



# *Transcendence* & Sacred Spaces

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# Transcendence and Sacred Spaces

DISSOLVING THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN THE  
INDIVIDUAL AND DIVINITY

M A R I N A   L A I R D

University of Detroit Mercy 2022  
School of Architecture and Community Development  
ARCH 5100, Fall 2021 - Winter 2022  
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## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my family and friends who supported me through my years in school and to all the wonderful people I met along the way.

A special thank you to Claudia Bernasconi and Fr. Gilbert for all the guidance and support.







# Abstract

There are many understandings of transcendence that begin to describe the experience through a variety of lenses. What most definitions have in common is the understanding that trance like states are

ego-dissolving states of selflessness where the individual or collective loses focus on the self.

These encounters are not limited to spiritual revelations, but spirituality and transcendence have been known throughout history to be tightly linked. Sacred spaces have the power to support such spiritual encounters by promoting the separation from everyday experience and reflect upon the beauty and mystery of divinity. The domesticated and unceremonious environments found with many contemporary suburban parishes compromise and interrupt the opportunity for transcendental and divine encounters. The perception of awe and beauty are critical when promoting spiritual transcendence.

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# Introduction to the Thesis.

Our sacred spaces can and should become opportunities for catechesis,  
engaging our senses, awakening our spirits and inviting transformation.  
-- Roberto Chiotti

# Thesis Statement

There are many understandings of transcendence that begin to describe the experience through a variety of lenses. What most definitions have in common is the understanding that trance like states are “ego-dissolving” states of selflessness where the individual or collective loses focus on the self. In other words, “the boundary between the self and the outside world is broken and a more expansive perspective diffuses throughout all aspects of one’s experience (Gorelick, 2016).” These encounters are not limited to spiritual revelations, but spirituality and transcendence have been known to be tightly linked. Sacred spaces have the power to support such experiences.

Gregory Gorelick establishes four modes of transcendence that include group directed (ritualistic), theory of mind (pertaining to ultra-human agents), aesthetic (feelings of awe), and epistemic (revelation of truth) (Gorelick, 2016). This thesis is working under the assumption that these modes of transcendence can bring a community closer to divinity and sacred spaces should support such encounters. Duncan Stroik writes about the importance of sacred places that promote the separation from everyday action and reflect upon the beauty and mystery of divinity.

Working under the assumption that transcendence allows a person the opportunity to connect to divinity, this thesis questions the utility of transcendence as a tool for spiritual unity and conviction. What can these encounters do for a spiritual community? Often resulting in divine encounters, how can sacred spaces take advantage of the utility of transcendence?

The contemporary and mundane state of church architecture today compromises and interrupts the opportunity for transcendental and divine encounters. This thesis argues that there is an underutilization of aesthetic transcendence as a tool for spiritual unification and social bonding. It is through aesthetic transcendence that sacred spaces can achieve more effectively the other modes of transcendence. M. R. Austin discusses the relationship of both spiritual and aesthetic experiences. “The religious experience and the aesthetic experience have much in common; both trigger similar types of knowledge, both promote a similar process of self-unification and integration, and both motivate moral behavior (Oxford Handbook, 2021).” The perception of vastness and beauty invites further exploration. “It provokes a change in the structures that we ordinarily use to understand the world – a form of cognitive realignment (Dein, 2020).”

Investigations into recent church history has led to a discovery in the shift of our understanding of sacred spaces. This change closely relates with the cultural and architectural shifts seen in the same time frame. Analyzing these spaces has revealed significant changes in the spatial attributes and qualities between churches built prior to Vatican II and after. Duncan Stroik describes these changes in church architecture as a shift from “otherworldly” to “of this world.” “In this increasingly secular age, our houses of worship, by blending in this contemporary architecture, are in danger of becoming theaters and assembly halls, rather than sacred and prophetic places (Stroik, D., 2013).”



Photograph Taken by Author

This thesis does not address conversations regarding cost or feasibility of design. Well-designed sacred spaces do not need to imply excessive cost. The investigation is about understanding the spiritual and provocative nature of sacred spaces. When addressing the transcendental understanding of sacred spaces, this investigation remained focused on the visual experience. However, it can be argued that transcendence is a multi-sensorial experience. Due to the limitations of time, this thesis did not address the audible or tactile encounter with sacred spaces.

