
A PERSPECTIVE ON CHRISTIAN SACRAL ARCHITECTURE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Jan Rabiej¹, Yuriy Kryvoruchko^{2*} and Bogusław Podhalański³

¹ *Silesian University of Technology, 2A ul. Akademicka, Gliwice, 44-100, Poland*

² *Zaporizhzhia Polytechnic National University, 60 Zhukowsky street, Zaporizhzhia, 69063, Ukraine*

³ *Academy of Applied Sciences, 71 ul. Kokoszków, Nowy Targ, 34-400, Poland*

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Abstract

The origins of Christian sacral architecture are formed by:

- the models of sacral buildings shaped in ancient civilisation, when considering formality and aesthetics and
- the rite in the communal Christian liturgy of thanksgiving, when considering ideology and functionality.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate the timeliness of the principle. New and original concepts in the evolution of Christian sacral architecture - distinctive sequences in the process of its transfiguration – were stimulated by crisis conditions. In order to prove this condensed principle, the following methodological framework of argument was adopted:

1. critical analysis of literature on the subject
2. evolutionary and comparative analyses with elements of a case study and in situ research
3. heuristic analyses

The research results on the subject, presented in 4 parts of the article, summarize the following conclusions - they characterize the universal perspective of sacral Christian architecture.

Keywords: theory of architecture, sacral architecture, crisis, transfiguration

1. Introduction

The following features are encoded in architectural forms: utilitarian function, aesthetic values, semantic and symbolic narratives. These parameters are transformed and form sequences of figures [1]. Analysis of the process of architecture transfiguration comprehended in this way points to a paradoxical regularity, a rule or principle. Namely, that its stimulators become both the circumstances of civilisational culminations, as well as the conditions of crises in civilisation.

Buildings constructed out of religious inspiration are cultural phenomena [2]. In the history of Western civilization these edifices marked the peaks of

* yurikryv@gmail.com

ideological and aesthetic aspiration and the horizons of building potential. Religious zeal, intellectual genius, technical potential, artistic craftsmanship, material wealth and the authority of those in power were all involved in their construction. The culture we inherit is also evidenced by works of sacral architecture: the Parthenon in Athens, the Pantheon in Rome, Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, St. Peter's Basilica in Rome or the Sagrada Familia church in Barcelona (still under construction). The panoramas of modern European cities are still distinguished by the profiles of Christian churches erected in past eras [3] (Figure 1. a, b, c).

In our times the construction of a church does not merit the significance of becoming an epochal event. Religious buildings do not stimulate avant-garde trends in architecture. Paradoxically, it is in contemporary buildings that we recognise archetypal characteristics of churches, in those that display works of art, put on commercial exhibitions, exchange consumer goods, or even those that provide recreation or entertainment. There is no question that architecture, including sacral architecture, is currently in a state of crisis [4]. It is a direct manifestation of the crisis in religion, and in a broader sense, it is one of the symptoms of a crisis in civilisation [5, 6].

The circumstances described above raise the question of a perspective on sacral Christian architecture in current times of civilisational crisis. The author's approach to this question was formed on the basis of the following assumptions:

- architecture is the art of transfiguration,
- a state of crisis (Greek: κρίσις) can stimulate changes typical of watershed phases or 'turning points in civilisation'.

2. Crisis – its creative potential in Christianity

A symbolic figure of the radical transformation taking place in times of crisis might be personified by the biblical figure of the Patriarch Abraham. Old Abram, with his unconditional faith, leaves behind his former life, affirms new goals, a new perspective ... and is reborn as a new man endowed with supernatural vitality. He makes non-conformist commitments which are rationally inexplicable, risky, wild and visionary. The descendants of Abraham produce a tradition that is filled with a sequence of crises and overcoming these crises [7]. The imperative of constant transfiguration inscribed in the history of the Chosen People determines the eschatological view of Christianity.

Christianity 'was born' and 'matured' in circumstances of crisis, far removed from the conditions typical of the so-called 'golden ages' in the history of civilisation [8]. As a religious system, rooted in monotheistic Judaism, it emancipated itself on the peripheries of an ancient universe sinking into crisis [9]. The religion of Jesus of Nazareth turned out to be a 'mark of opposition' both to the polytheistic environment as well as to the monotheistic environment of the followers of the god Yahweh. Yet its message was not a call for annihilation but for transformation, reconstruction and transfiguration, both in relation to the collapsing order of the ancient world and to the tradition of the Torah [10].

