

Contemporary Catholic Architecture: A Space for the Eucharist in the Cultural Environment

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The origins of the Catholic Church's sacred architecture point towards the ideal of a church that is integrated with the local cultural context. As the models of Christian churches evolved, there occurred a consolidation of the elements of tradition and modernity.² The essence of this phenomenon is summarized by a statement of the Second Vatican Council: "The world encountered the Church and the Church encountered the world."³ The rules by which Catholic sacred architecture is shaped are not proscribed by any canons or aesthetic models; the Church does not claim ownership over any specific style. The Roman Church's openness also expands the horizon of the search for appropriate forms and meanings of contemporary places of worship.

The Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the presence of the Catholic Church in the changing world was a response to the cultural transformations that had been inspired by twentieth-century modernism. This movement refocused societies' consciousness, which had evolved across the centuries. It changed humanity's attitudes towards values, which over the centuries had preserved their absolute and universal nature. The modernist worship

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 - 2 J. Rabiej, *Tradycja i nowoczesność w architekturze kościołów katolickich. Świątynia fenomenem kulturowym*, Gliwice 2004 (Zeszyty Naukowe Politechniki Śląskiej, 1606).
 - 3 E. E. Y. Hales, *Papież Jan XXIII i jego rewolucja*, Warszawa 1967, p. 9.

of ahistorical modernity designated new criteria that would shape the ideal milieu of a person's life. In theory, modernist models of cities reflected changing assumptions related to human aspirations, including those that had maintained their religious references. In the modernist reality, the place of churches changed greatly. Their shape and their significance in historical models were no longer adapted to the modern situation. As a result of the modernist breakthrough, the search for a new model of a church that would correspond to the changing cultural conditions intensified.

Openness to modern conditions and the simultaneous deepening of awareness of one's own tradition determined the new transhistorical perspective that shaped Christian churches. This was expressed in sacred buildings that were designed not as absolute dominants that determined the spatial order and the meaning of the cultural landscape. Instead, integrally inscribed within them were architectural assumptions that served religious worship and manifold non-religious functions corresponding to the multicultural needs of the community (see Illustrations 1–3).

1. Contemporary Sacred Architecture and the Crisis of Culture

The cultural conditions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in which Catholic sacred architecture has been evolving are experiencing a major metamorphosis. On the one hand, proposals for enculturation, which are especially portative under the influence of the effects of globalization, give rise to fears of a syncretistic relativization of the truths of the faith. On the other, the universality (catholicity) of the Church, which is identified with the values of universalism, is confronted with fears of the obliteration of the denomination's uniqueness. These controversies, which influence the criteria that impact contemporary places of worship, are an expression of a crisis of culture. The state of the ideological "tortuousness" encompasses universal meanings and virtues that also refer to the reality of the sacred. Sensitivity to its transcendental virtues weakens the contestation of the meaning of the antinomy of the sacred and the profane. The sacred "reduced" to the emotional sphere is available almost without any constraints. An expression of this "dissemination" is the free assimilation of symbols or attributes of sacredness in all the areas of the environment shaped by humanity. We are gradually becoming accustomed to characteristic forms of buildings, interior designs,

or specific elements of their furnishings, which we can alternatively find in churches, concert halls, museums, shopping malls, recreational and leisure facilities, and even in our homes. Through a perception of space shaped in this way, we lose our feeling of the strict identification of so-called *sacred spaces* with the sphere of religious experiences. An effect of these reappraisals is the free construction of para-sacred spaces. They are relativized by expressions of the metaphysical orientation of human nature that is characterized by the anthropological category of *homo religiosus*.

Attempts at redefining the concept of the sacredness of sacred spaces and sacred architecture is complicated by the process of the desacralization of buildings intended for religious worship. The “fizzling out” of the religious meaning of places of worship is symptomatic of secularization. Consequently, numerous churches have become troublesome real estate whose value has been reduced to that of vacant premises intended for demolition or their transformation to perform secular functions. The direction in which these choices go is determined primarily by economic factors. The primacy of economics entails certain risks whose effects are the deformation of architectural landmarks and even the irreversible destruction of the unique qualities of cultural heritage. The processes of desacralization undertaken in accordance with regulations protecting against desecration or devastation frequently give rise to spectacular “successes.” Historical churches that have been transformed, for example, into concert halls, libraries, or art galleries restore the implementation of the original revitalization designs.⁴ At the same time, exclusive hotels, private apartments, posh restaurants, large shopping centers, skateparks, and even night clubs are arranged in the no less valuable interiors of abandoned churches.