In the promotion of transcendental encounters with divinity, this thesis acknowledges the key role sacred places have in connecting a spiritual community with divinity. It is the perception of awe that will allow an escape from everyday actions and thoughts by allowing the collective to reflect upon the beauty and mystery of divinity.

# Objective and Questions

The objective of this thesis is to investigate sacred spaces through the lens of spiritual transcendence. This study assumes that it is important for a spiritual community to harness a deep connection with divinity. “Catholics take the art and architecture of their church very seriously, believing architecture represents the faith they celebrate (Considine et al., 2021).” It is built into the very liturgy and beliefs of the Catholic Church that a person may connect with and come to know God. “Man’s faculties make him capable of coming to a knowledge of the existence of a personal God. But for man to be able to enter into real intimacy with him, God willed both to reveal himself to man, and to give him the grace of being able to welcome this revelation in faith (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994).” It is based on this understanding that this thesis assumes the importance sacred spaces play in revealing God to His people.

Working under the assumption that transcendence allows a person the opportunity to connect to divinity, this thesis questions the utility of transcendence as a tool for spiritual unity and conviction. What can these encounters do for a spiritual community? Because trance like states often result in divine encounters, how can sacred spaces take advantage of the utility of transcendence?

How can these divine encounters be used as a tool for spiritual conviction and unity?

## **Key Terms**

### **Transcendence:**

“existence or experience beyond the normal or physical level.”

Definitions from Oxford Languages

### **Spiritual Transcendence:**

“a perceived experience of the sacred that affects one’s self-perception, feelings, goals, and ability to transcend one’s difficulties.”

(Abernethy, 2018)

### **Divinity:**

For the purpose of this thesis, synonyms for divinity include God and “ultra-human agents (Gorelick, 2016).”

### **Spiritual Community:**

Spiritual community refers to a collective consciousness and participation in ritualistic practices as a group.



# Understanding Transcendence.

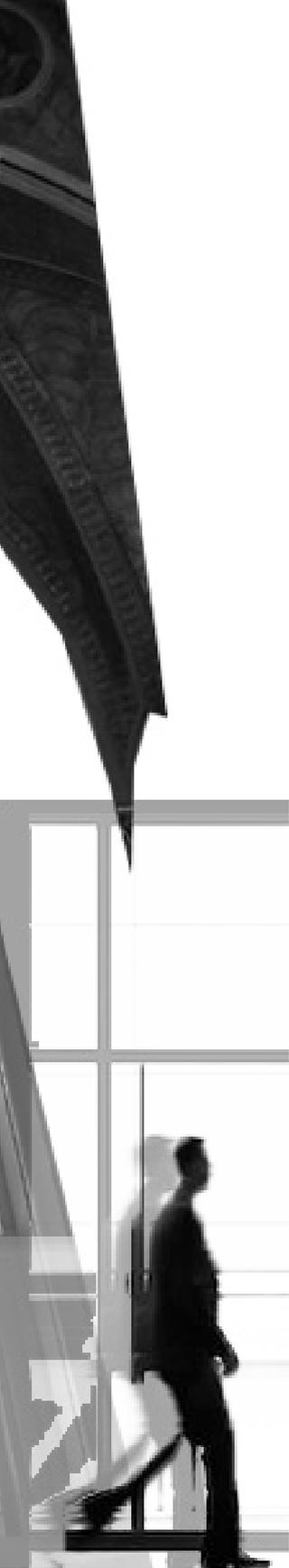
Reality that does not belong in our world.

-- Philip Sheldrake



Figure 1.1: Transition to Transcendence

## What Is Transcendence?



For the purpose of investigating spiritual transcendence, this thesis began with an understanding that trance-like encounters are defined as an “existence or experience beyond the normal or physical level (Oxford languages).” Beyond this definition, there are a variety of lenses in which to explain such encounters. There are some who investigate the experience as a “state of expanded consciousness (Pamela Reed’s theory of self-transcendence 2022).” Victor Frankl (Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, philosopher) and others have argued that “self-transcendence is a natural and desired developmental stage, which people must reach in order to be fulfilled and to have a sense of purpose (2022).” Others break down transcendental experiences by establishing different forms of transcendence. Julius Kuhl, a professor of psychology, established three different forms of transcendence. These three forms include Ego, Self, and Spiritual. What remains consistent across the variety of definitions found is the shared understanding that these encounters are self-diminishing experiences. The trance-like states are “ego-dissolving” states of selflessness where the individual or collective loses focus on the self. In other words, as Gregory Gorelick, a research scientist, writes, transcendence is when

“the boundary between the self and the outside world is broken and a more expansive perspective diffuses throughout all aspects of one’s experience.”

