

# MATERIAL RELIGION AND CHURCH ARCHITECTURE IN CULTURAL ANALYSIS A THEORETICAL SHORTCUT

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JENS WIETSCHORKE

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*This paper provides some theoretical framework for the cultural analysis of church architecture. It suggests a classification of three basic research approaches: the symptomatic reading, praxeological analysis and ethnographic study of architecture. Furthermore, it is shown how these approaches of architectural research can be implemented with regard to sacred space. Overall, the paper underlines that a comprehensive cultural analysis of built structures has to make use of all the proposed concepts together.*

*Keywords: architecture, church buildings, sacred space, material religion, atmospheres, emotions*

*Članek ponuja teoretski okvir za kulturološko analizo cerkvene arhitekture. Predlaga tri osnovne raziskovalne pristope: simptomatično branje, praxeološko analizo in etnografsko raziskavo arhitekture. Pokaže, kako je mogoče te pristope raziskovanja arhitekture uporabiti v svetem prostoru. Poudarjeno je, da celovita kulturna analiza grajenih struktur lahko pridobi z upoštevanjem vseh predloženih konceptov skupaj.*

*Ključne besede: arhitektura, cervene zgradbe, sveti prostor, materialna religija, razpoloženje, čustva*

## INTRODUCTION

Some decades ago, investigating religion meant dealing with a mentalist view on reality. Many studies in this field were predominantly based on a history of ideas, interested in contents of theology and belief. Nowadays, investigating religion means dealing with social practice and materiality in all its semantic range and all its interconnections, from matters of body and habitus to matters of objects and space. Cultural anthropologist Jojada Verrips put it like this:

I think that this kind of lopsided classification and evaluation of religion and belief at the side of an immaterially conceived mind, at least in the Western world, is one of the big mistakes of our time. It would also be better to perceive religion and belief as physically embodied phenomena and the sometimes very violent reactions to confrontations with deviant representations of dogmas and imagery as efforts both to defend bodily grounded metaphysical truths and, in doing so, to maintain a socially informed physical integrity of self and society. (Verrips 2010: 37)

In so far as all metaphysical truths are “bodily grounded”, there must also be an analytical conjunction between religious ideas and spatial or architectural structures. Nevertheless, in the recent field of material religion studies, sacred architecture has received

relatively little attention. This is especially true of Christian church architecture that is certainly a standard topic of Practical Theology and Art History, but not a standard topic in cultural anthropology and cultural studies. Although some social and cultural historians discovered the importance of churches as sites of political representation and in their symbolic meaning with regard to social order (e.g. Dürr 2006; Kilde 2008), this remains a marginal rather than central issue in the interdisciplinary field. However, it can be easily demonstrated that all the elements of the Christian idea of belief – such as trust, declaration, inwardness, and affirmation, as Malcolm Ruel (1997: 50–51) classified them – are closely linked to architectural form and spatial practice. In Catholic as well as in Protestant contexts, the social use of architecture supports and even constitutes religious belief. This paper outlines some theoretical framework that can be helpful to grasp the connection between architectural space, religious practice and personal belief. Furthermore, it asks also for cultural practices within churches that are not clearly linked to religious belief. In this sketch of only a few pages, I can only briefly touch on all these questions. In terms of a theoretical shortcut, the paper presents some issues that can provide an impulse for further discussions of architecture in religious studies.<sup>1</sup>

### CULTURAL STUDIES IN ARCHITECTURE: THREE APPROACHES

There is a very broad literature concerning the field of cultural studies in architecture. Theoretical approaches and case studies from different disciplinary perspectives enrich and advance the debate, and some specialists even speak of an “architectural turn” in the last years. The German sociologists Heike Delitz (2010) and Silke Steets (2015) developed promising new concepts for architectural research. Susanne Hauser, Christa Kamleithner and Roland Meyer (2011, 2013) presented an instructive two-volume anthology of texts that has opened up a Cultural Studies perspective on the subject. And also in the field of cultural anthropology, there are some new attempts to integrate built space systematically into the investigation of social and cultural practice (Buchli 2013; Wagner and Cepl 2014).

