

TRANSCENDING ARCHITECTURE

Contemporary Views on Sacred Space

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Foreword by Randall Ott

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12 ARCHITECTURAL CATALYSTS TO CONTEMPLATION

On the website introducing the interdisciplinary symposium for which this chapter was originally written—a wide-ranging conference titled with the double (maybe triple) entendre “Transcending Architecture: Aesthetics & Ethics of the Numinous,” Julio Bermudez presents the following daringly exuberant claim: “Architecture is called to do a lot more than to guarantee the public health, safety and welfare of building users. . . . At its highest, architecture has the ability to turn geometric proportions into shivers, stone into tears, rituals into revelation, light into grace, space into contemplation, and time into divine presence.”¹ I, for one, am persuaded by these lofty contentions concerning ways that built forms can play a crucial role in, as Bermudez writes, “moving us from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from the profane to the sacred.” But if we aim now for a somewhat

finer point on these bold assertions, how, more precisely, can we describe the relationship between the physical forms of architecture and religious experience?

In this chapter, I will propose three quite different answers to that question—and all that I have to say is predicated on the tensions between these three significantly different ways of conceiving of the relations between built forms and religious experience. In fact, if you are unpersuaded that these are three distinct alternatives, then you are not likely to find any of my comments persuasive. The first, which I designated as the “*theatric mode*,” considers the prospect of architectural forms that provide something like the stage-setting or backdrop for theatrical ritual activities, ceremonial occasions that presumably rouse (or arouse) participants and onlookers to have some sort of transforma-

tive experience. The second reply, tendered under the heading of the “sanctuary mode,” will direct attention to architectural forms that simply provide boundaries between the wider, presumably more prosaic, environment and some special “sacred space” within which worshippers are afforded an experiential engagement with “the divine.” And the third way of conceiving the relationship between architecture and religious experience, which I will term the “contemplation mode,” involves built forms that serve as props for reflection and devotion, that is, built architectural configurations that devotees engage in direct and purposeful ways as objects of sustained, often meditative, attention.

Readers of my *Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture* may recognize these as three of the eleven general sorts of so-called “ritual-architectural priorities” that I enumerate in that work.² In any case, of these three possibilities, it is the third—the one that deals with architecture and contemplation—that vexes me most in the present context; but discussion of the first two can prepare the way for my comments on the third.

THE COMPARATIVE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS AS A RESOURCE FOR MAKING ARCHITECTURE

Attending a symposium populated largely by architectural theorists and, yes, real architects, I feel myself very much a historian, or, more properly, a historian of religions who emerges from that hermeneutical school of thought that most readers probably know via the work of one of my teachers, Mircea Eliade. Operating from that disciplinary frame of reference, then, I should forewarn you that I am much more comfortable talking about what architecture, in various contexts, *has*

done in the past than about what architecture *could* or *should be doing* in the future. Neither ethical nor aesthetic judgments about good or bad architecture, nor prescriptive recommendations about how we can improve our built environment, are, as a rule, part of my scholarly game.

Moreover, while I share Eliade’s generous bent toward all faith traditions, and thus am similarly uninclined to make rulings about good versus bad religion, you will note at several points my willingness to acknowledge that “religion,” broadly conceived, can be an insidious and destructive as well as healthy and improving force in people’s lives. In fact, where Eliade is routinely associated with a “hermeneutics of retrieval” wherein one celebrates the diversity of ingenious ways that people exercise their religious inclinations, and thus he is often criticized for inordinate generosity, this chapter is, in large part, an exercise in the more skeptical “hermeneutics of suspicion” wherein one brings to the fore discrepancies and distortions in the ways that previous scholars have interpreted architectures of old.³ It is, in short, a contribution to—and an interrogation of—the history of ideas about supposedly sacred architecture.

Additionally, in the spirit of self-disclosure, I should note my childhood aspirations to becoming an architect—that is, a person who actually designs and builds something—got me only so far as an undergraduate degree in environmental design before I left (or maybe *descended* from) the world of “making” to that more humble universe wherein historians, critics, and theorists subsist via their second-order reflections on the world-shaping efforts of architects. This symposium has reaffirmed my self-deprecating surmise that architects are real athletes whose creative

performances can engender standing ovations or, on occasion, similarly exuberant boos and brickbats; but historians are only commentators, wannabes, and “wished-they-weres” whose observations are, as a rule, easily ignored by all but their other academic cohorts.

On the one hand, then, my disappointed self-assessment that I lacked the “right stuff” to be an architect has left me with a very lofty—perhaps excessively charitable—assessment of those who do actually design and build things. To be sure, I hold many architects in awe and thus wonder why and how a mere historian of religions made it into this edited collection. But, on the other hand, I also persist with the opinion—or maybe hope—that historians of religions can indeed make a constructive contribution to the world-shaping efforts of working designers, and that hopeful confidence accounts in large part for my great pleasure at being included in a conversation where I feel like something of a black sheep. It is, in other words, my very strong opinion, for one, that we contemporary Westerners, professional designers included, tend to persist with quite impoverished appreciations of all that architecture can do in facilitating a richly rewarding religious life. But, for two, I am also convinced that a widely cross-cultural survey of the myriad of ways that architecture supports, frames, expresses, and enables “religious experience,” again broadly conceived, can provide a very practical resource for working architects, that is to say, a valuable means of mitigating otherwise too-modest evaluations of all that built forms can do to enhance religious sensibilities.

In this respect, I am reminded of a little anecdote wherein an art instructor submits her students to a two-part drawing assign-

ment. First, she asks them to remain at their desks, *imagine* a tree, and then draw it.

Then the instructor requires the pupils to go outside, find a specific tree and draw that.

The contrast between the two sets of sketches is drastic and telling. The exercise in imagination leads to uniformity, an abundance of those proverbial lollipop trees, more simple and symmetrical than any that one can find in nature. The second exercise—wherein the students conduct themselves more like empirically grounded historians of religions who train their attentions on specific cases—leads to vastly more diversified, intricately eccentric, and thus far more interesting depictions of “real trees.” The dual point of the anecdote is, in other words, that our personal imaginations, invariably confined by our personal experiences and sociocultural horizons, remain very limited—but also that those limitations can be greatly alleviated, sometimes even exploded, by more wide-searching observations of what really is out there in the world.

With this appreciation of the richness of historical specificities in mind, I re-echo the comparative morphology of Mircea Eliade insofar as I draw ideas and inspiration from a host of deliberately far-spaced cross-cultural contexts; at the same time, I have, however, taken a special interest in the pre-Columbian architectures of Mesoamerica—that is, the built forms that persist as ruins at such sites as Teotihuacán, Chichén Itzá, Palenque, Tikal, and Monte Albán, all of which qualified in their primes as pre-Columbian cities. And thus, while raising some very general issues and engaging some widely disparate examples, I want to reflect especially on the supposed connections between built forms and religious experience in those ancient urban contexts.

More specifically, to the extent that this chapter ventures a somewhat original thesis, I will be arguing that students of Mesoamerican architecture—most notably, archaeologists and art historians—have had little trouble imagining that these ancient architectural configurations, when they were up and running as pre-Columbian cities, facilitated religious experiences in the first two ways that I enumerated at the outset. That is to say, lots of scholars and commentators have hypothesized (or often just assumed) that these huge stone structures were designed in order to, and seemingly succeeded in working as, either (a) the stage-setting for large-scaled and highly theatrical ritual proceedings or (b) boundary markers that delimited, or marked off, a privileged “sacred place” wherein one could partake of some sort of special engagement with “the divine.” These first two possibilities have been well worked, indeed probably overworked; and I will suggest reasons why that has been the case. The third possibility, however—namely, that these stone formations were intended and utilized as, what I’ll term, props to contemplation—is a possibility that has received, I think, too little serious consideration, at least among mainstream scholars. The impetus for this manuscript was, in other words, a troubled observation concerning the extreme unevenness with which the three modes have been respectively applied to pre-Columbian Mesoamerican architecture, especially the overrepresentation of the theatric mode and the severe underrepresentation of the contemplation mode.

I will explore that disconcertingly wide discrepancy by following the same three-step format for each of the three ways of conceiving the relation between built forms

and religious experience, though allowing greater time and attention for the third. In other words, for each possibility, I will first quickly characterize the alternative in very general terms; second, I will provide a couple of instructively salient exemplars of that heuristic option; and third I will inventory in a succinct fashion ways in which that alternative has (or has not) been deployed as an explanation of the logic of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican architecture. The final conclusions—which direct attention to the very large disparities between the respective ways in which professional scholars and “New Age” enthusiasts engage the ancient ruins—return to the possibility that consideration of these specific cases may (or may not) provide insights and inspirations for practicing architects, including those who are unencumbered by any special interest in Mesoamerica.

ARCHITECTURE AS THEATER: SETTING THE STAGE FOR RITUAL PERFORMANCE

The distinctions between these three alternatives—(a) architecture as stage-setting, (b) architecture as sanctuary, and (c) architecture as props for devotion—are heuristic and by no means absolute. Assuredly, in actual practice, these are, not infrequently, mutually supportive design strategies. Nevertheless, I can present them as three discrete alternatives or three “modes of ritual-architectural presentation,” and thereby appreciate the very wide spectrum of different relations between built forms and religious experience, via consideration of two sorts of distinctions: *inclusivist* versus *exclusivist* experiences of architecture, and *direct* versus *indirect* experiences of architecture (see chart on p. 174).

This first so-termed “theatric” option,

	Indirect apprehensions of architectural forms: <i>Architecture as an ambience for ritual activity</i>	Direct apprehensions of architectural forms: <i>Architecture as an object of devotion</i>
Inclusive: Performative / spectator-oriented ritual events—in which the priority is encouraging wide participation	Theater mode	Contemplation mode
Exclusive: Cloistered, esoteric ritual events—in which the priority is the protection of purity, sanctity	Sanctuary mode	Contemplation mode

wherein built forms provide the backdrop for ritual performance, involves ritual-architectural configurations that are designed to be *inclusive* insofar as the incentive is more often to cajole spectators into involvement than to restrict access to the proceedings. In other words, by contrast to the second “sanctuary” alternative, wherein built forms are *exclusivist* insofar as they restrict access to some sacred place, theatric configurations are expressly inviting, enticing, welcoming, even seductive. The ceremonial proceedings that they support are, by and large, non-elitist and encouraging of widespread participation; these ritual events are more often collectivistic than individualized. Indeed, involvement in these events is, in many instances, mandatory and coerced rather than voluntary and self-initiated.

Moreover, with respect to the second tension, such theatric architectural arrangements enhance the experience of those ceremonial proceedings in an *indirect* fashion insofar as they involve the layout of the stages, backdrops, ambiances, and atmospheres that

enable and support those performative activities. That is to say, by contrast to the *direct* engagements that we will encounter in the third “contemplative” alternative, in this first option, the built forms themselves are not, for the most part, objects of the direct circumspections of ritual participants. In these cases, it would be more accurate to say that people experience *the ritual performances* that the architecture facilitates rather than experiencing the architecture per se. In these cases, the built forms are “working on” ceremonial patrons in *indirect* ways of which those persons are largely unaware.

Furthermore—and this helps to explain the deep ambivalence with which many assess this alternative—it is this theatrical option that draws us most fully into a swirl of subtly interrelated themes concerning not only ritual performance and persuasion but, more specifically, architecture’s and ritual’s relationships to emotion, sentiment, and sensory stimulation. In many instances, expressions of this mode involve the elaborations of pageantry, procession, and spectacle.

Here we are, generally speaking, trafficking in the *affective* dimension of the experience of sacred architecture, the evocation of awe, wonderment, and sentiment. Often loud and spine-tingling in their affect, theatrically presented architectural events, as a heuristic type, are those that work, in very concerted ways, to make an impression, to influence, touch, impress, sway, and persuade the assembled audiences and participants. In these events, where pomp and panache tend to prevail, feeling supersedes critical thinking.