(Gorelick, 2016)

Experiences such as these may come in many forms and at varying intensities. Entering into a state of selflessness requires a reorientation of the person’s attention. It is not until the individual is less focused on themselves are they able to focus on something beyond the self. One may “Feel a sense of connection with God or the universe, feeling at one with everything (Johnstone, 2012).” It is often through these experiences that the person is often able to find clarity, peace or fulfill some type of inner need (Achleitner & Stock, 2003). Some examples might include being lost in a movie and escaping to another reality. One may find a connection to a larger and more universal perspective when lost in nature or a sunset. Some of these

trance-like states include spiritual encounters that may be a result of prayer or meditation, allowing the individual an opportunity to connect with divinity. One may even find that being in a state of absent-mindedness or having a strong imagination might afford them the opportunity to quiet the inner monologue. The list of transcendental experiences is long and unique to the individual (Johnstone, 2012). “While all individuals can potentially transcend their self, some have a greater predisposition to do this.”

Transcendence may also encourage moments of social bonding. There are often instances where a collective may unite under a common goal or interest. An example can be found with sports. People crowded in a stadium might find a sense of deindividuation and loss of self-awareness. “Individuals lose a sense of individual selfhood and develop a collective consciousness within the group (Dein, 2020).”

- 1 Lost in **Meditation.**  
Transcend through silence.
  
- 2 Lost in a **Prayer.**  
Connected to something greater.
  
- 3 Lost in **Nature.**  
Connected to something greater.
  
- 4 Lost in a **Sunset.**  
Beauty providing inner peace.
  
- 5 Lost in **Music.**  
Shuts off the inner monologue.
  
- 6 Lost in a **Movie.**  
Escape to another world.



Figure 1.2: Trance-Like States



Photograph Retrieved From Wikimedia Commons

4



5



6



## Setting a Framework

Having previously studied research and experimental psychology, Gregory Gorelick establishes four different modes of transcendence. These modes of transcendence begin to set a framework in which to investigate these experiences for the purpose of my thesis.

The four modes of transcendence include group directed (being ritualistic), theory of mind (pertaining to ultra-human agents), aesthetic (having feelings of awe), and epistemic (the revelation of truth). This thesis is working under the assumption that these four modes have the potential to bring us closer to God and it is the role of sacred space to support this relationship.



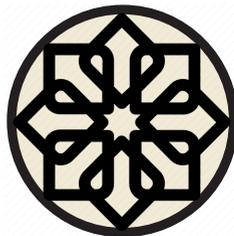
## Group-Directed

“Feelings of unity and camaraderie usually as a result of ritual”



## Theory of Mind

“Pertaining to the perception of incorporeal minds and ultra-human agents”



## Aesthetic

“**Feelings of awe** in the presence of something beautiful and powerful, resulting in expansive feelings of **symmetry, grace and balance**”



## Epistemic

“Involving the revelation of hidden truths, illumination and enlightenment, which differs epistemically from everyday encounters with others, places and objects.”

Figure 1.3: Modes of Transcendence



# Transcendence Through Time.

They pay no attention to history, the great teacher of mankind.  
-- Pope John XXIII

# Evolution

Based on questions regarding the utility of transcendence, this thesis began to research the evolution of these encounters. What was understood is the manipulative effectiveness throughout history. This can be found in early religiosity, including shamanistic practices.

"Shamanistic practices result in 'enhancement of attention, self-awareness, learning, and memory and elicit mechanisms that mediate self, attachment, motives and feelings of conviction.'"

(Dein, 2020)

As populations grew, there was a shift toward more permanent settlements. "These sporadic dances were only effective until our ancestors began to settle down around 12,000 years ago (Dein, 2020)." This sparked the formation of temples and churches where people were able to congregate in shared beliefs. These sacred spaces began to rely on passionate oratory and architectural beauty to reach aesthetic and epistemic states of transcendence.

Other examples that show the evolution of such experiences include the deindividuation found in sports and the exploitation of transcendence for propaganda (Gorelick, 2016). It is important to consider that trance like states are immersive experiences easily exploited, but they also have the potential for enhancing feelings of conviction, promoting integration, and motivating moral behavior (Oxford Handbook, 2021).

