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## MEANINGFUL ARCHITECTURE – – INTUITIVE SYMBOLIC CODE

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## ARCHITEKTURA ZNACZENIOWA – – INTUICYJNY KOD SYMBOLICZNY

### Abstract

This article is an attempt to show the unique role of “symbolic intuition” in the process of designing meaningful places (holy structures, commemorative places).

Originally, architectural creativity was associated with sheltering humans, namely with the sacred – holiness, the sense of safety. Desacralization of space through the rational lead of modernism redefined such values as: truth, good and beauty. The split between the pursuit of modernity and adhering to traditional ideas influenced the form, matter and semantics of meaningful structures. Many contemporary architects rather develop the awareness of the “self” rather than reaching for the source of sacral architecture, namely the “semantic intuition”. The author’s presentation becomes the primary goal. However, “intuition” still remains the primary tool for creating sacred art. This fact is proven by excellent works of contemporary meaningful architecture. The article describes the creative processes accompanying the design work of five prominent creators of sacred space: Le Corbusier, Tadao Ando, Olafur Eliasson, Stanisław Niemczyk, Michele De Lucchi. The creativity of these representatives proves that sacred architecture, in spite of the crisis in art, is still unique. It is an activity without the supreme role of utilitarianism, holding deeper content.

*Keywords: Sacred architecture, signs and symbols, creative intuition, commemorative, signifying*

### Streszczenie

Artykuł jest próbą ukazania szczególnej roli „intuicji symbolicznej” w procesie projektowania przestrzeni znaczeniowych (obiektów świętych, miejsc komemoratywnych).

Pierwotnie twórczość architektoniczna związana była ze schronieniem człowieka, czyli z sacrum – świętością, poczuciem bezpieczeństwa. Desakralizacja przestrzeni przez racjonalny prym modernizmu zredefiniowała takie wartości, jak prawda, dobro i piękno. Rozdarcie pomiędzy pogonią za nowoczesnością a odniesieniem się do tradycyjnych wyobrażeń wpłynęło na formę, materię i semantykę obiektów znaczeniowych. Wielu współczesnych architektów zajmuje się raczej rozwijaniem świadomości samego „ja” niż sięgnięciem do źródła architektury sakralnej, jakim jest „semantyczna intuicja”. Autorska prezentacja staje się celem nadrzędnym. Nadal jednak „intuicja” pozostaje prymarnym narzędziem tworzenia sztuki sakralnej. Świadczą o tym wybitne dzieła współczesnej architektury znaczeniowej. W artykule zostaną opisane procesy twórcze towarzyszące pracy projektowej pięciu wybitnych twórców przestrzeni sakralnej: Le Corbusiera, Tadao Ando, Olafura Eliassona, Stanisława Niemczyka, Michele de Lucchi. Twórczość tych przedstawicieli potwierdza, że architektura sakralna, pomimo kryzysu sztuki, jest nadal czymś szczególnym, niosącym za sobą głębsze treści, aktywnością bez nadrzędnej roli utylityzmu.

*Słowa kluczowe: Architektura sakralna, znaki i symbole, intuicja twórcza, komemoratywna, znaczeniowa*

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*The intuitive mind is a sacred gift  
and the rational mind is a faithful servant.  
We have created a society that honours  
the servant and has forgotten the gift*  
Albert Einstein

## 1. Introduction

Sacred architecture is an area of unique activity for the human being. The need for the sacred is not only related to knowledge of religious forms or the language of symbolic portrayals. It is not a group, culture or religion that determines the ability to experience transcendental events. According to Rudolf Otto, the experiences of *tremendum* and *fascina* [21, p.136] are “tendencies and predispositions to practice religion, which may spontaneously become an instinctive feeling and a search for something, a restless fumbling and a desire full of longing”. Therefore, the space of the sacred is universal, regardless of culture or religion. Mircea Eliade proved that each man is naturally *Homo religiosus*<sup>1</sup>. The original longing for paradise indicates the universality of sacral needs. With the notion of “sacredness” understood as such, even an areligious man experiences the sacred.

