Sacred Environments

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It may seem unusual to introduce the sacred into a discussion of aesthetics the one presumably dealing with ultimacies and the other with appearances, although a certain resemblance of religious to aesthetic experience has occasionally been remarked on. Perhaps it is more plausible to consider the sacred when exploring aesthetic values in environment, for every culture consecrates certain places, such as houses of worship, tombs, and by extension, national monuments and memorial buildings. Even so, "sacred" still seems an unlikely term to apply to environment, for an environment, as we have seen, is less a place than a situation, less a location than a context. Convention, however, has no monopoly on meaning but rests only on general agreement about the significance of a term, when such agreement exists. And the authority of convention depend only on the extent of agreement, not truth. Given the approach to environment, it is not surprising to suggest that, convention notwithstanding, such notions require re-thinking—environment no less than place, sacred no less than aesthetic.

To the extent that a philosophical inquiry can be empirical, let us begin by considering four cases, each representing a particular type of sacred environment. Together they will provide the grounds for a more general understanding of the environmental experience and meaning of the sacred.

Four sacred environments

The first of these kinds of sacred environment centers on an object, in this case Brancusi's *Endless Column,* a large outdoor sculpture in Tirgu Jiu, Rumania. Set in a circular grass plaza, the column is constructed of geometrical steel modules piled far into the sky to a height of nearly a hundred feet. Brancusi had used that relatively simple modular form for the pedestals of far smaller sculptures, yet magnifying its size and duplicating its pattern in a high vertical sequence transformed the shape. The *Endless Column* is no slender shaft but a series of large units, each the height of a person and nearly as broad. The pedestal has become a sculpture in its own right, a great soaring column that emanates extraordinary force, charging the surrounding space and enveloping the onlooker.

This is true of every good sculpture, to be sure, but the power of the *Endless Column* is remarkable. Looking upward from its base, the column is true to its name, appearing to dwindle into infinite space. Moreover, on entering the sculpture's field of force, the viewer's position and movement seem to affect the work, causing it to bend and twist in ways that have a reciprocal physical impact on the body of the onlooker. As one moves toward the column, the sculpture seems to tilt away, its elongated mass leaning precipitously backward. As one backs off, the pitch of the column changes, its great bulk bending

forward at an increasingly threatening angle. As the viewer walks around the sculpture, the column appears to twist and spiral upward, its geometrical facets alternately reflecting light or obscured in shadow. Not only does the sculpture's force generate the space around and charge it with energy, but the work magnetizes the viewer into a powerful dynamic relation with it. A new order has been created that joins sculpture with the human body.

A different type of sacred environment occurs in an interior space, in this case the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas. Visiting the chapel takes on the character of a pilgrimage, since it is an unobtrusive structure hidden on a college campus in a residential neighborhood some distance from the center of the city. When the chapel is finally located, one enters a forecourt, a small rectangular plaza dominated by the steel form of Barnett Newman's "Broken Obelisk" set in a reflecting pool. Poised inverted, tip to tip above a pyramidal base, the truncated obelisk extends a profound reception to the visitor. As the pool reflects the planes of the sculpture, its precarious balance seems to extend that moment of equipoise to eternity. Yet as one walks around the pool, both the object and its reflection change, creating a magical mobility that resembles the dynamic movement of the *Endless Column,* and producing, as a result, a dialectic of permanence and change. Meditation thus begins even before entering the chapel.

The small, low doorway into the chapel leads to a wide but shallow antechamber, at each end of which is a modest opening into the inner, main chamber. The chapel itself is a simple octagonal space containing fourteen large, somber, almost monochromatic gray canvases, four wooden benches facing the largest walls, and three meditation cushions. Natural light comes from a large center skylight and is diffused by a reflecting panel beneath. Some visitors are disappointed by the low key, understated interior; others are overwhelmed. A mere description cannot convey the peculiar force of this environment. It does not possess the architectural grandeur of a cathedral or the religiosity of a church. The sacredness of the chapel lies in the experience rather than the place. A quiet energy emanates from Rothko's art in this setting, filling the chapel ad suffusing the enclosed space with a force profound and powerful. Its strength may be felt to so overwhelming a degree that some, on entering the chapel, find themselves weeping uncontrollably. Such art posseses an ontological dimension, joining with person and place to create a world of the sacred.

