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**Sacredness of nature and interiority of forms.
Contemporary interpretations of the chapel in the woods**

Abstract

Since ancient times, sacred – the unknown and incorporeal otherness with which man tries to establish an intimate comparison – has been felt in places with a strong naturalistic meaning where, usually, the predisposition of the soul to interiority intensifies. In fact, nature – as a metaphorical evocation of wandering, contemplating, seeking, getting lost but also of finding oneself – in its many guises has often been the mystical and idyllic place of architecture, especially the sacred one. The archetype of the sacred wood is deeply rooted in the ancestral imagery of man and architect: from Vitruvius to Alberti, from Laugier to Loos, from Asplund to Tessenow, it is the 'topical' space in which architecture reveals its presence.

Keywords

Nature — Architecture — Sacred — Interiority of Form — Contemporary

In this singular historical moment, man has returned to look for the reasons for his work, to ask himself what is the meaning and the role of his being in the world, to discern and give the right weight to the things that happen to test him. In spite of ourselves, the pandemic experience that the world unexpectedly had to face the last period has awakened us from a condition of dormancy in which we were more or less unconsciously, from that mechanical loop of gestures, actions and daily rituals that every day they absorb us and distract us from the fact that the time of our lives is a limited time. The questioning of the concept of relationship and the denial of any physical contact with the other, for the fear of accelerating the contagion, brought us back to a more intimate and reflective dimension, revealing the human need to relate and get in touch with the outside, perhaps because the space of nature refers to an original and ancestral dimension that concerns existence and the deep meaning of the life. Nature, as an emblem of life that cyclically transforms itself, remind a cosmogonic and universal vision in which a superior order can be traced and that elevates it to human eyes: this explains the reason why, since ancient times, for a lot of peoples from different cultures and traditions nature has been constantly deified and sacralized.

In the features of a forest, a desert, an expanse of water, a mountain or even a swamp, the naturalistic dimension of an uncontaminated space can be the evocation of the metaphysical. In fact, when man is in front of nature, and in it he feels an invisible force that almost goes beyond his human finitude, the soul unconsciously prepares itself to seek some relationship with it: it is in this constant tension of man towards nature that the indissolubility of their bond is manifested. It is then that mystery, which intrinsically hides itself in nature, that it determines the ecstatic condition of man towards it,



Fig. 1
Arnold Böcklin, *Stèle Funéraire*,
1880.

a condition which can oscillate between a cautious fear or deep devotion precisely in those who cross it and experience it directly with body and mind. In other words, the state of mind that man activates towards nature can change between the recognition of its immensity and unreachability, which presupposes an authoritative respect (*ehrfurcht*), to a state of symbiotic empathy (*einfühlung*).

Subject of a strong symbolism, in literature, philosophy and figurative art, the ambivalence with which nature has been interpreted over time, as benign or stepmother, is the result of the different historical-cultural eras that man it has gone through and which, inevitably, have conditioned the way of looking at and deciphering the world. Among the many forms in which nature manifests itself, the forest is perhaps one of the images most rooted in the primitive memory of man. In classical mythology it was considered the Muses' abode, a place with a strong spiritual charge in which it seems that the divine resided. Its double meaning as *silva* (ὕλη) – a place where nature is free, uncontaminated and inaccessible – and as *lucus* (ἄλσος) – a sacred place in which unknown primal and divine forces reside – has influenced not by chance the imagination of many authors and artists who have chosen the forest for the setting of stories and figurations. Therefore, if on the one hand it is an inaccessible and dark place that arouses in man his deepest fears – a mysterious place, an allegory of inner bewilderment, of the unfathomable, of estrangement, of the interior – on the other – because *lucus*, as well as from *locus*, place, it also derives from *lux*, light – figuratively in the sacred wood there is also a reference to the image of the clearing where the light can radiate itself. In the forest, therefore, two opposites coexist, as well as in the desert: even in the latter case there is a double conception of the desert figure that from an iridescent expanse of sand under the scorching sun of the day is transformed, at night, into the purest, clearest and darker manifestation of the celestial vault, an absolute spectacle of the greatness of nature.

