Spring 5-4-2013

Lexiconic: Reading the Edifice

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by Amanda Mejstrik

A Design Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of
The College of Architecture at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Architecture
Major: Architecture

Under the Supervision of Professor Brian Kelly
Lincoln, Nebraska

May 2013
Language has undergone an evolution similar to architecture. Both have been defined through multiple styles which have a tendency to change and reestablish themselves based on popular culture, eventually permeating through society, while subsequently losing momentum and necessity. In the same way that architecture has transitioned through time based on a societal importance of efficiency, economy, and effectiveness, language begins to assume a new oratory standard.

Old English begat Middle English begat Modern English
Victorian Style begat Modernism begat Structural Expressionism

These entities have become representative of our culture throughout the ages and have reached a point of abbreviation so severe that LOL has become accepted in our contemporary language in the same way that the recycled geometries of a builder’s suburbia are accepted in the built urban fabric. Common architecture that inhabits neighborhood streets and replicates empty strip malls is a simple form being pushed through an algorithmic system, with the core necessity of the building being ignored in favor of a quicker output. The same is happening to language: shortened words and poor grammar causes the orator to produce an idea quickly, but the audience to break down a sentence in order to understand the idea, adding an unnecessary setback to the mode of communication. Should we allow ourselves to be accommodating to a lack of effort by both common architecture and language, merely writing them off as an unfortunate fad? Or does this signify the transition to the next phase of evolution – in which case the issue is not whether this will continue, but where it will take us.

“Strictly speaking, semiotics and structuralism propose language not as a metaphor for architecture, but rather that architecture is a language.”

Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture
Adrian Forty
2000
Can architecture become an accessible language able to communicate to different user groups?
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Any study of architecture and language dives into familiar but dangerous waters. The idea touches on the humanistic theory of the ‘sister arts’ as well as the classical analogy of linguistic and visual style.

But the metaphor of language cannot hide the fundamental differences between visual and linguistic forms, and highlights inherent issues within description, interpretation, and critical vocabulary. Buildings are not arbitrary, as in language, but based on universal and scientific laws.

However, enormous importance has been given by philosophers and aestheticians to language in human life and experience. Linguistic philosophers, semioticians, and literary theorists have argued that language provides the model for all the symbolic systems that constitute the arts, including the visual.

Sacred architecture is distinctively known for having a strong symbolic connection between spaces, decor, and ritual and will therefore be the primary area of programmatic study. Although many other architectural typologies have proven to effectively communicate messages and intentions, religious architecture remains known throughout time as successfully encompassing spiritual beliefs in the manifestation of physical space.
Sacred Architecture

Historical Analysis
The evolution of Christian architecture is heavily influenced by the political power of the church. The typology of the church changed throughout time in order to establish a distinct separation between clergy and laity.

1. Early meeting places of Christians take place in the homes of patrons. Hierarchy is introduced through separate rooms, a distinct space for baptism, and men and women praying separately. Distinction between clergy and laity begins through this separate spatial arrangement.

2. The appeal of the basilica derives from its flexibility and ready absorption of symbolic meaning. East-West orientation is introduced as a symbol of Jesus rising with the Eastern sun. The idea of a journey to the sanctuary is present in the long processional entry of the basilica. A raised platform is introduced where the clergy is elevated above the laity, and therefore closer to God.

3. The altar moves away from the apse, creating a Latin cross floor plan referencing the same cross of Jesus Christ. Separation between clergy and laity increases with the altar now separating the two. New spatial arrangement focuses less on the shared community of the congregation and more on the sacrifice of Christ, represented through the Eucharist.

1. Dura Europos church, 235
   Dura Europos, Syria

2. Basilica of San Clemente, 392
   Carlo Stefano Fontana
   Rome, Italy

3. Peterborough Cathedral, 1118-1237
   Cambridge Shire, United Kingdom
4. The Gothic Cathedral is historically known for representing the Bible to the illiterate population of Western Europe. This was also a representation of the social classes, being that the clergymen held sole access to the Bible. The laymen were not only reliant on the clergy to tell stories from the Book, but also used the building as a means to understand the messages. They literally read the building.

