

Numinous Edifices

Aesthetic Experiences of Sacred Spaces

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Strolling through Rome

Once, when I was strolling through the Centro Storico in Rome, sometime after the third wave of the Coronavirus, I was struck by the long queue for the Pantheon. Usually, one can simply walk straight through the portico into the rotunda, but at this time, no doubt because of the health measures called for by the pandemic, one had to stand in line to get in. Judging by the length of the queue, the wait did not seem to deter the visitors: the Pantheon remained one of Rome's best-attended monuments. Although I usually take the time to visit the Pantheon whenever I am in Rome, this time I decided to pass. A few days later, however, I went to St Peter's Basilica, avoiding the longer queues by arriving early in the morning. At 8:30 a.m., the queues for the security and health checks were short, but soon, even the massive St Peter's started filling up. Security checks were, to be sure, in place even before the pandemic, but it is still interesting to note how popular it is to visit this monument, despite the inconvenience of the security check.

No doubt there are many significant differences between the Pantheon and St Peter's in terms of history, purpose, and architecture, the one being (re)built as a temple by the Roman emperor Hadrian (76–138) with the help of the architect Apollodorus of Damascus and dedicated around 126 CE, the other being (more or less) completed in 1626 as the most important church of Western Christendom. The Pantheon was, at least in the

beginning, a sanctuary for Roman religion, but was converted into a Christian church by Pope Boniface III (c. 540–607) in the seventh century, and still functions, occasionally, as a church even though it is the property of the Italian government.

What they share, however, and the reason that I mention them together here, is the experience of space that they both conjure up in the visitor. To enter the Pantheon's dome between the columns via the vestibule is a short, horizontal walk that abruptly ends with a vertical shift when our attention is drawn upwards in accordance with the central axis of the building. Our eyes are almost inevitably attracted to the *oculus* or eye in the centre of the dome, which is where the light enters from above. It is always open. The centre of gravity in the relation between visitors and the space circumscribed by the edifice shifts from us to the temple as our own activity is transformed into a more passive receiving of the light that flows from the *oculus*. It is as if the eye in the ceiling is looking at us rather than we at it.

Something similar could be said of the experience of visiting St Peter's. Arriving, as one does as an unofficial visitor, from the Piazza San Pietro, one is enclosed by the colossal colonnade, designed four columns deep by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) as a forecourt of the basilica.¹ Although the square is, in itself, awe-inspiring, even in its horizontal direction towards the entrance of the basilica, the trajectory turns upwards after the entrance, as the visitor is struck by the vastness of the space circumscribed by the building. The dome of St Peter's is 136,57 metres tall, compared with the Pantheon's 43,3 metres, and is one of the tallest domes in the world. The central nave that stretches towards the apse is 186,36 metres long and is lavishly furnished in a baroque style and ornamented with huge pilasters. The experience is overwhelming, not least due to the sheer volume of the space enclosed by the building. If the experience of space in the Pantheon, particularly the shift in the centre of gravity experienced by the visitor to the temple or from horizontality to verticality, could be described as intense, at and in St Peter's, the similar shift in the centre of gravity is experienced as prolonged and massive. It is difficult to take in the vastness of St Peter's. Perhaps it is better experienced in a crowd, as a collective experience?² Like all the grand churches of European Christendom, it is not exactly a serene place of meditation, but rather a crowded and cluttered place.

1. See Mårten Snickare, "How to Do Things with the Piazza San Pietro: Performativity and Baroque Architecture", in Peter Gillgren & Mårten Snickare (eds.), *Performativity and Performance in Baroque Rome*, Farnham 2012, 65–83.

2. See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Crowds: Das Stadion als Ritual von Intensität*, Frankfurt 2020.

Here, I am trying to conjure up some basic aspects of the experience of numinous spaces. The examples I have chosen are of course examples of temples (from the Latin *templum*), that is, places for worship of the divine. Never mind that the Pantheon once was a sanctuary for all the gods (*pan* in Greek meaning “all” and *theion* “gods”) and only later became a Christian church. One may perhaps even presume that one reason for turning the Pantheon into a Christian church was that the experience of numinosity remained, even for those inhabiting a post-Constantine Rome that had become Christian and that had a constrained relation to its non-Christian past. Undoubtedly there is a difference between entering the Pantheon in its pre-Christian days and entering after it had been redecorated more in accordance with Christian beliefs, but nevertheless its fundamental axes remain and so also the possibility of experiencing the shift in the centre of gravity. This is an experience that is possible to have outside any traditional religious affiliation, often witnessed to by visitors writing from an allegedly non-confessional perspective; I would even venture to suggest that this is a large portion of the attraction for the contemporary tourist. Standing in the queue waiting to have his or her Green Pass checked, the expectation of a numinous experience is invoked by the space of the building. William L. MacDonald (1921–2010), in his book on the Pantheon, thinks the experience is “neither sacred nor secular”, but goes on to describe it in terms that describe precisely such a crossing of the horizontal and vertical as an experience of the sacred does.³ Such experiences are of course coloured by one’s religion, or lack thereof. I suggest, however, that religion or personal belief is not the cause of these experiences but rather that they are, in fact, a function of space itself or, perhaps better stated, the relation between human beings and a particular kind of space, defined by a certain kind of building. The experience of numinous space is the experience of an embodied being, who, due to the embodied nature of his or her existence, is always also a spatial being.

In this article, I will explore the experience of the sacred with a focus on how it is realized in and through spatial categories, particularly buildings. My main aim is to show how this experience is an aesthetic experience – “aesthetic” in the more original meaning, as an examination of the knowledge of our world gained intuitively and through our senses. Although I am sceptical of claims of separating experience from ontology or theology, my perspective here is decidedly phenomenological, particularly in that I am interested in how the sacred is experienced, not in whether it should be

3. William L. MacDonald, *The Pantheon: Design, Meaning, and Progeny*, Cambridge, MA 1976, 132.

interpreted as an apprehension of the divine or some supramundane being. At the same time, however, I am also concerned with uncovering some of the shortcomings in how phenomenology has treated the topic, especially concerning the relation between the power and the performance of the sacred, as well as the sometimes quite abstract and generalizing talk of the sacred in some classic accounts. With regard to terminology, I use “sacred” and “numinous” more or less as synonyms, which I believe is generally the case in the literature, although I have some sympathy for Rudolf Otto’s (1869–1937) understanding of the numinous as the sacred minus the moral. My exploration shall proceed through a critical look at some of the classic contributions on the topic; one may well have reservations with regard to some of their suggestions, but to dialectically proceed through them may have the constructive advantage of clarifying their shortcomings while building on their strengths in the service of a revised understanding of sacred spaces. At the end, I offer some constructive suggestions on how to improve the way in which we deal, phenomenologically, with numinous edifices.