In the days of modernism, the question arose of whether the layer of meaning carries the sacral value of the structure. Desacralization of space – “disenchantment of the world” was already described by the sociologist Max Weber as a feature of a rational society. Modernism redefined the classic values of *truth, good and beauty*. This affects the contemporary condition of architecture and sacred art. Therefore, many contemporary architects, when designing sacred buildings, are more focused on developing the awareness of the “self” rather than reaching for the source of architecture. The tool for designing forms and symbolic matter may be the so-called “*semantic intuitive code*”. Omission of this path results in the fact that the author’s presentation becomes the primary goal, and the creator is no longer a servant but rather a “dogmatic priest”. However, “intuition” still remains the primary tool of creating sacred art. The crisis of sacral architecture is related to the crisis of mankind.<sup>2</sup> However, sacred structures are still being built. This fact is proven by excellent works of contemporary meaningful architecture. For this reason, sacred architecture, in spite of the crisis in art, is a special activity. It is an activity without the supreme role of utilitarianism, holding deeper ideological content.

### 1.1. The main issues raised in the paper

The paper discusses the issues of designing modern sacral facilities based on the introduced notion of *intuitive semantic code*. Nowadays, the design of sacral facilities is a complex issue. On the one hand, we have the supremacy of modernity and, on the other hand, a pantheon of various aesthetic and formal patterns. Recommendations of the church council

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<sup>1</sup> M. Eliade, *Traktat o historii religii*, przeł. J. Wierusz-Kowalski, Warszawa 1966.

<sup>2</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Duch liturgii*, Poznań 2002.

emphasize that no style is reserved for sacral architecture. At the same time, there is an entire legacy of tradition that greatly effects the design of sacral facilities. Intuition is one of the methods and tools used when designing structures connected to a certain meaning. On the other hand, ‘*intuitive semantic code*’ covers meaningful forms – symbols discovered during the process of designing sacred spaces.

## 1.2. Definition of the notion of “intuition”, “symbol”, “intuitive symbolic code”.

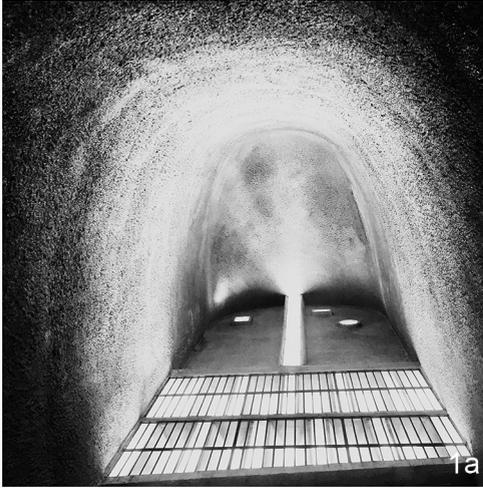
The term “**intuition**” is multi-dimensional, and its definition is vague. The notion concerns various phenomena: cognition, knowledge and disposition”.<sup>3</sup> The above phenomena apply to architectural design, which is always a combination of multiple factors: becoming familiar with the object and analysing the place are the first step in the designer’s work. For this purpose, apart from pure intellectual analysis, creators reach for previous impressions and experiences. This constitutes knowledge essential for verification of design ideas and premises. On the other hand, intuition – as creative disposition – is always connected with work and decisions. Intuitive cognition, strictly connected with the creator’s work, is multi-dimensional, and refers to non-material cognition – pure intellect (Plato). Descartes classified intuition as “God’s gift” to all people as intelligent beings<sup>4</sup>. Rationalists held the opinion that intuition is related to human’s sensory cognition. In this interpretation, senses were the primary source of cognition. Kant believed that a person’s actions are spontaneous and full, and complete intuition “is a feature of God”. According to the philosopher, intuition is sensual. However, he assumed the existence of pure intuition of time and space. Intuition in this respect applies to phenomena of natural a priori character. A link between the notion of “intuition” and social instinct appears in the works of H. Bergson. He attributed intuitive cognition to pure intellect assuming that intuition is what lets people systematize the world. O. G. Jung linked intuitive cognition with the subconscious and collective experiences. Such an approach implies cognition in the context of identity and memory. This, in turn, is associated with symbolic cognition.

