

Between Concept and Identity

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Edited by

Esteban Fernández-Cobián

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

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CHAIR

2ND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS
ARCHITECTURE
BETWEEN CONCEPT AND IDENTITY

After the excellent reception of the 1st International Conference on Contemporary Religious Architecture (September 27-29, 2007), the Ourense Bishopric through the Santa María Nai Foundation and the Ourense Branch of Galician Official Association of Architects (COAG) have called a new edition to be held from November 12 through 14, 2009 in Ourense under the title: *Contemporary Religious Architecture. Between Concept and Identity*.

The identity of places of worship is one of the most difficult problems faced by religious architecture at the start of this new millennium. Contemporary globalising experiences demand, peremptorily, a reflection, both conceptual and situational, on the origin of objects, people and institutions.

The easiness with which foreign cultural systems are currently reached allows multiple exchanges, some of them leading to a transfer of values and to inter-religion dialogue. This happens as a result of the on-going influx of migrants to the rich and strongly secular countries of Europe and North America, the repeated fundamentalism outbreaks in various corners of the World and the gradual religious opening of the Far East.

Nevertheless, the chance of these migration flows annihilating already-existing religious identities is perceived as a problem. This problem is directly linked to the survival of architecture as a system carrying a material representation of the divine and constituting a self-reference system for the community of believers.

Therefore, it is important to define the extent to which the new religious architecture has given room to an abstract type of formal experimentation which is disconnected from social reality. Does this architecture maintain its bridging, sacramental value, or, on the contrary, has it given way to the conceptualist trends still alive in the artistic world? Is metaphor a valid concept for the Christian religion? Is there an essential aspect linking this architecture to the centuries-old tradition of the Catholic Church?

Different architectural, pedagogical, exhibition and formal initiatives have arisen in recent years and it is necessary to get to know them, with the purpose of understanding where contemporary religious architecture is heading in its eternal search for a permanent identity.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

1 Cor	<i>1 Corinthians</i>
2 Cor	<i>2 Corinthians</i>
Acts	<i>Acts of the Apostles</i>
Col	<i>Colossians</i>
Ex	<i>Exodus</i>
Ez	<i>Ezekiel</i>
Gn	<i>Genesis</i>
Jn	<i>John (Gospel)</i>
Josh	<i>Joshua</i>
Lk	<i>Luke</i>
Mk	<i>Mark</i>
Mt	<i>Matthew</i>
Prv	<i>Proverbs</i>
Ps	<i>Psalms</i>
Rev	<i>Revelation (Apocalypse)</i>
Rom	<i>Romans</i>

SECTION 1

THE EXPRESSION OF THE IDENTITY OF CHRISTIAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE MYSTICAL BODY

HOW TO BUILD CHURCHES AFTER THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

Steven J. Schloeder

I want to thank the organisers of this conference, especially His Excellency Bishop Luis Quinteiro Fiuza for his patronage of sacred art and architecture, the *Fundación Santa María Nai*, and Professor Fernández-Cobián for their kind invitation. I am especially honoured to have been asked to give the keynote address, which is a call to frame the whole conference and to give context to the discussion we will have over the next few days in the lectures by my esteemed colleagues.

I intend this keynote talk to be provocative: I want to provoke reflection, discussion, even rebuttal, since these are ideas and arguments that I think are most central to the issues that we all grapple with as we attempt to design, or think about, what constitutes a valid sacred architecture. I hope to get to the heart of the issue, and not talk around the problems as I see them. So I intend no offence, but I do intend real engagement with each of the participants here at this conference.

THE PROBLEM OF A CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE

The general theme of this conference is *contemporary religious architecture*. And the specific theme asks us to consider contemporary sacred architecture within some dialectical framework *between concept and identity*. For me, the key term here is *contemporary*: of our time. This seems to presuppose a particular historical consciousness: that we are aware, or at least we believe, that our particular place in history should demand, or elicit, a way of thinking about sacred architecture that is respectful of our contemporary condition. It also suggests that our contemporary response might be different from past ages.

But every age is contemporary. And all we can do is contemporary architecture. We simply cannot think about architecture except as contemporaries of our age. We can no longer cut stone into sculpture with the eye and the mind of a mediaeval mason. Nor are we any longer engaged in the

Counter-Reformation polemics which gave form to the glorious Baroque churches. We are no longer involved in the Christological debates that informed the architectonics of the churches in the age of Justinian. No Gothic Revival building is not understood as a modern age interpretation of a true medieval building. No Renaissance classicism can ever be confused for an ancient Greek or Roman temple, just as none of these contemporary neo Classical churches could ever be confused for a work of Renaissance genius like Palladio, Bramante or Alberti. So I think the fascination with the notion of *contemporary* is problematic.

Furthermore, the term itself presents theological and ecclesiological difficulties in that it absolutises this time we are living in as *contemporary*. Absolute from *ab-solvere* is to cut off from, and does not allow for a continuity in tradition. It does not allow for a universality to the human condition that transcends time and place. It does not permit a Church that is fully operational and fully equipped in every age, and in every culture, to respond to the demands of whatever age and culture she finds herself. As St. Augustine reminds us, «The Church of today, of the present, is the Kingdom of Christ and the Kingdom of Heaven»¹. Yet who here can imagine the Bishop of Hippo hosting a conference in the year 400 on *Contemporary Religious Architecture*?

Yet this question of contemporary sacred architecture seems to be the core dialectic that architects and liturgists have been enmeshed in for the past hundred years or so. I would point out that we do need to respect the particularities of our age, and it is helpful to examine to what degree they should influence our decision making process, and what values are being embedded in our approach to sacred architecture. But to what degree it should influence our approach to sacred architecture is much more limited.

So let us return to this question of the dialectic between *contemporary* and *sacred*. This dialectic expresses a whole series of stresses and strains in our experience of the modern world, our approach to architecture, and in our thinking about religion itself before we get to the question of contemporary religious architecture.

Architecturally we can see the tension between an architectural vocabulary of forms that are derivative and expressive of the natural world and an architectural vocabulary that is based on a whole other set of determinants: the efficiencies of concrete, steel, sheet glass, plastics, mechanical ventilation and artificial lighting. This is a tension between an approach to buildings derivative of preindustrial materials of load bearing stone and hand