Mircea Eliade's Sacred Space

The common denominator and point of departure for a phenomenological discussion of what I call “numinous” or “sacred spaces” is likely to be found in the first chapter of the Romanian historian of religion and philosopher Mircea Eliade’s (1907–1986) classic *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (written in French but originally published in a German translation in 1957).⁴ The chapter is entitled “Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred” and is a summary of the experience of space in several religions and what is common to them all. Eliade is keen to uphold the commonality of experiences of the sacred among all human beings throughout his book. In it, he is heavily dependent upon the binary distinction between sacred and profane, heterogeneity and homogeneity, cosmos and chaos, as well as centre and periphery. One of the hitherto most ambitious attempts at interpreting spatiality from a phenomenological perspective, the German philosopher Otto Friedrich Bollnow’s (1903–1991) *Human Space*, has a chapter on sacred space that is essentially based on Eliade’s account – with the addition of a few pages from the Dutch historian and philosopher of religion Gerardus van der Leeuw’s (1890–1950) *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* as well as from a few other authors such as the Austrian art historian Hans Sedlmayer (1896–1984) and Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945).⁵ I take my current

4. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Orlando, FL 1959, 20–65.

5. Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Human Space*, London 2011, 133–141. See also Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, Princeton, NJ 1986, 393–402.

point of departure from a critical reading of Eliade's book, so let me begin with a short summary of what it says.

Eliade's chapter on sacred space begins with the distinction between heterogeneous and homogeneous space. The experience of a certain space as sacred is an experience of that space as different from other spaces. Space in its most general form is experienced as a vast expanse without any form; only the hierophany (that is, the manifestation of the sacred) establishes a centre around which orientation is possible. In this way, a world is established where qualitative distinctions are possible. "There is, then, a sacred space, and hence a strong, significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and so are without structure of consistency, amorphous", writes Eliade.⁶ The founding of the world, if you will, *is* the differentiation within space between sacred and profane. For the non-religious human being, or the human being without any notion of the sacred, space can only appear as undifferentiated, amorphous, and neutral, and, like the scientific geometrical space, without existential significance. This is, however, only possible in theory, according to Eliade, not in practice, as some kind of "valorization of the world" always remains, like "privileged places".⁷ Only the founding of the world through a hierophany permits a true orientation in the world, and so, despite Eliade's quite obvious critique of "industrial society" for its levelling of human existence, the distinction between heterogeneous and homogeneous space is ontological, not just historical.⁸

In more concrete terms, the distinction or even opposition between homogeneous and heterogeneous space could be illustrated by my example of St Peter's in front of the Piazza san Pietro in Rome. The door and the threshold between the church and the square indeed mark the continuity between these significantly different spaces, but most of all mark a form of discontinuity, according to Eliade: "The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds – and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible."⁹ This is not a property of the threshold of a church door as such, but holds both for thresholds in general (think of domestic thresholds that differentiate between the domestic and the public) as well as for other religious buildings, monuments, and sites. Thresholds signify passage and transformation. But entering a church or any other religious building is not the only way that this differentiation occurs. Within the religious building another opening usually occurs, where

6. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 20.

7. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 23–24.

8. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 24.

9. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 25.

the sacred intervenes – this is the hierophany or theophany. This second opening need not occur each and every time, automatically as it were, but at least must be indicated by a sign or an evocation. Even if sacred space in one sense is a given, it is not static but has to be performed, but this performance is not, at least not from the perspective of the sacred space, a construction of sacred space by human beings alone, but “reproduces the work of the gods”.¹⁰ As Eliade puts it somewhat later, “every construction or fabrication has the cosmogony as paradigmatic model”.¹¹ Remember my short description in the introduction of how our eyes turn upward towards the *oculus* when entering the Pantheon.

The heterogeneity of sacred space is not confined to particular religious buildings, sites, or monuments, however. All the world could be a place of manifestation of the sacred, according to Eliade, and so also particular territories that are consecrated by a ritual. Since the distinction between the sacred and the profane is the origin of the world, any ordering of a previously unordered chaos is also a sanctifying act through which a cosmos is created. Eliade uses the erection of a Vedic fire altar as an example of how the claim for a new territory – whether through conquest or occupation – is a cosmogonic act through which what previously was, at least for us, an unordered chaos becomes part of “our world”.¹² At least in archaic religions, according to Eliade, whatever world that is not ours is not a world but chaos: “the cosmicization of unknown territories is always a consecration; to organize a space is to repeat the paradigmatic work of the gods.”¹³ This works both ways: the loss of that token that signifies creation also undoes the cosmos and with it the community that belonged to that cosmos. The enemy that threatens one’s own community is also a representative of chaos. Even the fortifications against enemies around a city are thus more than defences against human beings; through circumscribing the city it also rules out and holds off the powers of chaos.

The *axis mundi* or cosmic pillar through which all levels of existence commune with one another signifies the centre of the world. Now we are, in a sense, back to the sacred space in a more circumscribed meaning: the *axis mundi* that symbolizes the centre of the world could be manifested concretely in a religious building, site, or monument. It need not be a building, like a church, as in my own introductory example, but could be a sacred mountain, like Meru in India or Fuji in Japan, or a city, like the former city of the emperor in Beijing (or the city of Rome, for that matter, or Jerusalem,

10. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 29.

11. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 45.

12. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 30–31.

13. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 32.

or Mecca, and so on). This is where heaven and earth meet and where chaos is ruled out. It is the place that orders the world, the centre from which the world comes to birth, even its navel.¹⁴ Thus, the centre of the city or village symbolizes the creation of the world, and the centre of the city or village, in a traditional society, could be empty but could also be represented by a sanctuary. But more common dwellings, like the house one lives in, are also structured in the same way as are sacred buildings in that they too take part in the cosmic symbolism: “The house is an *imago mundi*.”¹⁵ Every house in that sense is a sacred space, since it enacts and repeats the creation of the world by its bringing order to space. That a certain space is considered sacred, as, for example, a church or a mountain, does not exclude but presupposes that the entire world is sacred, and the former works rather as a representative of that more extensive sacred space, an intensification of it. According to Eliade, such buildings are derived from the primary experience of sacred space in its more extensive meaning, a sacred cosmos.¹⁶ Sacred space as manifested in buildings is dependent on a particular, and experienced, worldview. At the same time, these buildings serve as a reminder of the sacredness of the cosmos, and thus resanctify the world. Even if they are mere earthly versions of a more perfect transcendent ideal, they not only point towards their archetype but symbolically participate in it.