Tall ceilings and large, stained glass windows allow in light and draw attention to the disparity between divine and human existence. “The sharp contrast between the ideal quality of the house of God and the low, cramped, irregular and impermanent character of men’s earthly dwellings were powerful statements in that new language.” [Christopher Wilson, architectural historian] The area for the choir is developed, and a boundary is established between clergy and laity with the use of an altar rail or rood beam.

**Christian Architecture**

**Analysis**

Symbolism in Sacred architecture

Cathedral of Reims; Reims, France
Considered by many to be a masterpiece of the Gothic era.

The upper section is dedicated to God.

Rose window symbolizes eternity with God.

Dedicated to the leaders of the church and kings of the region.

Side entries symbolize either the Virgin Mary, or the local saint.

Center entrance represents the last judgement. The statues inside this area are the many demons and angels that one may encounter.

The lower section is dedicated to the history of the church and the months of seasonal labor. This area was directed towards the laymen of the congregation, who had a high rate of illiteracy. By keeping the stories and sculptures at eye level, they communicated with the lower class of the church directly.

Floor plans are laid out in a Latin cross formation, the strongest symbol of Catholicism.


5. Cruciform or centralized? Architects of the Renaissance become interested in the perfect [symmetrical] forms. Emphasis is placed on the ritual accessibility for the lay people as opposed to the distinction of the clergy. However, the new spatial arrangement limited the duration and impact of processions. The long naves of the cathedrals and basilicas allowed for lengthy processions that underscored the power of the clergy.

6. The Council of Trent met between 1545-1564 and established new methodologies of Christianity in its rituals and environment. In architecture, the blending of the cruciform with the central plan attests to the conservatism of the church leaders. The single, unified space of St. Peter's demolished the earlier strategy of arranging two separate spaces of clergy and laity.

7. Multiple axes in Baroque buildings competed for the attention of the congregation. Longitudinal axes intersected with vertical ones, and apses softened the power of both. Spaces for frescoes and paintings were designed to be a part of the interior, and gave new meaning to the Christian narrative. In a time where the church was accused of being corrupt, the focus became the elevation of human power through the worship space.
Christian Architecture

8. Modernist architects begin to manifest Christianity’s universal message through architectural language and space as opposed to statuary and stained glass. Le Corbusier attempted to erase cultural references from buildings in order to convey meaning through structure and material alone. In the Notre Dame du Ronchamp, the use of space and light, the spare aesthetic of the plain walls and simple furnishings placed an emphasis on the power of the liturgy and on lay participation.
Islamic Architecture
Sacred architecture as an open book

The typology of the Islamic mosque has remained consistent over the course of its evolution. Throughout numerous empires, the mosque has maintained its powerful purpose of a place for worship.

1. The center of worship for all Muslims, the foundations of the Kaaba are said to have been laid by the prophet, Abraham. The form is derived from the shape of “the house in heaven” and sets the standard for geometric and symmetrical forms of future mosques.

2. Also known as the House of the Prophet, the Al-Masjid mosque houses the main prayer space within an open courtyard. The original building had no minaret, however the first minbar was introduced which elevated the Imam on a two-step platform while addressing the congregation.

3. Rectangular layout with an impressive number of arcades; four riwaqs flank the maqsura which was determined undesirable due to the separation of prayer lines. A dome over the central riwaq highlights the importance of the space as well as emphasizing a oneness with Allah. The minaret was the first to implement the dual function as a landmark as well as a place for the muezzin to call to prayer.
4. Marks the place of the Prophet’s ascension into heaven. The circular plan focuses the congregation onto the rock located in the center, which has significant meaning to the Muslim community, however the arrangement also weakens the dominance of the Qibla wall. Ornamentation began to make its way into mosques as a replacement for figurative representation.

5. The Abbasid revolution and rule did not bring about major changes in the architecture of the mosque, however, the evolution of the minaret was influenced by the malwiya tower of Samarra. The minaret was traditionally raised as a symbol of conquest but through its evolution became a landmark.

6. Early beginnings of the madrasa, a teaching and prayer complex which housed many different programs as well as places for worship.
Analysis

Symbolism in Sacred architecture

Minarets symbolize both the supremacy and the oneness of God. To some Muslims they represent the Arabic letter Alif, the first letter in Allah’s name.

