

THESIS BOOK

TRANSCULTURAL ARCHITECTURE  
ARCHITECTURAL PATTERNS OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AT  
THE INTERSECTION OF DIFFERENT CULTURES

ZOLTÁN MAJOR  
SUPERVISOR:  
LEVENTE SZABÓ DLA  
PROFESSOR

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## SUMMARY

The encounter and interaction of cultures has been a feature of our history and its architectural patterns are still evident, hidden or obvious, today. However, the coexistence of groups of different cultures and religions can also lead to dialogue and the interaction of spatial practices. As a result, new patterns of build spaces, common or interacting, are created and live side by side. In my thesis, I investigated spaces with sacred functions used by immigrant, mainly Islamic communities, looking for situations in which cultural minorities create their religious spaces within the spatial and social framework of the majority society. Due to the reasons and circumstances of their creation, the studied cases can be identified as transcultural architectural works. The concept of transculturation is primarily used in social science to describe the processes by which new hybrid cultural forms are created. Understanding and using this concept has helped me to recognize exactly what kind of social processes can result in novel architectural patterns. The thesis consists of three chapters, which are further divided into two sessions.

The first session of each chapter presents the different phenomena of sacral architecture originating from the coexistence in a historical context. The second sessions analyze specific, mainly Islamic, architectural spaces. The studied examples reveal distinctly different spatial and social properties.

Chapter I, religious spaces operating in buildings with a profane function are discussed. After a historical perspective, the phenomenon of hidden mosques in Budapest is shown. Muslim immigrants in the capital of Hungary created their religious spaces in the absence of social acceptance and resources, but at the same time with a desire to live out their identity. These spaces do not reveal their true function from the outside at all, only the interior space ensures their sacred use. The combination of the isolation of the majority society and the satisfaction of the elementary needs of the minority has led to the birth of a previously unknown type of mosque.

In chapter II, the adaptive sacred spaces are investigated, mainly through the Islamic Religious and Cultural Centre in Ljubljana, designed by the architect's office Bevk Perović. The mosque can be considered as a contemporary interpretation of Western and Islamic religious cultural references. The design intention was to be still acceptable for Muslims, but also to be interpretable for members of the majority society. The result was a 'reform mosque' which should provide religious worship as well as promoting social integration.

Chapter III analyses the phenomenon and evolution of inter-religious sacred spaces using several examples. These spaces are shared by groups of different religions and cultures. There is no more hierarchy of majority and minority; all participants are of equal rights. A fundamental question in the construction of shared spaces is how to treat differences of each culture in the use of space or even architectural means representing the identities.

In this work, I identified three aspects that were of particular importance in each of the studied examples. These aspects are suitable for the interpretation and analysis of transcultural architectural works, regardless of the different spatial and social characteristics of the projects.

The first aspect is publicity that means how the investigated sacred buildings can be operated as community spaces and what are their characterizing qualities (accessibility, visibility, openness). The degree of openness is closely related to the level of acceptance of immigrant groups and has a significant influence on the architectural behaviour of spaces. The relationship can affect the identification (hidden, representative), function (open, closed), spatial location (central, peripheral) of a building or space.

The second aspect is materiality, that is the changes in the architectural elements in the studied examples which play an important role in the expression of cultural identity. Due to the social conditions of immigrants, the architectural elements (form, mass, use, ornamentation) representing cultural identity can be changed, transformed or, in extreme cases, disappeared.

These elements can change and adapt, but they can only reflect identity as long as they retain their cultural essence. If not, they lose their meaning and fail their role.

The third aspect is readability, that is the different meanings of the spaces for the users. Transcultural spaces are the common “products” of interacting groups and, as a consequence, they have multiple cultural meanings. They involve both local and foreign elements, therefore have special meaning for the immigrants and members of the majority society. These meanings, narratives and readings, however, are more or less different, depending on the prior knowledge and culture of the users. In order to understand the social meaning of spaces, all readings have to be considered.

Conclusions of the individual chapters as well as the thesis are drawn along these views. They are expressed in a dual system. At first, the different aspects lead to the consequences of each chapter; then they are summarized in the general conclusion of the whole thesis. Each chapter ends with three statements related to the aspects of readability, relevance and publicity; these are finally reconstructed according to each aspect and act as a basis of the theses.

## 1.THESIS

### SACRED SPACES IN PROFANE BUILDING

I HAVE IDENTIFIED THE PHENOMENON OF SACRED SPACES SUBSEQUENTLY CREATED BY MINORITIES IN BUILDINGS ORIGINALLY INTENDED FOR PROFANE PURPOSES AS A CATEGORY WITH SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS. A GENERAL CHARACTERISTIC OF THESE ARCHITECTURAL EXAMPLES IS THAT WHILE THEY ARE INCONSPICUOUS IN THEIR APPEARANCE FROM THE OUTSIDE AND HIDE THEIR REAL FUNCTION, IN THE INTERIOR THEY TRY TO REFLECT THE RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY OF THE USERS.

The hidden mosques in Budapest are characteristic examples of this category. In the absence of resources as well as the need to hide, religious communities rejected by the majority or the authorities transform spaces that were previously built for other purposes. Hiding is a compulsion, but it is still a means for the minority to create its essential social spaces for itself. The feature of hidden spaces is that they do not communicate with the members of mainstream society. The majority do not have access to the meaning of space. As a consequence, the hidden part provides protection that can be read and understood only by the initiated peoples. In this way, the users experience their own religious and national identities in safety, excluding the majority.