1



early religiosity

Group directed (ritualistic) -  
utilizing movement and  
sound

Figure 2.1: Evolution of Transcendence

2



propagandistic

Use of music and visual  
propaganda -  
Aesthetic transcendence

3



deindividuation

Visual engagement and  
music - Social bonding and  
deindividuation

# Why Sacred Spaces?

As mentioned, transcendence is not limited to spiritual revelations, but spirituality and transcendence are often suggested to be related. As an introduction into sacred spaces, one might look to the sacred architecture found in the three monotheistic religions.

## Judaism

Judaism relies on regional design methods rather than an overarching architectural style. Some unifying elements among the various spaces are the use of light and symbolism. Because Judaism avoids the depiction of a God, there is a use of symbolism to depict the religious beliefs and traditions. Light is used to convey meaning and emotion. (Kahera, 2014)

## Islam

Similar to Judaism, Islam relies on regional architectural styles and the context in which the sacred space is built. There is a strong use of geometry and pattern throughout the sacred spaces. Islam often looks to nature to inspire the patterns and design. There is often a strong use of repetition that creates a sense of harmony. There is no depiction of a God and attempts to avoid the object of desire. (Kahera, 2014)

## Christianity

Christianity, specifically Roman Catholicism, has evolved through different overarching ecclesiastical architectural styles that include Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque and various revivals of these styles. The qualities found within these spaces are more important to note. It is common to find the use of natural elements to create the sense of sacred, including light, water, and even incense. The sacred spaces are typically filled with iconography and images depicting God and the saints. It is very common to find a strong use of symbolism and storytelling within the spaces. (Kahera, 2014)

Among the three religions, there were some spatial and design consistencies found in the various sacred architecture.

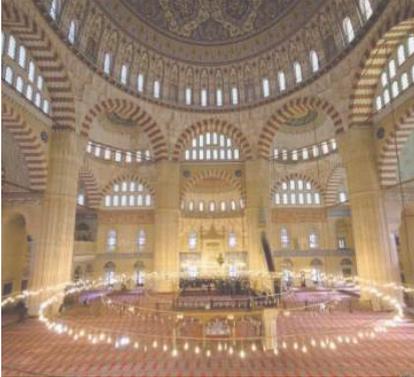


Figure 2.2: Findings on the Monotheistic Religions & Their Sacred Spaces

“Our sacred spaces can and should become opportunities for catechesis, engaging our senses, awakening our spirits and inviting transformation.”

- Roberto Chiotti

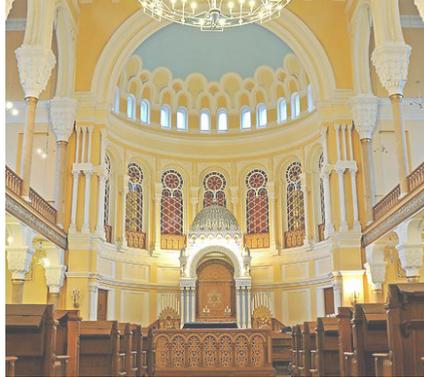
1



Edirne Selimiye Mosque  
1574

**Islam**

2



Grand Choral Synagogue  
between 1880 and 1888

**Judaism**

3



Sweatest Heart of Mary  
1893

**Christianity**

4



Christ the King  
2001

**Christianity**

5



The Jewish Center in Munich  
2007

**Judaism**

6



The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque  
2007

**Islam**

Figure 2.3: Monotheistic Religions & Their Sacred Spaces

# Why Catholicism?

“Visible expression of an invisible reality.”

– Duncan Stroik

This study assumes that it is important for a spiritual community to harness a deep connection with divinity. "Catholics take the art and architecture of their church very seriously, believing architecture represents the faith they celebrate (Considine et al., 2021)." It is built into the very liturgy and beliefs of the catholic church that a person may connect with and come to know God. "Man's faculties make him capable of coming to a knowledge of the existence of a personal God. But for man to be able to enter into real intimacy with him, God willed both to reveal himself to man, and to give him the grace of being able to welcome this revelation in faith (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994)." It is based on this understanding that this thesis assumes the importance sacred spaces play in revealing God to His people.