Domes were first used as a symbolic reference to paradise. A dome highlights the centrality and symmetry of the mosque and provides a visual focus for the complex. For many Muslims, the dome represents a oneness with God.

The idea of a mosque is to create as much space as possible for the uninterrupted communion between worshipers and God. This idea often creates open floor plans.

Islamic Architecture

continued

Blue Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey.
Culmination of two centuries of both Ottoman mosque and Byzantine church development.

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Islamic Decor.

Islamic Decor.

7. With the evolution of the dome, the vault and the arch all laid the foundation for the mosques of the Ottoman Empire. The space is divided into a large courtyard surrounded by a colonnade with arches and/or domes. The whole complex is framed with two, four, or six minarets to create an ensemble where the whole is much more than the sum of its parts.

Unlike Christian architecture, Islamic buildings prohibit any use of iconography or figurative representation. Instead of statues and stained glass to tell a story from the Quran, Muslims decorate the mosque with words from the book. They literally write on the walls.
Islamic Architecture

continued

8. Architects begin to stray away from traditional typologies of mosques, and move towards a modern approach. The mosque in Lisbon has no dome, and no minaret, yet still pays respect to old traditions with ornamentation. However, the architectural structure becomes the ornamentation as opposed to reliefs and carvings of the past. Lisbon Ismaili Centre, 2002

Raj Rewal

Lisbon, Portugal
Present Situation

Current Analysis
What Happened?

From this:


To this:

*SET THE CAPTIVES FREE DELIVERANCE MINISTRIES*

*IGLESIA CRISTIANA PENTECOSTES JESUCRISTO ES DIO"

*JESUS IS LORD*
According to Victor Hugo, ‘This will kill That.’
‘This’ being the book
‘That’ being the building

Hugo argued that the availability of the book to the public would eventually kill the necessity to read architecture. By juxtaposing technological advances onto the timeline, we can begin to make connections between a rise in communication exchange and the decline of an architectural language, particularly with the invention of the printing press in 1440 and the almost immediate death of the Gothic style of architecture.

As technology progressed, so did our means of communication. With each new invention, we were able to transmit ideas and information very effectively. Communication itself had to evolve from morse code to email to what we have now: text messaging.
Before the printing press, books were only owned by the rich or the church. Once the invention went into common use, the rarity of books dropped sharply and the literacy level crept upwards in major cities.

The telegraph revolutionized long-distance communication. The further development of a code allowed for the simple transmission of complex messages across lines. It had laid the groundwork for the communications revolution that led to later innovations.

"We have only to think of medieval cathedrals to realize that there is always more than meets the eye. At the iconographic level we find, e.g., features such as the basic prismatic ground plan and various ornamental and numerical symbols (before columns, three aisles), as well as the hidden [but felt] importance of proportion and symmetry. Interpretation of their meanings is highly complex and is made even more so by the amount of collateral information it presupposes." (Donougho, 1987)

"This will Kill that." (Hugo, 1947)

Robert Venturi prefers "complex and contradictory" architecture because it promotes "richness of meaning over clarity of meaning." (Venturi, 1977)

Christian Norberg-Schulz presented a "theory of meaning" in which he argues that people bring meanings to words in the same sense that they bring meanings to buildings. "We have all experienced how political propaganda, in particular, suffers from a meaningless use of language, and also holds true for the architectural debate." (Norberg-Schulz, 1985)

Robert Venturi prefers "complex and contradictory" architecture because it promotes "richness of meaning over clarity of meaning." (Venturi, 1977)

"The complexity, ambiguity, the meanings that model and decorate language are part of what I like to think about when I create plans, cities, and buildings." (Libeskind, 2013)

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The radio was the beginning of wireless communications, in which intangible signals could be sent through the air over long distances.

The television has had a great influence on popular culture, setting trends in fashion, music, and language. Language migrates from place to place in a complex manner, but with the television bringing many different cultures and languages into the American home, the cultural exchange accelerates across nations.