**1.2.1 The Symbol** is often mistaken with the notion of a sign. It always explains the spiritual reality and has an *a priori* character. The symbol’s characteristics differentiate it from the notion of a sign. A symbol is characterized by a dichotomy of meanings, transparency and the fact that it is not the product of a culture. Its meaning, as justifiably noted by E. Cassirer following in Kant’s footsteps, is discovered by man when experiencing things. Understood as such, each symbol is a sign, but not every sign is a symbol. On the other hand, J. Hanı believed that *one should precisely distinguish two types of symbols: intentional [conventional] symbols and essential symbols. The symbolism can only explain the spiritual reality already implicitly existing in the object itself, its interior, which it inhabits as an intimate centre of its being. At this point, it is necessary to introduce one more distinction. In the case of essential symbols, which are based on the nature of objects itself, we are dealing with symbols of the*

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<sup>3</sup> M. Walczak, *Intuicja jako typ poznania, wiedzy i dyspozycji, Zagadnienia Naukowo-poznawcze*, 2(188), 2001 p. 127–144.

<sup>4</sup> Por. *ibidem*.



1a



1b



2a



2b



3a



3b

*cosmological order and symbols of the theological order*”<sup>5</sup>. The sanctity of a symbol results from participation in a particular mystical act; a symbol may be any product of a culture the meaning of which is uncovered in the process of designing the sacred space<sup>6</sup>.

**1.2.2 Intuitive symbolic code** is a notion introduced to the work in order to clarify individual processes occurring in the course of designing meaningful facilities. The paper presents the activity of five designers analyzed in terms of diversity and processes occurring during their work. **Intuitive symbolic code** distinguishes meaningful projects in which creators reach for the essence of symbolic – cosmological message. The search for meanings is in this case *a priori* in character – resulting from the nature of the object.

## 2. Analysis of particular creators

The notion of *creative intuition* described above is strictly associated with semantic intuition. It concerns, first for all, the phenomenon appearing during the work of an architect – creator on projects connected to a certain meaning. A deeper sense of matter, form and order of the structure often reevaluates previous methods of work on the design. An idea that is not yet a work of art is recorded in the consciousness and the subconsciousness of the architect. As justifiably noted by Arnheim<sup>7</sup>, *visual perception does not consist in passive recording by the mind. The sense of vision works selectively (...) Perception is associated with solution to a problem.* Like in the case of *creative intuition*, in the case of sacred facilities, it enters the field of *semantic intuition*. A sketch – especially – a *primary sketch* is usually the first tool in the designers’ work. It is often preceded by models or three-dimensional ideas of the designed facility, since *drawings are the fundamental drivers through the course of project that help to think from inception to technical resolution*<sup>8</sup>. Symbolic intuition as a method of designing is used by creators of meaningful places. The article describes the phenomenon that often occurs in unconscious works using works of designers of idea-based spaces, such as: Le Corbusier, Tadao Ando, Olafur Eliasson, Stanisław Niemczyk, and Michele De Lucchi.

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<sup>5</sup> J. Hani, *Symbolika świątyni chrześcijańskiej*, Cracow 1994, „Le Symbolisme du Temple Chrétien” S. Perennis, 2007, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> M. Eliade, *Traktat o historii religii*, przeł. J. Wierusz-Kowalski Warszawa 1966, p.16.

<sup>7</sup> R. Arnheim, *Myślenie wzrokowe*, Gdańsk 2011, pp.118–119.

<sup>8</sup> D. Derni, *Architectural Drawing*, second edition, Londyn 2010, p. 9.