To provide a better overview of current concepts and approaches, I suggest a classification which could be helpful to understand the different epistemological and methodological implications: There is, in the first place, what we can call the *symptomatic reading* of architecture, which means that the built structure is considered as a mirror of society. Architectural space becomes in a certain sense a “text” that can afford information about historical social orders. A prominent exponent of this approach was Norbert Elias with his work about Versailles and the courtly society in France:

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<sup>1</sup> This paper presents some aspects of my habilitation research, completed in 2015. For a broader discussion see Wietschorke 2017, 2019)

Not all social units or forms of integration of people are at the same time housing or dwelling units. But they are all characterized by certain types of spatial arrangement. They are always units of interrelated, intertwined *people* [...]. And so the precipitate of a social unity in space, the type of its spatial arrangement, is a tangible one, a literally visible representation of its character. (Elias 1969: 70-71)<sup>2</sup>

Understood in such a way, architecture reflects social structure and social change of its time, and it serves as an expression of accumulated social practice, so that we can “read” a society in its built structures. As convincing this approach may be, especially in the context of a cultural history of architecture and dwelling, it also has problematic aspects: The logic of representation that the symptomatic reading of architecture is based on, will never be able to grasp the full complexity and contrariety of social practice. In the second place, this problem leads to the *praxeological analysis* of architecture provided by the current sociology of materiality and architecture. This means to consider what the German scholar Heike Delitz (2010: 12) calls the “agency” or “social efficacy” of built structures. What difference does architecture really make? In search of classical research examples, we can go back here to some famous studies, for example to Bourdieu’s work on housing, dwelling and kinship in Algeria (Bourdieu 1970) or to Foucault’s analysis of the Bentham panopticon (Foucault 1975). Here, buildings are closely linked to social practice, and they are considered as a productive factor in the making of the social. But also many current sociological and anthropological studies are following this praxeological approach to architecture, for an example see Robert Schmidt’s reflections on the “material and symbolic order of the office,” presented in his book on Sociology of Practices (Schmidt 2012: 130–155).

In the third place, there is what we can call the *ethnographic study of architecture*. From this point of view, architecture is considered as the setting of concrete actions and interactions of concrete persons. This setting opens up for ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation. The ethnographic approach is based on the sensuousness and atmosphere of architectural arrangements because they proceed from specific spaces and develop their findings consistently from the perspective of experiencing and experience. If we think this through to the end, this also includes a perspective on processes of constructing and placemaking. Thus, the focus shifts from the built structure as a finished and fixed artifact to the social practice of building itself (Rolshoven and Omahna 2013; Omahna and Schruth 2016). The architecture theoretician Achim Hahn puts it like this: “We focus not on a product but on a behavior. It is not architecture (as the product of the building) that is at the center of architectural theory, but the human behavior that relates to architecture” (Hahn 2008: 30).

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<sup>2</sup> Translation of all the quotations from the German language: Jonathan Uhlener.

## INTERCONNECTIONS: MATERIAL RELIGION AND THE STUDY OF ARCHITECTURE

In the following, I will show how the aforementioned approaches of architectural research can be implemented with regard to the field of material religion studies: How can we make use of these three levels of analysis, and how can we bring all these perspectives together to provide a consistent research design? This research design shall take into focus the social and cultural use of churches in a broad and systematic sense, including social and political conditions as well as material culture, sensuality, lived experience and the everyday production of meaning. It addresses general questions of symbolic order, cultural memory, emotional practice and social interaction: What are people doing within church buildings? How can we develop a perspective on sacred space that includes not only religious practices but also tourist practices, political rituals, public issues and everyday routines? What do church buildings – in their materiality – do with regard to the regulation and reproduction of social life and social order throughout history? How do they matter as a social and political space? For one thing is clear: From a historical perspective, there is hardly a place that mattered more with respect to the symbolic orders of Western society since the Middle Ages and to their transmission to everyday life. In many cases and variations, the church building was the symbolic center not only of the spiritual, but also of the municipal life and the most important place of collective representation. To understand the church as a focal point of social life and social practice means to understand important aspects of collective life until far into the 20th and even into the 21st century.

