exists a special combination of shapes, numbers, and patterns. It embodies the golden ratio. Its existence is a testimony to the creator, God himself ([Willson 2003](#)).

According to Husserl ([Hajdamowicz 2021](#)), the idea of architectural concepts is a self-contained being, which provides a timeless dimension to all ideas born in the consciousness of an artist. The architectural structure of a sacral object usually attempts to present high aesthetic values and to induce, in the process of perception, specific references to the knowledge resources of the recipient and influence moral attitudes and emotional feelings. Heidegger claimed that architectural work is not an abstract organization of space. Architecture is where the truth is present, where the artist is the first witness of this phenomenon ([Michalski 2015](#)).

However, Ingarden believed that the work of art is built out of a neutral framework of artistic values, which was overbuilt with aesthetic values, constituting an aesthetic-specific realization of the work ([Ingarden 1966](#)). He considered artistic values as tools, ancillary means in the face of aesthetic values, allowing these values to appear. However, aesthetic values are derived from artistic values. While artistic values are the direct result of the work of an artist, the aesthetic

values for their existence and the assessment of artistic quality (beauty) require active interaction between the subjective perception of a co-constitutive aesthetic object ([Stróżewski 2002](#)). Similarly, Stanisław Ossowski shared the aesthetic assessment of the work, giving a psychological interpretation to the term of beauty, by delamination into the values of objective beauty, attributed to objects and artifacts, and of subjective beauty (every recipient has the right to assess because these values are democratic) ([Ossowski 1958](#)).

The relationship of the *sacrum* with beauty is symbiotic. Gołaszewska describes this relationship as the “aesthetics of spirituality”. She believes that the uniqueness of religious architecture consists of inclusion in this term as the result of a strong emotional interaction, related to the stimulation of religious feelings. This interaction is implemented through several artistic expressions, ranging from the location and composition of the whole work, as well as its parts, to details and material ([Gołaszewska 2001](#)). In religious architecture, the desire for beauty is expressed in the creation of forms that affect the viewer, which exacerbates the perception of the user of space in a multilateral manner. Religious architecture is not a flat perception of an image, in which the essence is merely the visual interaction of forms, colors, illusions, or associations. According to Gołaszewska, religious architecture resonates with the three-dimensionality of space along with the entire spectrum of multi-sensory effects through spatial attributes such as scale, rhythm, articulation, shapes, lighting, detail, interior decoration, acoustic feeling, odors, temperature, and the touch of materials and textures. This immeasurable wealth of sensory experiences, when combined into a single perceptual system, creates and reinforces the uniqueness of the architectural form and its sensory multilateralism ([Paszowski 2017](#)). In turn, according to Wojciech Kosiński (2011), a theoretician and designer of the new religious architecture, it is the sacred building that is the highest form of architectural work, which evokes feelings of high religious and aesthetic exaltation, combining mysticism and beauty, which in many examples takes unimaginably strongly influencing forms. The feelings evoked by an architectural form can become the beginning of a process of spiritual ascent, which is part of an individual's spiritual development and therefore can be an important aspect of their mental health.

Today, it is difficult to clearly and objectively define the beauty in architecture and it is difficult to identify the important values and the path that leads to it. In theory and practice, subjective beauty is easier to define because it is based on individual perception and simple analysis of examples and subjective judgment. Identifying objective beauty in architecture, as well as its basic artistic values and ways of achieving a positive result in the theory and methodology of architectural and urban design is difficult, which, as a result, raises many questions during research on beauty and when new work is created. Especially in the context of religious architecture, aesthetics should be accompanied by ethics and thus a return to the ancient definition of beauty. Ultimately, what is beautiful can be considered holy if it is given religious values. In Christian metaphysics, beauty plays a special role. It underlines the greatness of God and testifies to the truth about him. It is also meant to lead to an experience of the sublime. What is holy can also become beautiful in its way, because it is exceptional and recognized as holy by the local religious community. *Sacrum* in the presence of beauty becomes the opening of a mind and soul to the perception of this beauty, which may also involve a certain definition of the value of truth as beauty is closely related to truth and good ([Paszowski 2017](#)). Communing with both values can have a significant impact on the process of spiritual development of an individual.