Within this intense and mutual relationship between the sacred and nature, architecture also plays its part in the revelation of the spiritual. The spaces built on the basis of this relationship usually emanate a strong introspective charge in those who pass through them, almost as if they already had a sort of natural predisposition to introversion. Renato Rizzi spoke, in this regard, to the concept of

“interiority of form”¹ attributing a character that typically belongs to the sphere of the person – the interior – to the architecture, the city and also to the landscape: a character of serious emotion and transport towards an intimate dimension of the soul that the form induces in man. *The interiority of form* may be the architectural character through which some recent examples that have taken on the task of deciphering the sacred can be read.

Undoubtedly, the chapel in the woods has influenced the imagination of many contemporary interpretations on the theme, the most recent of which is attributable to the Vatican experience of the ten chapels, in the woods of the San Giorgio Maggiore island, for the Venice Biennale 2018. The exhibition, entitled *Vatican Chapels*, was imagined as a widespread pavilion in the woods – to be discovered slowly – a catalogue of contemporary translations of sacredness. In the construction and design of these small pavilions which, at the express request of the Vatican, should have been transportable in the hypothesis of their potential relocation, the designers involved in the prestigious initiative² have mostly tried to express and represent the construction tradition and material of their country of origin.

The chapel is a small place that can have different purposes and destinations: it can be a place of worship or a landing place, for rest or meditation. Since it is not necessarily associated with a specific religious cult, the symbol of the cross was not expressly requested by the Holy See, which therefore also opened up the hypothesis of imagining lay spaces.

As always, the project is (or at least it should be) the transposition of an idea in which we believe and that we try to transmit with architecture, an idea that is mediated through the construction of a space that aspires, in its essence, to become a place. From a comparative reading, the spatiality of the ten chapels are different despite they have some recurring attributes. Wanting to find descriptive categories – also to understand how each chapel manifests the *interiority* of the sacred form – it could be observed how in some cases there is the theme of the opposite *contrast* between exterior and interior; in others the refined combination of *materiality* between space and light; in still others the reference to an evocative *symbolism*; while in others the theme of the essential *archetypal* of the wall.

Referring to the idea of contrast, from a constructive and formal point of view, the chapels by Berman and Fujimori – although both use inverse colours for the exterior and interior – are also, among others, the proposal that come closest to the Asplund chapel: the first, triangular in plan, recalls it in the entrance prelude which reveals a very dark interior in which only a dim natural light penetrates from above; instead the second, with a regular plan, recalls it in the gabled roof realized by wooden supports between which a narrow passage it opens up allowing the entry of only one person at a time.

Referring then to a particular attention to the material aspect of the interior space, Radic has created a truncated conical chapel, with a transparent roof, with concrete shells textured with a pluriball texture, inserted into the formwork before casting. As for the lighting aspect as an essential part of the experience of space, Foster’s chapel – a tensile structure with wooden cladding facing the lagoon – is one of the projects that have worked most in this direction: there, in fact, the experience of natural surrounding crosses the entire space of the chapel in a kaleidoscopic play of light and shadow that changes at different times of the day. Finally, the suspended pavilion of Corvalán refers to the image of a Venetian steel bricola – certainly the least temporary proposal –; even in this case the light is the real protagonist because it defines on the earth, in the shadow of the trees that surround it, a large oculus of light in which, at certain times of the day, the shadow of a three-dimensional cross is projected.