### CHURCH ARCHITECTURE IN SYMPTOMATIC READING

The interior of a Catholic church is a segregated and highly structured place. The spatial division between the clergy and the people, the hierarchy of positions and the seating arrangements, the placement of spiritual goods within the church: all these aspects show that the building and its interior design can be read as a strong representation of religious and social order. Thus, we can explore the socio-spatial logic of liturgy; we can explore the making of the sacred through spatial demarcations and operations of inclusion and exclusion. The symptomatic reading of sacred space allows to grasp the principles of constitution and legitimation of power in its concrete historical context, for “religious space is powerful space” (Kilde 2008: 4). As every church building constitutes a normative arrangement of salvific goods and regulates the access to these goods, it shows specific power structures. This perspective also includes the analysis of churches as places of powerful commemorative culture. While the role of sacred space in religious memory is evident, there are also many elements of public, political, and private commemorative culture. In the historical analysis of my Vienna-centered study, I tried also to show how this has been made urban politics

by building churches in certain areas of the city. Starting from the baroque fortresses of counter-reformation, considering the monuments of political romanticism and historicism in the 19th century, considering the several attempts to influence the working class by means of church buildings, up to the integration of chapels and worship areas into the municipal buildings of „Red Vienna“ in the 1930s – under the Austro-fascist regime, there is a rich – and mostly unwritten – history of what we can call the missionary intervention of religious space into the symbolic urban structure (Wietschorke 2019).

Obviously, architecture serves here primarily as a mirror of society and of social change. The starting point of this sort of analysis is the built structure itself: the position of a church building within the city, the iconography and iconology of the facade, the spatial disposition of the interior, the arrangement of the furniture and the religious objects, the selection of saints used in the decoration, the memorial tablets for the military. Such an approach to sacred space is customary in the disciplines of art history and social history of art. It serves to bring out social figurations and configurations, but it is obviously less instructive with regard to the cultural analysis of social action. Symptomatic reading finds its sources in ground plans and built spaces, which are connected to a lot of other information. On that basis, it can find significant homologies, but it can not claim to trace empirically the relationships between built structures and social structures.

## CHURCH ARCHITECTURE IN PRAXEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

To cover in more detail the aspect of practice, we have to leave behind the symptomatic level of analysis for a moment. Here it is needed to develop an explicit praxeological approach to sacred space that is reflecting especially its materiality. For quite some time, there has been an important interdisciplinary branch of research concerned with the question of materiality and religious practice: the so-called material religion studies (e.g. Arweck and Keenan 2006; Houtman and Meyer 2012; Hutchings and McKenzie 2017; McDannell 1995; Morgan 2009; Vásquez 2011). Beyond the methods of symptomatic reading, there is a strong interest in a dynamic view on religious objects, but also a sacred space and architecture. Perhaps the most important focal point of all this theoretical work is the body. In their editorial statement to the new journal *Material Religion*, Birgit Meyer, David Morgan and Crispin Paine connect the categories of space and the body to show how to develop a praxeological understanding of religion from its materiality:

Religion is not considered a merely abstract engagement in doctrine or dogma, not a rote recitation of creeds and mantras. In other words, religion is not regarded as something one does with speech or reason alone, but with the body and the space it inhabits. Religion is about the sensual effects of walking, eating, meditating, making pilgrimage, and performing even the most mundane of ritual acts. Religion

is what people do with material things and places, and how these structure and color experience and one's sense of oneself and others. (Meyer, Morgan and Paine 2005: 5)

The entangled view on space, materiality, and the body allows to come closer to an understanding what people are really doing within churches. As psychologist Paul Pruyser has shown already in the 1960s, sensual perception, cognitive and emotional processes and energetics need to be brought together in order to understand religion (Pruyser 1968). Recent attempts to theorize the link between emotions and space can help to develop a distinct perspective of research in the cultural analysis of sacred space. In her brilliant contributions to the history of emotions, Monique Scheer speaks of four “overlapping categories of emotional practices” that can be studied here. Emotional practices can be, according to Scheer, *mobilizing*, *naming*, *communicating* and *regulating* (Scheer 2012: 209–217). And all these practices are “habits, rituals, and everyday pastimes that aid us in achieving a certain emotional state” (ibid.: 209).