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III.1A. Chapel Ronchamp interior, arch. Le Corbusier, fot. Anna M Wierzbicka

III.1B. The Dominican Monastery La Tourette in France, arch. Le Corbusier, fot. Anna M Wierzbicka

III.2A. St. Peter’s Church in Firminy in France, arch. Le Corbusier, fot. Anna M Wierzbicka

III.2B. Meditation Chapel UNESCO in Paris, arch. T. Ando, fot. Anna M Wierzbicka

III.3A. Chapel of St. Jacob’s Chapel in Auerberg in Germany, arch. Michele De Lucchi, fot. Anna M Wierzbicka

III.3B. Chapel of St. Jacob’s Chapel in Auerberg in Germany, arch. Michele De Lucchi, fot. Anna M Wierzbicka

## 2.1. Le Corbusier

**Le Corbusier** grew up in a strict Protestant home. He treated religion as a collection of religious rules and moralisms<sup>9</sup>. This experience from his youth had a strong impact on his sacral creativity. After the failed design of St. Mary Magdalene Chapel in the hills of Sainte – Baume, the architect became sceptical about designing sacred facilities. However, he undertook the design of a small pilgrimage chapel, erected on a wooded hill in **Ronchamp** in 1955<sup>10</sup>. The architect said that during the design phase he had been able to *immerse himself in problems for which no utility purposes had needed to be met*<sup>11</sup>. The creative search can be seen in numerous original sketches. The facility gained fast publicity and Norberg-Schulz believes that the object is a confirmation of the rebirth of interest in existential content<sup>12</sup>.

The Dominican Monastery **La Tourette** in France, designed before the 2nd Vatican Council, in 1957–1960, is an example of intuitive searches reaching towards traditional ideas of the sacred. The play of light and form is the main symbolic element of the monastery's interior [26. p. 236]. Like in Ronchamp, Le Corbusier was looking for meaningful forms by reaching for *a priori* meanings of symbolic forms. Nature, light, texture, and form are the basic language of semantic messages.

The last sacred facility designed by Le Corbusier is **St. Peter's Church in Firminy** in France, designed in 1960–1968, built in 2006 by José Oubrerie on the basis of drawings and sketches by the architect [16]. *The temple, seemingly devoid of meaning, was complemented by the cosmological symbolism of light. The facility proves that the rational assumptions of sacral design are not possible in meaningful facilities* [14, p. 15]. The architect uses *intuitive symbolic code*, seeking forms and elements related to cosmological symbolism.

## 2.2. Tadao Ando

**Tadao Ando** is one of the most well-known Japanese architects. His works are very diverse; however, they contain structures related to meaning. The most interesting are the **Church of the Light in Ibaraki**, 1989 [3] and **Chapel on the Water in Tomamu** (Hokkaido, Japan) 1991 and the UNESCO Meditation Chapel in Paris 1994–1995. In his designs, Ando reaches for an extra-cultural layer of meaning. The author's handmade sketches show, just like in the case of Le Corbusier, fascination with primordial forms. The semantic message is clear. Nature and, above all, light are the main tools in the architect's creative work. This is best shown by the semantic layer of the UNESCO non-denominational Meditation Chapel in Paris. It is the first design by the Japanese architect in Europe. A simple cylinder refers with its shape to the symbolism of God – the eternal and infinite logos. Road and direction are extra-cultural cosmological symbols. Water flowing gently down stones brought from Hiroshima refers to the symbolism of peace.

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<sup>9</sup> A. Flint, *Le Corbusier*, Warszawa 2014, p. 190.

<sup>10</sup> W. J. Stock, *Architectural Guide – Christian Sacred Buildings in Europe since 1950*, Bonn 2004, p. 56–67.

<sup>11</sup> Corbusier Le. [in:] A. Kotula, P. Krakowski, *Architektura współczesna*, Kraków 1967, p. 160.

<sup>12</sup> Ch. Norberg-Schulz., *Znaczenie w architekturze Zachodu*, Warszawa 1999, p. 236.