Paradoxically, the state of loss that accompanies the shaping of new, modern religious buildings as well as the protection of existing places of worship is the source of the architectural diversity of churches in our time. New places of worship continue to be built in cities in the shadow of spectacular acts of secularization and desacralization. The Catholic Church gives them the forms of chapels, oratoriums, parishes, abbeys belonging to religious orders, cathedrals, or monumental churches that are monuments.

4 J. Rabiej, *Architektura. Sztuka transfiguracji*, Gliwice 2013.

2. "The Churches of Our Age" and the "Socialization of the Church"

The outlines of churches that are visible in the panoramas of contemporary cities are not the only forms of emanation of a religious nature in the cultural space. In the structure of cities, small religious communities create a networks of chapels or oratories integrated with secular architectural complexes. Their function is to be denominational centers with differing degrees of accessibility. With regards to architecture, these are usually assumptions included into larger, multifunctional buildings or complexes with an intricate program for use. That these places are sites of religious worship is attested by religious symbols or elements of visual information found in them. The ideal of the "socialization of the Church" is manifested in these forms of sacred space devoid of majestic traits, built on a minimalized scale, and permeated by neighboring spaces where people live, study, or work (Illustrations 4–5).

The formula of a Catholic church whose religious dimension maintains its strict unity with the social context reflects the essence of the Christian vision of the fullness of life. The meaning of building such places of worship is conditioned by the awareness of the local Catholic community, in whose life the Eucharist, the liturgy of sacrifice and of thanksgiving encompassing and affirming all its manifestations, is at the center. Consequently, the church's space is not a sphere situated "above" other areas of the environment of everyday existence, but in its interior. The numerous complementary functions and ministries found in a church designate its meaning as a multifunctional, open house; a shelter or a haven. Apart from the space intended for the celebration of the liturgy and meditation, they also contain a preschool, library, recreational room, and dining area⁵ (Illustrations 6–8).

In the past half-century, diverse forms of "socialized churches" have become popular, especially in Western Europe, Scandinavia, and the United States.⁶ Their urban layout and architectural shapes are subordinated to the assumptions of functional programs, which reflect the multifarious expressions of the engagement of religious communities in pedagogic, charitable, educational, and cultural activities performed for the good of the local community. In this period, unique traits distinguishing the architectural programs

5 J. Dahinden, *Kirchenbau – Zeichen für was?*, „Kunst und Kirche“ 41 (1978), p. 121.

6 M. E. Rosier-Siedlecka, *Odpowiedź przestrzenna na nowe założenia liturgii i duszpasterstwa. Przegląd nowych kościołów Europy Zachodniej*, [in:] *Sacrum i sztuka*, oprac. N. Cieslińska, Kraków 1989, p. 72–84.

and forms of parish complexes in France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, the Netherlands, or Belgium began to appear. In France, where the Church is being revived by so-called “small communities,” we find numerous small centers devoid of monumental rhetoric. In Germany and in German speaking parts of Switzerland, multifunctional rooms where alternative programs for young people, for example, are situated in parish centers next to churches. Clubs for elderly persons, preschools, publicly accessible libraries, and reading rooms function in these parishes. In Italy, places of worship have become particularly interesting as a result of their compositional values, especially spatial solutions integrated with complex landscapes. Contemporary parish centers built in the Netherlands and Belgium, however, reflect a different sensitivity. They encompass formal restraint and an authenticity of resources ensuring harmony, balance, and calm.

Of the large number of Catholic religious complexes that have been built in European cities in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it is difficult to exhaustively present the traits of one dominant model or ideal. A telling illustration of the approach to places of religious worship in a contemporary urban environment is the religious complex built in Tor Tre Teste, a peripheral district of Rome. This example characterizes Catholic sacred architecture at the end of the second millennium in the history of Christianity. It remains a sign of the supernatural reality and at the same time is embedded in the realities of local communities, which are often religiously passive and socially disintegrated. The openness of this concept was determined by the program assumptions formulated by its initiators as well as by the circumstances under which it was realized. The architectural blueprint of the sacred complex was selected as part of a contest organized by the Diocese of Rome to commemorate the Holy Jubilee Year of 2000. Several leading contemporary architects representing diverse cultural and religious traditions were invited to participate in it. They were T. Ando, G. Behnisch, S. Calatrava, P. Eisenmann, F. O. Gehry, and R. Meier. The element shared by all the blueprints in the contest was the clear emphasis on the community-fostering, social element of the Church. In his personal comment on the victorious blueprint, Richard Meier writes: “It was indicated in the terms of the contest that the main aim was the reintegration and repair of a truly isolated and degraded neighborhood and its community. The church was thought up in opposition to the isolation of its location. It was designed as a place in itself, one that is partly sacred and partly secular, which can help its inhabitants in finding their place in the