Different styles of communication have evolved through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, instant messaging, and e-mail. The internet has produced a new vocabulary (internet slang) consisting mainly of acronyms and abbreviations for quick communication.

"The complexity, ambiguity, the meanings that model and decorate language are part of what I like to think about when I create plans, cities, and buildings." (Libeskind, 2013)
CONSISTENTLY CONTEXTUAL

Language and Architecture
In America, we are conditioned to read our environment in a specific way. Typologies in the US become “a constant [that] manifests itself with a character of necessity; but even though it is predetermined it reacts dialectically with technique, function, and style as well as with both the collective character and the individual moment of the architectural artefact. Typology is an element that plays its own role in constituting form, it is a constant.” (Vesely, 2007)

The images to the right demonstrate basic ideals that we understand when deciphering the built environment. But with the rise of the “big box” movement around the world, we have to begin to ask ourselves if this method is really best for everything. The attempt of efficient building and design becomes negated due to the conditions that begin to confuse our surroundings.

Currently, the same scenario is happening to language. George Zipf studied language efficiency in 1936 and developed a theory of communicative efficiency stating that word length should not depend on frequency of use, but rather on the amount of information conveyed by a word. LOL has approximately 50 different definitions online that state the correct use of the acronym. To try and explain the concept of LOL to someone who is not fluent in media lingo would require more time to explain the abbreviation than would be needed to simply say the full phrase.

Efficiency of this sort has its place, but comes with the cost of leading to further problems in description, interpretation, and critical vocabulary. The availability of the message becomes saturated with multiple meanings, and can lead to confusion as well as a weak conviction.

However, what this does tell us is that our society can read messages, symbols, and language very efficiently because we base it on context. Not only does this apply to language, but to the built environment as well; symbols and metaphors have taken a tertiary relationship to form and typology.
"Most people who pass a church’s door never enter it. But they do form impressions of the Church from the physical church. There are questions which consciously or unconsciously arise in people’s minds: ‘is this building and its purposes relevant for me? Or of no particular interest?’ People are inclined to wonder if the institution the building represents has anything to say to them really worth hearing.”

(White, 1964)

Islamic Cemetery in Altach
Architect: Bernardo Bader
Location: Altach, Austria
Year: 2011

The concept of the cemetery in Austria is structured and orientated to Islamic belief, funeral rites, and also the understanding of nature and social conditions. The Qibla wall and prayer niche was designed in collaboration with a Muslim artist and adheres to typical Islamic architecture, where the decoration only unfolds in the interior.

Church of Seed
Architect: O Studio
Location: Huizhou, China
Year: 2011

The design concept of this building is derived from the form of a seed – an important metaphor in the Gospel stories. The stepping of the roof allows northern daylight to diffuse into the interior and communicates the message of religious culture through the play of light and shadow.

Los Nogales School Chapel
Architect: Daniel Bonilla
Location: Bogotá, Colombia
Year: 2001

The form of Los Nogales School’s Chapel is based on the dualities of life. A pure and basic prism represents the pureness, the essential, and the harmony. The various volumes and cracks represent the spiritual sense in human lives, the alterations of harmony. The juxtaposition of the alterations generate light cracks on the elevations, alluding to hope and opportunity in a life of darkness.
Modern Precedents
Contextual Architecture

Light as communication

“My eyes] behold something which expresses a thought. A thought which reveals itself without word or sound, but solely by means of shapes which stand in a certain relationship to one another. These shapes are such that they are clearly revealed in light. They are the language of Architecture. By the use of raw materials and starting from conditions more or less utilitarian, you have established certain relationships which have aroused my emotions. This is architecture.”

(Le Corbusier, 1946)

Ray of Light Mosque
Architect: ZEST Architecture
Location: Proposed in Dubai
Year: 2010

A new concept allows equal access to the prayer room for men and women with a physical separation by means of light. The prayer hall consists of a geometry which is separated into two halves by a wall of glass through which sunlight streams in to form the ‘ray of light.’

Chapel of St. Ignatius
Architect: Steven Holl
Location: Seattle, WA
Year: 2007

“Seven bottles of light in a stone box” is how Steven Holl describes the concept for the chapel. Each ‘bottle’ of light corresponds to an aspect of Catholic worship. Light passes through each ‘bottle’ to define physical and spiritual spaces with pools of natural and colored light.