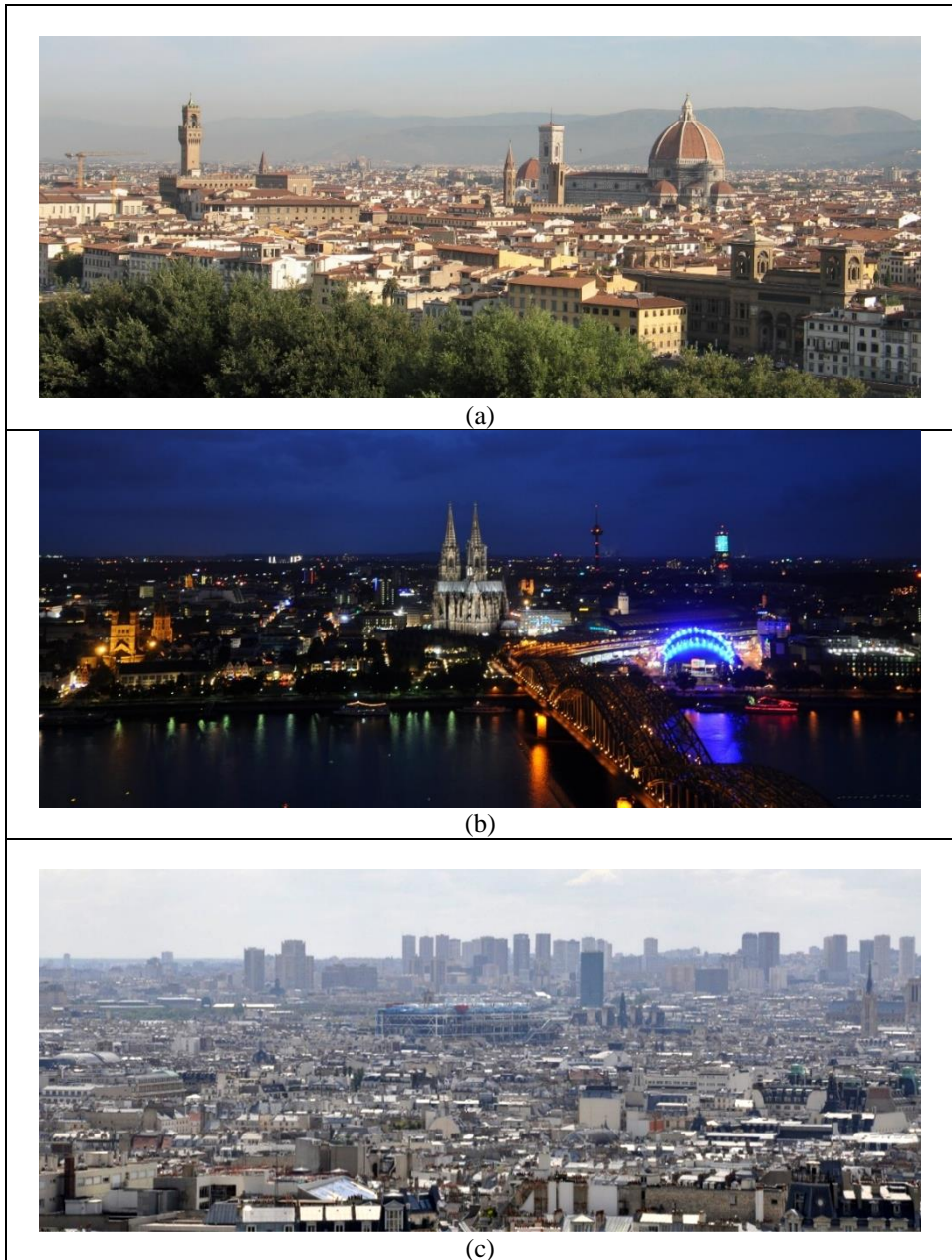


Figure 1. Panorama of Florence (a), Cologne (b), Paris (c)

The Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth inspires us to undergo radical change, thorough re-evaluation, refreshing turnabouts, but which are also accompanied by tensions, dramas and ... crises. Christianity is the opposite of sustainable, conservative and conformist attitudes. But the growth of this new religion, both in times of rigorous persecution as well as conditions of religious freedom, progressed through motions of re-evaluation of a degenerated reality, and not in attempts at arbitrary destruction of it. The dynamics of evangelisation were not

directed against the co-religionists of Yahweh who betrayed the covenants made with Him or against the idolatrous followers of 'foreign gods. Thoughts of demolishing the Jerusalem Temple or destroying pagan temples were contrary to Christianity. The actual goal and methods of evangelisation are characterised by the metaphors 'cleansing of the Jerusalem Temple' and 'sacralisation of pagan temples. They also explain the precepts upon which Christians build their churches [11]. They comprise - subject to transfiguration - ancient models of sacral and secular architecture, as well as new and original elements that reflect Christian dogmas of theology and the ritual of the liturgy of thanksgiving.

Transfigurations of the Jerusalem Temple - the archetypal Christian church

Of the ideas adopted by Christians taken directly from the Israelite tradition, a special place is occupied by the archetype of the temple - the 'House of God'. The concept of building a Temple to the god Yahweh matured during the course of the dramatic history of the Chosen People - the descendants of the Patriarch Abraham. The fate of the homeless nation, longing for its own 'home', was tempered by the closeness of God. The Children of Israel's dreams of possessing their own land were combined with the vision of a worthy home for the One God, Yahweh.

The conditions enabling the implementation of the commitment to build a 'House of God' did not occur before the reign of King David. Following the conquest of Jerusalem in the war against the Philistines, the prophetic prediction of the rise of a mighty Davidic Kingdom came to pass. Following this triumph, the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the city by the king. From that time on Jerusalem became the capital of the kingdom and at the same time the 'Holy City'. David constructed a temple there after receiving detailed instructions from Yahweh himself as to its architectural form. However, he was not granted the privilege of completing this plan. This work was carried out by his son Solomon. The 'House of God' and the location of the 'home of the Ark of the Covenant' remained a tent for a long time from when Jerusalem was first conquered to the construction of a temple in it.

The biblical tale describing the circumstances presaging and directly related to the construction of the Jerusalem Temple is a narrative of collaboration between the Israelite community and their God. The conditions for the participation of community members in the work of erecting the Tabernacle, the features of its physical shape, the mode of its construction and the strict rules of operation came from God's Revelation. They were documented in law. In keeping with these conditions, the temple was erected on a hill in Jerusalem. It was given the name 'House of God'. Inside, worship involved a variety of prayers and sacrifices. In contrast to the temples of the ancient religions, inaccessible to the faithful as a whole, the Jerusalem Temple was a sanctuary with varying degrees of accessibility to the Israelites who practised its faith. The hierarchical zones of the temple hill were attended by crowds, especially on holy days. Coupled with the religious acts undertaken in them were various aspects of an institutional centre of power. This holy place served as the core of the urban design of Jerusalem, in

which the real life of the city and, symbolically, the life of all the Israelites was engendered.

The Jerusalem Temple was erected as a place of perpetual residence of Yahweh with his people. Contrary to these expectations, the masterpiece was repeatedly the subject of historical drama, as reflected in the history of the Israelites. The long-term fate of this building was set out in a sequence of construction, destruction, reconstruction, modernisation and destruction (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Contemporary panorama of Jerusalem.

In 587 BCE the Babylonians destroyed Solomon's temple. The Israelites, directed by Zerubbabel and Joshua the priest, began to rebuild it in the years 520-515 BCE. The new building, deprived of the lost Ark of the Covenant, never attained its original glory. It was desecrated by the Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes. In 165 BCE the temple was cleansed following this desecration. King Herod, I commenced its subsequent reconstruction in around 20 BCE. The work continued until around 66 CE. It was almost completely destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. The only surviving relic of the Jerusalem Temple after this ruination was the so-called 'Wailing Wall'. It testifies to the complex architectural features of this symbolic building. Its archaeological interpretation confirms the theory that, despite the ideological dissimilarity of the Jerusalem sanctuary when compared to ancient sacral buildings, they were linked by analogous architectural features. They underwent transfigurations corresponding to the evolution of stylistic models and their diffusion into different cultural spheres.