Consequently, and perhaps not unfairly, of the three options, it is theatrical configurations that draw by far the most frequent accusations of both superficiality and manipulation. Often, this means of engaging an audience is assessed as a pandering to emotion, a kind of ceremonial sentimentality rather than facilitation of a “real encounter” with the divine; instead of illuminating onlookers, they are simply aroused, maybe “juiced up” and titillated—and thus the charges of superficiality. Likewise, because this inclusive version of ritual-architectural choreography is designed to grab the attention of even reticent onlookers—in an important sense, to take control of their emotions and thereby rearrange their sentiments and convictions—there is, not surprisingly, a notoriously close relationship between highly dramatic ceremonialism and religiopolitical propagandizing. It is the theater mode that shows best architecture’s potential for suasion, coercion, and ideological realignment, even against considerable resistance.

Thus, instead of deepening insights and awareness, these ritual-architectural experiences often do precisely the opposite insofar as disparities of socioeconomic power are obfuscated and reinforced; often, instead of

enlightening, these events indoctrinate—and thus the charges of manipulation. Among ample relevant cases, the infamously exuberant public rallies of the Third Reich, assuredly “religious” rituals in some sense, provide quintessential exemplars of this mode of evoking attitude-altering experiences. That is to say, this theatrical mode may facilitate the sort of lofty, life-enhancing experiences that many discussions of architecture and “spirituality” are likely to celebrate, but they are likewise prone—much more prone than the other two options—to facilitate those sorts of “religious experiences” that are easily derided as disturbingly propagandistic, politically manipulative, mystifying, even conspiratorial. Here, then, the too-simple presumption that ostensibly sacred architecture prompts only high-minded and magnanimous “spiritual experiences” is quickly dispelled. Architecturally abetted ceremonialism is, to be sure, a resource that can be put to either altruistic or pernicious purposes.

SPECIFIC EXAMPLES: CHRISTIAN DEBATES OVER THE SUITABILITY OF THEATRICAL RITUAL

The highly emotive stagecrafting of Baroque architecture and statuary arguably provides the quintessential Western exemplar of this heuristic option. Nonetheless, for present purposes, a quick appeal to the interminable debate among Christians as to the suitability (or lack thereof) of such theatrical modes should help us appreciate the very mixed—in fact, invariably polarized—assessment that theatrical modes of ritual-architectural choreography spawn. On the one hand, Christians in numerous contexts have embraced highly theatric liturgical celebrations as assuredly the most expeditious means of

making the faith both appealing and accessible, especially to the unlettered; and, on the other hand, there are Christian critics of a more iconoclastic bent who, with equal vigor and certainty, reject entirely the prospect that the essential truths of Christianity can be served via the elaboration of art, architecture, and ritual, least of all via the choreography of emotion- and sensory-driven ceremonialism.

Historical case in point: the competition and interaction between circular and longitudinal European church plans, and particularly the controversy and eventual rejection of Italian architect Donato Bramante's sixteenth-century design for the round rebuilding of Saint Peter's in Rome, illustrate very well a complex play of ritual-architectural priorities and the eventual victory of theater—in this case, liturgical—considerations. In his account of that controversy, Rudolf Wittkower argues that the shift from the basilican cross form to centralized church plans was the architectural expression of a fundamentally changed conception of the godhead that separated the Middle Ages from the Renaissance: the medieval Christ, the "Man of Sorrows," suffered on the cross for humanity and the Latin cross plan was the symbolic expression of his crucifixion; by contrast, the Renaissance Christ was the essence of perfection and harmony, the "Pantocrator," whose truth and omnipotence were best captured in a mathematical architecture of centers, circles, and spheres.⁴ Moreover, Wittkower notes that Christian martyria were likewise traditionally circular in plan.

Thus, whether Bramante conceived of Saint Peter's as an enormous martyrium for the Father of the Church,⁵ or perhaps as an architectural symbol of God's perfection,⁶ his original idea called for a centrally planned

building. In either case, the circular plan was severely criticized as inadequate to the needs of ecclesiastical ceremony: It had no adequate sacristy, few chapels for the worship of individual saints, and, worst of all, no nave, a feature essential to house a large congregation and to provide a suitable setting for opulent liturgical processions.⁷ That is to say, Bramante's plan could accommodate neither the lavish ritual proceedings nor, accordingly, the popular experiential sensations that large audiences could derive from their participation in those elaborate ceremonies. Accordingly, after several attempts at compromise, round symmetry was jettisoned in favor of the Latin cross plan—the most propitious stage to grand processional ritual—that exists at Saint Peter's today.

The resistance to centrally planned churches, in other words, stemmed largely from the liturgical, and to that extent affective, potency that the basilican plan had demonstrated during the Romanesque period. The longitudinal shape, originally borrowed from the form of the pagan Roman basilica, had endured hundreds of years of transformation and refinement to bring it into accord with the demands of Christian ceremonialism, an evolution that perhaps culminated in the third abbey church of Cluny (1088–1130).⁸ Even better than Saint Peter's, in fact, the similarly shaped Cluny church well demonstrates the ascendancy of theater, liturgical priorities insofar as, here, gigantic scale, munificent lavishness, and sublime symbolism collaborate in a longitudinal basilica that was designed, above all, to provide the backdrop for grandiose procession and ceremony. Of the single-minded agenda at Cluny, Wolfgang Braunfels, for instance, writes: "Building was to one end only: the life of the

monks was almost exclusively devoted to the celebration of liturgy, to such long drawn-out services that by comparison meditation and study were virtually, and bodily labor wholly, neglected.”⁹ In the eyes of its patrons and priests, the opulent theatrics of Cluny, honed and refined over several generations, were unprecedentedly successful in evoking the desired flood of emotions; it was a masterful design solution to abet Christian liturgy and thus stimulate a distinct and, in their view, wholly legitimate sort of religious experience. Yet, from other, still-Christian perspectives, the very same agenda was condemned as completely misguided and inappropriate. Among the most articulate critics, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, espoused a radically different arrangement of ritual-architectural priorities and was, therefore, adamant that the ostentation of Cluny was an obstacle to proper Christian spirituality rather than an enhancement. According to Bernard, “the soaring heights and extravagant lengths and unnecessary widths of the churches, . . . their expensive decorations and their novel images, . . . catch the attention of those who go to pray, and dry up their devotion.”¹⁰

Saint Bernard was prepared, it would then seem, to acknowledge that Cluny’s ceremonialism was highly effective in evoking an experience of sorts—but it was, in his view, one that was actually distracting from, rather than in conformity with, the proper ideals of Christianity. He did not doubt that Cluny’s shimmy and splendor incited intense experiences; but it was, in his view, the wrong type of experience. In Bernard’s protestations, then—and even more in his own Cistercian monastic building program (a featured example relative to the forthcoming sanctuary mode)—we are apprised of a wide and very

enduring strain of Christian architecture that strives in a most deliberate fashion to absent itself from the theatrical mode (at least as I have defined it). Embracing plainness over grandeur, intellectualism over sensuality, the design tradition epitomized by Bernard’s Cistercians and their Trappist inheritors—not unlike the great majority of Protestant architectures in this respect—does *not* aspire to foster an emotional sense of wonderment.

Nonetheless, albeit in a somewhat backhanded way, Bernard’s condemnation of Cluny’s ritual-architectural agenda constitutes a very strong affirmation of architecture’s proficiency in educing powerful human experiences and emotions; but it is likewise a stern warning that architecture is even more proficient in evoking sensations that draw one away from Christianity than into the fold. According to Bernard—and, in the broad strokes, a host of later Protestant thinkers—architecture can, when configured in the very different ways that I will address with respect to the second alternative (i.e., “the sanctuary mode”), make fabulous contributions to the advancement of Christian spiritualities; but theatrical configurations—precisely because of their effectiveness in summoning intense sensations and passions—are invariably subject to skepticism and liable to be derided as among the most egregious obstacles to Christian advancement.

In any case, I turn now to the abundant, albeit ambivalent, ways in which this notion of architecture as theater has been applied to pre-Columbian Mesoamerican architecture, a context that provides yet another arena in which to debate the mixed merits of this mode of ritual-architectural choreography.

**PRE-COLUMBIAN ARCHITECTURE
AS THEATER: HEAPS OF
CONGRATULATORY CONDEMNATION**

Irrespective of the usually pejorative valences that accompany the assessment of architecture as “highly theatrical”—or, actually, precisely because of those negative connotations—this has been, assuredly, the most common way in which both lay and academic commentators have made sense of the enormous outlay of labor that ancient Mesoamericans invested in their architectural elaborations. From the Spanish Conquest forward, when confronted by the ruined remains of magnificent processional ways and “pageant-spaces” of ancient Mexico, even those reporters who were usually content with formal descriptions have been swept into imaginative (re)creations of the supposed histrionics of pre-Columbian ritual-architectural performances.¹¹ In the musings of seventeenth-century Spanish Franciscan historian López de Cogolludo, for instance, the long-abandoned and overgrown pyramids of Yucatan conjured simultaneously fascinating and repulsive images of the “horribly exciting” spectacle of Maya human sacrifice, which he guessed transpired atop those tall structures.¹² And for a Spanish bishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Yucatán, Diego de Landa, whose own grizzly orchestrations of sixteenth-century inquisitional ritual-architectural events demonstrated a “superb theatrical sense,”¹³ those same ruins similarly evoked an imagined scene of the “great show and company of people,” which, in his view, must have accompanied the steamy dramaturgy of Maya public ceremony.¹⁴

So, too, in the nineteenth century, British explorer Frederick Catherwood’s imagination filled the still ruins of the Yucatec Maya with “great exhibitions of pomp and splen-

dor,” while his American traveling partner, John Lloyd Stephens, likewise envisaged “the theater of great events and imposing religious ceremonies” that must have characterized pre-Columbian Yucatan.¹⁵ In the heart of the southern Maya zone, the obviously amphitheatric arrangement of the main court of Copán, bounded on three sides by artificial ramparts and low platforms, and on the fourth by a three-hundred-foot-wide stairway, inspired equally graphic imaginings of ritual spectacle and panache: Guatemalan historian and poet Francisco de Fuentes (c. 1700) pictured “the great circus of Copán”;¹⁶ American art historian Herbert Spinden considered that “the plaza [of Copán] is surrounded by a stepped wall as if it were a sort of theater”;¹⁷ and art historian Pal Kelemen, going directly for a parallel to the theatrical Baroque churches of Bernini, described the Copán plaza as “an ideal arena . . . Baroque it is—in feeling, in its complication of design and ebullience of detail, in the dramatic dynamics of its whole conception, in the untrammelled freedom of its execution . . . a ceremony witnessed here must have been immensely awe-inspiring.”¹⁸

By the same token, the long vacant and dilapidated but still sumptuous mountain-top Great Plaza of Monte Albán inspired William Henry Holmes (1895), a typically impassive American archaeologist, to muse that “civilization has rarely conceived anything in the way of amphitheatric display more extensive and imposing than this,”¹⁹ an assessment re-echoed a hundred years later when art historian George Kubler was moved to an uncharacteristic flourish on “the stirring fusion of stone and ritual . . . the sumptuous life of religious pageantry” that must have transpired on the platforms



FIGURE 12-1. THE GREAT PLAZA AT THE ZAPOTEC SITE OF MONTE ALBÁN, OAXACA, A MESOAMERICAN SITE IN THE "THEATRIC MODE." SCHOLARS HAVE OFTEN CONCLUDED THAT THE BUILT FORMS PROVIDED THE STAGE-SETTING FOR DRAMATIC CEREMONIAL OCCASIONS THAT PRESUMABLY AROUSED MANY PARTICIPANTS AND ONLOOKERS TO TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES.