If you take into account the possibility of transferring the values of beauty, truth, and good through architectural forms, it can be assumed that the architectural form can become an inspiration for a believer, which refers strongly to self-development. In this aspect, the educational role of religious architecture is implemented. It can be expected that a believer, participating in the rites of its religion in characteristic temples, has the possibility of not only realizing the cult itself or being in contact with the *sacrum* but also of experiencing certain aesthetic feelings that may support its both spiritual and moral development. Aesthetic development goes hand in hand with moral development as the value of beauty is very close to the value of the good ([Paris 2019](#)). Both are crucial in the personal development of an individual and may contribute to maintaining mental health. Personal development, striving for subjective autonomy is inextricably linked with moral and spiritual development. Someone developed as a person represents a high moral and spiritual development potential at the same time. The indicators of such development will be high sensitivity and the ability to perceive values and act in accordance with them. According to Stefan Szuman ([Polak 2021](#)), development is about moving from ambivalence to ethics. In nature, man is neither good nor bad. Only as a character does he become good or bad, according to the virtues he has or the lewdness he is subjected to. Virtues are an acquired, relatively permanent disposition to act in a good and noble way, and the stability of character in doing good is learned from experience. This is why virtuousness is a positive result of internal battles being fought. Among the main virtues of a human, Szuman mentions moderation, love and justice, godliness (faith), courage, integrity (dedication to the truth), and spirituality (nobleness). It seems that the nobleness proposed by masterpieces of sacral architecture can be of educational meaning in the sense that it forms the basis for shaping certain attitudes. Szuman, similarly to Herbert Read ([Keel 1969](#)), was a supporter of bringing up art, as well as aesthetic education ([Polak 2021](#)). This is one of the most important objectives of modern holistic education.

Other researchers have also highlighted the possibility of acting through art, including the impact of architectural space on the development of an individual ([Keel 1969](#); [Mesquida and Inocêncio 2016](#)). According to Herbert Read ([Keel 1969](#)), contact with works of art and the artistic activity itself is a catalyst for positive changes in many different areas of life and the functioning of an individual. In the case of religious architecture, people would expect to implement not only the Kantian category of elevation (*the sublime*), which goes beyond the familiar concept of beauty and extends it by a more transcendental dimension but also a specific non-verbal message of certain axiological contents ([Specht 2013](#)).

People with developed aesthetic sensitivity also usually have a very wide repertoire of moral virtues corresponding to moral values they believe in. A high level of morality can be an indicator and, at the same time, a manifestation of both aesthetic development and the spiritual development that goes hand in hand with it. Being sensitive to aesthetic values may be associated with a higher level of insight, self-reflection, and the ability to read aesthetic values among other values. This deepened level of sensitivity can also influence moral reflection. It has been known for a long time that by supporting aesthetic development, one can also contribute to growth in the field of moral development ([Reid 1982](#)). The upbringing through art is, therefore, an upbringing not only in light of certain behaviors or attitudes toward aesthetic values but also in light of moral values. People who are sensitive to art are also sensitive to moral aspects of reality. This is demonstrated by the most recent results of neuroimaging studies, which emphasize the parallelism of activity of certain brain areas when performing moral and aesthetic judgments. The fMRI study has shown that the attractive faces of males were better remembered by female participants. Neuroimaging has shown greater activity in hippocampal and orbitofrontal areas of the brain during the study which may serve as an argument for the significant involvement of prefrontal cortices in the process of an aesthetic assessment ([Tsukiura and Cabeza 2011](#)). This indicates that morality and sensitivity to aesthetics share a common biological basis. This would explain why they are so closely related. This also justifies why by following the value of a good one can simultaneously realize the values of beauty with greater probability and vice versa.

It seems, therefore, that aesthetic values and their embodiment in artifacts can constitute important tools supporting educational and pedagogical processes, both in terms of education with the importance of religious and socio-moral values. This approach is very close to the idea of psychodidactics, which uses psychological knowledge and methods to support teaching and educational processes ([Stec and Kulik 2021](#); [Stec et al. 2021](#)). Moreover, recently, more and more interdisciplinary areas of interest for researchers, such as *moral architecture*, are becoming common place ([Edgington 1997](#)). Its fundamental objective is to promote the design of space in such a way that it is appropriate to the social and moral context, and thus, for example, that the various social groups are not excluded by certain features of the design (e.g., contemporary, modern, almost sterile interiors of certain public places exclude the use of such spaces by the poor or homeless people, or even sick ones).