## 2.THESIS

### ADAPTIVE SACRED BUILDINGS

I CALL ADAPTIVE SACRED BUILDINGS THOSE ARCHITECTURAL CREATIONS THAT REVEAL THAT THE COMMUNITIES APPEARING WITH LIMITATIONS IN THE PUBLIC SPACES OF A CITY CAN ADOPT THE ARCHITECTURAL FORMS PREFERRED BY THE MAJORITY. AS A RESULT THEY BECOME VISIBLE AND ACCEPTABLE BY THE MAJORITY AS WELL.

The study of the design process of the Islamic Religious and Cultural Center in Ljubljana assisted to understand the relations of the architectural and social processes. The appearance of spaces for minorities is a significant step towards social integration, as the building expressing the identity of the minority will be a part of the cityscape and, at the same time, the minority symbolically becomes an equal member of society. The minority expresses its own identity in such a way that the majority can accept and interpret it, moreover, can connect to it. Therefore, spaces and buildings are created that can still be accessed by the minority, but already accepted also by the majority. The architecture of adaptive sacred buildings is characterized by the fact that the traditional architectural elements of a minority are modified and mixed with and influenced by the majority culture, creating a new type of building.

### 3.THESIS

## INTERFAITH SPACES

IN THE CASE OF INTERFAITH SPACES, THE ARCHITECTS INTEND TO FIND AND REPRESENT THE COMMON FEATURES AND SYMBOLIC SPATIAL CONTENT OF THE ARCHITECTURAL TRENDS CHARACTERIZING ANY RELIGIONS: AMPLIFYING THE SIMILARITIES AND DECREASING THE DIFFERENCES. THESE SPACES CAN BE CLASSIFIED AS NEUTRAL AS WELL AS MULTI-CHARACTER SPACES.

Studying the already existed and planned interfaith spaces, I identified two relevant groups. The first one includes the neutral space not displaying the religious and cultural differences. Instead, they express a common religious character; the meaning of the space is born via its use. The other one is the group of spaces with multiple characters. Their purpose is to express the deviations of the religions and to situate them next to each other. In this case, an environment is built, can be understood by everyone, but it contains separate spaces that can reflect the individuals' identities.

### 4.THESIS

## PUBLICITY

THE PUBLICITY OF TRANSCULTURAL SPACES IS RELATED TO THE LEVEL OF SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE OF MINORITIES. THE PUBLIC VISIBILITY OF A MINORITY GROUP AND ITS MANNER IS DETERMINED BY THE DEGREE OF ITS ACCEPTANCE OR REJECTION, WHICH IS FAITHFULLY REFLECTED IN THE SACRED SPACES CREATED FOR THE PURPOSE OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE.

Hidden mosques cannot be identified from the outside; the main reason of hiding is the social and political rejection of any religion. With this behavior, however, a protected community space is created. On the other hand, the Islamic Religious and Cultural Center in Ljubljana is already a well-perceived building complex that influences the cityscape, but it cannot be clearly identified as an Islamic building. The quality of the equal status of the minority is a function of adapting to the rules established by the majority or power. In the case of interfaith spaces, the majority-minority relationship is no longer there, all religions are equal. Such spaces are open to everyone and take place in symbolically important locations. Their visibility and public operation is important; as they can demonstrate the idea of peaceful coexistence in this way.

IN THE CASE OF TRANSCULTURAL ARCHITECTURE, THE ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS EXPRESSING COMMUNITY IDENTITY CAN FIT TO THE VIEWS OF THE GIVEN SOCIETY ABOUT THE COEXISTENCE OF DIFFERENT CULTURES. HOWEVER, THE ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS CAN ONLY REFLECT THE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF INDIVIDUAL COMMUNITIES AS LONG AS THEY PRESERVE THEIR ESSENTIAL CHARACTER.

Despite the fact that the hidden mosques are only interior spaces, all mandatory elements or spatial situations absolutely necessary for the meaning of the religious space appear in them. The interior can be considered completely authentic, despite the complete absence of external elements. The external features of the Ljubljana mosque, which can be said to be traditional, could only appear in a reinterpreted form together with adaptation to the majority culture. The result is a contemporary building that represents the identity of the local Muslim community only partially, with compromises. On the other hand, the interfaith spaces have a common architectural world that can integrate elements reflecting different identities. In this way, individuals or groups of different religions can feel these places as their own.

EXAMPLES OF TRANSCULTURAL ARCHITECTURE ARE CHARACTERIZED BY THE FACT THAT A GIVEN SPACE OR BUILDING CONVEYS CONTENT EMBEDDED IN SEVERAL DIFFERENT CULTURES AT THE SAME TIME. THESE MAY NOT NECESSARILY BE READ IN THE SAME WAY BY GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS WITH DIFFERENT CULTURAL IDENTITIES AND LITERACIES, BUT THE READINGS ARE NECESSARY TO MAKE THE SPACE SUITABLE FOR INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL RELIGIOUS PRACTICE BECAUSE OF ITS IDENTITY-MEDIATING CHARACTER.

The reason for the widespread proliferation of hidden mosques is that they avoid the attention and opposition of the majority society by omitting traditional external features and remaining hidden, while still fulfilling their role for Muslims. The two groups see things differently, creating conflicting readings of the same place. The architects of the Ljubljana mosque have consciously tried to make the building complex legible for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The building and some of its architectural elements, which are not traditional in the local culture, were designed to be less alien to the locals, but at the same time to be legible even for Muslims. People look at the same thing, but recognize different aspects. In the case of interfaith spaces, the aim is to create a neutral or cross-cultural universal architectural medium that can integrate and accommodate different religious spaces. Such a medium is created which can be interpreted by everyone, at the same time, however, the different tools of use and architecture provides special meanings for religious practitioners depending on their personal identity.