Yet another kind of sacred environment encompasses an open space. Jefferson Rock, near Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, is a great boulder atop a lofty prominence overlooking the smooth outlines of the low surrounding mountains. Far below lies the silver surface of the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers. The Rock offers a striking vantage point from which to view the landscape in all directions. Here Thomas Jefferson once stood in wonder, and many both before and after him have come to admire the same scene. This dramatic experience of space is unusual for the way in which the viewer's presence gives the great expanse coherence and a center. Wallace Stevens, the American metaphysical poet of the twentieth century, offered a metaphorical description of such a situation in the "Anecdote of the Jar:"

> I placed a jar in Tennessee,
> And round it was, upon a hill.

It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.[1]

What makes the view from Jefferson Rock so extraordinary is not any sense of power that may come from dominating the scene, the feeling mountain climbers report on achieving a summit. It is rather the awareness of being at the heart of an immense space and the source of its coherence. One stands at the center of a world that radiates outward. Although at a great height, the viewer is still not above and beyond the scene but is part of an immense universe which he or she orders and is enfolded within. Instead of feeling pride at so powerful a position, the viewer is characteristically overtaken by a deep sense of humility. Perhaps this comes from being encompassed by such greatness, perhaps from recognizing how small and vulnerable a part of the world one truly is. In this form of sacred environment, the human presence creates and orders space on a cosmic scale, while at the same time being dependent on and integrated in it as, on the microcosmic level, a nucleus is in its cell.

The final kind of sacred environment does not involve a relation with a particular object or place but centers on an experience of a dynamic and integrative character. This form of sacredness is perhaps more modest than the others, and its occasions may be more familiar and even common: strolling through a Japanese garden, paddling down a quiet stream, walking along an unfamiliar woodland trail rich in detail, perhaps even driving at a leisurely rate along a scenic country road in the first green of spring. Moving through an evocative landscape, rich with interest and detail, the scene may be absorbing but is still incomplete: It requires our thoughts, associations, knowledge, and responses. If an active interpenetration of person and place develops, a fusion may emerge that depends on our personal contribution, on how we activate the environment by engaging with its features and bringing them into meaningful juxtaposition with our memories and associations. When this fusion occurs with focus and intensity, it may become the peculiar, charmed experience we associate with the sacred. And because its quality lies in an extraordinary experience rather than an extraordinary place, this last leads us to find the sacred in many environmental situations. Yet what is it that makes them sacred?

What makes an environment sacred?

While it is useful to identify these different types of sacred environments, and there are surely still others, it is important to recognize that they refer not to kinds of places but rather to different settings of experience. They make clear that these places, without the human presence, are not sacred nor are they even environments, for an environment results from the fusion of person and place. Nor at the same time is the experience of such an environment simply an internal occurrence. Rather, such places succeed because they encourage active physical and perceptual engagement. Is there anything common to these kinds of environments that leads us to find them sacred?

A characteristic that appears both in the experience of art and in sacred environments is the sense that the occasion has a distinct and special significance so focused as to make it unique. One is, as it were, centered during that time, perceiving things with enhanced acuteness and concentration. This is sometimes described as a magical moment in which the world has become intensely vivid. One experiences a personal relation to the place, a relation so close as to intimately engage one's thoughts, one's attention, one's body, one's senses. A powerful feeling of connectedness displaces the protective distance we so usually impose between ourselves and the places we encounter, a distance not only physical but psychological. This is sometimes cultivated in art as the "psychical distance" thought necessary for appreciation, but in art as in environment it sacrifices the direct bond of engagement in order to focus on a object. Moreover is a false exchange, since perceiver and object are not discrete and separate but mutually supportive. Particularly in environment one has the sense of being taken up, of being immersed in the situation, engaged in a total, binding condition. And at its most intense degree such a situation evokes an aura of reverence. The very air seems hushed and charged: The environment has become sacred. This condition has a curious corollary in the transformation that takes place in the self. The sense of being disparate and detached diminishes and even vanishes, and the participant becomes inseparable from the place and the occasion.

The four examples cited at the outset are forceful instances of other, perhaps less rare sacred environments: the sight of a brilliant sunset modulating dramatically before one's yes into decline and oblivion; the breathtaking extension of space in the panoramic view from the top of a high hill; the fragile floridity of a crabapple in full bloom; the landscape after a fresh snowfall; a walk in a city park whose details, volumes, and spaces welcome us; even a room in our home that evokes a quality of personal intimacy and belonging.

