

Media Rehabilitation in Sacred Places

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Abstract- This paper addresses a concept of the rehabilitation of sacred places with the use of media technology, particularly contemplating those interventions which may have a distinct impact on sacred places. The concept focuses on the rehabilitation of those places that, in some way, are expected to gain new dynamics after a media intervention. This is obtained by means of the exploration of the aesthetic aspect of art as an object of contemplation and the measurement of sensory impact of the intervention on the human being. Manifestly, the impact that the use of media in architecture may have on current urban societies is still under-explored, and requires further definition and implementation. As such, this work is a consideration on the subject of rehabilitating of places of contemplation using new media technology.

Keywords : Media, Architecture, Sacred Spaces, Rehabilitation.

1 INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on space occupation scenarios, not from the tectonic perspective which has always been associated with architecture, but from a fluid, ethereal and electronic aspect, linked to media technology. By reflecting on space and how it's occupied, architects present us with alternatives, projects and ideas so that space becomes synchronous with modern society's concepts, technology and evolution of mentality. Technological innovation, while expanding its part in human experience, leads us to contemplate on the transformation of specific spaces such as religious places and their adaptability to the new cultural, social and even spiritual goals which that same technology has facilitated.

Countless questions plague architects in their attempt to explore modern societies' new awareness and perception of place. The creation and use of places of worship or symbol-dedicated sacred places is as old as man himself, ever since the first cave paintings were made and the cave became in itself a place of contemplation. The place of worship ahead of being a place of belief, is a place of sensory experience produced in a creative process. This process prompts the architect, the painter or the sculptor to catalyse cultural, social and spiritual stimuli that translate into the work.

Sacred places have been losing their aura as a result of the conscious reasoning of human beings about our own existence and our place in the universe. However, in these locations the essence of the place still remains a sensorial experience connected to light, sound and to the objects that stay and shape the interiors. It is here that the proposal of this paper arises: to rehabilitate and incite new sensory impressions in religious or contemplative places by way of media technology; to contribute to the enrichment of the effects of proprioceptive stimulation, caused by internalised external stimulations; and consequently, to add value for the adjustment and fair evolution of the quadrants and operatives in the various social systems. Whether or not it is connected to spiritual or religious movements, a sacred place can be a sensorial, architectural and technological experience. Yesterday as today, the sacred place has always exerted a powerful attraction on the human spirit. Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews and many other religious organisations and manifestations have used the contemplative place as an interface for answers to the complex questions that still, today, are being asked. Changes in human attitude and thought allied to the technological evolution of human society have clarified many metaphysical and supernatural issues. With increased skills in cognitive and «techno-operative» functions, human beings have created their own interface for efficient and clear answers to the most complex questions. Religious places thus begin to lose the prominence and relevance of the past, but remain, however, as a historical document of beliefs and personalities. The distancing from these places and the adoption of spiritual sensorial alternatives by human beings have left many places abandoned and degraded. Regardless of spiritual and/or religious options, contemplative places do not remain indifferent to experience when visited and contemplated. They are a reflection of cultural, historical and religious heritage.

It is a fact that architectural places affect the sensory impressions of human beings, on account of architecture being an expressive and representational form of three-dimensional modelling that appeals to most senses. Our starting point is a clear and objective observation of the architectural place, specifically the religious or contemplative place and its relationship with the individuals who walk through it, experience it, feel it and think about it. Architecture is a manifestation of the various components of human existence and the occupation of space is a reflection of the perception of reality. The aim of this work is to propose ways of (re)using religious places at a time when, on one hand, media technology is an integral part of our current experience and, on the other hand, a certain emotional and spiritual disposition is beginning to take on scientific contours.

After numerous visits to sacred places, a specific iconographic set was gathered on the state of use, maintenance and dynamisation of these places. It became evident that there are a large number of places that have been closed down and/or abandoned without any spiritual or cultural re-dynamisation. From this realisation came the idea of rehabilitating places through media technology in a way that would promote and expand a new perspective of the place. In a world increasingly powered by the fluidity of media technology, the question arose of how to integrate these devices in specific places.

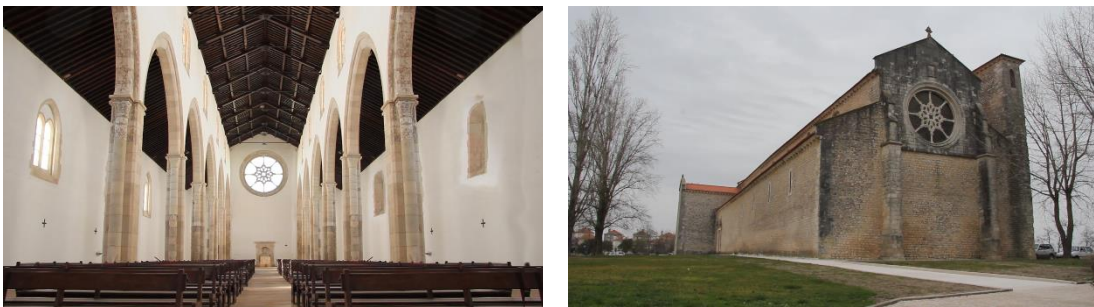


Fig 1. Santa Clara Church, Santarém, Jorge Duarte Sá.