and stairways of Monte Albán, "the most grandiose of all American temple centers."²⁰ And likewise in the Aztec case, even William Prescott (1843), among the first to bring what he termed the "horrid wonders" of Aztec ritual to North American readers, despite his inclination to characterize the "barbarian"

Mexica as superstitious heathens rather than astute politicians, nevertheless imagined the gory showmanship of human sacrifice at the Templo Mayor was intended more for the large audience than for the actual participants, let alone for the deities of Mesoamerica. In Prescott's Victorian prose: "From the



FIGURE 12-2. THE GREAT PLAZA OF CHICHÉN ITZÁ CAN COMFORTABLY ACCOMMODATE THE MORE THAN THIRTY THOUSAND VISITORS WHO ATTEND THE DESCENT OF THE "SERPENT OF LIGHT" ALONG THE BALUSTRADE OF THE MAIN CASTILLO PYRAMID EACH SPRING EQUINOX. SUCH ARCHITECTURAL SPACES WERE SITES OF THE CEREMONIAL EVENTS CHARACTERISTIC OF THE THEATRIC MODE.

construction of [the Aztecs'] temples, all religious services were public. The long processions ascending their massive sides, as they rose higher and higher toward the summit, and the dismal rites of the sacrifice which were performed there, were all visible from the remotest corners of the capital, impressing on the spectator's mind a superstitious veneration for the mysteries of his religion, and for the dread ministers by whom they were interpreted."²¹

The romantic excesses of Prescott notwithstanding, state-of-the-art excavation and interpretation of the Aztecs' Templo Mayor have done little to dispel his vision either of the lushness of the ceremonial theatrics or of the inclusively public character of the proceedings. Ethnohistorian Johanna Broda, for instance, explains how each successive Aztec ruler enlarged the Templo Mayor, not in its entirety but particularly in a fashion that produced an increasingly spectacular frontal view;²² it was appearances that mattered most. Moreover, Broda recounts how, in the wake of each remodeling, selected lords of allies and enemies alike were then invited—or, more properly, forced—to witness extravagant inaugurations that began with displays of the architectural embellishments and tributes of luxury goods from the conquered provinces and then climaxed in massive human sacrifices of captives from resisting populations.²³ Likewise, historian of religions David Carrasco has also emphasized that the Aztecs' Templo Mayor ceremonials were, among other things, spectacular "dramas of intimidation" wherein motion, color, sound, and gesture were all choreographed with a very specific audience in mind: "The ritual extravaganza was carried out with maximum theatrical tension, paraphernalia

and terror in order to amaze and intimidate the visiting dignitaries who returned to their kingdoms trembling with fear and convinced that co-operation and not rebellion was the best response to Aztec imperialism."²⁴

In sum, then, with respect to this first option, there is a surfeit of commentators—and, believe me, I could assemble many more—for whom the notion of highly emotive, lavishly orchestrated public ceremony provides the most obvious way of (re)conceptualizing the design logic that led to these huge pre-Columbian urban complexes. That is to say, rather than overlooking the prospect of architecture as theater, that notion provides the default hypothesis for what was happening when these ruins were in full operation as living cities. But there is also a deep ambivalence in those assessments. On the one hand, ancient Mesoamericans are praised and congratulated for their triumphs in ritual-architectural showmanship. In that technical respect, pre-Columbian architects win enthusiastic commendations for demonstrating a skill at ritual-architectural choreography that rivals, or perhaps even exceeds, that of Cluny or Bernini.

On the other hand, however, those approbations are invariably laced with even stronger negative evaluations insofar as the Aztecs' and Mayas' proficient preoccupation with glitzy and gory ritual is utilized as among the surest signs of their barbarity. Not unlike Saint Bernard's judgment that the refinement of Cluny's ceremonial dramaturgy actually signaled superficiality and misplaced priorities, assessments of ancient Mesoamericans as ritual showmen of the highest order is a version of praise that actually eventuates in a condescending dismissal of their culture and religion. Imagining these great urban

complexes as, first and foremost, “theaters of intimidation,” wherein shock-and-awe ritual strategies—most notably, dramatically staged human sacrifices—prevailed, allows one to dismiss the ancient Indian rulers as self-serving totalitarians and the native masses as superstitious, easily manipulated pawns to their leaders’ ritual-architectural propaganda. In short, the pervasive focus on the theatrical quality of Mesoamerican architecture leads to (or arises from) deeply ambivalent assessments that their design initiatives are spectacular but not sophisticated, provocative but not profound, stirring but not subtle.

In any case, I will have more to say concerning the forces that underlie this frequency with which pre-Columbian architecture has been interpreted as an expression of primarily theatrical incentives; but let me first turn toward the second way of conceiving the relationship between built forms and religious experience—namely, architecture as sanctuary.

ARCHITECTURE AS SANCTUARY: DELIMITING CONTROLLED AND SACRED SPACES

A second, much less ambiguous way of conceiving of the relationship between built forms and religious experience—a very widely recognized option that I address under the rubric of “architecture as sanctuary”—depends upon the demarcation of a “threshold,”²⁵ that is, a boundary, limit, frontier, or picket between, in Eliadean terms, two “modes of being”—between “a profane outside” and “a sacred inside.”²⁶ In the emblematic case of a walled city or compound, for instance, Eliade contends that outside one may have the not-altogether-rewarding sensation of the ordinary and mundane, of

chaos, confusion, and danger; but to be inside opens the possibility of experiencing the security, “reality,” and “being” that come only via accessibility to “the Sacred.”²⁷

As privileged places that open the way to privileged experiences, sanctuary shelters and enclosures have the appearance, however illusory, of perfection, if only within tightly circumscribed boundaries. Historian of religion Jonathan Smith, for example, directs attention to what is distinctive about this second alternative when he argues that a crucial feature of a sanctuary space is not some qualitatively different ontological status but rather that it has been “marked off” and then carefully groomed with such deliberation and meticulous order that nothing random or insignificant is allowed to remain. And, as Smith explains, that exclusion of disorder and distraction has a salient experiential effect: “When one enters a temple, one enters marked-off space (the usual example, the Greek *temenos*, derived from *temno*, ‘to cut’) in which, at least in principle, nothing is accidental; everything, at least potentially, demands attention. The temple serves as a focusing lens, establishing the possibility of significance by directing attention, by requiring the perception of difference. Within the temple, the ordinary (which to any outside eye or ear remains wholly ordinary) becomes significant, becomes ‘sacred,’ simply by being there.”²⁸

This option, then, which engenders none of the ambivalence associated with the theatrically staged ritual-architectural events, may seem, at first, to be essentially synonymous with many generic conceptions of “sacred space.” Again, however, the distinctions between (a) inclusivist versus exclusivist and (b) direct versus indirect experiences of

architecture can be useful in appreciating sanctuary as an option different from either the so-termed theatric or contemplative modes. Unlike the embracing, *inclusivist* pageant spaces and public spectacles typically associated with the theatric mode, the delimitation of a sanctuary space is invariably characterized by a measure of *exclusion* and restricted access. Instead of persuading even reticent onlookers into involvement, often by appeals to emotion, sanctuary configurations are designed to guard the integrity of the occasion by limiting involvement to some select socioreligious contingency. Sanctuary spaces fence in and fence out, thus blocking access, insulating, and protecting the sanctity, or maybe insidious secrecy, of the ceremonial (or perhaps not-so-ceremonious) proceedings.

Nonetheless, the architecture in theatrical configurations works on ritual participants in largely *indirect* ways that are effective irrespective of worshippers' self-conscious awareness of the built forms. In sanctuary configurations, people are really experiencing the space delimited by the architecture rather than the constructed features themselves. Unlike contemplation modes, to which I will turn next—that is, circumstances wherein worshippers engage the physical forms of architecture in *direct* and purposeful ways—sanctuary spaces facilitate religious experience *indirectly*, by creating an environment of special possibility. As a heuristic possibility, the so-termed sanctuary mode, like the theatric mode in this respect, is *not* concerned with the presentation and apprehension of actual objects of devotion but instead with the construction of a ritual ambience, a background or setting that can then serve to facilitate any number of very different sorts of subsequent ceremonial and/or meditative

proceedings. Even immediately after an event within such a controlled space, however, again not unlike many theatric arrangements, worshippers may have considerable difficulty in describing in any detail the physical aspects of the environment. Sanctuary configurations, which frequently do little more than demarcate between a prosaic outside and a sacred inside, often succeed by their inconspicuousness.

SPECIFIC EXAMPLES: JEWISH SYNAGOGUES, ROMAN ARCHITECTURE, AND CISTERCIAN MONASTERIES

Though this alternative is straightforward enough not to require great elaboration, three brief cases exemplify architectural programs that explicitly eschew more ambitious roles in favor of the modest function of differentiating a sacred inside from profane outside. In the first case, Jews, consonant with their celebrated iconoclasm, are, however (in) appropriately, sometimes awarded credit as “the first to voluntarily assemble to erect a structure for prayer and study, *and not to house a visible God.*”²⁹ Though claims both to chronologic priority and drastic discontinuity with past practice are overstated, according to this argument, the architecture and institution of the synagogue (from the Greek word meaning “assembly” or “assembling together”), which arose largely in response to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, was, in spirit and use, the very opposite of the ancient Near Eastern temple or, for that matter, of the tabernacle and the Jewish temple of earlier times.³⁰ Instead of symbolic “Houses of God” designed to signal the glory of the Almighty or cultic centers designed to facilitate ritual sacrifices, synagogues were

originally conceived simply as meetinghouses for prayer—that is, sanctuary spaces—the efficacy of which depended neither on any specific physical form nor location. Entirely different from Cluny’s evocation of highly emotive “religious experiences” via splendid ceremonialism, synagogues were designed to cultivate the sort of intellectualized “religious experiences” that one achieves via communal study and prayer.

The early synagogue constituted, then, ironically, a special place in which Jews experimented with the possibility that one’s devotional obligations to God could be fulfilled in *any* place, not only in the now-desecrated Jerusalem Temple. Since these structures had more the character of schools than shrines, here the architecture was called upon to do considerably less; the design agenda was more modest. Instead of marking the site of some hierophanic manifestation of God or even the place of some fateful event in Jewish sacred history, synagogues were located wherever there was a community of Jews, providing, in a sense, a kind of “portable fatherland.”³¹ Moreover, unlike most exhortative, inclusivistic, theatrically arranged ritual contexts, there was little attempt to beckon or even allow the involvement of outsiders. Likewise, the notion that worshippers would meditate directly upon the actual architectural features (as in the contemplative mode, to which I turn next) was repugnant to iconoclastic Jews. And furthermore, unlike most propitiatory exercises in buildings wherein one expects some sort of “cosmic compensation” for undertaking the labor and expense of erecting religious structures, both the synagogue’s visual appearance and mode of construction (or often simply the expropriation of an existing construction) were largely

inconsequential so long as the congregation was, in the end, afforded a safe interior space in which to study the Torah, pray, and foster a sense of community in Diaspora.

A second, similarly strong demonstration of the historical ascendancy of the sanctuary mode—and thus of a building agenda of containment, control, and exclusion—though stimulated by quite different sociocultural forces, comes in Vincent Scully’s account of the transition from Hellenistic to a radically divergent tradition of Roman building.³² In Scully’s view, the Classic Greek temple was outstanding both for its reciprocal relationship with nature, its “outward-looking design” as he terms it, and for its sculptural representation of the abstract attributes of specific deities, say, Hera, Demeter, Artemis, or Aphrodite. While wide-open in a certain respect, Classic temples provided virtually no sheltering space and thus served less as “ritual contexts” per se into which officiates and worshippers entered than as sculpture-like objects of meditation and reflection, in Scully’s phrase “articulated sculptural bodies,” which were viewed and appreciated from outside. In that respect, then, the experience of Classic Greek temples instantiates the sort of direct engagement of built forms characteristic of the contemplative mode.