world. To a large extent, it does so in a way that facilitates the community's representation in the processes of ritual, play, and celebration. [...] When we designed the church and center with its courtyards, we had in mind H. G. Gaddamer's views on the fundamental role of games, play, and ritual in all forms of culture. [...] Thus there arose a concept of the complex as a place of formal and informal special celebration: the symbolic commemoration of Christ's sacrifice will take place through prayer and the orchestration of human movement."⁷

Despite often being original, the ideals contained in each competing concept of the Church of the Holy Jubilee Year of 2000 turned out to be deeply rooted in the Church's timeless tradition. It finds its place in a changing world, pursuing a path of affirmation and revolution, not through a negation of historical continuity and revolutionary ferment. The appearances of contemporary churches remain a reflection of the multifaceted cultural reality. The subject and at the same time creator of this reality is the person for whom the natural optimal life environment is the society that accepts him or her. Thus if the church is to be a space that is truly favorably disposed towards the person, it should be an open, welcoming, safe, creative, healthy, and environmentally friendly space. It is difficult to expect that contemporary sacred architecture will designate spectacular breakthroughs that the contemporary person who constantly pursues new and increasingly powerful experiences wants. The vision of a church, which constantly refers to the transcendent reality, still maintains marks showing aspirations, possibilities, and the social limitations that create it. Thus despite the expectations of the initiators and architects of churches, the Church of the Jubilee Year of 2000 also did not lead to a qualitative breakthrough in Christian sacred architecture. However, the fact that several dozen new churches commemorating the Jubilee Year of 2000 were built in Rome in the Jubilee Year 2000 was a historic event. Among them, the sacred complex in Tor Tre Teste became a jubilee monument of the faith of the Church, whose Christian faithful can discover the roots of their cultural identity anew (Illustrations 9–11).

7 R. Meier, *Estetyka logiki*, tłum. M. A. Urbańska, „Architektura i Biznes” 1996 no. 7–8, p. 11–13.

3. The Contemporary Architecture of Catholic Churches in Poland

The spread of models of the “socialization of the Church” in Western Europe have also found their expression in the functional programs and architectural shapes of numerous religious complexes built in Poland in recent decades. Before the transition to democracy in 1989, churches were built in a political environment marked by the atheistic pressures of communist authorities and were thus relegated to the “margins” of the official forms of the functioning of society. In addition to overcoming propaganda and administrative challenges, one had to receive permission to build a church. New churches were typically situated in peripheral locations: on the outskirts of neighborhoods and without any reference to the logic of urban planning. The scale and functional scope of sacred buildings were limitations. Under such circumstances, many new churches were built in spite of mounting difficulties and in an atmosphere of conspiratorial haste, often according to inconsistent assumptions. It is difficult to understand the “great wave” in the construction of sacred buildings in the Polish People’s Republic without reference to these conditions.

We can find an eloquent illustration of the “openness” that occurred in Catholic sacred architecture inspired by the Second Vatican Council. In addition to examples duplicating historical models, buildings whose essence consists of a consistent permeation of the liturgical function with other community-forming functions were built. They took on the forms of broadly accessible parish complexes. Permanent seeds of the Church’s social role were planted during the building of parishes under difficult circumstances marked by numerous limitations. This symptomatic dependency marks the history of churches built in this period in Krakow’s Nowa Huta. The Ark of the Lord Church in Bieńczyce or the symbolic church in Mistrzejowice have gone down in the history of the dramatic events of the 1980s as “oases” of free thought. Numerous artists who were subject to political persecution found asylum in the walls of these churches. Concerts, exhibits, plays, and lectures were organized in their spaces. Such events were inspiring examples for many other forms of social activity in churches, which became places with culture-creating effects, at that time.