3. Transfiguration of the ancient models in the evolution of Christian sacral architecture

The crystallisation of Christian sacral architecture is illustrated by the transfiguration of residential houses (*Domus Ecclesiae*), in which the first Christians communities gathered for the ‘breaking of bread’, into autonomous forms of temples (*Domus Dei*), modelled on ancient sacral buildings. Our knowledge of house churches, based on examples such as the one in Dura Europos, indicates that they were buildings with multiple functions [12]. The first Christians set out places for liturgy, prayer, teaching, and other ancillary functions of the community within the spatial layouts of typical Hellenistic villas. In times of religious persecution these were asylums of relative freedom and security founded on the privilege of inviolability of the home - *ius domiciliare*.

Christians began building churches in the form of free-standing buildings even prior to the Edict of Milan in 313 CE which ended the period of religious persecution. We learn about facts that verify the construction of buildings to meet the growing needs of Christian communities from written sources between the years 260 and 303 CE. In a text by Porphyry from his dissertation ‘Against the Christians’ from around 270 CE we read: “Christians, copying the construction of temples, build great houses in which they gather for prayer” [13]. From reading these communications we also learn about the existence of churches in Gaul, Caesarea in Palestine, and Neocaesarea in Pontus. From a letter written by Bishop Mensurius we know about the existence of a church in Carthage, and the churches erected in Salona in Dalmatia with the involvement of Bishop Dominio. Letters written by St. Augustine, relating to the activities of Bishop Theogenes, testify to the existence of a church in Hippo. While the accounts of Lactantius, referencing a period of persecution from around 303 CE, mention the existence of a church in Nicomedia. These reports show that the churches of the first Christian communities were built during the traumatic times of waves of persecution [12].

In ancient times the temples of the polytheistic religions were erected as sanctuaries dedicated to deities. Their accessibility was limited to an elite group of priests and temple servants. Set against these archetypes, Christian buildings were rather places of the Eucharist - the liturgy of thanksgiving - celebrated by the baptised congregation under the direction of a presbyter. These gatherings became times when their God’s personal presence was felt among the community of the faithful. The interior space where the Eucharist was celebrated served simultaneously as both the House of the Church (*Domus Ecclesiae*) and the House of God (*Domus Dei*). Within this integration of meanings lies the essence of the specificity of Christian sacred buildings. They are not created in opposition to a locality requiring purification, but neither are they a feature of its emancipation. Their presence provides the locality with supernatural properties. Acts of theophany and sacralisation take place within churches [14]. In such relationships there exist features of purification, transformation and transfiguration. This summation of the phenomenon of Christian sacral architecture explains the construction of Christian churches founded on the ancient cultures of the Jews, the Greeks and the Romans, and the adaptations of existing buildings originally

used for the worship of foreign religions, or used as courts, for education or for trade. An important illustration of this type of adaptation was the renaming of the Roman Pantheon in the 7th century CE to the Church of Santa Maria Rotonda. In the 8th century CE Christians built the church of San Lorenzo in Miranda into the walls of the ancient temple of Antoninus and Faustina which had formed part of the Roman Forum (Figure 3). These examples clearly demonstrate that pagan temples and Jewish synagogues are ‘transitional links’ in the complex chain of transfiguration of Christian sacral architecture [15].



Figure 3. Forum Romanum – as it looks today.

The architectural forms of the first episcopal churches are also expressions of Christian transfiguration. The Roman Lateran basilica – ‘the mother and head of all the churches of the city and the world’ was built in 314-324 on the initiative of Emperor Constantine. Being the property of the potentate, it comprised part of the suburban imperial residence and was integrated into its garden. Together with the palace, constructed on the foundations of the barracks of the Equites Singulares legion it was entrusted to the Bishop of Rome, thus becoming the cathedral church of the first Popes [16]. The first Basilica of St. Peter, built on the Roman Vatican, also adopted the design and architectural form of a basilica from ancient times. The mainstream evolution of Christian sacral architecture was founded on this type of building.

Christian churches reflect the reach that Christianity attained and the religion’s importance over the following centuries of European history. They determined the spatial and functional order of cities. They played a dominant role in their designs and panoramas. The life of local communities centred around them. The building of churches was a religious undertaking in which the apotheosis of faith was combined with the emanation of civilisational progress. Just as Christianity as a religion became a source of indisputable ethical and moral standards, so the qualities of outstanding buildings were to be found in Christian churches. Today we perceive the degree of dissemination of stylistic features of Romanesque, Gothic and Renaissance architecture in terms of universal and transcultural phenomena. Tellingly, they did not adopt the properties of arbitrary

canons. Stylistic models of Christian church architecture were influenced by local traditions and evolving aesthetic criteria, but they maintained an ideological coherence (Figure 4. a, b, c).