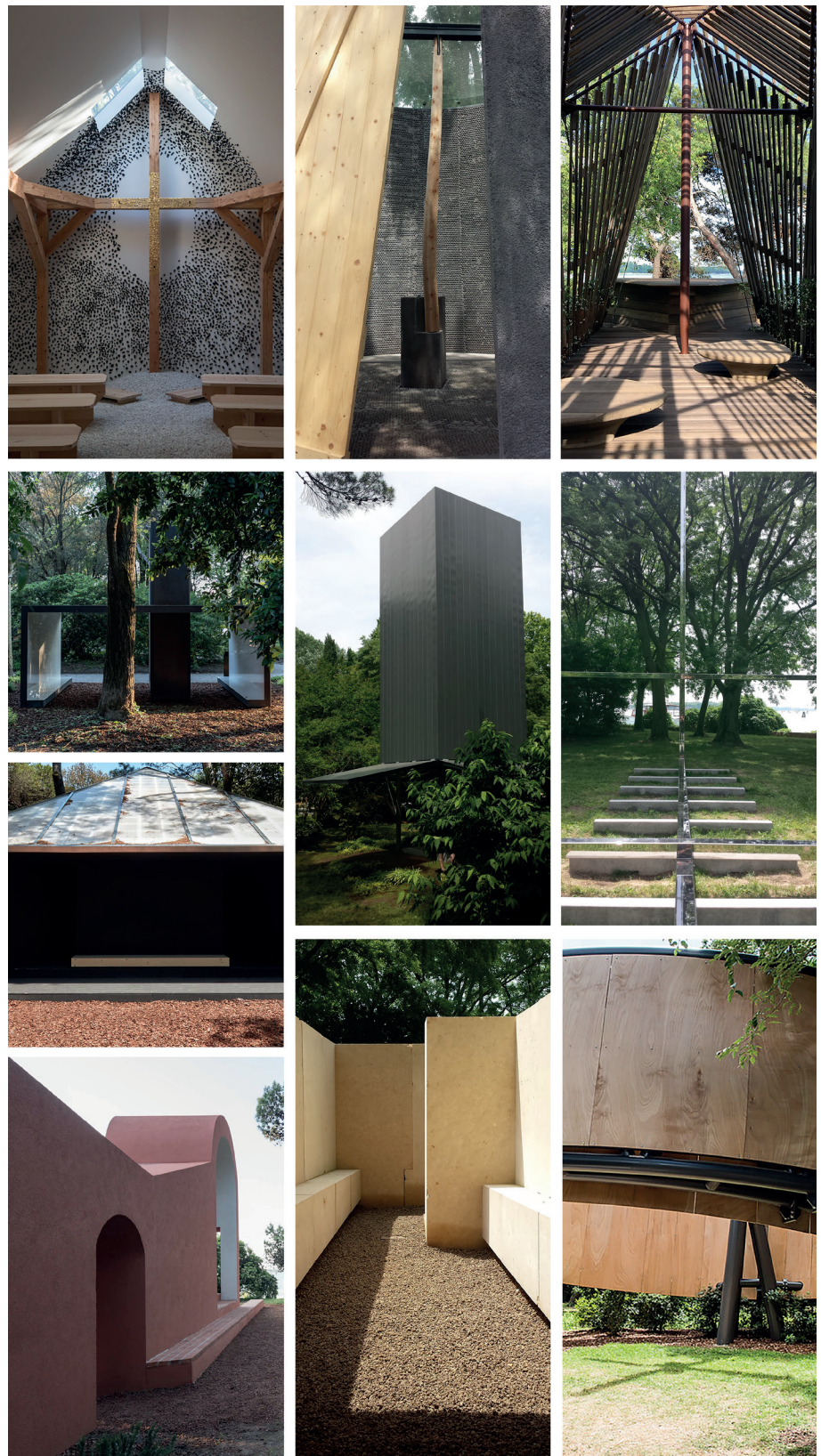


Fig. 2
Vatican Chapels, Venice 2018

The proposals by Cellini and Godsell instead recall, in different ways, the symbolism of the cross in the space concept: while the Roman architect opted for a volumetric intersection of two parallelepipeds with two of the six open sides – also in this case there is the use of opposite colours – the Australian architect has created a square-based prism with a structure of wooden and steel poles whose base when it is open, from a planimetric view, refers to the image of a cross. Juaçaba's project is also part of this

group: with a few but calibrated signs – four mirrored stainless steel beams resting on seven plinths that act as benches – it is created a space totally open to nature where is reflected.

Flores and Prats, on the other hand, have built their chapel in the variable thickness of a wall: on the less thick side there is the entrance slit through which the visitor finds himself in front of a natural gash that welcomes him; on the thicker side there is the space for a niche opened towards nature too and the lagoon, where the lectern is located. Souto de Moura also builds his chapel using a Vicenza stone wall, an enclosure of a trapezoidal space with oblique sides, which envelops an internal space that is collected and shaded by a roof over the altar.