Eliade, finally, suggests that, on one hand, for the “profane” human being in the modern world, there are no longer any distinctions that differentiate sacred from profane space, which means that such distinctions disappear. In the industrial age, when, for example, the architect Le Corbusier (1887–1965) suggests that a house is “a machine to live in”, habitation becomes a matter of functionality only, and the distinctions between different kinds of habitation disappear and lose their cosmic significance.¹⁷ Space becomes homogeneous and dwellings infinitely replaceable, as the desacralization of the cosmos goes hand in hand with the desacralization of human dwellings. On the other hand, there are still vestiges of a more traditional worldview in industrial society, Eliade thinks, in the way that there are still rituals for

14. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 38–39, 44.

15. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 53.

16. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 58.

17. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 50, 56–57. The quotation from Le Corbusier comes from *Towards a New Architecture*, Garden City, NY 1986, 5. The introduction to Le Corbusier’s book, originally in French from 1923, suggests that this is more complicated than Eliade’s mention in passing allows for: “The Architect, by his arrangements of forms, realizes an order which is a pure creation of his spirit.” Perhaps this is a creation of the architect’s own spirit, and he or she now becomes the creator, but on the other hand, the architect “gives us the measure of an order which we feel to be in accordance with that of our world” (p. 3). Whatever the differences, it is remarkable how similar these accounts are in terms of the significance they ascribe to buildings.

settling into a new house, people still have “privileged places”, such as where one was born or met one’s partner.¹⁸ These are experiences of nonhomogeneous space, even though they lack any cosmic underpinning. It seems to me that Eliade is profoundly ambivalent about the possibility of experiencing a thoroughly profane space even by modern human beings, and perhaps consequently so: if profane space means homogenous space, according to Eliade, then this is a space where no existential orientation is at all possible, and since even modern human beings do or must orient themselves, even existentially, then it seems to follow that the notion of a genuinely empty or homogenous space is more of a limiting concept than anything encountered in practice.

Phenomenology in Eliade’s Account of Sacred Space

Eliade’s understanding of sacred space is not just pure phenomenology in the sense of only describing how space appears to human beings as it appears in their experience. It is also ontological, in that it suggests what kind of “worldview” is implied by such experience. One could even get the impression that the worldview seems to take precedence, and, to be sure, Eliade never suggests that it is phenomenology that he is doing. Also, his account is highly abstract in that it generalizes from a broad religious material, something Eliade himself admits by saying that it is not the infinite variety that interests him, but rather the elements of unity. The emphasis on difference is between the two different attitudes of “religious man” and “nonreligious man”.¹⁹ Yet another characteristic of Eliade’s interpretation of sacred space is that it abstracts from any actual description of how space is materially constituted and structured. It is hardly Eliade’s point, I think, to dissociate material construction from existential significance, even if he differentiates between “geometrical space” and the experience of heterogeneous space.²⁰

Nevertheless, in effect Eliade leaves out, from his discussion, the possibility that the actual, material construction of space could give rise to genuine differences in the way that space is experienced existentially. Does the materiality of a building contribute to the way it is experienced, so that the tactile harshness of the concrete that the Pantheon is built of gives rise to a different experience from, say, the warmth of a wooden stave church? Do the different organizations of space in, for example, a traditional basilica, a gothic cathedral, and a modern brick church with a flat roof bring about different conceptualities as well as experiences of how the divine is related to

18. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 24, 57.

19. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 63.

20. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 22–23.

the created?²¹ What I suggest is that Eliade's emphasis on elements of unity between different manifestations of the religious worldview and, especially, different instances of sacred architecture actually obscure some of the complexity of the experience of sacred space and how it is dependent on sense impressions.

Along with this tendency comes, not surprisingly, another problem that I have already hinted at: the precedence of worldview or ontology in Eliade's account on behalf of experience. While I think it is certainly permissible and even commendable to ask what worldview certain experiences imply and vice versa, I cannot escape the impression that Eliade's reduction of the possible attitudes to just two, "traditional" and "modern" or "religious" and "nonreligious", is too simplistic. This distinction goes hand in hand with the experience of space as heterogeneous and homogeneous, respectively, but it does not really hold up for Eliade himself, as he insinuates that space is never really experienced existentially as purely homogeneous. Implicit in Eliade's argument is that the "modern" attitude has as its consequence an impossible flattening of the experience of space, but in a certain sense Eliade too, with his description of sacred versus profane space in *The Sacred and the Profane*, partakes in such a flattening. What if it is the poverty of the descriptions of space that obfuscates the heterogeneity of the experiences of space rather than a lack of the experiences themselves? It is understandable that Eliade writes the way he does in a book from the 1950s that wishes to speak to how its own context perceives itself, but it is perhaps less an attempt to stay true to the experiences of space and more of a polemical piece that risks overstating its case. Eliade's account runs the risk that his more historical distinction between sacred and profane, as a result of secularization, overrides a phenomenological distinction between space as sacred, as in a temple, and as profane, as in a market. In the latter distinction, sacred and profane could be understood not as a binary opposition but as a functional differentiation within society. Such a functional differentiation may well conform to a traditional society in the way Eliade conceives it, as the differentiation between "red letter days" and ordinary days in the liturgical calendar does not exclude that the whole month, or year, is sacred.

Consequently, my critique of Eliade's understanding of sacred space in *The Sacred and the Profane* has to do with its lack of phenomenological precision. One need only look at a comprehensive description of spatiality as an existential category, as in Bollnow's *Human Space*, to understand how

21. See Richard Kieckhefer, *Theology in Stone: Church Architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley*, Oxford 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195154665.001.0001>; Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *Sacred Power, Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship*, Oxford 2008, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195314694.001.0001>.

complex spatiality as such is, and that “homogeneity” might be an imprecise designation even of something called profane space from a phenomenological perspective. But perhaps I am unfair to Eliade, given that he never claims to be doing phenomenology in *The Sacred and the Profane*? Let us therefore take a short look at the section on sacred space in Bollnow’s book to see what he does with Eliade, while also glancing at how he uses van der Leeuw’s short section on the very same topic.