While we can consider the sacred from the standpoint of the participant's experience, we can also approach it from the conditions of such experience. Many features characterize a sacred environment, most general of all the strong sense of value that pervades the situation. Sometimes the historical significance of a place may put one in a reflective, reverential mood, receptive to associations with earlier personages, inhabitants, or events whose aura still lingers. The features of the place, indeed its very ground, possess for those who enter a sense of importance, a preciousness in themselves. We experience the space as charged, intense with its own energy, not static but active. Such a space possesses a mag-

netic attraction, drawing us into its power and encouraging us to reciprocate by rapt attention and perhaps by movement. The conditions of the sacred develop a continuity with those who participate in it and become absorbed and integrated into the space.

These ideas resemble the native North American understanding of human life in nature that we considered earlier. Many of these tribal societies express views that are at their base religious in character. We may too readily dismiss as primitive animism the sense that all creatures, things, and places have a spiritual character. Yet as our environment deteriorates, responsible governments and individuals are beginning to question the narrow faith in the technological domination of nature. This has led many to reconsider this ancient view and to recognize the profound insight such an idea embodies. We have begun to rediscover the preciousness of land, water, and air as a result of the often irrecoverable harm done to our environment by small interests and short-term objectives. For environment is socially created and almost always common to many inhabitants, so any damage to it has social as well as physical effects. The native American grasp of the sacredness of the land is, the, not a case of primitive piety but a deep and inescapable insight.

Implications of sacred environments

Grasping the nature of sacred environments carries with it some curious consequences. Such environments, such events, tell us something about what environment, all environment, is. Not a place but an occasion, it is the world we experience. This makes the difference between environment and place clearer. A place is a physical location which we can enter and occupy. It is objectively there, impersonal and self-sufficient, and a person who approaches and penetrates its distinct and separate. We can describe places in impersonal terms because they do not depend on a human presence, for any such presence is merely contingent and irrelevant. An environment is different. It is more than surroundings, as environments are usually construed, more even than a relation with surroundings. An environment is rather a continuity of person and place, a situation that is more than the sum of its parts but a distinct, complete, and integral whole. This is intimated in what is sometimes called a sense of place, that is, place that has the special, binding quality we are ascribing here to environment.

Recognizing their differences also helps us distinguish between a sacred environment and a sacred place. A sacred place is a location that is honored, institutionally valued, such as a cathedral, a synagogue, a temple, a sacred grove, a memorial. Its value presumably rests in itself, quite independent of anyone who visits it. A sacred environment, on the other hand, is one which engages and binds us as participants, with a force and intensity that result in the kind of powerful occasion described earlier. Sacred places are sacred by decree. They may evoke the kind of intense engagement that would transform them into environments, but again they may not, and then they become only formal objects of ritualized veneration and indifferent feeling.

Understanding the character of a sacred environment has yet another implication, one whose significance is far-reaching. Because a sacred environment exemplifies environment most intensely, it also tells us something about how environment can fail. We can see this best by distinguishing the sacred from the profane. The profane is a desecration of

place, even more, a desecration of environment. It involves an action that removes the sacredness of an environment by destroying the binding unity of person and place. Examples are all too common: eliminating living neighborhoods to make way for freeways, razing historic structures that give character and quality to a district in order to erect a monumentally impersonal office towers, displacing the grand homes on older streets near the center of cities with a line of dull commercial structures, flattening and paving the green spaces surrounding cities into prosaic malls, channeling streams in urban areas underground or hiding them between concrete embankments.

The dictionary defines 'to profane' as "serving to debase or defile what is holy."[3] Yet in some sense, is not all land holy land? Atoning for such profanation, to continue the theological metaphor, means becoming reconciled, literally making what has been profaned "atone." And in this case, that is making a failed environment sacred again. Furthermore, human activity can not only desecrate a place but destroy the very possibility of environmental engagement, the very possibility of sacredness. Yet as people can profane environment, so they can atone for such desecration by reviving the possibility of environmental unity. Capable of destroying environment, we may also be able to re-create it.

Environments so powerful as to be sacred may seem unusual, far from the ordinary run of experience. We are accustomed to observing the sacred on special occasions under prescribed conditions and carefully choreographed rituals. While this may be customary, it is not necessary. In fact, because it isolates the sacred, it allows violence to be perpetrated on the rest of our world. If only special places and rare environments are sacred, then the balance of the human world becomes disvalued and a ready victim to desecration. Yet the native North Americans had a different sense of things, one that can guide us here. For them a power inheres in every object and place, be it stone, tree, lake, or sky. All must be treated with respect and reverence. A religious view of nature means that all nature is one's cathedral and worshipis the usual attitude. The Jews's blessing before eating bread and the Christians' grace before meals are similar forms of reverential behavior that introduce the sacred into the mundane. Indeed, it does not demean the holy by sanctifying ordinary life but rather raises its value to the level of the sacred. No sharp division, in fact, separates sacred from ordinary environments, for these are not opposites. There is rather a continuity between them, since value suffuses all environment. Any environment can become sacred and any environment can be profaned. And all are capable of degrees.