Bruder Klaus Field Chapel
Architect: Peter Zumthor
Location: Mechernich, Germany
Year: 2007

The opening in the roof allows sunlight to penetrate the space and create an ambiance very specific to the time of day and year. “To me, buildings can have a beautiful silence that I associate with attributes such as compassions, self-evidence, durability, presence, and integrity, and with warmth and sensuousness as well.”

(– Peter Zumthor)
Modern Precedents

Contextual Architecture

“Architecture, by unifying foreground, middle ground, and distant views, ties perspective to detail and material to space. While a cinematic experience of a stone cathedral might draw the observer through and above it, even moving photographically back in time, only the actual building allows the eye to roam freely among the inventive details; only the architecture itself offers the tactile sensations of textured stone surfaces and polished wooden pews, the experience of light changing with movement, the smell and resonant sounds of space, the bodily relations of scale and proportion. All these sensations combine within one complex experience, which becomes articulate and specific, though wordless. The building speaks through the silence of perceptual phenomena.”

(Holl, 2006)

Material as communication

Depending on the perspective of the viewer, the church is either perceived as a mass volume or partly dissolving into the landscape. In this way, both church and landscape can be considered part of the work. The church makes the experience of the landscape visible and vice versa.

Treptow Crematorium
Architect: Axel Schultes and Charlotte Frank
Location: Berlin, Germany
Year: 2009

The design concept for this crematorium is to celebrate silence and light by creating ceremonial spaces through the use of monochromatic finishes. Concrete is used to craft a serene and quiet atmosphere and adds to the overall spiritual and sacred quality of the space.

Church of the Sacred Heart
Architect: Allmann Sattler Wappner Architekten
Location: Munich, Germany
Year: 2000

A central gathering place and center of worship, the church uses glass to represent its role in the city, symbolizing an open, bright, and nonrestrictive relationship with the outside world. In this project, glass not only transmits and filters light but also acts as a structure and space-defining feature.
MANIFESTATION

Language and Architecture
Can architecture become an accessible language able to communicate to different user groups?

After studying the precedents of the Catholic church and Islamic mosque, one way to test the thesis question is through a hybrid structure for the two religions. The combination of two user groups into a single space creates opportunity for multiple readings to occur in a space devoid of iconographic metaphors. With this, in the same sense that our language is moving towards an accessible, yet contextual based communication, so must architecture be flexible in its readability.

Architecture can communicate a message through ritual as well as form and ornamentation. With the proposed program of a combined spiritual space, the daily routine of each religion must be understood and respected. Islam and Catholic adherents can coexist in a building where meaning is left to the discretion of the user. A Muslim will read a principle wall in a much different way than a Catholic: understanding that it is the Qibla wall directing the congregation towards Mecca. When presented with multiple meanings, the user will default to the contextual language they can understand, similar to oratory communication.

“It should be understood as an expression of social order, or as an aspect of deep culture. [Architecture] can be understood by analogy to language; either as a ‘code’ capable of use to communicate the architect’s intentions to the users of their buildings,’ or more literally as an equivalent to spoken or written language.”

How do buildings mean? Some issues of interpretation in the history of architecture

William Whyte
2016
Muslims are expected to pray five times per day. These times vary according to the season, and are based around the path of the sun. Although it is not required, Muslims are encouraged to pray as often as possible inside the mosque. Praying together signifies the brotherhood, and emphasizes the unity of the congregation with Allah. Friday afternoons are considered the Holy Day of the week. Muslims are expected to be in the mosque at this time, and the prayer session typically lasts 1 - 1.5 hours.

Catholics pray frequently on their own time. It is typical to pray often throughout the day, and is therefore not required to take place within the confines of the church. Although the church always welcomes members, and holds a morning mass everyday, most Catholics attend church on Sunday mornings.
Islam bases its holy days on the Islamic calendar, which is a Lunar calendar consisting of 12 months in 355 days. This means that the holy days shift and will have periods of overlap with Catholic holy days. The diagram to the left is based on the Islamic calendar of the year 2012.