In *Human Space*, Bollnow starts from Eliade’s distinction but remarks almost at once that one needs to be more careful in distinguishing between the homogeneity of abstract, geometrical space and the homogeneity of profane space, as the latter is only homogeneous in relation to sacred space.²² For Bollnow, non-homogeneity is a characteristic of “experienced space” – that is, “space as it is manifested in concrete human life” – as such.²³ Only when “experienced space” is colonized by abstract, geometrical space would it assume a homogeneous character, but even then it goes against the grain of experience. Even today, “in these secular times”, “the house of the human individual is still a sacred area”, according to Bollnow, so there is a limit to secularization in the sense of emptying the human dwelling of all existential significance.²⁴ According to van der Leeuw, there is a proximity between house and temple in traditional society, and Bollnow traces the remaining sacrality of the dwelling back to its roots in “mythological thought”.²⁵ In his association of the existential significance of the dwelling with religious thought, Bollnow is essentially in agreement with Eliade. No secularization in the sense of a complete rationalization and externalization of human life is possible. But at the same time, Bollnow is more nuanced than Eliade in terms of his phenomenology.

To begin with, Bollnow emphasizes that there are different forms of sacred space, and, perhaps more importantly, with the help of van der Leeuw he points out how the manifestation of sacred space occurs as an internal differentiation within space. As van der Leeuw puts it, sacred spaces “have their specific and independent value” as “resting-places” in “universal extensity” and thus become not a “part” of this universal extensity but a “position”.²⁶ This means that sacred space might well be a kind of centre with the help of which human beings can orient themselves in space, but that does not mean that whatever parts of space are not “centre”, not sacred but

22. Bollnow, *Human Space*, 135.

23. Bollnow, *Human Space*, 19.

24. Bollnow, *Human Space*, 133–134.

25. Bollnow, *Human Space*, 134. See also van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 395.

26. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 393.

profane, are just an amorphous homogeneous extension. Quite the contrary: even peripheral space stands in a non-antagonistic relationship to central space. There is a recurring antagonism in Eliade's exposition between sacred and profane that is explained more by his cultural criticism than his phenomenology. Bollnow essentially agrees with Eliade's idea that, as Bollnow himself puts it, "every building of a house is the establishment of a cosmos in chaos", but this act of separation that is constitutive of a world does not mean that profane space will forever be associated with chaos.²⁷ Building a house, or for that matter founding a city, is a repetition of the primordial act of creation, which also means that the house or the city in itself symbolizes the creation of cosmos. As examples of this, Bollnow picks up Eliade's report of a Native American tribe, Hans Sedlmayr's account of the symbolism of Byzantine churches, as well as Plutarch's (c. 45–c. 120 CE) account of the foundation of Rome.²⁸

Essentially, Bollnow is more interested in the sacrality of the house, of human dwellings, than in the more pronounced sacrality of religious buildings and sites, and how their "paler, but still effective form" is a reflection of "a purer and more primeval case". This comparison, he suggests, helps us to understand how even today (Bollnow's book was originally published in 1963), "in these secular times", building and dwelling in a house retain something of a sacred character: the experience of the dwelling as in some sense the centre of the world, the house as set apart from other spaces, the house as a realm of peace, and as an image of the world.²⁹ On the last point, he quotes Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962) and suggests that being at home in a house is the presupposition of being at home in the world.³⁰ Bollnow's interest, in other words, is more in the experience of the sacred in "ordinary" spaces than in traditionally "extraordinary" spaces, such as religious buildings.

Writing a comprehensive phenomenology of the human experience of space, Bollnow's aim is different from Eliade's in *The Sacred and the Profane*. Nevertheless, we can see a convergence in how Bollnow suggests that the house retains some of the characteristics of a more traditional form of sacred space and that, therefore, the distinction between "traditional religious" and "modern secular" is far from absolute. However, even in his dependence, for his own analysis, on Eliade, he is quietly but distinctly critical of Eliade's conflation of a historical narrative of secularization and a phenomenological

27. Bollnow, *Human Space*, 137.

28. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 46; Hans Sedlmayr, *Die Entstehung der Kathedrale*, Wiesbaden 2001, 119.

29. Bollnow, *Human Space*, 140–141.

30. See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Boston, MA 1994, 4, 7.

distinction between sacred and profane space. In Bollnow's own account, existential space, whether sacred or profane, would not be reduced to homogeneity, except as a matter of the colonization of the spatial aspects of the life-world by an abstract, geometrical understanding of space. While there are indeed, as Eliade suggests, social trends that threaten to mute spatial "resonance" – the possibility of standing in a living relationship to one's environment and not just regarding it as inanimate – and while some of these trends *may* be effects of a scientistic (rather than scientific) worldview, that does not mean that human beings in general experience space as something amorphous, homogeneous, and inert, only that the vocabulary for describing experiences of spatial significance in everyday life is reduced, privatized, and, in the worst case, assumes an uncanny quality.³¹ To a certain extent, Bollnow presents a more nuanced phenomenology of sacred space, especially in his clarifications. But at the same time, he leaves out some of the more "extraordinary" experiences of sacred spaces (not just religious buildings), which might be disadvantageous to his understanding of the sacred as such and also, by extension, to his account of the house. The latter, although interesting as such, is of no concern here.

The Power of the Sacred

One essential trait of Eliade's understanding of sacred space that is missing from Bollnow's discussion, and that perhaps tends to be overshadowed by other concerns in Eliade's own analysis, is the power of the sacred. To experience a space as sacred is to have some experience of a power that cannot be fended off but that imposes itself on the person. This corresponds to the hierophany in Eliade's account: "Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred."³² The word "hierophany" comes from a combination of the Greek adjective *hieros*, "sacred", and the verb *phanein*, "to bring to light", "to reveal". The verb emphasizes the dynamic character of how the sacred imposes itself on the recipient. In my short description of visits to the Pantheon and St Peter's in Rome, I pointed out how the experiences of these two buildings involved a shift in the centre of gravity from visitor to space. This is an example of how the quality of power in the experience of the sacred is manifested concretely in the very form and materiality of a building. In other words, there is an active or even performative quality in how the power of the sacred asserts itself. I shall return to this performative quality below, but in this section I will focus on the question of what kind

31. See Hartmut Rosa, *Resonanz: Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung*, Frankfurt 2019.

32. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 26.

of power inheres in the manifestation of the sacred, taking my cue from one of Eliade's predecessors, Rudolf Otto.