The incentives and uses of Roman building were, however, Scully argues, profoundly different in virtually all important respects. Instead of an intimate integration of architecture and nature wherein apprehensions of the built forms were inseparable from those of the features of the landscape, Roman builders, generally speaking, aimed for complete disconnectedness from the landscape—that is, for the creation of highly restrictive sanctuary spaces. “Roman theaters, like those at

Orange in southern France and Aspendos in Asia Minor,” Scully explains, “were intended, like most Roman buildings, to provide an enclosed experience totally shut away from the outside world.”³³ In a military empire like that of Rome, then, the objectives of security and dominion ascended to priority even in the realm of explicitly religious architecture so that, unlike the Classic Greek temple’s sculptural analogy to the attributes of a deity, the Roman temple was rigidly symmetrical, logical, self-sufficient, and bastioned.³⁴ Again venturing to accomplish somewhat less (religiously speaking) with the actual built forms, the fabric of the Roman structure was no longer itself holy; it, like the Jewish synagogue, simply enclosed space—and thereby provided an ambience for the cultivation of a more thoughtful than emotive version of religious experience.

Third, while all monasteries are pertinent to this discussion, the building agendum of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and his Cistercians provides the consummate exemplar of what I am terming the sanctuary mode. Bernard is especially instructive, first, because of his explicit, fully informed, and vehement rejection of the similarly Catholic logic that had eventuated in the opulent decoration, sculpture, stained glass, and towers of Cluny; he rejected, in other words, the appropriateness of decidedly theatric modes of ritual-architectural presentation. Even more famously well documented and equally adamant (though somewhat qualified) is Bernard’s patent dismissal of the anagogical Gothic machinations of his contemporary, Abbot Suger, whom I will discuss momentarily in connection with contemplation modes.³⁵ Not only was Bernard certain that Christian ritual-architectural agenda should

not be working to further the socioeconomic interests of the state, nor was he favorably disposed to the notion, which Suger among many promulgated, that a Christian church building could serve in some tangible sense as “the house of God.”³⁶

Alternatively, Bernard, in formulating the design of Cistercian communities, imagined that a church building ought to be first and foremost an oratorium, the place of the soul’s communion with God, a kind of sanctuary within a sanctuary insofar as he believed also that the entire monastery complex ought to be a pristine, autonomous refuge wherein all energies were enlisted in perfect conformity to the Rule of Saint Benedict.³⁷ Life in the Cistercian cloister was to be an image and foretaste of paradise, an ideal that Bernard termed “*paradisus claustralis*.”³⁸ The monastic ideal espoused then and now required a lifestyle of compromiseless devotion to God: “Everything in our life tends to protect us from the turmoil of the world and of our passions, to guarantee us solitude of the spirit, the heart and the will, in order that our monasteries may be sanctuaries of silence filled with the fragrance of prayer.”³⁹

To achieve that ideal, then, unlike the overtly politicized ritual-architectural agenda of Abbot Suger, Bernard (who was by no means oblivious to the wider, worldlier ramifications of his plan of action) opted for a monochromatic architecture of simplicity and geometrical clarity. Instead of stimulating the senses, he aspired to austere architectural configurations that would quiet them; instead of winning converts, his more exclusivist approach aimed to facilitate the ideals of poverty, retreat from the world, and a renewed spirit of Benedictine regulation. It is ironic, then, but perhaps not too surprising,

that Bernard's economical plan for Clairvaux won sufficient acclaim that it was repeated in some 742 Cistercian monasteries, virtually all of which were located at similarly remote rural sites—and while visitors to these monasteries may well feel a kind of stirring of emotion, in principle, the built forms are not doing anything more than delimiting a space in which dedicated and disciplined Christians can undertake their fully clearheaded engagements with the divine.

**PRE-COLUMBIAN ARCHITECTURE
AS SANCTUARY: WIDESPREAD
NONCONTROVERSIAL
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

As an explanation for the logic of numerous features of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican ritual-architecture design, the sanctuary mode has been invoked with only somewhat less regularity than the theatric option—though I should note, with none of the ambivalence that is associated with ritual-architectural dramaturgy. To the contrary, this is a heuristic possibility that anthropologists and religionists working in nearly every cultural context have recognized, and there has been no reason to suspect that ancient Mesoamericans would stand as an exception to the apparently universal urgency for clearly partitioning the exceptional from the prosaic in every architectural medium and scale. It is, quite plainly, what people do. In fact, while there may be vigorous disagreement as to whether the devotional activities that Toltecs, Aztecs, and Mayas undertake within their sanctuary spaces are best characterized as astute, vulgar, or simply specious, there is virtual unanimity that the meticulous delimiting of specific zones in which to conduct those ritual exercises is entirely healthy and

normal. Accordingly, a very brief sampling of the abundant observations relative to the sanctuary option should be adequate to signal the widely acknowledged diversity and ingenuity with which pre-Columbian designers pursued this mode of ritual-architectural presentation.

Perhaps the most elemental strategy for acknowledging specially sacred places amidst the wider environment is the expropriation of some sort of natural sanctuary, most obviously, a cave, or “a womb of the earth” as they are so often conceived; such places are alluring already by virtue of seemingly inherent cosmological or mythological significance. The spectacular system of underground passageways at Balankanche near Chichén Itzá is but one of countless examples wherein ancient Mesoamericans co-opted natural caves as ritual-architectural “sanctuaries” with the confidence that such caverns are intrinsically potent places wherein the efficacy of their ritual propitiations would be greatly intensified.⁴⁰ Likewise, very common are those circumstances in which the sanctity and potent rebirth symbolism of entering and exiting a cave is architecturally (re)created quite apart from any natural cavern. The abundant cave-like “earth monster” temples of the Rio Bec-Chenes area with their face-like facades and tooth-lined doorways, a luridly elegant effect that Paul Gendrop describes as “mythical surrealism,” provide one large set of exemplars;⁴¹ and art historian Richard Townsend comments, for instance, on the sense in which the Mt. Tlaloc temple enclosure in the mountains outside the Aztec capital was “a diagrammatic womb of the earth, containing the source of water and regenerative forces,” an artificial sanctuary configured to resemble a natural one.⁴²

Though the incentive to build cave-like structures eventuated in many very elaborate constructions, other Mesoamerican sanctuary configurations are of the most unextravagant and transient sort. Bishop Diego de Landa, for instance, provides the quaint example of four sixteenth-century Maya priests holding a rope to tether off a temporary sacred context for the performance of the *emku* or Yucatecan coming-of-age ceremony;⁴³ and Karen Bassie-Sweet contributes the parallel southern Maya case of a “tying dance” at Copán wherein a cord was apparently stretched around four inner columns, presumably in order to form “a quadrilateral space just as the deities tied off the quadrilateral world.”⁴⁴ That is to say, from a Maya view, even the gods are inclined to exercise this version of spatial planning.

Other Mesoamerican expressions of this mode involve only slightly more elaborate and lasting structures that serve as preparatory refuges, that is, transitional spaces to which ritual celebrants retreat for a matter of hours, days, or even months, either to cultivate a sense of renewal or, in other cases, to purify themselves in advance of their participation in the main ritual event. Bishop Bartolomé de las Casas, for instance, reported that the highland Mayas in Guatemala were “accustomed to separate from their wives and take up residence in special men’s houses near the temples for 60, 80, or even 100 days before some great festival”; and, in the same vein, Landa observed that before major ceremonies in Yucatan, “all had to sleep, not in their homes, but in houses which for the time of the penance were near the temples.”⁴⁵

Along with these temporary and transitional sanctuary spaces, there is, of course, a plethora of larger and more substantial

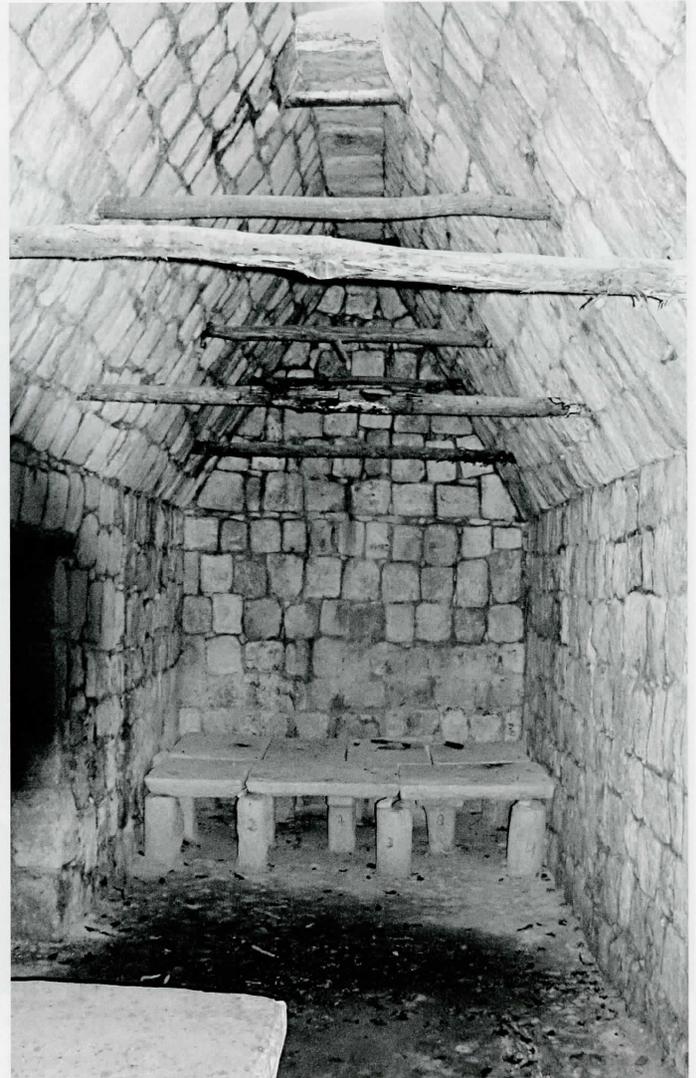


FIGURE 12-3. MESOAMERICAN ARCHITECTURE, WHILE LARGELY DEVOID OF LARGE INTERIOR SPACES, DOES FEATURE COUNTLESS WINDOWLESS AND NARROW STRUCTURES SUCH AS THIS MAYA BUILDING IN THE INITIAL SERIES GROUP AT CHICHÉN ITZÁ, CHARACTERISTIC OF THE “SANCTUARY MODE.” IN THIS SACRED SPACE, WORSHIPERS COULD ENGAGE WITH “THE DIVINE.”