This theoretical background is extremely helpful to grasp what is going on in the production and the social use of religious emotions. And it is helpful to recognize how social actors use specific surroundings and material arrangements to create the right mood for religious practice. If emotions “not only *follow* from things people do, but *are* themselves a form of practice, because they are an action of a mindful body” (ibid: 220), we can investigate how these form of practice is constituted by concrete correlations of space, architecture, objects and social actors. In brief, this opens up the whole field for praxeological analysis.

Only a few years ago, sociologist Andreas Reckwitz considered the connection between the categories emotion and space to be “a double blind spot” in research (Reckwitz 2012: 243). Therefore, he developed an analytical model to understand just this connection better. Reckwitz carefully criticizes Gernot Böhme's concept of atmospheres as “one-sided” and pleads – as Monique Scheer does in a similar way – for a praxeological approach inspired by the theoretical vocabulary of Pierre Bourdieu:

affects only form when a space is practically appropriated by its users, which always activates these users' implicit cultural schemes and routines. These influence and focus their perceptions and sensations. (Reckwitz 2012: 255).

With Bourdieu, Reckwitz reformulates the concept of atmosphere in a practice-theoretical way:

Routine practices mostly rely on perfect matches between atmospheres and sensitivities similar to the ideal fits between habitus and field that Pierre Bourdieu mentions. In these cases, we can detect an *affective habitus*, which is, again and again, reproduced in the same spaces and atmospheres, for instance in the case of religious practices and feelings carried out and experienced by pious actors in churches. (Reckwitz 2012: 255)

Thus, Reckwitz understands the sacred space firstly as a perfectly fitting resonance space of habitual actions, and secondly as an instrument used by social actors to produce a certain feeling. From this praxeological point of view, the sacred space can be conceptualized as a multi-sensorial and atmospheric setting for emotional use; most things people do within churches are connected to this sort of action program. For example, this can shed a new light on the production of sound as well as on the production of silence in liturgy and religious practice (for a historical view see MacCulloch 2013). Space, sound and silence – in prayer, in sacred music, in the sound of organs and church bells – are strong elements of what William Reddy (2001) calls the “navigation of feeling”; all this together produces and shapes religious experience and has to be integrated in the analysis of sacred space.

The qualities of the outlined approach are obvious: In praxeological approaches, architecture is considered not as a mirror of society but as a part of a practical setting. With regard to the methods, this approach calls for empirical research designs, it deals much more with documentary material and requires more fieldwork than the “symptomatic” studies. But generally speaking, here too the built structure remains the main source. Only the epistemic understanding is different: Architecture doesn’t serve as a snapshot of social structure, but as an element and – so to speak – an actant of social practices. From here, it is only a small step towards the ethnographic study of religious architecture.

## CHURCH ARCHITECTURE IN ETHNOGRAPHY

What perspectives can be outlined for an ethnographic approach to architecture? Obviously, there is no contradiction between praxeological and ethnographic concepts – both are closely connected and intertwined. Even the symptomatic reading can be linked to ethnographic methods. But participant observation of spatial practices within churches can help to give empirical substance to the symptomatic and the praxeological understanding of sacred architecture. It is astonishing that there are only very few ethnographic studies on Catholic service and Catholic liturgy – as well as on tourists visiting churches. For it is not evident what’s really going on there. What do religious and non-religious people do within churches? How do they use this specific space and how do they produce different meanings of it? And how do social actors describe their sense of social order, their “navigation of feeling”, their religious experience while using sacred space? Here is still much to be done. Apart from empirical studies, a theoretical framework needs to be developed which can integrate architecture systematically into ethnographic research. Built spaces – and therefore also church buildings and other sacred spaces – are in many cases only the *locus*, but not the *focus* of ethnographic fieldwork.