# Paradigm Shift

In order to fully understand spiritual transcendence, this thesis studied the Catholic Church's more recent history within the context of changes happening around the time of Vatican II. A time of agitation and anxiety led to the church's formation of the Ecumenical Council where bishops came together to decide how the church can start to address the needs of the modern world. Similar to other changes happening at the time, there was a shift toward global thinking and a need for community focus as well as a break from many of the past traditions.

During the time of Vatican II, the church was undergoing a liturgical reform that resulted in much change in regards to the mass. In 1962, the venerated Pope John XXIII called upon the Ecumenical Council of Bishops to discuss how the church can address the needs of the modern world (Rynne, 1999). During a time of great anxiety and fear, Pope John XXIII hoped the council of bishops would provide "an example of peace on concord between men and an occasion for new hope" (Rynne, 1999). The Council's objective was to foster church unity. However, it is safe to assume the Pope and bishops were not aware that the changes made and church needs addressed would bring controversy and unrest that still exists today.

The liturgical reform that resulted from this Ecumenical Council sought to bring the congregation of the Church closer to the mass. Prior to Vatican II, the mass, referred to as the tridentine mass, was being performed under the Traditional Roman Rite. The tridentine mass tends to be more theatrical and mysterious in comparison to the mass performed under the New Roman Rite. All masses were held in Latin

rather than allowing the mass to be translated into the native language in which each church sits.

Vatican II changed this. "In December of 1963, the leaders of the church at the Second Vatican Council issued their first statement: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (CSL). The church today is still living out the challenges presented in the wisdom of this document (Glatz & Agency, 2019)." Rather than a sense of mystery when it came to the performance of the mass, the Vatican Council hoped the members of the church would be fully aware and conscious of the sacrament. "We needed to see in a new way that it is our full participation in the liturgy that makes us integral and responsible members of church (Glatz & Agency, 2019)." There was an aim to "express more clearly the holy things which they signify" (Novus ordo, n.d.).

There have not only been changes in the liturgy of the mass but the spaces in which they are performed. There are many external factors that can be tied to the changes observed in sacred spaces. These changes are not only a result of Vatican II, but rather an accumulation of factors (Smith). Some of these factors include architectural shifts, technological advancements, and social changes. However, it is a common misconception that the modernist approach to sacred spaces is a result of the Ecumenical Council (Smith). "Our problems began some decades before the Second Vatican Council convened: they began with the embrace of modernist architectural principles by contemporary architects and, more disastrously, by the liturgical "experts" who have insisted on laying down the rules and regulations for all new Catholic churches built in America (Smith)."



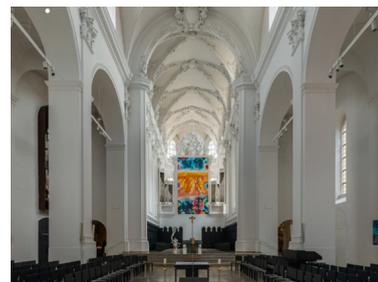
Giancarlo Giuliani. Catholic Press Photo



THE AUGUSTINERKIRCHE  
BEFORE WWII



"WRECKOVATION -  
IN SPIRIT OF VATICAN II"



THE AUGUSTINERKIRCHE  
IN 2011



THE AUGUSTINERKIRCHE BEFORE WWII



"OTHERWORLDLY"



AXIAL PLAN



CHANGE IN CONTEXT

FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR  
1870-71

WORLD WAR I  
1914-18

**Vatican I 1870**

"TIME OF AGITATION AND ANXIETY"

1900s

IMPRESSIONISM 1860

POST-IMPRESSIONISM 1880

SYMBOLISM 1880

MODERNISM 1910

FUTURISM 1909

ART DECO 1920

BAUHAUS 1920

SURREALISM



PRINTING PRESS INVENTED 1440

WESTERN PRINTING TECHNOLOGY  
(IN ALL WORLD REGIONS)  
19TH CENTURY



ELECTRICITY  
WAS  
DEMONSTRATED

Figure 2.4: Timeline Approaching Vatican II



"WRECKOVATION - IN SPIRIT OF VATICAN II"

WORLD WAR II  
1939-45

VIETNAM WAR  
1955-75

POPE JOHN XXIII  
ELECTED 1958-63

**Vatican II 1962-65**



CIRCULAR OR  
SEMI-CIRCULAR PLAN



INCREASE IN  
SUBURBAN CHURCHES

IRAQ WAR  
2003-2011

1984 - POPE JOHN PAUL II  
GRANTING PERMISSION  
TO CELEBRATE THE  
TRADITIONAL ROMAN RITE.