FIGURE 12-4. CONFIGURATIONS LIKE THE SUNKEN PATIO AT MONTE ALBÁN INSTANTIATE THE MUTUALLY SUPPORTIVE DESIGN STRATEGIES OF THE SANCTUARY MODE AND THE THEATRIC MODE. ALL WHO ASSEMBLE WITHIN THE RECESSED PLAZA ARE URGED TO TRAIN THEIR ATTENTIONS ON RITUAL PERFORMANCES THAT OCCUR ON THE CENTRAL PLATFORM.

expressions of the need to control and restrict access. Archaeologists working at nearly every site comment on walls and gateways that, while ostensibly serving military purposes, invariably functioned also—not infrequently, *only*—to differentiate in very clear ways between profane and sacred spaces. Monte Albán, for instance, is just one of numerous ancient cities wherein an extensive system of walls apparently served both as very practical fortifications and as symbolic dividers between the rigorously controlled urban space and the wider, wilder surroundings. Additionally, to cite an even more ingenious ritual-architectural means of differentiating that which is normal (or profane) from that which is special (or sacred), the pre-Hispanic designers at work in the lush tropical forests of southern Mesoamerica relied on blocky monumental forms accentuated by rigid straight lines and bright colors, which, as Broda explains, “created an artificial order in contraposition to nature; [such design tactics] imposed a new structure, a ‘human order’ upon the ‘natural order.’”⁴⁶

Finally, while carving out refuges and controlled spaces may appear at first a means of *disengaging* from social conventions and hierarchies, scholars are likewise quick to note even more Mesoamerican instances in which sanctuary configurations work to reinforce and perpetuate the status quo. In the simple two-room plan of the pre-Hispanic Zapotec *yohepèe*, for example, literally the “house of *pè*” (i.e., of wind, breath, or spirit), the outer room that one encounters first at the top of the stairway entrance was open to anyone who wished to make an offering; the actual sacrifices, however, were performed on an altar called the *pecogo* or *pe-quie* (the stone of *pè*) in a second, “more sacred” room to which no lay-

person was ever admitted, but that the priests rarely left.⁴⁷ At the scale of whole settlements, Landa describes the concentric arrangement of sixteenth-century Yucatecan Maya villages, like Mayapan for instance, wherein there was an unmistakable correlation between levels of social prestige and access to the sacred center: “The houses of the lords and priests [were at the center of the city, near to the temples], and then those of the most important people.... [Then] came the houses of the richest and those who were held in highest estimation nearest to them, and at the outskirts of town were the houses of the lower class.”⁴⁸

Robert Carmack likewise describes a pre-Columbian sociospatial circumstance in the Quiché Maya capital of Uatlán in Guatemala wherein residents’ social identities were defined in a fully public way by the structures that they could or could not enter: “Buildings occupied by the lineages became as important symbolically as the lineages themselves—hence the name *nim ja* (‘big house’) as the general term for lineage.”⁴⁹ In short, controlled access to architectural spaces and access to social influence were mirror reflections of one another.

To summarize then, in ancient Mesoamerica, just as in virtually all traditional contexts, the utilization of architecture simply as a means of containment and controlled access has been undertaken with diversity, ingenuity, and great frequency—and those efforts have been widely acknowledged. By contrast to theatric modes, sanctuary configurations are *exclusionist* (not inclusionist) insofar as they fence out “profane” distractions, unsuitable people included, and thereby “mark off” an ambience of possibility in which devotees are allowed, so long as they do their worshipful part, an engagement with the

exceptional and “sacred”; but, by contrast to the so-termed contemplation mode (to which my attention now turns), the built forms in these cases contribute to religious experiences only *indirectly*. In sanctuary configurations, the physical elements are called upon to do little more than cordon off a zone of purity and perfect order, in short, to distinguish an inside from the outside. Thus, instead of either congratulations or condemnations, the Mesoamerican demarcation of sanctuary spaces has been assessed, by and large, as neither deficient nor outstanding; it is simply par for the course, if you will. Probably because such sanctuary configurations afford art and architecture the sort of modest and indirect role in facilitating religious worship that even Protestant skeptics of ritual can accept; pre-Columbian exercises of this mode evoke no accusations of superficiality, superstition, or heathenism. This is, by far, the least controversial of the three options.

At any rate, consider now another more vigorously contested alternative in which the demands and expectations of architecture’s role in the cultivation of religious experience are both more direct and far more grandiose.

ARCHITECTURE AND CONTEMPLATION: PROVIDING DIRECT CATALYSTS TO SPIRITUAL ASCENT

In Puebla, a state in central Mexico famously abundant with spectacularly tiled, carved, and stuccoed colonial churches, two modestly sized but stupendously decorated exemplars stand out: Santa María Tonantzintla and Santuario San Francisco Acatepec.⁵⁰ Both reflect the paired efforts of Spanish architects and indigenous craftsmen. As though the winners in some tournament to create

the most crowdedly ornamental facades and surfaces, the interior of each of these small nineteenth-century churches features literally hundreds of small cherubic faces scattered through a riot of gold-leafed Churrigueresque decoration in which Catholic motifs are integrated with indigenous ones. Upon entering either structure, the earliest in a chain of sensations is an experience of affectivity as visitors are stunned or surprised by its decorative, histrionic hyperbole. Sitting in the back near the door, one hears an audible gasp from nearly everyone who enters, particularly if this is their first time.

The initial sensation of these Mexican churches, which can be overwhelming, is, then, of that emotive sort characteristic of the experience of the theater mode. But then, very likely (at least in my experience), this very same fantastic array of angelic visages sustains continued interest as the patron’s attention fastens on one, or maybe a series, of the exuberant elements in the decoration as a kind of mandala-like object of meditation. The beholder’s mode of architectural apprehension, the nature of one’s relationship to the built forms, can shift, in other words, perhaps in the matter of a few moments, from that of the theatrical sort to that which is characteristic of what I now consider under the rubric of the “contemplation mode.”

Consequently, where, in the cases considered thus far, built forms contribute to the experience of ritual *indirectly*, either by crafting constructional elements into a stage for the performance and witness of ritual enactments (as in the theater mode) or by providing an environment of distractionless purity (as in the sanctuary mode), my present concern is with a sort of ritual-architectural presentation in which the link between building elements and

worshippers is *direct*, purposeful, immediate, and unmitigated. These are ritual-architectural events that depend on the explicit engagement with, or sustained meditative attention on, the actual physical forms of the architecture itself. The so-termed contemplation mode, in other words, concerns architecture that serves variously as an object of concentration, a prop or focus for devotion, an aid to spiritual exercise or ascent, a support or a guide—in short, a *direct* catalyst to religious ritual experience. With respect to this alternative, we encounter frequently claims that the architectural elements are not just helpful but instead are absolutely crucial in instigating the subsequent religious experience.

Regarding that tension between inclusive versus exclusive modes, the term contemplation, which I am using here in a quite specific if somewhat idiosyncratic way, connotes a whole complex of introspective, perhaps esoteric meditative practices; and indeed, many expressions of the contemplation alternative are, like the sanctuary mode, *exclusivistic* insofar as they restrict access to a minority of largely self-selected, sophisticated, and deep-thinking religious experts. But as the example of the Puebla churches and others that I will cite momentarily demonstrate, even more often the cache of the contemplation mode, like the *inclusivistic* theater mode, is its ability to reach unschooled and less than fully enthusiastic audiences. Thus, where the contemplation mode may find its most glamorous instantiation in highly self-reflective, rarified, and esoteric art-assisted introspections of monks and mystics, this mode of ritual-architectural presentation can pertain likewise in unremarkably mundane, pedantic, and popular devotions—say, direct and purposeful interactions with paintings,

posters, banners, stained glass, statues, stelae, and totem poles, as well as with geometrically decorated floors, domes, and towers. In short, while, by heuristic definition, every expression of contemplation mode depends upon a concentrated, sustained, and productive engagement with the physical features of architecture, this may involve either *exclusive* or *inclusive* audiences.

Likewise, as in the case of the theatric mode, there is, in principle, no reason why “contemplative” engagements with art and architecture could not be put to malicious as well as beneficent and mind-expanding purposes; and recall that Saint Bernard, for instance, speaks for a very large (and otherwise diversified) iconoclastic camp when he argues that art-reliant programs of religious proselytism like that of Abbot Suger’s Gothic cathedral (to be discussed momentarily) involve trade-offs that make them ultimately deterrents rather than aids to healthy spiritual development. The contemplative mode, like the theatric, has harsh critics as well as staunch supporters. Yet, *unlike* the theatric mode, scholarly treatments of this less discussed possibility, as a general rule, display much less of the ambivalence and far fewer charges of superficiality and political manipulateness than do discussions of highly theatrical ritual-architectural histrionics. To the contrary, scholars who train their attentions on this sort of deliberative, “contemplative” engagement with art and architecture tend generally—and generously (maybe overgenerously)—to associate it with personal spiritual enhancement rather than socioeconomic manipulation.

Anthropologist Jacques Maquet, for instance, describes the “contemplative encounter” between art object and beholder as

less methodical, intense, and “radical” than meditation per se, but nonetheless “a special mode of consciousness,” an “insight-oriented process” that is irreducible either to cognition or to affectivity, which participates in the character of meditation insofar as it entails a “disinterested engrossment.”⁵¹ Philosopher of aesthetics Harold Osborne argues similarly that purposeful encounters with art and architecture invariably entail a “weakening of the ego,” “nonattachment,” or a “reduction of self-interest.”⁵² These contentions that, to an important degree, “selflessness makes contemplation possible and thus is reinforced by contemplation,”⁵³ likewise accord with Hans-Georg Gadamer’s notion that the “productivity” of such deliberative encounters with art and architecture is largely contingent on a measure of self-abandonment and acceptance of vulnerability as one enters “the closed world” of the work, accepts the wager that the situation offers, and thus commits to abiding by rules that may be less than pleasant.⁵⁴ And art historian David Freedberg puts a similarly affirmative, apolitical spin on what he terms “image-assisted meditation” when he writes that “the aim of this kind of meditation is to grasp what is absent, whether historical or spiritual. It is predicated on the view that since our minds are labile, meditation profitably begins in concentration. By concentrating on physical images [or perhaps on an architectural form], the natural inclination of the mind to wander is kept in check, and we ascend with increasing intensity to the spiritual and emotional essence of that which is represented in material form before our eyes—our external eyes and not the eyes of our mind.”⁵⁵

In short, albeit an imperfect generalization, scholars who devote serious attention

to the so-termed contemplation mode (irrespective of whether or not they use that precise term) have tended to assess these sorts of engagements with built forms, whether deservedly or not, as signs of spiritual sincerity, sophistication, and even selflessness—a positive affirmation that, I’ll opine in the following discussion, accounts in large part for the very oddly skewed application of this alternative to pre-Columbian Mesoamerican architecture. But before turning to that context, consider first a couple of famously pertinent cross-cultural examples.

SPECIFIC EXAMPLES: GOTHIC CATHEDRALS AND BUDDHIST MANDALA ARCHITECTURE

In a longer chapter, I could provide, for instance, Egyptian and Hindu examples of this same sort of expansive expectation for a very direct role of architectural forms in the enhancement of religious experience.⁵⁶ Even among Muslims, especially but not strictly within Sufi traditions, one finds architecture conceived as a means of “structuring” that facilitates contemplative ascents from “the Manifest” (*Zahir*) to “the Hidden” (*Batin*).⁵⁷ But for present purposes, two very prominent, deliberately far-spaced, examples should suffice to reveal this as a distinct heuristic alternative.

The first is Abbot Suger’s much-discussed deployment of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite’s metaphysical theory of anagogical illumination to the realm of Gothic architecture. As noted, Christians debate at great length among themselves the appropriate role (or lack thereof) of art and architecture in religious devotion. If Saint Bernard represents an especially articulate spokesman for only highly restricted and indirect reliance on

architecture, his French contemporary, Abbot Suger, provides an even more fascinating counterargument via his total confidence that images and works of art can indeed facilitate a “transport from the material to the immaterial,” an assertion that finds its most spectacular architectural climax in his conception of the Gothic cathedral.

Abbot Suger’s innovative design for the abbey church at St. Denis near Paris, often termed “the first Gothic cathedral,” provides the preeminent example particularly because he produced a manuscript that thoroughly documents what he hoped to achieve with his massive twelfth-century building program. Among the most fortuitous documents in architectural history, Suger’s treatise makes explicit both his intention to adapt fully the Pseudo-Areopagite’s anagogical theory to the realm of architecture, and, moreover, his obvious self-satisfaction in having succeeded.⁵⁸ Invoking beautifully expansive language, Suger explains how contemplation of the architectural elements of St. Denis, in this case the precious stones and altar ornaments, lifted him (and, presumably, anyone else who visits there) out of his quotidian boundedness, up to a “strange region” of ethereal bliss, which lies somewhere between heaven and earth. Few statements capture better what is at issue in this presentational mode than Suger’s poetical account of his own personally transformative apprehension of St. Denis:

When—out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God—the loveliness of the many-colored stones has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime

of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner.⁵⁹

Suger, then, like the designers of Borobudur’s massive gilded surfaces and flamboyant narrative reliefs that I will discuss next,⁶⁰ contrived at St. Denis, in every way possible, to construct an atmosphere of sumptuousness and ostentation. The dramatic effect is unmistakable, and there is most assuredly an appeal to the senses. Yet the (anticipated) experience of the Gothic, again like that of Borobudur, is *not* primarily of the affective, theatric sort; nor is it simply a sensation of quietude like that enabled by the hermetic architectural spaces of the sanctuary mode. Alternatively, at St. Denis, the relation between the human and the architectural forms is (intended by the designers to be) more direct. The artistic forms are “effective symbols”⁶¹ insofar as they are specifically responsible for stimulating or triggering a transformative experience—an experience that Suger considered not simply as psychological but, moreover, religious.