Whatever the source of an experience of the sacred and the nature of the sacred itself, an essential quality of that experience is how it asserts itself with power. The experience of someone who finds him- or herself in the grip of the sacred is sometimes described as “awe”, “astonishment”, or even “dread”. A classic interpretation of such experiences is found in Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* from 1917, which is mentioned by Eliade as the very starting point of his own reflections on religious experience.³³ Unlike Eliade, Otto, a German theologian and scholar of religion, wants to uncover and isolate to make more distinct that aspect of the “holy” (or sacred) that goes beyond any moral goodness or epistemological cognition, and which he calls the “numinous” – it is the same thing as the holy, one could say, minus the moral. “Numinosity” is an adjective coined by Otto himself, and he derives it from the Latin *numen*.³⁴ A particular characteristic of the numinous is that one cannot have it at one's disposal; the initiative, so to speak, is always on the side of the numinous itself, even when its reception is conditioned by the one receiving. As Otto puts it, the numinous “cannot, strictly speaking, be taught, it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind”.³⁵ This means, as Otto is eager to emphasize, that any reception or reaction on behalf of the subject experiencing it is dependent upon its being “objectively given”; even if the numinous cannot be described as such, it is experienced as something “which in itself indubitably has immediate and primary reference to an object outside the self”.³⁶ The important point about the numinous is not that it is an object in any definable sense but that it is something external to the subject, which means that it also can impose itself on the subject receiving it. This is also why Otto chose to talk about it as *das Ganz Andere*, the “Wholly Other”.³⁷ Even when Otto speaks of the numinous – as in “the numinous” – as a noun, his intention is quite the opposite of any objectification. The numinous quality of the numinous itself can be spoken or written about, but strictly speaking never defined, only experienced.

How is the numinous experienced? It is experienced not in a simple but in a complex way, as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. That it is a mystery essentially means that we cannot have the numinous at our disposal. It imposes itself; it takes the initiative. The aspect of *tremendum* accentuates this

33. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 8–10.

34. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, London 1958, 6–7.

35. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 7.

36. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 10.

37. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 25–30.

distance between the numinous and the experiencing subject. A translation of *tremendum* would be “awe inspiring” to the point of “dread” or the “uncanny”. Otto summarizes it as “absolute unapproachability”.³⁸ To further highlight that this still is a phenomenon that overpowers any human ability, Otto also speaks of the experience of the numinous as *majestas* – “majestic” – as a qualification of *tremendum*. In the experience of being overpowered, as being a mere creature before something that absolutely exceeds oneself, unapproachability takes upon itself an aspect of humility on behalf of the subject. A third and final qualification of the numinous alongside *tremendum* and *majestas*, mentioned by Otto, is “energy” or “urgency”. This further stresses the active nature of the numinous object, which is not indifferent, but as if it has its own desire.

Even given these different aspects of the experience of the *mysterium tremendum*, this is only one side of the experience of the numinous. If *tremendum* speaks of the distance between the numinous object and the experiencing subject, there is also the almost opposite or at least contrastive pull of the *fascinans*. The mystery of the numinous object at the same time has an “element of daunting ‘awefulness’ and ‘majesty’” and “something uniquely attractive and *fascinating*”, which “combine in a strange harmony of contrasts”.³⁹ Despite the aspects of awe or dread, in the experience of the numinous one is also drawn towards it as an object of desire in its own right, not only for the sake of “salvation” or anything else that is pragmatically useful. “Longing”, “solemnity”, and the sheer dazzlement and excitement of the over-abundant nature of the numinous characterize the fascination that is also part of this experience. For Otto, all these aspects, both of the *tremendum* and the *fascinans*, help us to understand the phenomenon of the power of the numinous. They are still generalizations, however, of experiences of something that cannot, in principle, be defined, and in Otto’s discussion of them in *The Idea of the Holy*, they are presented as drawn from an empirical material that is quite rich in its nuances. In keeping with the irreducibly transcendent nature of the numinous, he calls them “ideograms” to suggest that they hint at rather than denote their referent.⁴⁰

In the wake of Otto’s interpretation of the power of the sacred, we can now approach the question that I asked at the beginning of this section, concerning what kind of power the power of the sacred – or the numinous – is. The “object-like” quality of the numinous is a presupposition of that power, which perhaps becomes clear if the moment of surprise is

38. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 19.

39. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 31.

40. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 19.

accentuated in the awe-inspiring and overwhelming experience of the numinous. A constitutive part of the experience of the sacred is the asymmetry implied between the experiencing subject and the numinous object in which, as mentioned, it is the latter that takes the initiative and, in keeping with the uncontrollable nature of the experience, seemingly spontaneously so. The German philosopher Hermann Schmitz (1928–2021), one of the so-called “new phenomenologists”, defines the numinous, inspired by Otto, in terms slightly different from the previous discussants, as that which, “for a human being seized by it at the time in question”, then and there possesses authority in the form of an “unconditional seriousness”.⁴¹ Schmitz praises Otto for his phenomenological insight that the phenomenon neither belongs on the side of subjective feelings nor appears as an object, even though he thinks that Otto falls short of his own insight due to his dualistic Kantian epistemology. Schmitz himself, however, suggests that the numinous is a kind of “atmosphere”, that is, something that surrounds the one seized by it as an aesthetic experience that is embodied – aesthetic in the sense of sensory impressions – and that unconditionally lays hold of the person.⁴² Dwelling, in the most general sense of the term, is the human attempt to become familiar with an atmosphere of this kind through carving out a leeway or an area that relieves us of this unmediated exposure to its unconditional authority.⁴³ Building a temple – or any house for that matter – is an attempt to circumscribe the numinous, to make it somehow manageable and possible to live *with* rather than *before*.

Schmitz is helpful when it comes to understanding the nature of numinous power. On one hand, as we have seen, this power takes its expression in and authority from what he calls an “unconditional seriousness”. On the other, through the dwelling this “unconditional seriousness” is mediated so that human beings do not encounter it, as it were, “raw”. This “mediation of the unconditional” sounds as if it were a paradox, but I think not in the sense of a cognitive paradox. Rather, it refers to the ambiguity or perhaps duality of the experience of the numinous. Otto was, as we have seen, quite emphatic about the ambiguous quality of the experience, but here it is a matter of another ambiguity or duality – more like Moses, in the story of Exodus 33:18–34:9, who asked to see the glory of God but only got to see his back, since no one could see God’s face and live. In other words, God’s manifest presence is only presented to Moses indirectly. Analogically, the

41. Hermann Schmitz, *System der Philosophie: Dritter Band. Der Raum, Vierter Teil. Das Göttliche und der Raum*, Freiburg 2019, 87. My translation.