### 2.3. Olafur Elíasun

**Olafur Eliasson** is an artist working in various fields of creativity. Some of his accounts are related to a search for meaning in space. Although none of his projects are strictly sacrally allocated, Eliasson's designs have some features of a sacred space. Just like in the case of Le Corbusier and Ando, light is a leading element of the symbolic narration. The artist emphasized many times that it is not the object that counts but the process and the impact on the viewer. The first known design by the author was "The weather project", completed in the London Tate Modern in the Turbine Hall, 2003. Semi-circular, scaled-down sun reflecting on the ceiling uncompromisingly changed the space of the engine room – the gallery hall. The author used a very simple language to convey his message: nature – sun – source of life, fog, reflection and a human in its scale. On the other hand, in the design of New York City Waterfalls, carried out from June 26th to October 13th of 2008, most important was to present the scale through the spatial relation of falling water and the distance from the viewer. The artist emphasizes the very close association between working on an idea the design. Ideological models often stem from creative intuition by reaching for the universal symbolic code. In the work of Olafur, we can clearly see his fascination with the impact of light in space. The last work completed in Versailles, installed in 2016, entitled "Versailles", shows a new image of this place. The guiding principle of the architect is also light. The artist has many works touching upon the issues of the meaning of space. In 2018, he created the first architectural facility made fully by him. The project is going to be built in an unusual spot – on water, more precisely on an artificial Danish island, Havneøen. The building's form refers to archetypical shapes, but it does not have the characteristics of a sacral object. The facility's shape proves that creative intuition rather than rational solutions is the pivotal point of ideas for the artist's designs.

### 2.4. Stanisław Niemczyk

The sacral works of the architect Stanisław Niemczyk, in the context of the analysis of meaningful architecture, are remarkable. The designer has completed many interesting sacral projects, most of which were built in Silesia. The first significant work is the Holy Spirit Church in Tychy, built in 1983. The facility was designed in difficult times of post-council renewal and the search for the rebirth of the lost importance of the Liturgy in the Catholic Church. As admitted by the architect himself, the recommendations of the church council concerning the congregation as a community of worshippers were very important during his creative work. The shape and tent-like form refer to the primordial ideas of holy spaces. The church interior illuminated through the central opening brings to mind the holy verticality. The St. Francis Monastery in Tychy, the construction of which began in 2001, is an interesting example of a facility where the *semantic intuitive code* can be clearly seen. When working on the design, the architect reaches towards the universal semantic message. Narration using light is the essence of space. The whole structure is linked with its form and matter with Assisi. The atmosphere of the place, connected with meaning, forms a coherent whole. The design process in this case is connected with the relation of architecture embedded in the landscape of culture. Niemczyk's works convey a deep message. As emphasized by the creator himself, it is very important to imagine the sacred spaces in primordial terms during

work. The idea of the place discovered in the process of designing is building a Home for God<sup>13</sup>. Niemczyk's sacral projects are timeless, accepted both by worshippers and architects. Deep symbolism stems from the architect's beliefs about the order of matter.

## 2.5. Michele De Lucchi

Michele De Lucchi is an Italian architect working in different scales. His portfolio contains many designs, industrial design items, interiors and large architectural facilities. An interesting aspect of the architect's design process is working on wooden models. One of the unusual, albeit small in scale, facilities is St. Jacob's Chapel in Auerberg in Germany, built in 2010. The facility is one of the stops during pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela. The author uses the archetypal idea of a sacred space in his work. The building brings to mind the Ark of the Covenant or Noah's Ark. The author himself emphasized that this design was inspired by nature as the perfect work of God. It constitutes the essence of the work's narration. The view from a round window in the chapel oversees a cross hidden between trees. Meditation is the pivotal point of the message and, as emphasized by the author himself, *There is no better way to understand that God exists than to watch such a wonderful scenery and to contemplate the beauty of nature. There is no better way to pray than to sit in front of the universe and realize how wonderful this round tiny planet is. There is no better way to listen to inner voice than to hear the sound of silence in a small quiet room. (...) There is not a better way to believe in a supreme Entity than to meditate in front of a small cross surrounded by old oak trees. There is no better way to trust in a prosperous future than to be here to dedicate a chapel to St. Jacob.*

The St. Jacob's Chapel, as compared to other projects by the architect, shows that semantic searches in design works related to the sacred always concern the semantic code. It is a symbol discovered by the creator during the process of intuitive denotation. The universal *a priori* code that is the symbol determines the essence of the sacred, which cannot be designed but only discovered.