Media experimentation in religious places is hardly a new concept in itself. However, the vision and the perception of these places has changed considerably in recent centuries. Nowadays, architectural sacred places are still a means to intensify religious experience, but they also open up alternative experiences to such encounters, may they be spiritual, cultural, or even technological. Religious places can be a receptive and introjected experience of sensory stimuli induced not by worship nor by the veneration of a religious iconography and narrative, but by a new expression of the digital times, in which image and interaction become a perceptive, aesthetic and cultural sensory experience. Objectively, it is not usual to use religious places for media experimentation, but it can be reasoned that there is an increasing open-mindedness and a broader acceptance of the use of technological arts in this specific context.

Media Rehabilitation

The dynamic and interactive pluralism that can be found in religious places has nothing to do with specific rituals or celebrations, but with the space itself, as it provokes sensorial and perceptual particularities and specificities in the visitor.

Nowadays, architectural spaces associated with the sacred are not just limited to cult practice, but are also places of cultural and social convergence (and it is this facet that can be explored by new devices). Despite some resistance to new artistic technology within sacred places, it is in such a redefinition and reinterpretation of that place that those sensory impressions beyond established religious convention can be born.

There are no works of art of an essentially technological nature in sacred places in Portugal. The works on display are part of the contemporary world, and resort to painting and sculpture. Architecture, however, has begun to bring forward proposals that reflect aesthetic and technical innovations. This is evident in new churches where there is some change in the morphology of the space and its design such as the church of Santo António in Portalegre by Carrilho da Graça, the Restelo de Troufa Real church or the Marco de Canavezes church by Siza Vieira.

In Architecture, the term rehabilitation appears associated with a set of changes that are carried out in a structure or space, allowing for the requalification and the redesign of the image of the architectural object. Rehabilitation brings about regeneration, reactivation, replacement, or it simply renews and innovates something which is inactive or without dynamics. In order to synchronise function with contemporary time and space we may ask ourselves if architectural structures, whether public, private, religious or cultural, can also be rehabilitated via new media technology. The integration of new technologies in religious places is a relatively recent field when compared to the use of painting or sculpture or even compared to experimentations with magic lanterns or darkrooms. However, the rehabilitation of places of worship could be a developing field of work in the near future. Such rehabilitation could be done via the re-service of the place by conferring new guises and dynamics to it and by scouting new sensory and aesthetic dimensions. Furthermore, but more challenging, this rehabilitation could consider integrating such places in the cultural hospitality industry and events, within a commercial role, or some other means of heritage valorization.

The field of study in this paper is focused mainly on the specificities of those places meant for the cult of the senses, in addition to the hierarchy creation and management of mental mechanisms inherent to beliefs and spirituality. These places are characterised by a very particular image of their own, which determines a design of space in accordance to specific symbolic concepts and meanings. It is even worth mentioning a certain aura of media virginity that characterises the contemplative space, which makes it tempting from an artistic and architectural point of view. In the course of History, we have witnessed a constant mutation of spiritual places, developing in parallel with the times' prevailing mentalities and thought patterns. Society's evolutionary itinerary has evolved along with and has been closely linked to doctrinal rigidity or flexibility. Possibly, it is within these places that the great artistic and architectural sensory experiences are felt, as a result of a connection between that which is sensorial and the human creative spirit. The conceptual proposal of media rehabilitation aims to integrate in places of worship current technology which is synchronous with contemporary thinking. Spirituality and the plane of sensation have changed over recent centuries, breaking the heavy heritage of religiosity. Nowadays we witness and experience new and stimulating sensory

experiences due to these technologies. Thus arises the relevance of rehabilitating spaces with new sensory experiences, opening the door to a new field of creative possibilities, which present the opportunity not only to stimulate artistic creation but also dynamise inactive places.

Nowadays, there is an apparent openness to sensorial and emotional conscience that increasingly links art, science and spirituality. Therefore, it seems pertinent to move forward with a proposal for revitalisation and «media rehabilitation», in this case in sacred places. Within the framework of a facilitating and insightful vision of the future, with regard to the development and adjustment of social systems (which are required to be open), media rehabilitation in the near future could be a field of work as natural as architectural rehabilitation or restoration.