Because there will be years where important times such as the Christmas season and the season of Ramadan will intersect, careful consideration must be made during the design process to ensure that both religions receive the respect and space they need during holy seasons. This presents an interesting challenge and raises questions of intentions, meanings, and respect.
Rituals are the backbone of any religion, and where the worship takes place breaks in the homogeneity of the profane world. “Here in the sacred enclosure, communication with the Gods is made possible.” (Jones, 2000). Although the rituals and rites have been passed down over decades, the architecture of the space can contribute to the meaning and message of the faith. For example, in the Catholic religion, the worshipper kneels down to pray to God, a ritual designated to him through time. But the altar, which brings blessings upon the church, is raised up on stairs to emphasize that there is always a higher power above that of the congregation.

As much a part of the prayer ceremony as rituals are, architecture has an important role that allows these rituals to take place and in some places, allows for the opportunity to enhance the ritual itself. Shoe storage in an Islamic mosque can be more than a simple cubby system. A water font in a church can add to the experience of entering a space instead of remaining as a simple basin. “The font should be in the way, because it is the way.” (Roberts, 2004)

### Building Orientation

- **Priest faces East during mass**
- The sun rises in the East, the sun represents Jesus
- Entire congregation prays in the direction of Mecca.
- Signifies a direction to maintain unity among worshippers

### Congregational Organization

- Men and women are kept separate from each other to limit distractions during prayer
- Women are encouraged to pray at home
- Prayers are done in unison
- Shoes must be removed, placed inside shoe storage
- Rinse face, hands, feet, ears, nose, mouth in water (or sand) basin

### Entry Ritual

- Font of holy water is placed near the entry
- Adherent dips fingers into water, make the sign of the cross
- Men and women are kept separate from each other to limit distractions during prayer
- Women are encouraged to pray at home

### Prayer Service

- Kneeling
- Facing the Crucifix
- Altar is raised
- Prayers are done individually
- Shoes can be raised, not necessary
- Prayers are done in unison
- Facing the congregation
- Ceremony takes place on the altar level
- Do not kneel
- Vows are read from the Catchism
- Sitting
- Facing the congregation
- Ceremony takes place on the altar level
- Do not kneel

### Weddings

- Kneeling
- Facing the Priest
- Altar is raised, ceremony takes place on the steps
- Vows are read from the Catchism

### #1 Christianity

- 1.5 Billion Roman Catholics
- 375 Million Protestants
- 220 Million Orthodox
- 82 Million Anglicans
- 2.1 Billion Total

### #2 Islam

- 940 Million Sunni
- 150 Million Shias
- 1.9 Billion Total

### Spatial Rituals

**Hybrid overlaps**
Religious beliefs are symbolized and enacted by rituals, and there is often a direct relationship between the ritual and the architectural response. By understanding sequence and needs of the prayer ritual of both religions, the architecture can respond to requirements of furniture, space, and circulation.
Both religions value a processional quality to the space. Not only does it give the ability to orient the user both psychologically and spiritually, it also gives the chance for the worshipper to shed themselves of the outside world, a washing away of the secular as the sacred is approached.

According to Kevin Lynch in *The Image of the City*, 'a path needs to have a distinct identity, with a clear sense of directionality and continuity that includes both origins and destinations. Often, paths comprise a ‘time series’ – a sequence of events along the path and landmarks and nodes that give identity to each section.'

Through trials of preparation, separation and return, the procession becomes one of the most important rituals of either religion.

**Diagram:**
- **KNOWN**
  - Secular
  - Preparation
  - Separation
- **UNKNOWN**
  - Sacred
  - Return
Los Angeles, California has the second largest metropolitan area in the US, with approximately 15 million people residing in the urban and suburban areas. Consisting of nearly 16 regional cities and over 300 registered neighborhoods, LA is known for its myriad of diverse cultures spread across a wide region. Within this region lives the largest population of Catholic adherents, and nearly half of the nation’s total Muslim population.