Thus, to the extent that Suger prevailed in his grand plan—success and failure would have to be assessed on a case-by-case basis—meditating directly on the shiny surfaces of Saint Denis’s liturgical objects and “altar furnishings,”⁶² or even more famously on the light that filters through the Gothic stained glass, induces a trance-like state, a mesmerizing sensation described by Erwin Panofsky as “spiritual illumination.”⁶³ The constructed elements of the cathedral were intended as, in Joan Gadol’s terms, “referential symbols”;⁶⁴ in Otto von Simson’s phrasing, “objects of mystical contemplation . . . gateways leading the mind to ineffable truths;”⁶⁵ or in Suger’s

own words, “anagogical windows [that] urge us onward from the material to the immaterial.”⁶⁶ Art and architecture are, in this case, not only helpful guides to transcendence; they are indispensable. In fact, for Suger, the *only* route to God is through material things.

A second example, the similarly famed Buddhist monument of Borobudur in Java, depends upon the “architecturalization” of the logic of the mandala. Mandalas, in perhaps their most simple form, are two-dimensional diagrams that represent, at once, maps of the entire universe and of human consciousness itself. Accordingly, the famous mandala paintings that hang in Tibetan monasteries, beyond a merely decorative or even pedagogical function, serve very pragmatically as aids to devotion, or as objects of contemplation. By concentrating on these two-dimensional, microcosmic paintings, Buddhist monks, in a sense, “enter” that world that is represented there, and thus are allowed to “travel” through the larger macrocosm, and thus, in an important sense, to make the cathartic ascent of the mythical Mount Meru, which corresponds both to the center of the world and to the center one’s being.⁶⁷ In Giuseppe Tucci’s Jungian language, these mandalas serve as “the concretization of a psychological state,” that is, as “psychocosmogrammata that lead the neophyte by revealing to him the secret play of the forces that operate in the universe and in us, on the way to reintegration of consciousness.”⁶⁸ In Romi Khosla’s terms, “The initiated *arhat* seeking to realize the mandala is compelled to concentrate upon it and enter within it so as to eventually merge completely with the central deity within.”⁶⁹

Moreover, in addition to these flat, cos-

mogrammatic wall hangings, the mandala concept is likewise expressed in a more explicitly architectural fashion in the layout of the entire Tibetan monastery. Thus, besides contemplating the two-dimensional mandala diagrams, moving through the monastery itself becomes a figurative sort of journey around the universe, or, perhaps, more psychologically speaking, around one’s consciousness. As Kholsa explains, “The Tibetan temple within the compound of the monastery is also a mandala. Just as the disciple mentally enters the spiritual realm of the diagram through concentrated meditation, he too, by physically entering the temple, arrives within a spiritual realm.”⁷⁰

This architecturalization of the mandala concept finds arguably its grandest expressions in the cosmogrammatic monuments of Angkor Vat in Cambodia and Borobudur in Java. Praised as no less than “the most complex and sophisticated conception of deity in the whole history of religious iconography,”⁷¹ the huge pyramidal structure of Borobudur is a monumental vehicle for devotion, the physical ascent of which provides what Tucci would term a “means of psychic integration.” In other words, where “reading” a Tibetan painted mandala diagram—a devotional activity presumably undertaken in a stationary seated posture—requires concentrating on the painting’s pattern and effecting a kind of “liberation through sight” that is typically reserved for initiated *arhats* (or monks),⁷² the analogous, though perhaps more flexibly egalitarian, sort of spiritual transformation that Borobudur facilitates requires that pilgrims literally walk along the circuitous paths of the ninth-century shrine. This devotional exercise stretches the label “contemplation” insofar as the ambulatory experience of the

monument is bodily as well as simply cerebral, and multisensory as well simply visual.

The transformative, carefully choreographed journey proceeds in several stages. At the base of Borobudur, according to Hiram Woodward's interpretive reconstruction, the pilgrim is confronted with nearly two miles of didactic reliefs of the elementary laws of cause and effect, a kind of cautionary primer on the ubiquity of karma. From there, the pilgrim enters a "monster gate" and begins to climb through a series of four corridor-like galleries that encircle the monument, creating spaces open to the sky but otherwise closed off to the outside world. These galleries are lined with life-sized images of the Buddha and with a succession of relief panels based upon the life and enlightenment of Gautama, and on the *Gandavyuha-sutra*, there is a Mahayana text telling the story of the edification of a pilgrim named Sudhana, with whom visitors presumably identify.⁷³ Emerging from this confining space and passing through a second monster doorway, the pilgrim is finally granted an open view of the great crowning *stupa*, encircled by seventy-two smaller *stupas*, each containing an image of the Buddha and, perhaps, symbolizing seventy-two elements or *dharmas* of existence.

Woodward, insisting that the meaning of Borobudur be interpreted against "an international Buddhist context," finds an important analogy between the two main levels of the huge Javanese monument and the two complimentary mandalas of Japanese Shingon Buddhism.⁷⁴ He believes, in other words, that Borobudur actually consists of a pair of superimposed mandalas: the dim lower galleries correspond to the "womb mandala," the real world or the trial, while that the upper open terraces and apical *stupas*

correspond to the "diamond mandala," the ideal world as known by the Bodhisattvas, the reward for lessons learned in the dark galleries.⁷⁵ Thus, according to Woodward, ascending the monument entails a preparatory sort of education, a daunting experience of confinement, and then, finally, at the top, a crowning sense of freedom and exhilaration. Upon emerging into the open air at the summit of the monument, Woodward imagines that "even the visitor who has understood little from the reliefs in the galleries should be deeply stirred."⁷⁶

Though the specific analogy to Shingon Buddhism will not persuade everyone, Woodward's interpretation of the pilgrim's experience of Borobudur does illustrate very clearly the profoundly transformative potential of this sort of monument.⁷⁷ Not unlike the "anagogical illumination" that is accomplished via an engagement with Gothic architecture, pilgrims are "transported" to previously inaccessible awarenesses. Furthermore, Woodward's discussion helps to foreground the specific mechanism of growth and change that is more generally characteristic of contemplation modes of ritual-architectural presentation and apprehension: beyond simply creating a dramatic ambient background (as in the case of theater or sanctuary modes), the reliefs and built forms of Borobudur—like the images in the two-dimensional mandala diagrams—are engaged directly and deliberately. The art and architectural elements are, in this case, absolutely indispensable to the pilgrim's spiritual ascent; the transfiguration of the pilgrim, when the work of the monument succeeds, is not one that could have happened otherwise.

**PRE-COLUMBIAN ARCHITECTURE
AND CONTEMPLATION: COMPETING
BIASES AND OVERLOOKED
POSSIBILITIES**

Consideration of this heuristic possibility as an explanation of the logic of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican architecture has been tellingly sparse and even more tellingly uneven. A scour of the relevant literature for intimations of the contemplation mode turns up infrequent exceptions such as the great German Americanist Eduard Seler who, in the beginning of the twentieth century, interpreted portions of the *Codex Borgia*, a set of Mixtec pictographs and hieroglyphics, after the fashion of a mandala;⁷⁸ and influential British Mayanist Eric Thompson, on occasion, described the intentionally circuitous routes and manipulations of open and closed spaces in Maya planning as a design strategy that recalls the pilgrim's choreographed path at Borobudur.⁷⁹ Neither suggestion, however, received an enthusiastic reception. In the 1970s a handful of scholars—Laurette Séjourné, Irene Nicholson, and Frank Waters—employed Jungian perspectives to interpret Mesoamerican decorative motifs, particularly Quetzalcoatl and the quincunx pattern at Teotihuacan, as mandala-like symbols that functioned as props for psychic unity and reinterpretation.⁸⁰ But their work has been largely (maybe unfairly) consigned to the fringe of pre-Columbian art history.

At present, if still generally ignored by well-established scholars, the view that the renowned pre-Columbian monuments were products of something like an overlooked strain of ancient “Mexican mysticism,” and thus designed as catalysts of direct and purposive contemplation, does find very loud advocacy among those popular writers, that

is, aficionados of Mesoamerican culture who deliberately position themselves outside of mainstream academia. These authors win audiences—often very wide audiences!—in large part by presenting reinterpretations of the ruins that they claim have been either missed or, for more sinister reasons, deliberately suppressed by “establishment scholarship.”⁸¹ In this intrepid and controversial literature, one encounters frequent admonitions that the pre-Hispanic structures continue to stand as repositories of profound ancient wisdoms and, therefore, highly efficacious “props for devotion,” if only audiences have the informed receptivity to capitalize on those architecturally embedded insights. From this free-swinging perspective, neither Abbot Suger nor the designers of Borobudur were one iota more insightful or ambitious than the architects of Teotihuacán and Chichén Itzá.

The still-growing throngs of spiritually inclined visitors who nowadays flood into Mexico's archaeological ruins each spring equinox—these days, every major archaeological tourist site attracts tens of thousands of visitors on that day—testify, on the one hand, to the very wide appeal of these venturesome ideas. That is to say, popular audiences are entirely game to embrace the prospect that these monuments constitute Gothic-like vehicles to transcendence, and thus enduring, still-evocative exercises of the contemplation mode. Yet, on the other hand, professional Mesoamericanists, instead of imagining that this veritable explosion of devotional enthusiasm each spring might actually provide a helpful clue as to the original pre-Columbian usages of these ancient monuments, feel compelled to deride the New Age enthusiasts as ridiculously misinformed and completely at



FIGURE 12-5. MESOAMERICAN SITES PRESENT MANY HIGHLY ELABORATE FAÇADES SUCH AS THE CHAAC-MASKS ADORNING THE CODZ-POP PALACE AT THE PUUC MAYA SITE OF KABAHA, YUCATÁN. THESE TYPES OF ARCHITECTURAL MANIFESTATIONS WOULD HAVE ENABLED WORSHIPPERS TO ENGAGE IN DIRECT, SUSTAINED, AND PURPOSEFUL "CONTEMPLATION."

odds with the sensibilities of the monuments' original builders. To be sure, the chasm between popular and professional interpretations of the ruins is vast, with no sign of narrowing in the foreseeable future.

In sum, then, while conjecture that ancient Mesoamerican architecture was primarily animated by theoric concerns is abundant in the extreme, and while interpretive proposals concerning the sanctuary mode are

as prevalent here as they are in other Western and Asian contexts, the prospect that pre-Columbian architecture presented props for purposeful contemplation and reflection is subject to a striking difference of opinions. On the popular "fringe" of Mesoamericanist studies, the possibility enjoys very strong, seemingly growing support; but within the more professionalized scholarly mainstream, advocates for the likelihood that these

structures were designed to serve as guides or catalysts to otherwise inaccessible spiritual ascents are almost wholly absent.

How can we explain this stark discrepancy in views? What accounts for the great swell of popular enthusiasm? And how do we explain the lacuna of scholarly support? Is this the historical fact of the matter? Were ancient Mesoamerican architects truly uninterested in advancing the sorts of “anagogical” ritual-architectural programs that we observe at St. Denis and Borobudur? Is this design option—which scholars are so quick to discern in European, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Egyptian contexts⁸²—actually irrelevant to indigenous American architecture? Or could there be other forces that account for the weird skew with respect to this interpretive possibility?