Architecture itself can have a positive, moral, inclusive meaning, as well as a negative one, morally reprehensible through excluding, dominating, or overwhelming. A shrine, a place of religious worship, is very vulnerable to the influence of such tendencies. It would be worth taking this into account already in the process of the creation of architectural projects. As a sacred building can attract and deter believers, it can, therefore, provoke specific experiences and associated emotional states, which in turn can translate into the persistence of certain attitudes and resulting behaviors ([Marti 2009](#)).

The problem of risks in architectural creation is raised by Paszkowski in the context of the architect's desire for beauty. Architectural creation can be largely affected by serious threats and the rural shrine of Our Lady in Licheń Stary, the largest shrine in Poland, is given as an example. Despite the use of a classical canon of beauty, the architecture of the building raises serious concerns ([Paszkowski 2017](#)); there is a question of the inappropriateness of the form of the shrine to modern aesthetic needs and challenges, the architecture of which copies the canons of the counter-reformation Baroque church. The scale and construction of the shrine might be more of a symbol of the triumphalism of the contemporary Catholic Church than a place of prayer and contact with God ([Rutyna 2007](#)).

The composition of architecture and the interior design may give rise to calming anxiety, comfort or discomfort, a sense of harmony and order, or a feeling of being bored by the excessive number of stimuli. Therefore, in the design of the sacral religious architecture, the "less is more" principle, proposed by the master of minimalism in architecture Mies van der Rohe, is true ([Mycielski 2020](#)). On the other hand, new religious buildings with a minimalist form, so eagerly promoted in the industry's architectural journals, which are most popular among critics and architects ([Bertoni 2002](#)), may be rejected by the believers due to the overexposed space in their interiors. The emptiness is a kind of synonym for nothingness, and nothingness stands in contradiction with the main message of Christianity and takes away the spirit of uniqueness and holiness, which is not conducive to spiritual growth.

### 3. The Importance of Urban Qualities in the Choice of Location and Context of the Place of Sacral Architecture

For centuries, humans have shaped the space of their lives according to their knowledge and faith, giving many important attributes linked to tradition and culture to a given place. Humans created housing and work environments, as well as religious needs, while also entering the natural and cultural landscape. Architecture and urban planning have always been and continue to be the background for all human activities, the plane of shaping social life and the spiritual development of an individual. The human shapes their housing environment—the space of human life—with time models and shapes their own life (Paprzyca 2012). In its urban development plan, the historic city's urbanism provided for a reservation of a separate parcel in each district of the city, intended for the construction of a sacral district. Urban planners defined its dominant structure well in advance, and sometimes its aesthetics about the environment. The 20th century brought a completely different scale and design of urban residential and sacral buildings, and the 21st century moved the aesthetic problems of urban space in practice into the background (Paszkowski 2017).

The structure of the new architecture becomes part of the existing space and landscape. It is, therefore, important to respect the context of the site and to fit the new building into the existing environment and landscape—both natural and built-up (Wrana and Fitta-Spelina 2017).

The presence of religion in cities is realized through architecture. The choice of location for a new investment by the sacral team is closely linked to the paradigm of "New Visibility of Religion" (Deibl 2020). The depth of influence of the *sacrum* sphere is dependent on the choice of location and context of the site, as well as the urban values of the previously formed sacral environment of the building, which will allow the shaping of significant contact with the new sacral architecture by the users and observers of the sacral space, in occasional or systematic contact.

Sacral structures play an important role in shaping the public space of cities and villages in determining their composition relationships with the environment and in defining a clear and understandable language of symbolic forms of architecture. Their monumental structures often become icons of the city and signposts in the town planning system (Jencks 1973). On the architectural scale, the structures and interiors of modern churches offer many new possibilities for guiding users of space toward mystery. A believer, who crosses the threshold of a church, has the chance to enter the space where actual contact with the transcendence may and should occur (Rutyna 2007).

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