LA will be chosen as the site for a religious edifice due to its large mixture of Muslims and Catholics as well as its sprawling suburban neighborhoods of which will represent contemporary language.
Density of Muslim/Catholic in CA

Map of California highlighting the densities of Catholic and Muslim religious facilities. L.A. County is outlined which indicates the entirety of the region which consists of a high number of churches and mosques.

The overlap of the two religions’ densities suggests the site be located in the northern neighborhood of Downtown Los Angeles. The boundaries of the downtown area are highlighted in the red dashed line. The population of this neighborhood is approximately 34,000 people in a 6.0 square mile area. This region is highly diverse for the city of Los Angeles with large percentages of Caucasians, African Americans, Latins, and Asians. The area of overlap of the religious densities span residential and commercial zoning areas.

An estimated 2.6 million Muslims live in the United States, making up a mere 2.5% of the American population.
Inventory

Site Inventory

Days of Sun: 292)

Percent of Day with Sunshine: 73%

Average Low Temp.: 57°F

Average High Temp.: 73°F

Annual Rainfall: 7.5 mph

Average Wind Speed: 39 mph

Median Age of the Area: 27

Churches in the Overlap: 0

Mosques in the Overlap: 0

Younger than High School Diploma: 32%

Percent of Engaged Students: 73%

Churches in the Overlap: 0

Mosques in the Overlap: 0

Lack High School Diploma: 27%
1. 20-foot contours (with site selection in pink) show the complexity of the site condition. The topographic surface offers multiple varying heights which allows the architectural response to be involved with the surrounding land.

2. Nearby water sources. Water plays an extremely important role in each religion; often present in churches and mosques for the ablution ritual, the nearby water sources were studied for a useful opportunity.

3. Primary and secondary circulation. The location of the site is adjacent to the Hollywood Freeway, giving the site visual access to vehicular passersby.

4. Proximity to downtown Los Angeles. The close relationship between downtown L.A. and the site gives ample opportunities to frame views of the city.

5. Current zoning. The selected site is already zoned for public facilities such as a church, and also is zoned for parking structures as well.

6. Nearby churches. The area surrounding the site contains 27 churches, but no mosques. This information supports the need of a mosque in the area.
Programmatic requirements for both a Catholic church and a Muslim Mosque.

Schematic adjacency studies situating different scenarios of an intermixed system, and separated system. The challenge of the juxtaposition of a mosque and a church is to have a combination of the two, which brings both cultures together seamlessly in an effort to emphasize efficient building communication based on the interpretation of the user. This theory, then, would favor the combination iterations as opposed to the multiple program, one roof situation. Although extremely schematic in nature, these studies still take into consideration the adjacency of each program, and the most logical arrangement to maximize readability.

The programs were laid out according to program size and relationship necessity. The goal was to simplify these further in order to address the efficiency of the hybrid facility. The final adjacency study is based on:

- compactness
- orientation
- processional quality

This diagram drove the formal development of the church mosque.
Shared Sanctuary

Design of the edifice
The procession starts at the parking lot. The user moves through a series of stepped gardens towards the church mosque, recreating a path of paradise commonly referenced in the Quran. The path becomes a place of rest, reflection, and cleansing. The path offers a final view of downtown Los Angeles before reorienting the traveler to the sanctuary ahead; reminding them of the city they are leaving behind for the silence they are about to enter.

A reflecting pool located at the entryway is the beginning of a series of water features that greets users as they move through the space. A minaret is located within the reflecting pool, and is representative of not only a landmark, but of the two religions occupying the single space. It is at this point where the user is again reoriented toward a concrete wall, leading people through to the prayer space on the other side.

The entry sequence leads continually down a steep slope and carries the motion of moving downward even through the threshold of the building. The sloped floor becomes a series of stepped landings for Catholics to pray on, while the floor flattens out to allow for an open prayer space for Muslims.
As one enters the space, they are greeted with a thick, monumental wall that continues the procession into the ablution area. It is here that Muslims wash their feet, hands, and face before entering the prayer room. Catholics make the mark of the cross before moving through the wall.

At this point, they separate into a distinct yet open prayer room. Muslims lay out prayer mats in prayer formation, and Catholics make their way into the space to find a seat.
Pews establish a hierarchical relationship between Catholics and Muslims.