Figure 4. Reims Cathedral (a), Cologne Cathedral (b), Mary's Basilica in Gdansk (c).

The continuity of the evolution of Christian sacral architecture went through another phase of transfiguration in times of crisis during the Reformation ‘split’ in the unity of faith. Since then, various Christian denominations and rites have maintained the specificity of their churches. The diverse features of architecture of Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic churches are in fact an expression of differently distributed accents, reflected in a single common archetype of a Christian church. The most diverse transfigurations of this archetype are visible in the contemporary architecture of the Catholic church (Figure 5. a, b, c).

Today, the problems of the crisis of church architecture are reflected in the transformation of sacred objects from one denomination to another, in the need for tolerance toward other faiths in multicultural regions, and in the education of religious tolerance and empathy. The border areas of Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belarus are particularly rich in issues [17-23].

4. A case study of one example of church transfiguration

The history of the Catholic Church of St. Joseph the Worker in Bytom in Silesia is an illustration of one of the multiple scenarios of transfiguration that sacral buildings undergo. It was built in 1927-1928 to the design of Theodor Ehl in the industrial sector of the city. The form of its architecture corresponded to a historicising style, one of the characteristics of churches built in Europe during a period of civilisational crisis following the First World War. The profile of this building became another dominant feature in the panorama of this centuries-old city. The fate of this church and parish reflects the complex political, economic and cultural transformations that took place in Silesia in the interwar period, in the second half of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century (Figure

6. a). It functioned as a church until March 19, 2016 when it was deconsecrated by a decree of the bishop of the Diocese of Gliwice. This related to a decision for it to be demolished, owing to the following circumstances:



Figure 5. La Tourette Priory in Éveux (1960) – designed by Le Corbusier (a); Sanctuary of Divine Mercy in Kraków (1994) – designed by S. Niemczyk (b); Church of Our Lady of the Ark of the Covenant in Paris (1998) – designed by Architecture Studio (c).

- the church building's poor technical condition caused by many years of mining: increasing cracks in load-bearing walls and leaning of the belfry tower. Actions taken to stop the degradation of the church's structure failed to bring lasting effects, and any further usage of the building carried with it real dangers.
- residents of the Catholic parish in which the church functioned were resettled to another district of Bytom as a result of intensive urban transformations in the area. The Church of St Joseph the Worker became deprived of the proximity of its parishioners.

The demolition of the church was carried out between October 4, 2016 and November 22, 2016 (Figure 6. b, c). It was intended that treasured parts of its furnishings would be preserved during the demolition in order to integrate them into the interior design of a new church under construction. The new parish church was built on the estate where the faithful had been resettled. The architectural form of the church is a contemporary reinterpretation of the archetypes of Christian sacral architecture: a design in the shape of a Greek cross, a tent-shaped outline crowned with a vertical accent as a signature feature.

These included the tabernacle, the baptismal font, the cross, the figure of St. Joseph with Jesus and the Stations of the Cross. The location of the church, its scale, the building materials used, the stylistics of the architectural form and the semantic and symbolic strands encoded in it are characterised by simplicity, moderation and clarity (Figure 7 a, b). They reflect the qualities of a type of sacral architecture summarised by the term ‘poor Church’. Examples of this kind of turnabout in the evolution of Christian sacral architecture can be found in periods of critical turning points. Included in these are the Cistercian and Franciscan churches of the 12th century, ascetic churches built in the 20th century influenced by modernism, or churches constructed in mission areas.



Figure 6. Church of St. Joseph the Worker in Bytom – designed by Theodor Ehl, 1928-2016 (a), Demolition of the Church of St. Joseph the Worker in Bytom – 2016 (b, c).

In its current form, this sacral building is a successive stage of the transfiguration of the church of St. Joseph the Worker in Bytom. In the almost one-hundred-year history of this process, a sequence of actions has been encoded - construction, renovation, demolition, and restitution. Perhaps this process of transfiguration will be subject to further such actions. Anything could happen.