If we return to the question of the building process, this opens up new possibilities for the analysis of sacred space. To accompany processes of building churches using ethnographic methods would provide new insights in the making of sacred space. In this sense,

Johanna Rolshoven, Manfred Omahna, Klara Löffler and others proposed a cultural study of architecture that tries to trace the whole negotiation process that finally leads to the built space (see Rolshoven and Omahna 2013). Here, architecture is not a given structure, but an event that is really worth investigating. This brings together various perspectives, and brings together processes of imagining, planning, scaling, engineering, discussing and public presentation (for a research example see Yaneva 2009). This also brings together the material and the symbolic aspects of church architecture in a new way. In the abstract to her presentation at the SIEF Congress 2017 in Göttingen, Katharina Eisch-Angus invites us to think about this construction task:

Imagining to build a church for our time: What ambiguous messages would it give, which stories would it tell, how would they be materialised in stone, glass and colour, and where would this sacred home be built? Who authorises it, how can it be consecrated? (Eisch-Angus 2017)

This short passage could be taken as a superb description of how we can try to understand what this is all about and what we could ask writing an ethnography of a church building process.

## CONCLUSION

Obviously, this theoretical shortcut could only touch on some aspects of the framework that is needed to analyze sacred space as social space. However, in its general scope, it pleads for an approach that combines the question of sacred space with the question of architecture. For both perspectives can benefit from the other. I have tried to show how the three approaches of symptomatic reading, praxeological analysis and ethnographic study of architecture can provide instructive views on religious practice and sacred space. But a comprehensive cultural analysis of built structures – and this concerns the topic of “dwelling” in a very fundamental way – should make use of all the proposed concepts together. It has to take into consideration the methodological strengths and weaknesses of every single approach; so it can develop its full potential only by *combining* the epistemological styles of symptomatic, praxeological and ethnographic concepts. Thus, it may be possible to understand church architecture as an integral part of society, and to understand the specific impact of church architecture on the social – in view of symbolic order, cultural memory, emotional practice and social interaction. With all this in mind, we can adapt anthropologist Victor Buchli’s questions concerning the anthropology of architecture for the study of church buildings:



In short, how does the materiality of built form in its great variety make people and society? What does the materiality of built form in its various material registers do socially? As abstracted concept? As lived building? As metaphor? As mind, as sign, as environmental adaptation, as fossil, as performance, as ruin, as iteration, as destroyed object, as image, as flow and movement? (Buchli 2013: 2)

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MATERIALNA RELIGIJA IN CERKVENA ARHITEKTURA V  
KULTUROLOŠKI ANALIZI  
TEORETSKA BLIŽNJICA

*Pri raziskovanju religije kakor tudi arhitekture je množica zelo zanimivih novih pogledov na drugačen, nov status materialnega v vedah o družbi in kulturi. Na tej podlagi članek ponuja teoretski okvir za kulturološko analizo cerkvene arhitekture. Najprej predlaga razvrstitev treh osnovnih oblik za pristop do arhitekture na splošno: simptomatično branje, prakseološko analizo in etnografsko raziskavo arhitekture. Nato pokaže, kako je mogoče te pristope pri raziskvanju arhitekture uporabiti glede na polje raziskav materialne religije in svetega prostora. Upoštevano je več vidikov: povezanost med prostorskimi strukturami in strukturami moči, čutno in razpoloženjsko v cerkvenih zgradbah. V sklepu je poudarjeno, da naj celovita kulturološka analiza grajenih struktur upošteva vse predložene koncepte skupaj in tako poveže simptomatične, prakseološke in etnografske metode in epistemologije.*

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Assist. Prof. Dr. Jens Wietschorke, Institute for European Ethnology,  
University of Wien, Hanuschgasse 3, A-1010 Wien, Austria, jens.  
wietschorke@univie.ac.at