42. Schmitz, *System der Philosophie*, 81–82. On atmosphere, see Ola Sigurdson, *Atmosfärer: En essä*, Stockholm/Umeå 2023.

43. Schmitz, *System der Philosophie*, 213.

temple, as an example of the circumscribing dwelling, both presents and obscures the numinous in that it holds together the fact that it is not at our disposal and the hermeneutical insight that if it somehow engages us in any case it therefore must come within our reach. In other words, there must be both continuity and discontinuity in the aesthetic experience of the numinous for it to be experientially meaningful and even relatable.

In terms of power, this means that it is, at least in principle, possible to recognize the authority of the numinous, its overwhelming quality, while understanding how it is possible not to be directly seized by it. Take the tourist visiting St Peter's: it is indeed possible, as a tourist, to recognize as well as experience something of its numinous quality, while yet remaining a tourist, that is, someone visiting the basilica for sightseeing purposes rather than worship. Perhaps some of the allure of a numinous space like St Peter's, even for the tourist, who may well be a non-believer or an agnostic unconcerned with its religious meaning, is found in the potential numinosity of the building itself, experienced both as present and distant. That it is possible to experience an atmosphere such as the numinous as both present and distant in a particular building is explained by an understanding of the numinous such as Schmitz's, as it shows why the various degrees of experienced intensity do not contradict the asymmetry in the relationship between the numinous and the experiencing subject. There is indeed a shift in the centre of gravity from horizontality to verticality, but there is still the possibility of reflexively relating to this very shift while yet recognizing it. This means, in turn, that the power of the numinous should be understood not in purely causal terms but rather as an "insisting" power, a power whose vertical authority is mediated horizontally. Phenomenally, it is experienced more as a kind of dance than as an encroachment in this intertwining of activity and passivity, of horizontality and verticality. Here, I turn to the performative quality of the sacred experience.

The Performance of the Sacred

If the power of the sacred draws attention to the vertical moment of the numinous, the performance of the sacred similarly stresses the horizontal aspect. I have just suggested that, perhaps, verticality and horizontality should dialectically be held together, rather than be disconnected from each other. But before I return to this hypothesis, let me first present what I mean by the performance of the sacred from a spatial perspective. In my narrative introduction to this essay, I tried to present a short sketch of what an experience of the numinous could be from a first-person perspective. One distinguishing feature of such an experience that I wanted to highlight is its

dynamic quality. The shortest version of a description of such an experience is that it entails a shift in the centre of gravity from horizontality to verticality, but in real life it is a matter of approaching the building, entering it, walking farther inside it, and so on. In other words, the experience of the sacred is dynamic rather than static. As I have already made clear, it indeed involves a form of passivity on the part of the experiencing subject in that he or she undergoes this experience of some form of power outside him- or herself. At the same time, however, the passivity is not absolute. This is indicated by the narration of how this experience came about. It involves a dynamic transformation from one state to another and so the relation between passivity and activity is more complex and nuanced than an either/or relationship. In more detailed reports of experiences of the sacred, especially reports involving such buildings as the Pantheon or St Peter's, it is usually emphasized how iteration contributes to the sense of the sacred, either in the form of liturgy or ritual involving the buildings or just the thousands or millions of people who visit them, year after year. It is not just a matter of experiencing the sacred in and through the buildings but also of being aware of how they have been and are treated as sites of the sacred.

Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017) has, in a well-known critique of Eliade and his discussion of sacred spaces, pointed out how sacred spaces are created by religious traditions, not just given as such. In *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, Smith takes Eliade to task for privileging “event” before “memorial” and “cosmogony” before “politics” in religious history.⁴⁴ As Smith puts it, “there is nothing inherent in the location of the Temple in Jerusalem. Its location was simply where it happened to be built”.⁴⁵ It was an active choice to build it where it was built, not a necessity that passively had to be accepted (even though it was legitimated as such afterwards). Other places, of course, could have a necessary locative specificity, such as Bethel for its association with the patriarch Jacob (see Gen 28:10–22). Even then, the associations of the place will be built through narrative and ritual. Sacredness is, then, more a matter of the use of a certain building or site than of any inherent properties in it: sacred power is “situational” rather than “substantive”. “Ritual is not an expression of or a response to ‘the Sacred’; rather, something or someone is made sacred by ritual.”⁴⁶ This means that nothing is sacred in itself – nor is anything profane in itself. Or again, “ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are”.⁴⁷ Sacrality does not, even though experience might

44. Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, Chicago 1987, 1–23.

45. Smith, *To Take Place*, 83.

46. Smith, *To Take Place*, 104–105.

47. Smith, *To Take Place*, 109.

make it seem so, inherently dwell in certain spaces, but is on the contrary projected on certain spaces as an effect of rituals being performed in and around them. Sacred spaces are made, not found. The power of the sacred is a function of the horizontal – the temporal – not of the vertical.

No doubt Smith's critique of Eliade (who actually mentions performance, but does not offer any detailed account of it) is an important reminder that sacred spaces are always sites of power, where power is contested. Iteration is certainly a means for making something, a particular sacred space, appear as if it were absolute and natural rather than relative and construed. As Smith points out, the history of religions is certainly full of examples of how a particular place is imbued with new meaning through a ritual taking place there. There might be several reasons for speaking of "sacralized space" rather than "sacred space" to highlight this performative aspect of the sacred. If, however, Smith's critique is taken as replacing a vertical and substantive understanding of the sacred with a horizontal and situational understanding (which I am not sure was his intention), then there is a risk of underestimating the power of the sacred (by power, I mean here its "insistence"). Even if this power is in some way a function of ritual, the experience of it can hardly be altogether reduced to some kind of active intention behind the ritual. If it were just a matter of ritual, ritual would be understood as an arbitrary imposition on space, with space (and place) in itself just being inert and mute.