5. Conclusions – a perspective of sacral Christian architecture

1. Sacral buildings still pique interest not only in relation to their religious functions, but also as examples of architecture with a particularly intriguing cultural and civilisational dimension. Churches from hundreds of years ago have survived to our times, retaining their original architectural forms. Many survive having undergone numerous transfigurations. Churches built today reflect both direct references to the tradition of historical styles, their creative

reinterpretations, the influence of regional building patterns as well as to ahistorical creations, referencing avant-garde ideas of contemporary architecture.

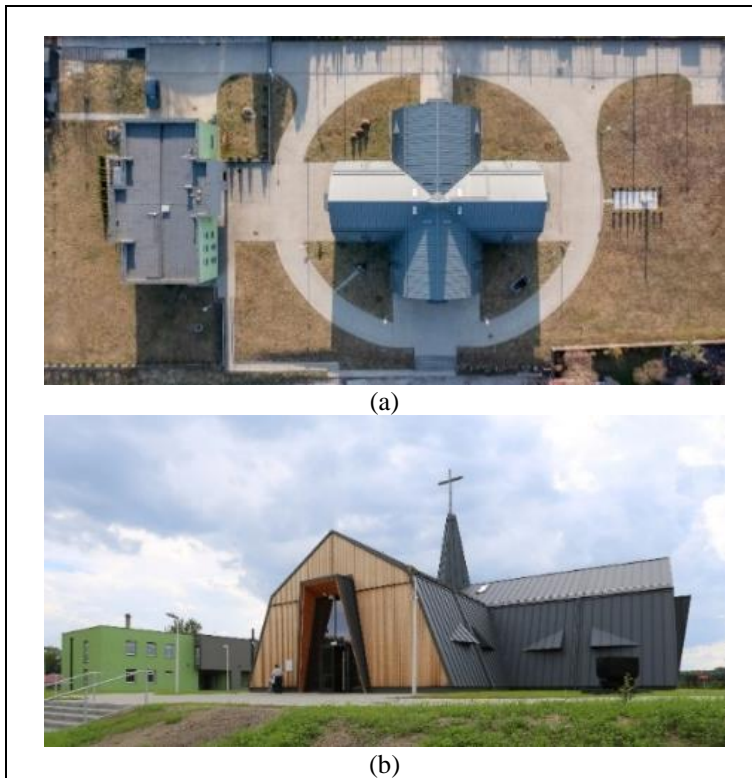


Figure 7. The new Church of St. Joseph the Worker in Bytom – designed by Jan Rabiej, 2021 (a, b).

2. The Catholic Church creates conditions for opening up to a complex range of inspirations in the shaping of buildings for worship. The affirmation of various stylistic and aesthetic concepts was confirmed at the Second Vatican Council convened in the 1960s. Sacral architecture in the Roman Catholic Church retains its ‘roots’ in the tradition of the first Christian communities but is also simultaneously created by communities living in the real conditions of place and time. The source of the Church's tradition is in the liturgy of the Eucharist. Its essence does not discontinue the framework of the ritual but is expressed by the church community’s acts of unity, living with its Creator and Lord, a transcendent and immanent God. Thus, the inspirations behind the transfiguration of this Eucharistic space are also derivatives of the evolving conditions of the environment in which the community of the faithful lives.

3. The churches of our times are not constructed in particularly prominently located places. Only a few forms the centres of urban layouts. They are often built ‘on the fringes’ of plans of housing estates, districts or cities. Irrespective of the significance of the location of houses of prayer, chapels, churches, monasteries, sanctuaries or cathedrals, they become symbolic centres of the environment in which the communities of believers who build them live. In the architectural forms

of these buildings – some of which are small, poor, clumsy, as well as those that are monumental, grand, impressive - we find an expression of functional criteria subordinated to the liturgy, as well as a reflection of the needs, zeal, aspirations, knowledge, craftsmanship and limitations of their creators.

4. A perspective of Christian sacral architecture, just like its origins, is determined by the relationship between the canon of the liturgical rite, setting the rules for the formation of the liturgical space, and features that result from the changing conditions of the environment of its celebration. In creating new sacral architecture and transforming the existing one, it is necessary to be aware of its temporality. The relationship between the constant and evolving criteria of shaping the space of churches is determined by a formula referencing the original vision of the Church of Christ: *'Ecclesia semper eadem'* (the Church is always the same) and *'Ecclesia semper reformanda'* (the Church must always be reformed) - usually initiated by states of crisis.

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