

An Architecture to Honor the Church's Vision

by Thomas Gordon Smith

In a new Catholic architecture we have an opportunity to forge a new architectural exegesis based on tradition. Rather than relegating tradition to a distant, inaccessible past, we must find ways to reconnect ourselves to our heritage, in order to create a culture of spiritual unity and continuity.

The Battle for Tradition

A battle rages in our culture over the issue of tradition. Now on the verge of a new century, we are emerging from an eighty-year period that has been characterized by the denigration of the value of traditional form and connotation in all facets of our lives, including architecture.

...

Breaking the Barriers of Modernism

It is time to take another look at the Vatican II documents. Recent questioning of the tenets of Modernism allows us to respond to these profoundly important directives with a full and confident sense of the relevance of the breadth of Catholic tradition for the year 2000 AD.

In proposing that we search for new ways to embrace and relish the physical tokens of our heritage in order to build a worthy response to Vatican II, I am not suggesting that we retreat to a fairy tale. We live now, and we should seize the moment to determine how we will live. We need not passively accept what our recent ancestors have dictated. If we apply what the Roman architect Vitruvius called "lively mental energy", we can innovatively contradict the prevailing orthodoxy of abstraction and revive over two millennia of tradition.

The thesis that has defined the life work of many architects, including myself, is this: to make traditional forms of architecture vitally expressive today. Since I began to study architecture formally in 1972, and in my professional and academic life since, my objective has been to break through the barriers that have been set up by Modernists in order to make our forebears seem inaccessible. I attribute my desire for liberation from such strictures to having been raised Catholic.

One of my earliest memories is hearing one of Saint Paul's letters read on a sunny spring morning in Saint Mark's Parish in Richmond, California. I recall wondering how Saint Paul could convey postage from heaven. This immature but tangible fascination with the communication of ideas and values over vast stretches of time is a foundation stone of my belief that we are not distantly separated from our ancestors. We can bring generations, even ages, together by concerted study, a world view

open to the lessons of the past, and the confidence that we can "learn from dead people".

One approach to this is to strive for a synthesis of architectural expression based on a thorough understanding of classical forms and methods. This goal inherently challenges the Modernist aesthetic that has gained hegemony in many minds as the sole medium for solving contemporary needs.

Renewing Classical Foundations

...Architects who sought to be skilled with their hands without formal education have never been able to reach a position of authority in return for their labors; while those who relied only upon Reasoning and Scholarship were clearly pursuing the shadow, not the substance, But those who have a thorough knowledge of both, like men fully armed, have more quickly attained their goal with authority. Vitruvius, Ten Books on Architecture. I.

Like many before me, I have found an armature for current theory and practice in the framework articulated by the Roman architect, Vitruvius. His *Ten Books on Architecture* culls and synthesizes five hundred years of Greek architectural ideas.

The classical language of architecture was initiated in Greece 2,500 years ago and it has been repeatedly altered, embellished, and reinvigorated in different places to create a diverse tradition. In the two thousand years since Vitruvius wrote, his books have over and over inspired the revival of an architecture that seeks integration and balance.

Since Early Christian times, an architecture that originated and flourished in pagan temples has been extensively developed in the design of churches. Even casual visits to Rome and other great cities reveal the ability of Classical architecture to express Christian values at the deepest level.

Restoring Sacred Dimensions

The most important challenge in building churches today is to unlock the connection to our full tradition and find expressions that convey recognizable qualities of sacredness. From the outside, a new church must clearly symbolize its unique function, in contrast to secular buildings. It must be immediately recognizable as a sacred edifice. Although connotations of sacredness are inherently intangible, and architectural proposals may vary widely, people generally agree as to whether or not particular places elicit a sensation of sacredness. The interior of a church, then, must reinforce the sense of sanctuary and convey the uplifting and challenging aspects of spirituality.

For two millennia the Catholic tradition has developed a vast set of cultural references that indicate sacred themes. These can be thought of as comprising a vocabulary of images and forms which evoke spiritual responses on three levels.

First, the shapes and volumes of basic church forms themselves have strong associations. The deeper question of which style -- Gothic, Classical or other -- will be used to articulate the church asks what these architectural languages evoke in a particular culture. For example, certain facets of Gothic and Classical have been developed for Protestant denominations and so might seem inappropriate for a Catholic Church.

Second, the tradition of iconography in Catholic culture is enormous. Meaning can be conveyed through formal elements or images, ranging from basic geometrical shapes which carry symbolic meaning to minute pictorial details.

We must realize that the initial reaction to Vatican II was to destroy the images, in virtually an iconoclastic frenzy which still affects parishes. In the aftermath we must learn to employ iconography, by reinvigorating canonical forms as well as incorporating specific traditions pertaining to cultural groups or regions.

Finally, the figural imagery that has been developed over the centuries to depict Christ and the saints in painting, sculpture, and stained glass has a renewed potential. Some of the most vital painters and sculptors working today have reformulated figural art not only technically, but with the intent to communicate meaningful spiritual themes. We no longer have to imitate Chagall or Matisse; we have living artists to work with who are keyed in to our objectives.

Imagination, Tradition, Delight

The perception of sacredness is inherently subjective, yet the fluent and intelligent use of our storehouse of cultural resources, from the muted language of architecture to the more tangible media of iconographic painting and sculpture, has enormous capacity to elicit sacredness. This is more likely to be achieved when we employ with a lively imagination elements that have traditional recognition than when we attempt to invent inspiration from scratch.

...

Patrons' Key Role

The renewal of ecclesiastical architecture does not depend only on architects who are willing to debunk the Modernist ideal of the architect as an isolated self-absorbed creator.

Although it is our responsibility to take on a more humble role as servants able to provide solutions for the needs of the Church, patrons must be more self-confident in order to help create a new Catholic architecture.

Patrons must foster buildings that fully honor the vision and legacy of the Church. This vital role has been forgotten because society has honored only secular buildings in recent decades. Patronage requires a study of architectural history and an

understanding of contemporary practice, as well as recognition and acceptance of the role of leadership. Confident leadership is characterized by a determination to do what is right despite obstacles.

The creation of great buildings requires the cooperative effort of many people, from architects to builders and artisans, but it depends most on the courage, dedication, and protection of patrons.

Thomas Gordon Smith is an architect and the dean of the University of Notre Dame School of Architecture.

From an Essay Originally Published in The Adoremus Bulletin.