But it is certainly in the relationship with the surrounding nature of the wood that each chapel has made the perception of the sacred ‘concrete’: despite the conceptual, formal and material diversity, each chapel has sought a unique relationship with the nature of the suggestive site which, according to the cases outlined here, it was interpreted by the designers either as a natural cover (in the projects of Corvalán, Juaçaba, Radic, Souto de Moura), or as a scenic front (in the projects of Cellini, Flores and Prats, Godsell), or as a visual goal (in the projects of Foster and Fujimori), or again as an uncontaminated backdrop (in the case of Berman): this is how the experience of the interiority made from these spaces is accomplished. The character of the interior is undoubtedly also present in other examples. Among the many works by Paolo Zermani, for thematic affinity with what is being treated, the *Chapel in the woods*³ is significant because it is charged with the meaning of place through the presence of only three elements – a cross, a wall and a seat – which in plan return to a point and two orthogonal lines. The Parma wood impregnates the scene in which the discreet project is located which, through the incisive essentiality of a few signs, builds an elementary place, a metaphysical space that is in tune with the surrounding nature. The sun illuminating the cross screens its shadow on the wall and on the ground and completes the expressive depth of the Zermani’s project: thus the suggestion of a pervasive experience is fulfilled and through nature it tells of the passage of time.

The *San Bernardo Chapel* of Nicolás Campodonico, located near a small wood near Cordoba, was also born from a relationship of a strong dependence with light: the orientation of the chapel was in fact studied in a way that two beams irradiate into the internal dome of the chapel a shadow that, in the hours of sunset, progressively draws a cross. The space that is created tells the visitor about the passage of time and makes the experience of the sacred – through nature, light and architecture – engaging and unique every time.

Last but not least, the *Bruder Klaus Chapel* by Peter Zumthor, near Cologne, is the emblem of a surprising experience where light and matter define a mystical and ascetic environment in a totally unexpected interior space: here material contrast and spatial experience are states poetically connected: the chapel externally has the shape of a pentagonal prism with a single large access opening; internally, the space, illuminated only by an eye of natural light, is the result of a concrete casting on a formwork consisting of wooden poles of variable diameter, which were subsequently burned for their removal. The dark setting of the chapel, due to precise choice of this traditional local procedure, presents a rough texture inside, almost as if one were inside the barky shell of a tree; in addition, in correspondence with the holes left in the concrete, Zumthor has located some

crystal beads which, when the external light radiates into the interior, become almost like crystallized drops of water, embedded in the surface of the walls.

The experience of nature and the revelation of its sacredness are obviously also evident in many other buildings linked to worship, memory and remembrance: from memorials to cemeteries, from crematoria to mausoleums to sanctuaries. Think of the numerous Italian hermitages and sanctuaries that from their acropolic positions look at distant and silent landscapes that give the viewer peace of mind, amplifying the experience of nature; or to the work of Dani Karavan in memory of Walter Benjamin or to the Monument to the Venetian partisan by Carlo Scarpa or to the suggestive cemetery of the sea in Fisterra by Cesar Portela which is interposed between the land and the sea.

All places dominated by nature are places that by their own vocation, as I have tried to affirm, predisposed to interiority. The singularity of nature which, as we have seen, becomes the horizon or scenic backdrop of some lucky projects, such as those described, is certainly a condition that in a certain way helps architecture to define, through the relationship and mutual exchange with the outside, a sacral dimension with the place. This does not exclude that even architecture, through the attention, constructive wisdom and material consistency of those who imagine and create it, contributes to constituting – with nature – the places of the otherness: places that nourish the spirit and the interior, places in which to wander and stop, reflect and get lost between the solitude and the nostalgia of a melancholic memory, between meditation and contemplation of nature and life.

Notes

¹ “Nobody can deny our interiority. Even if the impact of the word in our mind very often has an indefinable effect. Quickly fades into the nebulae of feelings or thoughts. Imagine instead if someone asked us to explain what the interior of the city, the landscape, the suburbs, the buildings is” (author’s translation from Italian); text available on <https://divisare.com/projects/286717-renato-rizzi-parma-inattesa-lo-spazio-del-pudore> or on RIZZI R., *Parma inattesa. Lo spazio del pudore*, Monte Univeristà Parma, Parma 2013.

² The initiative involved A. Berman, F. Cellini, J. Corvalán, R. Flores and E. Prats, N. Foster, T. Fujimori, S. Godsell, C. Juaçaba, S. Radic and E. Souto de Moura. F. Magnani and T. Pelzel were instead entrusted with the setting up of pavilion zero centered on the inspiring project of the exhibition: the chapel in the woods by Gunnar Asplund in Stockholm’s Skogskyrkogården.

³ The Italian architect Paolo Zermani has worked extensively on the theme of the chapel, including the chapel on the sea in Marsascala, the Noceto chapel in Parma and the chapel-museum of the Madonna del Parto by Piero della Francesca in Monterchi.

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