Prayer benches create an equality between the two while still providing comfort.
The interfaith community is comfortable sharing spaces with members of foreign religions. The series of diagrams to the right highlight times of overlap as well as times of singular religious occupancy. Strips of inlaid wood offer a means of congregational organization as well as controlling circulation and means of egress.

Friday afternoon prayer is the holiest time for Muslims. At this time, the building would be occupied majority by Muslims, with the exception of Catholics there for reflection.

Saturday evening is a time for devout Muslims to pray in the Mosque. This is also a time for Catholics who will not be in attendance Sunday morning to receive the weekly ritual of communion. Although both congregations may be present, the numbers present are low enough to maintain respectful prayer services.

Sunday morning is the holiest day for Catholics and is not a typical time for Muslims to be present in the mosque.

Ramadan lasts an entire month; every Muslim is expected to be present at Friday noon prayer during the month of Ramadan.

Although the Easter holiday lasts an entire month, it’s mostly celebrated on Easter Sunday. As it is the holiest holiday for Catholics, the large congregation would be able to spread out into the shared space around the altar.

Although rare, times when the two religions would need the same space would require negotiation from both sides.
Massing

Distinguished space

- Primarily Catholic
- Primarily Muslim

Shared space
The shared space is enclosed with a glass roof, allowing light down into the entire area and giving a sense of hierarchy to the hybrid programming. The material selection was inspired by Juhani Pallasmaa’s views of haptic architecture.

“Architecture, more fully than other art forms, engages the immediacy of our sensory perceptions. Architecture, by unifying foreground, middle ground, and distant views, has perspective to detail and material to space. While a cinematic experience of a stone cathedral might draw the observer through and above it, only the actual building allows the eye to roam freely among inventive details; only the architecture itself offers the tactile sensations of textured stone surfaces and polished wooden pews, the experience of light changing with movement, the small and resonant sounds of space, the bodily relations of scale and proportion. All these sensations combine within one complex experience, which becomes articulate and specific, though wordless. The building speaks through the silence of perceptual phenomena.”

Questions of Perception
Juhani Pallasmaa
1994

The use of concrete creates a serene experience within the space. The reverberation of chantings and prayers echoes along the walls and towards the entrance. The heavy material is surprisingly responsive to the human touch and maintains its monumentality while evoking a sense of the spiritual.

Wooden floors, runner, and walls bring to the space the sense of connectivity to the landscape through its warmth and naturalness. The tactile material can appeal to people’s psyche and senses and contrasts with the coldness of concrete.
Can architecture become an accessible language that is able to communicate to different user groups?

After historic research the question evolves to: how can architecture do this?

By looking into parallels of contemporary language and understanding society’s want of efficiency and flexibility, I propose that a hybrid church mosque can speak a language that evokes a sense of spirituality without the direct use of icons. Through its flexible space focused around the rituals of both religions, both Catholics and Muslims can use the space in the context that they see fit.

This thesis investigation was one of a design exploration. The final manifestation needs more investigation into the logistics of the shared space, but was able to tie together an abstract theory with an architectural proposal. When I first began the research process, it never occurred to me that the final outcome would be a shared religious space. However, once the process began, it became clear that any other program would not have been as successful. The development of the project was dependent on the understanding of a contextual based language, and its application to communication as well as architecture, and the design of the shared space as a means to appeal to two completely different groups was the best way to carry forward.

I was always under the impression that I would be designing something that had a direct relationship between architecture and language, a relationship that would compare a sentence structure to a building structure. The final outcome became something that was much richer than current theories of architecture and language. Not only can architecture fulfill a theoretical question, it can offer a societal solution to a question that may or may not have been asked.
References


Acknowledgements

A special thank you to:

My thesis mentor, Brian Kelly

Founder and Executive Director of Project Interfaith, Beth Katz

My parents for their help with my site model, Lynne and Keith Mejstrik

My thesis-sis, Elizabeth Hawkins, for an amazing cleaned up section model.

My fiancé, Nevada Schnatz, for his support and keeping me motivated.

My second year studio teacher, Hung-Tae Jung, for telling me that I would never make it through the architecture program. [I did]