## 3. Creative intuition – intuitive semantic code in the context of designing meaningful architecture

Designing structures connected to a certain meaning is largely, as described above, based on a search for the “intuitive symbolic code in [the process of association: linguistic and image-based]. The nature of intuition expressed through words, for example in literary works, is replaced by a spatial form – visualization of ideas. It can be repeatedly seen, as is indicated by architectural works and notes on ideas of great artists, that *creative intuition* is an inherent category of creating the idea of the project. A frequent return to initial thoughts and beliefs about the structure constitutes the role of intuition in the creative process. This process is holistic, and its character is focused on ordering matter. Primordial forms and beliefs are not deformed but gain a new look.

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<sup>13</sup> S. Niemczyk., *Stworzyć miejsce dla Stwórcy*, Gość Niedzielny, 18/2006.

#### 4. Use of research in didactic and design work

Creative intuition in the process of designing meaningful spaces can be identified as “intuitive semantic code”. It is formed through integration of the structure’s narration into a coherent whole. The idea of the design is born in the intellectual process of existence of universals. The design process not only involves previous experiences, but also the cosmological layer of the universe. This process is: complex, extrasensory and with a priori nature. However, it is expressed by formation of thoughts and judgments in the form of ideograms – drawings, or ideal 3d forms – models. Education in this respect generates many questions and doubts. Should teaching sacral architecture at universities consist only of consolidation of signs and symbols in meaningful facilities? If so, then the process of teaching design of sacral facilities only slightly differs from teaching design of secular architecture. However, as indicated by long-term experience of lecturers at Studio of Sacral and Monumental Architecture at the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology, education in semantic forms is a complex process. The first step is to clarify the semantics of architectural forms (signs and symbols). Another element is the use of narrative processes when bonding parts of the story into a coherent whole. Meaningful narration as a tool of designing commemorative forms was presented in the author’s monograph on this issue in sacred architecture<sup>14</sup>. In 2010–2012, the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology organized a seminar entitled “Signs and symbols in architecture”. It involved an attempt at implementation of a narrative method of design connected to a certain meaning. Students of master’s study programs, during classes related to designing commemorative spaces, had to choose a location and present a design commemorating the Smolensk tragedy of 10 April 2010. The first crucial point of the class was a short and individual description of the reaction to the tragedy provided by each class participant. Students chose important aspects that affected their design decisions. Another significant stage in the design process was an attempt to provide a detailed description of people, place, etc., also from their own perspective, through individual narration. Young designers reached for different solutions of the place of memory, often straying from the traditional form of a monument. Identification and combination of ideas through intuitive semantic code arises simultaneously in this process. Intuition is thus linked to creative human activity related to designing holy spaces.

#### 5. Final conclusions

Finally, it should be noted that issues concerning design of meaningful architecture should be examined in various areas. Sacral commemorative facilities, places of memory strictly associated with a certain meaning carry with them a moral imperative. The function and form are their secondary feature as compared to the semantic layer. Signs and symbols in these facilities are the essence and the pivotal point of the semantic message. The *a priori* nature of these phenomena leads to confirmation of the thesis that creative intuition, understood in this case as *symbolic intuition*, is a basic tool for creative work when designing sacral facilities. The essence of these searches leads to discovering the truth in the cosmological space. In this

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<sup>14</sup> A. M. Wierzbicka, *Architektura jako narracja znaczeniowa*, Warszawa, pp.146–150.

case, transformation has *a priori* features. The author does not create but only discovers and transforms the world previously created by God. Such an approach to “semantic intuition” defines the architect not as “a dogmatic priest” but as “a humble servant”. In this case, “intuition”, as assumed by Plato, is the “source of supreme cognition”, a religious act of aesthetic cognition.

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