Exercising a suitably skeptical “hermeneutic of suspicion,” one has to conclude that the deficiency lies in the history of the scholarship rather than the architectural history of Mesoamerica per se. More specifically, as I move now toward a more general conclusion, I isolate two relevant biases that grow from that academic study of religion’s exceptionally tangled roots in modernity: Protestantism and colonialism. Together, these two biases concerning ritual, contemplation, and art-assisted devotion, I would wager, have precluded a full and fair treatment of all of the ways that pre-Columbian built forms stimulated religious experiences. These two usually unspoken prejudices, intriguingly enough, account for a pair of nearly antithetical attitudes with respect to what I am terming contemplative modes of ritual-architectural design. One reflects the lingering legacy of iconoclasm insofar as it dismisses as superficial all versions of art-assisted worship,

the contemplation mode included; but the second bias actually romanticizes mysticism, and thus issues in an overgenerous, uncritical commendation of the contemplation mode.

In any event, following brief comments on these two competing distortions, I will provide some closing thoughts that return again to this very marked discrepancy between scholarly versus lay assessments of the architectural remains of ancient Mesoamerica.

The Dismissal of Art-Assisted Contemplation: Lingering Legacies of Iconoclasm

There is no denying that the scholarly practices of “comparative religion” have deep and tangled roots that, for better or worse, can be traced to the processes of colonialism, to the Enlightenment, and, more specifically, to certain versions of liberal Protestantism. It is perhaps not too surprising, then, that one pervasive and enduring bias within the academic study of religion reflects that strain in Abrahamic religion, to which I have already alluded, that is never fully persuaded that the merits of art-assisted religiosity outweigh the potentially idolatrous dangers. Though Protestant spokesmen against art-assisted devotion are abundant, the polemical opinions of medieval Catholic Saint Bernard are again useful in focusing on the still-relevant issues. While emphatically dedicated to meditation and contemplation in a general sense, we have noted that Bernard launches diatribes against the luxuriant dramatics of Cluny’s ritual-architectural program (i.e., against theatric modes) that apply likewise to the Suger’s notion that one’s Christian aspirations might require the use of artistic or architectural props for devotion (i.e., the contemplation mode).⁸³ Bernard, in other words, collapses

the distinction between the *indirect* reliance on architecture characteristic of the theatric mode and the *direct* reliance on art and architecture characteristic of the contemplation mode—and then rejects both.

Nevertheless, even Bernard, iconoclast that he is, provides a highly qualified, if condescending, endorsement of contemplative presentational modes by acknowledging their usefulness—but only among the spiritually immature. He says, for instance, that “bishops have a duty toward both the wise and foolish. They have to make use of material ornamentation to rouse devotion in a carnal people, incapable of spiritual things”; but he then quickly explains that, as monks, “we no longer belong to such people,” and, thus, art is necessarily more distracting than inspiring for the contemplative practice of the serious Cistercians.⁸⁴ That is to say, according to Bernard, artistic and architectural elaborations are crutches that might support the naïve and sophomoric, but able-minded grown-ups with more mature religious outlooks should have the good sense to toss them aside.

Modern scholars of religion also like to imagine themselves as “no longer belonging to such people”; and thus they, too, like Bernard, have been wont to lump what I have termed “contemplative approaches” together with theatric ones, and then to dismiss both with the same broad brush as superstitious and unreflectively gullible—that is, the virtual opposite of individuated, self-critical meditative introspection. From that perspective, which is much accentuated by the tacitly Protestant leanings of religious studies and anthropology, art-assisted contemplation of the sorts I just discussed is “ritualistic”; art-assisted contemplation is a kind of lingering legacy of (or similarly puerile parallel

to) medieval, magico-mechanistic delusions concerning the supposed inherent efficacy of sacramental actions and objects.

From this view, then, the orchestration of art-assisted devotion is not a viable religious alternative but rather a sign of immaturity and the “foolishness” of those who are “incapable of spiritual things.” Early students of Mexico’s native culture and religion, such as E. B. Tylor, author of *Primitive Culture* (1871), for instance, were willing to imagine the existence of an evolutionary stage in which native peoples believed in “fetishism,” an outlook that, to the extent that it involves accessing supernatural power via direct engagements with material objects (stones, rattles, carvings, or, by extension, whole buildings), participates in the logic of the contemplation mode. But, for Tylor, native peoples’ adherence to the notion that strategic interactions with material things, architecture included, could actually provide access to “the immaterial” was a sort of childlike error that signaled their standing on a fairly low rung of the unilinear evolutionary ladder.

In the century and a half since Tylor, Me-soamericanists, still more like Bernard than Suger, have remained largely unpersuaded by the proposition that there are indeed nuanced and sophisticated ways wherein art and architecture can engender “spiritual ascents”; and thus, the heuristic option of diagnosing some other culture—especially some indigenous culture—as involved in the utilization of art and architecture as a healthy and mature means of fostering religious insights and awarenesses essentially disappears. Thus, while, as noted, this way of interpreting the logic of pre-Columbian architecture is no less than the dominant explanation among “New



FIGURE 12-6. WHILE EVERY VISITOR TO THE ZAPOTEC-MIXTEC SITE OF MITLA SINCE THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY HAS COMMENTED ON THE AMPLE AND DIVERSE GEOMETRIC DESIGNS THAT COVER MANY OF THE BUILDING FAÇADES, ALMOST NO ONE HAS SERIOUSLY ENTERTAINED THE PLAUSIBLE POSSIBILITY THAT THOSE INTRICATE DECORATIONS SERVED AS PROPS FOR DEVOTION IN THE SENSE THAT THEY WERE OBJECTS OF SUSTAINED "CONTEMPLATIVE" ATTENTION.

Age” audiences, mainstream scholars remain even now very hesitant—I’ll argue, much too hesitant—to hypothesize that ancient Mesopotamians could have been engaging their monuments in the “contemplative” ways that we have described relative to Gothic cathedrals and Borobudur.

In short, while the next prejudice to which I now turn tends to elevate the contemplative mode too high, this first bias—the lingering legacy of iconoclasm—leads scholars to dismiss that heuristic prospect much too soon.

The Romanticization of Art-Assisted Contemplation: Privileging Mysticism

The second bias, which is also endemic in academic religious studies (and even more conspicuous in *popular* religious studies), curiously enough, pulls in nearly the opposite direction and, therefore, mitigates and sometimes overrides the first prejudice. Perhaps counterintuitively, the very same rationalist and Protestant propensities that tend to denigrate theatric modes of ritual-architectural presentation as superficial and meretricious work in precisely the opposite direction with respect to appraisals of contemplation and meditation. That is to say, contemplative and especially “mystical” practices (however vaguely and broadly defined), whether observed in Western or Eastern contexts—because they are presumed to constitute the most highly intellectualized, nuanced, explicitly cognitive, and cerebral strains of those traditions (particularly in contrast to the seemingly basely emotive and bodily character of theatric ritual practices)—have routinely garnered very generous academic reviews. Though often in implicit rather than explicit ways, scholars of religion have invariably judged contemplation and meditation

to be the most “hard thinking,” maybe the most responsibly self-controlled of devotional approaches, and thus the most sophisticated and deserving of respect. Moreover, the (only sometimes correct) perception of such activities as nonthreateningly apolitical and “specifically religious” also enhances this aura of sincerity and discipline; contemplation and mysticism are, in this view, if impractical, at least benignly harmless. Contemplative and mystical practices are presumed to be the abstrusely metaphysical cogitations of spiritual experts, “worshipful” or “prayerful” activities that barely qualify as “ritual”—again just opposite of theatrically choreographed ceremonial events.

There has been and remains, then, on the one hand, ironically, a kind of Western romanticization, sometimes exoticism, of the mentalist introspection associated with contemplation, particularly, but not only, in the case of Asian religions.⁸⁵ Yoga, Zen, Vedanta, and other versions of mindfulness meditation—these are ranked as both the healthiest and most unthreatening of religious practices. Commentators who are deeply skeptical of Christian institutions can nonetheless be enthusiastically affirming of “contemplatives” from Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, and St. John of the Cross to Thomas Merton; many who are wary of mainstream Islam are quite at ease with Sufism and Rumi’s mystical poetry; and lots who are generally indifferent to mainline forms of Judaism nevertheless embrace the esoteric and “mystical” ideas of Kabbalah. That is to say, oddly enough, from a liberal Protestant frame, that mysticism especially—because it seems to correspond most closely to the counterinstitutionalized, personalistic, and otherworldly “essence” of “spirituality”—has enjoyed a special privilege

in the comparative history of religions, which has only lately begun to be exposed and challenged.⁸⁶ In these meditative-mystical practices, according to the presumptions of many academic (and popular) assessments, the superficial differences of cultural-specificity are erased and the transhistorical crux of religion laid bare. Mystical contemplation, so these generous assessments go, involves essential insights that are transcultural and eternal, and thus shareable across the boundaries of time and space.

Therefore, from one solidly established scholarly sight-line, contemplation of all sorts, including where art and architecture are involved, is granted a kind of noncritical, overgenerous commendation. By contrast to the iconoclastic strain that collapses the distinction between theatric and contemplative modes, this mysticism-privileging perspective actually polarizes those two heuristic options: theatrical ritual, especially when highly politicized, is seen as religion at its worst; but cerebral contemplation (including that which relies on art and architectural supports) is, from the same vantage, religion at its best. Where theatrical ritual is condemned as self-serving and manipulative, art-assisted contemplation is, as we've seen, praised for its supposed dependence upon and reinforcement of a "reduction of self-interest."⁸⁷ From this perspective, then, to assess pre-Columbian architecture as an expression of the contemplation mode—something that happens frequently in "anti-establishment" venues but very *infrequently* in the mainstream academic literature—involves granting ancient Mesoamericans an exceptionally high compliment.

CLOSING COMMENTS: MESO-AMERICAN RUINS AS RESOURCES FOR SEEKERS, SCHOLARS, AND/OR ARCHITECTS

In the wake of this chapter's sustained "hermeneutic of suspicion," we can, I hope, begin to appreciate that appraisals of ancient Mesoamerican architecture, even those of the most rigorously academic sorts, have been, in larger part than we might expect, occasions to exercise a whole host of modern Western ambivalences about art, ritual, and mysticism as well as enduring colonialist ambivalences about indigenous peoples. Though most seem quite benign, interpretations of these ruins are, in no case, simply objective and empirical retrievals of a pre-Columbian past. To the contrary, these long-abandoned ceremonial centers—not least because they are accompanied by almost no contemporaneous alphabetical texts—offer fabulously provocative vehicles for imaginative rumination on these (and many other) vexing issues, and distressingly little in the way of resistance. By contrast to much more richly documented European and Asian contexts, the extreme elusiveness of the "facts" about ancient Mesoamerican religion and design have, for better or worse, allowed these ruins to stand as richly provocative and highly flexible resources. The range of interpretations they evoke allows these old buildings to act as palimpsests, Rorschach-like canvases, as it were, onto which Western audiences can project all sorts of complaints and aspirations that may have very little to do with the historical realities of this region.

The spectrum of responses and interpretations that these multivalent monuments elicit—the range the creative and interested "revalorative" uses to which the old build-

ings are put—is exceptionally variegated and indeed ever-widening.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, consideration of the highly disparate views of three sorts of audiences—“seekers,” scholars, and architects—can provide one final means of addressing the very different statuses of the three modes of ritual-architectural presentation with which I began.