I repeat my contention that this is not how space in general is experienced, and especially not sacred space. To the experience of the sacredness of a certain space belongs a surplus that in its manifestation cannot be reduced to anything self-produced. In its spontaneous and imposing power it is experienced as something beyond human control. Any particular experience of space, including, of course, sacred space, could well be illusory, in thinking that space actively imposes itself upon us. But if all our experience of the heterogeneity of spaces is false, then our alienation is without limit, including, I suppose, also our theories of the performance of the sacred. If spaces cannot assert themselves, but all their significances are actively and exclusively produced by us, then such a theory of the performance of the sacred is as "subjectivistic" as a theory of the power of the sacred, such as Eliade's, is "objectivistic". Would, then, an experience of anything "other" (even with a lowercase "o") be at all possible, or would every "other" be reduced to "the same"? Are we not, to the same extent as in Eliade's account, again encountering a perspective that takes leave of the material as "other", if spaces cannot affect us in ways that go beyond our use of them?

I am far from suggesting that this is what Smith wants to say, even though he has formulations that might sound like it. In his polemics against a

substantive interpretation of the sacred, he is understandably emphasizing a situational interpretation. His interest is not the phenomenon of the sacred as such or everyday life; rather, it has to do with how the sacred is interpreted in religious studies and how particular historical instances of it have been misconstrued. What if we, as I have already hinted at, do not think of the horizontal as the alternative or opposite to the vertical, but rather as the way in which the vertical asserts itself, as a kind of surplus over and in the horizontal? If there is, indeed, a “mediation of the unconditional”, then the sacred could be understood, not as a static relation between the sacredness inherent in a building and the one perceiving it, but as a dynamic mediation of something that takes place in between subject and object, as a kind of irreducible surplus.⁴⁸ To understand how this can come about, I shall now take a closer look at how performance might work in relation to the sacred.

A performance, according to Erika Fischer-Lichte, whose *The Transformative Power of Performance* (German original from 2004) is a classic, concerns “the transformation of the performance’s participants”; it disputes the dichotomous division between subject and object and turns the spectators into participants.⁴⁹ Thus, it is about presence rather than interpretation, and the presence in question is not something that exists “before” or “outside” the performance itself. Presence “happens” in the performance and is perceived as a form of energy.⁵⁰ It is important, however, not to understand this performance in an individual manner. On the contrary, it is an embodied co-presence among, in the case of theatre, “spectators” and “actors” and, of course, the material scene of the performance. This also, naturally, goes for the performance of a certain building, city, or site: the experience of a sacred space like St Peter’s involves the material edifice as much as other visitors, be they tourists or celebrants.⁵¹ A performance, in other words, is as much material as it is aesthetic, political, or social, if these are understood as differentiated from one another.⁵² All these dimensions of existence are intertwined in performance, and through the performance, any static dichotomies between subject and object or meaning and materiality become dynamized. As Fischer-Lichte describes the performance, it enacts what she

48. See Bernhard Waldenfels, *Hyperphänomene: Modi hyperbolischer Erfahrung*, Frankfurt 2012, 353–412.

49. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, London 2008, 16–17.

50. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 98.

51. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 75–137. See also Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Transforming Spectators into *Viri Perculsi*: Baroque Theatre as Machinery for Producing Affects”, in Peter Gillgren & Märten Snickare (eds.), *Performativity and Performance in Baroque Rome*, Farnham 2012, 87–97.

52. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 51.

calls an “in-between” state, or a state of liminality.⁵³ This is also what Eliade – as well as Fischer-Lichte herself – described as a threshold. As discussed above, thresholds enact and signify passage and transformation, and so do performances. Fischer-Lichte talks about a “destabilization of the self, the world, and its norms” in “the experience of the concerned subjects”, and this is very much what takes place when the point of gravity shifts in the aesthetic experience of sacrality in the Pantheon or St Peter’s.⁵⁴

Fischer-Lichte notices the similarities between performances understood as art and as ritual, and also that they often are intertwined, even though she ultimately wishes to hold them apart.⁵⁵ The distinguishing mark is that artistic performances take place outside a ritual or religious context. They do not refer to another world that might mitigate their physical impact or imbue them with meaning. This claim is somewhat dubious, given both Fischer-Lichte’s emphasis on the inevitable intertwining as well as the self-testimonies of performance artists.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, she is aware of how close a performative presence comes to some notion of the power of sacrality as it makes an impact on those within the sphere of its radiance. She sometimes uses a theological vocabulary, as in performance as a “transfiguration” of the commonplace, or when she uses the metaphor “*theatrum vitae humana*” – “the theatre of human life” – in understanding the relation between art and life.⁵⁷ Furthermore, in the last chapter of *The Transformative Power of Performance*, she speaks of the “reenchantment of the world”.⁵⁸ Reenchantment is understood by her as a “liberation from all endeavors to understand and the revelation of the ‘intrinsic meaning’ of man and things”.⁵⁹ Again, despite her nearness to some understanding of the sacred, in this last chapter she distances herself from what she calls a “two-world theory”, and suggests that performance is characterized by “self-referentiality” even as she recognizes the “transformational power” of performance. One may ask, however, if this “self-referentiality” of performance really does justice to the openness or porosity of the subject that undergoes the experience of a performance. Given the instability of the demarcation between art and reality in performance, according to Fischer-Lichte’s own understanding, how can performance be defined as something that, as such, excludes the possibility

53. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 174.

54. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 179.

55. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 91.

56. See, for example, the self-biography of Marina Abramović, *Walk Through Walls: A Memoir*, London 2016, in which she quite explicitly refers to Tibetan Buddhism as a background to many of her performances.

57. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 168, 205.

58. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 181–207.

59. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 186.

of experiencing what Otto calls the “Wholly Other”?⁶⁰ It seems to me that she applies a much too stark distinction between a traditional notion of the sacred and that kind of sacrality that takes place in artistic performances, as well as a simplified idea of the former’s “two-world theory”. If “aesthetic experience” – that is, transformative experience of the subject concerned – could be applied to non-artistic as well as artistic performances, then how could the “Wholly Other” be excluded in principle? As she herself states, “the border turns into a frontier and a threshold, which does not separate but connects”.⁶¹

As spatiality as such is also something that happens in performance rather than being a static “thing”, sacred space is performed, and it is through the very performance of the space that its sacredness takes place. It is when the sacred space is performed that it also lays claim to a certain authority over those present. But even though sacrality is in some way produced, much like presence, this does not mean that its production should be taken as the opposite of its reception. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht uses the Eucharist as an example of precisely this dialectic: “the celebration of the Eucharist, day after day, will not only maintain but intensify the already existing real presence of God.”⁶² In this account, the situational character of the Eucharist both holds together its presentation with its representation and also makes it uncontrollable in the sense of impossible to plan. Fischer-Lichte’s interpretation of the performance of the sacred, as we may well call it, is quite helpful in understanding how it is possible to speak of the production of an experience of numinosity in built edifices without denying the possibility of a power of the numinous that goes beyond human intention. As Paul Ricœur (1913–2005) has noted in a similar discussion, the interpretation of a founding tradition is a constitutive part of that very tradition; the performance of the sacred is part of the efficacy of the sacred: “between the sacrality of space and the act of habitation subtle exchanges occur.”⁶³ Ricœur shows us, in a manner not that distant from Fischer-Lichte, that the performance and the power of the sacred need not be understood as each other’s opposites, but can be held in dialectical tension.