Sacred buildings built in Poland in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are marked by openness to the outside world, with extensive pedagogical, charitable, educational, cultural, and even service-offering activity. The sacred complex of Our Lady of the Dawn of Freedom in Katowice,

which was consecrated in 2001 in Katowice-Brynów, took on the traits of “socialization.” Its ultimate appearance is the result of several changes to the initial blueprint during construction. The conceptual design, which had been chosen in an architectural contest, assumed the connection of the function of a Catholic parish with a formation center of the Life-Light Movement. Over the several years when the church was built, several circumstances that led to major functional and architectural improvements within the church building, programmatic changes in the segments of parish buildings, and changes in urban planning, appeared. In its current state, apart from a church and rotunda with a chapel the sacred complex integrates with buildings that perform various functions: a presbytery, diocesan retreat center, Missionary Museum, center for ministry to alcoholics, travel agency, and local post office. The complex of cubatures integrated with the indoor amphitheater is consolidated by urban elements: roads for motor vehicle communication and parking areas, pedestrian paths, open squares, and public parks. The church plays a central role in the outline of this. It is an idealistic-formal nucleus in the scale encompassing the development of the surroundings as well. The architecture of this sacred complex has the attributes of space, of an environment in which the integration of the religious and social dimensions occurs⁸ (Illustrations 12–13).

The Franciscan sacred complex in Tychy that has been under construction since 2000 refers to the tradition of situating mendicant abbeys within an urban environment. It was situated in an area bordering residential building complexes. The composition of the blueprint of this building complex shaped like the contours of St. Francis’ cross completely fills up an irregular lot. This form is clearly reflected both in the functional dimension of the building and in its outline. The originality of this assumption is reflected by the values of traditions and modernity that pervade its architecture. However, it is not the direct references to historical models of Christian places of worship, but their creative reinterpretations that determine their deep roots in tradition. The spatial arrangement is shaped by numerous motifs in which we recognize references to the stone, historical development of Italian cities: the frontages

8 The construction of the sacred complex of Our Lady of the Dawn of Freedom in Katowice was named the Best Building in Katowice of 2001. It was also received a Second Class Award in the National Contest of the Association of Polish Architects in the category of architectural sites built in 2001 as well as a Medal for a Distinguished Work of Architecture Built in 2001 from the Association of Polish Architects in 2002.

of serpentine streets and the vertical accents of towers. A direct reference to Franciscan models of architecture is the copy of the chapel of Portiuncula from Assisi composed within the body of the building. A telling expression of the connection between the church that is under construction and the tradition of medieval sacred architecture is the stone building material, dolomite from nearby deposits in Libiaz. Stone blocks are carved in the construction sites, solicitously adapted to the reinforced concrete construction, and are manually placed, thus gaining metaphysical dignity. In the slow construction intended for many years there is a symbolic creative act implemented according to consistent ideals, without haste, in accordance with the pulse of time, without exaltation, and custom-made by engaged parishioners and their material resources. One of the friars, aided by a small group of volunteers, is engaged in construction works under the auspices of an architect. The new Franciscan monastery in Tychy is becoming an inimitable work; it is simultaneously being born, maturing, and growing old. A new neighborhood “center” is appearing inside its space. It is part of the environment where the identity of the local community is shaped (Illustrations 14–15).

Conclusion

Like our predecessors in previous centuries, when we build contemporary churches we are faced with the unique task to build a house of God seamlessly embedded into the environment where the community of the faithful lives here and now. What should be permanent, unchangeable, and timeless in the structures of our churches is summarized in articles of the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the font from which all her power flows (1074).

It is the whole community, the Body of Christ united with its Head, that celebrates. “Liturgical services are not private functions but are celebrations of the Church which is ‘the sacrament of unity,’ namely, the holy people united and organized under the authority of the bishops (1140).

The liturgy of the Church presupposes, integrates and sanctifies elements from creation and human culture, conferring on them the dignity of signs of grace, of the new creation in Jesus Christ (1149).

These visible churches are not simply gathering places but signify and make visible the Church living in this place, the dwelling of God with men reconciled and united in Christ (1180).

A church, a house of prayer in which the Eucharist is celebrated and reserved [...] ought to be in good taste and a worthy place for prayer and sacred ceremonial (1181).

[T]he Church is the house of all God's children, open and welcoming (1186).

Awareness of these rules protects architects, builders, and worshipers from superficially copying the models of past eras or implementing in them ideals inspired mainly by ambitions, subjective preferences, or fashionable stylizations. In the Catholic Church, sacred architecture mainly serves the Eucharist. All that makes up the material shape of “the churches of our time” co-creates the space of the Eucharist, where all manifestations of life occurring in its environment are concentrated.