Fig 2. Jorge Duarte Sá, Nimbus Radiance Gate Project, Santa Clara Church, Santarém.

New communication technology, as an essential structural component, is now beginning to be integrated within current places of worship. Implementation of this same technology in future rehabilitation of places may become a reality. Many places of contemplation have lost their aura of sacred worship and have become tourist destinations and objects of heritage marketing or even been taken over by other functionalities and uses. However, they have not failed to emanate a spiritual essence. This is not indifferent to the visitor, and its ambience is positioned as the core of that which is to be explored – by combination with new technology, the aim is to create a medium extension of the religious place.

Architecture is full of examples that contemplate and stimulate the spiritual aspect of the human being. Sacred places have become, nowadays, not only places of worship, but have evolved into museological exhibitions where cultural and artistic heritage can be contemplated independently of religious beliefs. This presents an «inter-religious» openness and transforms them into multifunctional places where art and spirituality are fully united via the observer.

In the concept of media and architecture, there is a fusion between kinetic communication and architectural structures. They gradually acquire sensory and perceptive readings that penetrate the physical surroundings. This process can be applied in a micro-territory, in a religious place where the surroundings and the signals emitted by it may be perceived in an entirely new way. This increases the endemic spirituality of the space itself. Sensorial experience seems to be increasingly linked to a biopsych technological process: research on brain cartography appears now to reveal specific locations for spiritual activity. Concepts and beliefs that no longer have a place in human experience fall apart with the discovery of new territories of human reality. In their place, other concepts and beliefs are created from fragments of the rubble, as if by the emanation of material from new mental and valorization constellations. Despite the changes, images and spaces remain that may in the future acquire new readings and thus reveal new perspectives of the sensory realm. In this way, humanity created an iconographic and architectural universe that becomes an inexhaustible source of new forms of expression of the technological arts. It still appears early to technologically scrutinise the exploration of spirituality through media technologies, but some effort is being made, albeit in a controlled way, for example in the works of Helen Eastwood and Lauren Brun, and Poklong Anading. Other works are being created in

places of contemplation, thus renewing the readings and perspectives of space, such as the work of Stéfane Perraud, in St. Germain l'Auxerrois, Paris, (2008), the work of Sacred Places in St. Michael's Church, Leuven, Belgium, Emily Tracy in London, and Pat van Boeckel from the Netherlands. Anne Patterson, Graced By Light, Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, USA, (2014).

Architecture in its endemic practice implies a project and a practical application. That is to say, it is something that is built from an idea and is materialised in the occupation of space, by taking into account specific conditions of the programme and the environment. Since the first architectural treatises, a fundamental premise that has remained unchanged is the importance of place. Architecture develops based on places which in their own turn condition the act of building. In the case of Media Architecture, this premise remains valid because the fusion of media and architecture precedes the study of the place of intervention well as the study of the way in which it can communicate. In this context, media use in Architecture represents an attempt to create a new vision in sacred places and thus acquires a markedly spiritual aspect. Thus it explores an aesthetic of its own, appropriate to the space in question. Examples seem to emerge not only in Western churches (namely Christian), but they also occur in mosques and synagogues, as is the case with the works of Bill Seaman's Epiphany at the Synagogue Šamorín in Slovakia and by Sarkis Zabunyan at the Great Mosque in Paris.

This media rehabilitation in places of worship is a concept that can be extended to future interventions in other humanised or natural spaces, thus putting technology at the service of spatial dynamism and human experiences, even if circumstantial.



Fig 3. Jorge Duarte Sá, Nimbus Radiance Gate Project, Santa Clara Church, Santarém.

Evidently, the impact that the use of media in architecture may have on current urban societies is still under-explored, under-implemented and not defined enough. The experiments that have been carried out only testify to some of the possibilities and changes that the architectural place can undergo with the inclusion of media technology. The urgency of anthropological, sociological, psychological and neuropsychological studies makes itself noticeable while experiments that now begin to contaminate the urban space grow in number. The so-called visual culture may have here an imposing field of work, rich in social, cultural and spiritual approaches. This work may very well focus on better evaluating the impact of this new visuality of the architectural space.

The proposal of Kinetic Architecture, technological and sensorial media, with direct connections to the human being, is somewhat recent. Those experiments carried out are reflected in the domain of the psychological and neurological experience of the human being. The fact that a tectonic structure responds to human sensory impulses can have unexpected results in the private and public lives of individuals.

It is also very alluring, currently, to look for understanding on how the potential and use of large-scale media technology is experienced; on how this affects and conditions human beings in our relationship with surrounding places and external realities - intra and extra vital psychological spaces. The interaction of architecture and media with human beings is a field of research to be explored more deeply, drawing on areas such as Psychology, Neuropsychology, Imaging, Design and digital creation.

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