60. See Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 200.

61. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 204.

62. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford, CA 2004, 85. See also pp. 16–18.

63. Paul Ricœur, “Manifestation and Proclamation”, in Mark I. Wallace (ed.), *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, Minneapolis, MN 1995, 51.

Conclusion

Let us return to Rome, or at least to my short narrative introduction. I shall draw this exploration to a close through some short reflections on what it might mean that the experience of the numinous is an aesthetic experience. The casual visitor to the Pantheon or St Peter's might perhaps experience something of the numinous or sacred, and this, I assume, is one of the reasons why so many visit these monuments. If he or she experiences something like this, the history of the places as well as their former and contemporary uses are parts of such an experience and also, and perhaps not least, of their material form. Visiting the Pantheon or St Peter's carries the potential of such an experience, not only because of any ideas we might have of them but also for their atmosphere in the sense of that multi-sensory impression they evoke in us through and because of their appearance. Such impressions are not of sight only, but all of our senses play a role: the tactile feeling of the Pantheon's concrete, the smell of dust and sometimes of incense that surrounds us, the memory of bread and wine for those of us who go to communion, not least the acoustics of that vast space, and of course the sight of the play of light. The Pantheon and St Peter's are certainly only examples of the loci of such experiences; I have chosen them simply because they are quite well-known to many. Other similar buildings could, *mutatis mutandis*, work in a similar way.

In this article, I have argued that power and performance are dialectically related in the experience of the sacred; consequently, the experience of the sacred is not less sacred because it also is an aesthetic, multi-sensory experience. Without the circumscribing edifice in all these aspects that both evoke in us and shield us from the sacred, it is open to question how much of it we would experience. It is true that modern culture as well as modern Christianity has emphasized the cognitive faculties, and perhaps also sight as the sense associated with them, so there has been forgetfulness of the experience of being an embodied as well as a spatial creature. But that does not mean that the atmospheric qualities of an experience of space have disappeared, only that they have become more unarticulated, especially in much academic discourse.⁶⁴ To retrieve a sense of that experience through discursive articulation might both make us more aware of it and give us the means of a critical assessment of it. But to retrieve it, we need, I think, to be more mindful of its actual, material form. It is not so much that this form only exemplifies sacredness; rather, it participates in it through producing it. To articulate such experiences, we need also heed their specific characteristics:

64. On this topic, see, for instance, Gernot Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces*, London 2017; Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*.

even though there might be commonalities between different experiences of the sacred generated by different edifices, their distinct qualities are as important for rising above (or going below) mere generalities that might once again obscure the concrete experiences. The phenomenological study of sacred spaces might have something in common with cartography, in that it needs to attend to the specifics of the aesthetic experiences of these spaces.

I noted in my introduction that, even though there are common denominators between the experiences of the Pantheon and of St Peter's, these sites are both distinct in the way the experience of the sacred is staged in them. In the classic literature on the sacred, some of which has been discussed here, the accent is on the general rather than the specific and on the abstract and cognitive – myth, if you will – rather than the concrete and experiential – form and matter. Although some form of generalization and abstractness is unavoidable in academic inquiries of this kind, one should not stop there. In a discussion of the atmospheric qualities of experiencing the numinous in and through an edifice, the specifics of that edifice need to enter the discussion. The atmosphere's mode of existence is situated between subject and object – between the visitor to the Pantheon and the building itself – and to avoid giving the impression of that atmosphere as something existing only in the mind of the visitor, the specifics of the building become important for our understanding of its particular atmosphere. What Gumbrecht says about a literary work is also true of a building: “By ‘concreteness’ I mean that every atmosphere and every mood – as similar as they may be to others – has the singular quality of a material phenomenon.”⁶⁵ To attend to that “singular quality of a material phenomenon” through discursive accounts of aesthetic experience would, according to Gumbrecht, “reactivate a feeling for the bodily and for the spatial dimensions of our existence”.⁶⁶ The discursive description needs to attend to the intuitive impression as closely as possible to catch sight of how the numinous manifests itself. To understand the numinous is of course of utmost importance, but, in the face of this phenomenon, like so many other aesthetic experiences, one needs to be aware of the limits and shortcomings of academic descriptions. In some rare moments they might perhaps inspire an atmosphere in the reader, as literature often does, but more often they need to rest content with gesturing towards it.⁶⁷ ▲

65. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, Stanford, CA 2012, 14–15.

66. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 118.

67. See Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, 16.

SUMMARY

In this article, I explore the experience of the sacred with a focus on how it is experienced through spatial categories, particularly buildings. My main aim is to show how this is an aesthetic experience in the sense of what is intuitively given through our senses. My perspective is phenomenological in that I am above all concerned with how the sacred is experienced, not with how it should be interpreted. Thus, I discuss some of the classic writers on the phenomenology of religion – Mircea Eliade and Rudolf Otto – as well as some of their critics – Jonathan Z. Smith and, indirectly, Erika Fischer-Lichte. In their respective contributions to our understanding of how the sacred manifests itself in spatial edifices, I find both the classics and their critics constructive but ultimately wanting: while the classic approaches emphasize the power of the sacred and its verticality, the critics' responses stress the performance of the sacred and its horizontality. My own contribution consists of a dialectic combination of the two: that the sacred is in some sense construed through the iterations of its performance does not exclude a sacred power that manifests itself through this very performance as a surplus. I conclude that there is a need for a phenomenology of numinous edifices that attends more concretely both to the actual materiality of the buildings in question, as this gives rise to different experiences of the sacred, as well as to the articulation and nuances of a multisensory experience of such buildings.