We have spoken of the sublime, and at least as a positive characteristic of environment it seems to resemble the sacred. Both are experienced as possessing intense value. Both surpass the feeling of separateness and evoke an occasion that is overwhelming in its absorption. Both may involve natural occurrences of remarkable moment. Yet at least in its traditional signification, the sublime differs markedly from the sacred in other ways. The sublime is a feeling generated by contemplating an object—a thunderous waterfall or the starry heavens above, whereas the sacred is an experience evoked in a situation, from a religious ritual or a musical performance to a meditative stroll a Chinese temple garden. Traditionally, the sublime also differs from the sacred in being essentially dualistic or at least by building on the contrast between an overpowering object and the perceiver's re-

sponse to it. Historically and conceptually it rests on the opposition of subject and object. The sacred, on the other hand, is a fusion, all the more overpowering in not being localized or centered.

But even when the sublime is freed from these traditional constraints and is conjoined with the perceiver, either positively or negatively, in aesthetic engagement, it remains different in character from the sacred. The sense of overpowering magnitude that identifies the sublime, power so immense as to render the human presence puny and insignificant, does not occur in the experience of the sacred. Here is neither intimidation nor fear but rather a sense of being expanded and uplifted, rendered precious through the radiance of the sacred. The fearsome thrill of the sublime if replaced by the warm suffusion of affirmation, perhaps joyful, perhaps tearful, but always positive. The sublime may be either positive or negative. The sacred, on the other hand, is always positive; the profane is its negation.

A parallel has sometimes been drawn between aesthetic and religious experience. Both are intensely absorbing, personal, and immediate. Both extend their directness and intimacy to bring one into a region of being that far exceeds the private region attributed to subjectivity. While this discussion of the sacred in environment is only tangentially related to the religious and
important differences remain, the aesthetic and the sacred share yet another characteristic: Both have moral as well as aesthetic dimensions.

As in the experience of art, aesthetic value suffuses the sacred environment. Its aesthetic value may lie in its beauty or in its sublimity. Certainly both art and environment share our vivid perceptual interest. At the same time, the qualitative experience they generate not only has immediate value but effects that extend beyond the perceptual present. Experiencing an environment as sacred may change our sense of the world and affect how we live and act. To regard the world as sacred and everything that is part of it as inherently valuable can change our decisions and alter our actions. It can also sensitize us to the profanation of the world and render unacceptable practices that we formerly ignored or acquiesced in unthinkingly. Recognizing and conserving environmental values, then, takes on ethical import and becomes a moral obligation. Moreover, there is a social interest in sacred environments and, if all environments are potentially sacred, in every environment, just as there is a social interest in great art. As one can claim that the "owner" of such art has a moral obligation to preserve and share it, so one can hold similarly that everyone who participates in any way in an environment has an interest in it and an obligation toward it. In environment, as in art, possession is never absolute; one is always answerable for one's treatment of it. Because moral and aesthetic value appear to some degree in all environments, they both place an obligation on us individually and socially.

Sacred environments may develop, then, from the space generated by a radiant object, in an enclosed space charged with value, in open space made coherent through the human presence, through the dynamic interdependence of an active perceiver and an environmental order, and in still other forms. Moreover, since such environments are often not set apart from the ordinary course of experience, we can no longer regard them as rare and

different. And because environments are sacred in varying degrees, our participating presence both contributes to their sacredness and influences its extent. In so far as this confers a god-like power on humans, it confers on us an equally powerful obligation.

Although we may have begun by thinking of environment as a special, limited notion, these explorations have shown that it encompasses the entire human realm. In the process, the idea of environment has not lost meaning or clarity; rather it has gained in reasonance and value. Developing the idea has also expanded the reality, for we have ended by sacralizing the world and the human participation that is inseparable from it. The very grandeur of this conception of environment testifies to the value of its successes, the tragedy of its failures, and the endless richness of its possibilities.

Notes and References

1. The first quotation is from "Theory". It and "The Anecdote of the Jar" were published in Harmonium (New York: Knopf, 1950)
2. See the discussion of body and environment in Chapter 8 of my book *living in the Landscape Towards and Aesthetics of Environment* (forthcoming 1997)
3. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Mer-riam Webster, 1986), p.939/1.

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