SEEKERS: RUINS AS RESOURCES FOR “SPIRITUAL” INSIGHTS AND ENHANCEMENTS

First, by the imperfect term “seekers” I refer to those persons who visit and engage Mesoamerica’s ruins not simply with academic or recreational incentives but with expectations of some sort of “spiritual” enhancement. It is, of course, dangerous and sloppy to generalize as to the attitudes and expectations of the tens of thousands who attend the present-day spring equinox ceremonies at Chichén Itzá, Teotihuacan, and other sites. For many of them, a tour of the ruins is simply a vacation side trip with casual investments akin to thumbing through the *National Geographic Magazine*.⁸⁹ Others, however, are impassioned in the extreme and deeply invested in the “popular literature” on ancient Mesoamerica by authors such as José Argüelles, “the man who first introduced the date December 21, 2012, to public consciousness,”⁹⁰ and Hunbatz Men, the increasingly high-profile and controversial Maya “daykeeper,” a self-proclaimed “New Age” workshop leader and author of *Secrets of Maya Science/Religion* (1990) and *The 8 Calendars of the Maya: The Pleiadian Cycle and the Key to Destiny* (2009).

In these widely read works—which I suspect, at present, substantially outsell more rigorously academic books on the same area—one finds not simply different interpre-

tations of Maya history but a wholesale anti-modernist, antirationalist (or maybe trans-rationalist) critique of mainstream scholarship, which is to say, an explicit rejection of the very premises of “the academic establishment,” which, in the view of Argüelles and Men, is largely blind to the esoteric messages that reside in monuments like Chichén Itzá’s Castillo. These authors are, in the main, critics of positivism, doubters of the entire Enlightenment project, as well as harsh critics of the current consumerist and materialist preoccupations of Western society; and because they imagine that ancient Mesoamericans represent instructive antidotes on both those fronts, their assessments of pre-Columbian peoples are, instead of ambivalent, fully congratulatory, even eulogizing. These authors aspire not only to study the creations of Mexico’s ancient architects but to be replenished by them.

With respect, then, to the first of those two competing biases within religious studies, this popular constituency largely exempts itself from of “the lingering legacy of iconoclasm” insofar as its adherents are, as a rule, completely at ease with the prospect of art-assisted religious devotion. One could say that they find Abbot Suger’s anagogical approach to design far more persuasive than Saint Bernard’s protestations. However, with respect to the second bias—that is, the tendency to privilege “mysticism” as the surest sign of religious truth and sophistication—so-termed New Age audiences are quintessentially implicated. That is to say, this group does all that it can to downplay the political dimensions of pre-Columbian ritual-architectural design; among enthusiasts of Argüelles and Men, one hears frequent and emphatic rejections of the re-creations of the viciously

autocratic, human-sacrificing Classic Maya that one encounters, for instance, in Mel Gibson's 2006 film, *Apocalypto*.⁹¹ Accordingly, on the one hand, these authors almost never make the case that ancient Mesoamerican configurations were designed as the stage-setting for the sorts of highly dramatic, often propagandistic ritual performances that are characteristic of the theatric mode.

On the other hand, however, this popular literature takes every opportunity to accentuate and celebrate the supposed extent to which ancient Mesoamerican priests and architects were no less than mystical savants whose fabulous intellectual and calendrical insights remain available to those astute enough to read them out of the symbolism of their still-standing architecture. Consequently, their (re)constructions of the purported logic of pre-Columbian architectural design invariably and overwhelming presume something like what I term "the contemplation mode." In their view, the notion that the long-abandoned pyramids worked—and can continue to work!—as "direct catalysts to spiritual ascent" is a perfectly accurate description of the still-relevant genius of pre-Columbian architecture. For them, Suger's confidence that Gothic architectural forms can indeed "transport one from the material to the immaterial" is fully transferable into the Mesoamerican context.

SCHOLARS: RUINS AS RESOURCES FOR HISTORICAL AND (SUPPOSEDLY) ACADEMIC INSIGHTS

Second, mainstream scholars, by contrast, though often contentious among themselves, are nearly unanimous in taking issue with virtually every aspect of the New Age stance. In academic critiques, the ideas and practices

of equinox aficionados are decried variously as innocently naïve, insidiously harmful, or simply ridiculous. For scholars versed in the five-hundred-year history of Western ideas about indigenous American culture, the present generation of antiestablishment thinkers may be garnering an unprecedentedly wide following—and one might look to a host of technological and economical factors that enable the unprecedentedly huge book sales and the gigantic crowds at equinox ceremonies—but the current "spiritual" enthusiasm for the ruins is actually just the latest expression of a very long-running tendency to romanticize pre-Columbian peoples. A long view could find precedents in the discourses of "noble savages," which begin with Columbus's arrival in the New World; or, in a tighter timeframe, one could contextualize these current movements in relation to the raft of eccentric and historically preposterous nineteenth- and twentieth-century theories about the Mayas and Toltecs described in Robert Wauchop's *Lost Tribes and Sunken Continents: Myth and Method in the Study of American Indians* (1962) and a host of more recent works on the Eurocentric imaginings of indigenous peoples.

From these critical perspectives, the huge equinox crowds simply represent the newest version of a very old "primitivism" wherein poorly informed, if perhaps well-intentioned, "spiritual travelers" are willing to deploy highly distorted, inordinately romantic depictions of ancient Americans as a means for launching their own critiques against the excesses of modern Western culture and consumerism. Moreover, while most of these "seekers" explicitly differentiate themselves from the churchgoing mainstream, and thus would reject this assertion, scholarly

critics would maintain that these seemingly countercultural equinox enthusiasts are also instantiating a characteristically Protestant, highly individuated, and experience-driven conception of “religion” (which they would rather term “spirituality”); that is to say, New Age practitioners are also unwitting emissaries of the very modernist attitudes toward religion that they claim to reject and disdain. In short, for well-trained historians of religions and ideas, both the protestations and the enthusiasms of these pilgrims to the ruins are eminently predictable.

Consequently, academics may concede that adherents to the ideas of Argüelles, Men, and other venturesome writers deserve scholarly attention—but as a “new religious movement” rather than as reliable interpreters of past traditions.⁹² Scholars insist, in other words, that the ideas and exercises in “ritualization” undertaken by these contemporary spiritual sojourners bear virtually no significant continuity with the pre-Columbian mindsets and practices that they claim to be recovering. Instead, most Mesoamericanists—lots of who are deeply offended by what they regard as the wholesale distortion of the historical record—are adamant that we can learn absolutely nothing from these imaginative thinkers and practitioners about the pre-Hispanic past (or, for that matter, the present or future), a thoroughgoing dismissal that is often leveled with ridicule and sarcasm. Thus, while New Age enthusiasts accuse scholars of being “uptight” and imprisoned by their commitments to rational positivism, academics return the insult by assessing them as flaky and gullible, insufficiently critical either of their own motives or of the historical data. Expect no meeting of the minds between these two camps.

Be that as it may, I hope to have shown that scholarly as well as popular ideas about pre-Columbian architectural design invariably reflect unspoken, often unnoticed, biases and prejudices that have very little to do with “what really happened in ancient Mesoamerica.” More specifically, revisiting the literature with a skeptical-minded hermeneutic of suspicion, as I have tried to do throughout this chapter, has led me to the following set of hypotheses regarding the troubling discrepancies with which academic commentators appeal to the three alternative modes of ritual-architectural presentation.

First, *with respect to theatric modes*, while present-day aficionados intent on accentuating the “religiomystical” (not political) priorities of the ancient Maya deliberately reject this alternative, we nonetheless observe that this has been and remains, far and away, the most prevalent means of interpreting the logic of pre-Columbian architecture. The accounts of sixteenth-century conquistadors and colonial-era Spanish priests routinely accentuated the Indians’ garish, emotion-evoking, and politically manipulative ritual-architectural showmanship, an assessment that provided a dexterous means of simultaneously congratulating and condemning the accomplishments of native architects. Moreover, the theatric mode has endured as the default explanation of pre-Columbian design, so it would seem, in part, because it is an accurate assessment, but even more because it is a kind of backhanded compliment that provides the quintessential expression of what colonial historian Lewis Hanke (and countless others) have identified as an insidiously pervasive Eurocentric ambivalence about Indians, that is, a conflicted admiration and disgust for the native peoples

of New World⁹³—and it is, therefore, worrisome that contemporary scholars continue to appeal with such regularity to this interpretive alternative.

Second, *with respect to sanctuary modes*, a skeptical view reveals that the fairly common acknowledgments—among both scholars and popular writers—that ancient Mesoamerican architects were indeed very skillful and ingenious in delimiting privileged “sacred spaces” within the wider natural and urban environment provides a more modest way of working through conflicted feelings toward Indians. Conceding that they were artful and highly proficient in cordoning off specific zones in which to conduct their ritual exercises is a largely neutral assessment insofar as it allows students of this region, on the one hand, to affirm the able accomplishments of pre-Columbian designers, and, nonetheless, on the other hand, to abstain on the moral (im)propriety of the activities that were undertaken in those spaces. This is, as noted, the least controversial of the three options.

Third and last, *with respect to the contemplation mode*, we discover that serious scholars, unlike their more popular counterparts, have been distressingly (perhaps even increasingly) unwilling to appeal to this explanation. Despite the wide acknowledgment of contemplative modes in the so-called “great world religions” (from which I, too, have drawn my primary examples), academic interpreters of sacred architectures outside those major faiths—that is, among so-called “archaic,” traditional, or tribal contexts—very seldom appeal to this sort of explanation. Here, then, Christocentric and modernist biases are laced with colonialist ones insofar as Euro-American researchers have had particular difficulty in imaging that “indigenous” peoples (long

labeled “primitive” peoples), ancient Mesoamericans included, might have the inclination and/or wherewithal to undertake the sort of deep, abstract thinking required of contemplative modes of ritual-architectural design and apprehension. Native peoples’ ritualized interactions with art objects and constructions have been routinely diagnosed as “fetishism,” a condescending diagnosis that assigns to them a naïve, childlike version of contemplative modes; but, especially since the 1980s, rigorous scholars, unlike popular commentators, have been increasingly reticent to attribute the sort of “mysticism” to ancient Mesoamerican architects that would likewise attribute to them more nuanced and sophisticated exercises of the contemplation mode.⁹⁴

Oddly enough, then, at least where serious consideration of the contemplation mode is concerned, the often reckless ruminations of “New Agers” on Mesoamerica’s ruins might actually constitute a healthy corrective to mainstream scholarship. That is to say, while professionalized Mesoamericanists are vehement—and I’d say right—their scholarly practices and critical standards are drastically different from those of their more popular counterparts, on this particular point, “establishment academics” would, I think, do well to borrow a page or two from the interpretive catalogue of those free thinkers. More specifically, while a large majority of the claims that one finds in the antiestablishment literature are, shall we say, intriguingly unpersuasive, I am persuaded that the so-termed contemplation mode was, after all, a highly relevant priority in the design of many pre-Columbian buildings—a prospect that is, therefore, deserving of much more serious scholarly attention than it has received. Why, after all, when European, Asian, and Egyptian

designers have all made such effective use of contemplative modes of ritual-architectural presentation, should ancient Mesoamerican architects stand as an exception?⁹⁵

ARCHITECTS: RUINS AS RESOURCES FOR DESIGN INSIGHTS AND INSPIRATIONS

Finally, then, I end by quickly revisiting the question of the ways in which these monuments, and my skeptical reflections on the myriad interpretive controversies that swirl around these old pyramids and palaces, might (or might not) be of interest and use to architects and designers. In that spirit, I circle back to the hopeful proposition with which I tried to justify my presence in this book—namely, that observations emerging from the comparative history of religions can serve, among other purposes, as resources for practicing architects, that is, as tools and means of “deprovincialization” that broaden horizons with respect to all that architecture can do in facilitating and supporting religious experiences. And, in that respect, I remind you of my opening anecdote about the paired tree-drawing assignments, whereby I tried to suggest that, to quote myself, “the efforts of imagination are invariably improved by consideration of specific empirical examples,” in this case consideration of the specific cities of ancient Mesoamerica.

But whether or not these dilapidated old buildings, and the interminably debate that they continue to evoke, might really provide some practical insights and inspirations for working designers is not a query that a mere historian of religions can answer. Instead, I leave it to you—the world-shaping architects whom I hold in such high esteem—to answer that for yourselves.