Abstract

Contemporary Catholic Architecture: A Space for the Eucharist in the Cultural Environment

The phenomenon of Catholic religious architecture results from its integral integration with an evolving cultural context. The proposals of the Second Vatican Council concerning religious buildings emphasize their “openness” to the social dimension of the environment in which they are found. Such a conception of rules referring to religious architecture explains the lack of a rationale for creating an arbitrary ideal or a model for a canonical Catholic church. The architectural diversity of contemporary sacred ensembles in Western Europe, Scandinavia, and the United States reflects the distinct ideological and functional assumptions that respond to the needs, aspirations, and resources of local communities that build them. Analogous conditions determine the architectural uniqueness of Catholic churches in Poland. The dominance of liturgical and social criteria over formal and stylistic criteria in shaping sacred architecture is a source of inspiration in the search for new concepts of “churches for our age.”

Keywords: sacred architecture; cultural environment; Eucharist

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1. The Chapel of Nicholas of Flüe in Mechernich – architectural design by P. Zumthor



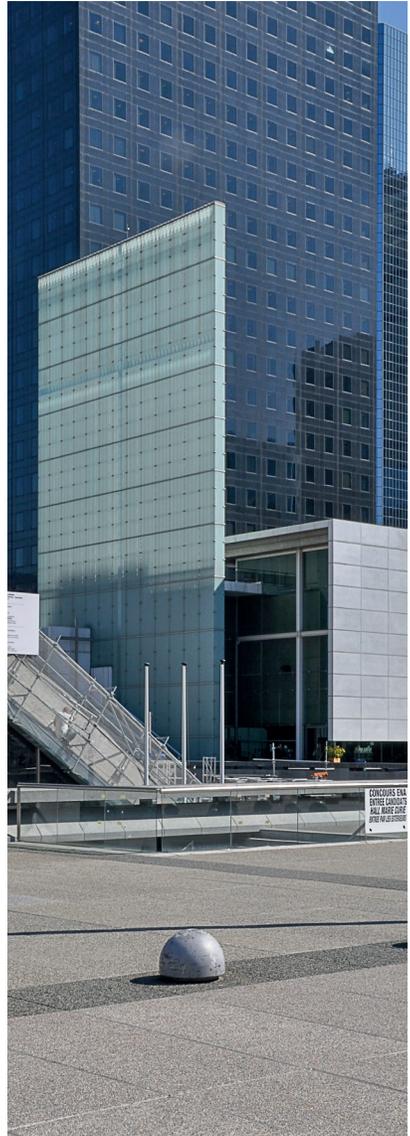
2. Church Complex of Our Lady of the Church in Gliwice – architectural design by M. Polak, M. Bielski



3. "Christ's Pavilion" from the EXPO 2000 exhibit in the European Center for Youth Formation at the historical site of the Cistercian abbey in Volkenroda – architectural design by Gerkan, Marg und Partner



4. The Catholic chapel De L'agneau de Dieu in Paris



5. The Catholic chapel of Notre-Dame de la Pentecôte in the Paris district La Défense – architectural design by F. Hammouténe



6. The Church of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ in Cologne – architectural design by G. Böhm



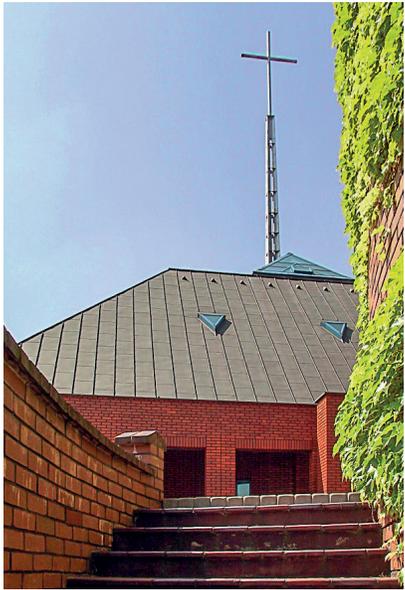
7. The Church of St. Peter in Firminy – architectural design by Le Corbusier



8. The Church of the Conversion of St. Paul the Apostle – architectural design by K. Kucza-Kuczyński, A. Miklaszewski, B. Osipiński



9-11. The Church of the Jubilee Year 2000 in Rome – architectural design by Richard Meier



12–13. Church Complex of Our Lady of the Dawn of Freedom in Katowice – architectural design by A. Galkowski, A. Lekka-Galkowska, T. Czerwiński, J. Rabiej



14–15. Church Complex of St. Francis and St. Clare in Tychy – architectural design by S. Niemczyk