TRADITIONAL ROMAN RITE

NEW ROMAN RITE



ABSTR. EXPRESSIONISM 1960

POST-MODERNISM 1960

MINIMALISM 1960

POP ART 1960



FIRST PORTABLE CELL  
PHONE WAS INVENTED

ELECTRONIC TELEVISION  
FIRST SUCCESSFULLY  
CONSTRATED

# Spatial Changes

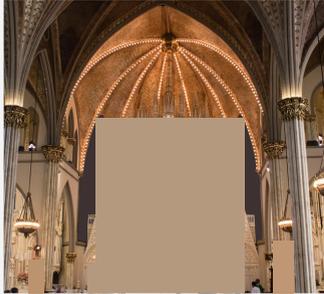
Some of these changes began to translate into the architecture of the church. Prior to the twentieth century, there was not much change to be observed. Some innovation, mostly structural, began to happen in the early 1900's. There was a "breakthrough" in church architecture when Le Corbusier designed Notre-Dame-Du-Haut. This chapel was a modernist approach to sacred spaces with what seemed like a collection of devotional spaces without barriers. Since that time, architects "began [to] embrace of modernist architectural principles by contemporary architects (Smith)."

This thesis began to analyze how these changes found in the church began to translate spatially. Again, breaking from tradition, there was an increase in churches being built in a semi-circular formation. Rather than the typical ornate details found often in church architecture, churches began to reflect contemporary ideas of design. There is no longer as strong of a focus on verticality and use of hierarchy.

1



2



3



4

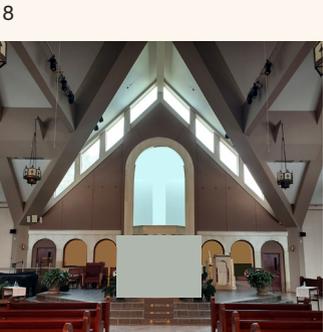
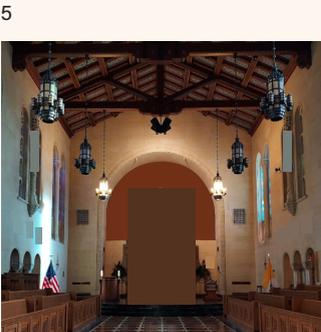


2



Figure 2.5: Spatial Shifts Through Time

- 1 **Old St. Patrick Catholic Church**  
Chicago, IL  
October 20, 1878
- 2 **Sweetest Heart of Mary**  
Detroit, MI  
1893
- 3 **Our Lady of Consolation**  
Carey, OH  
1924
- 4 **Mother of Sorrows Catholic Church**  
Put-In-Bay, OH  
1929
- 5 **CHAPEL OF MARY AND JOSEPH**  
Plymouth, MI  
1955
- 6 **Colline Notre Dame du Haut**  
Ronchamp, France  
1955
- 7 **St. Ignatius chapel**  
Seattle, WA  
1997
- 8 **Christ the King**  
Ann Arbor, MI  
2001



Horizontal & minimalistic.



# Qualities of Suburban Parishes.

We seem to have lost the ability to make new buildings which exude that ineffable sense of the “sacred” which can be rightly called the presence of the Almighty.

-- Duncan Stroik

# Perceptual Means of Investigation

Missing the perceptual aspects of church architecture, moving forward this thesis began an investigation into six contemporary suburban parishes. This study provided a lens into a spiritual communities encounter with sacred spaces. The six parishes were found in Wayne County and intended to be representative of a larger population of suburban parishes found in the Archdiocese of Detroit. The Archdiocese consists of 6 counties with over a million Catholics.

Writing about the experience, perception, and observations within each contemporary suburban parish allowed a deeper understanding of the qualities found within contemporary sacred architecture. These narratives were supported by collaging movement, noting details, and painting the effects of light and materiality within the spaces.

**Livonia Parishes**  
Wayne County

St. Aidan	17500 Farmington Rd., Livonia
St. Colette	17600 Newburgh Rd., Livonia
St. Edith	15089 Newburgh Rd., Livonia
St. Genevieve - St. Maurice	29015 Jamison St, Livonia
St. Priscilla	19120 Purlingbrook St, Livonia
St. Michael the Archangel	11441 Hubbard, Livonia



Photographs Taken by Author

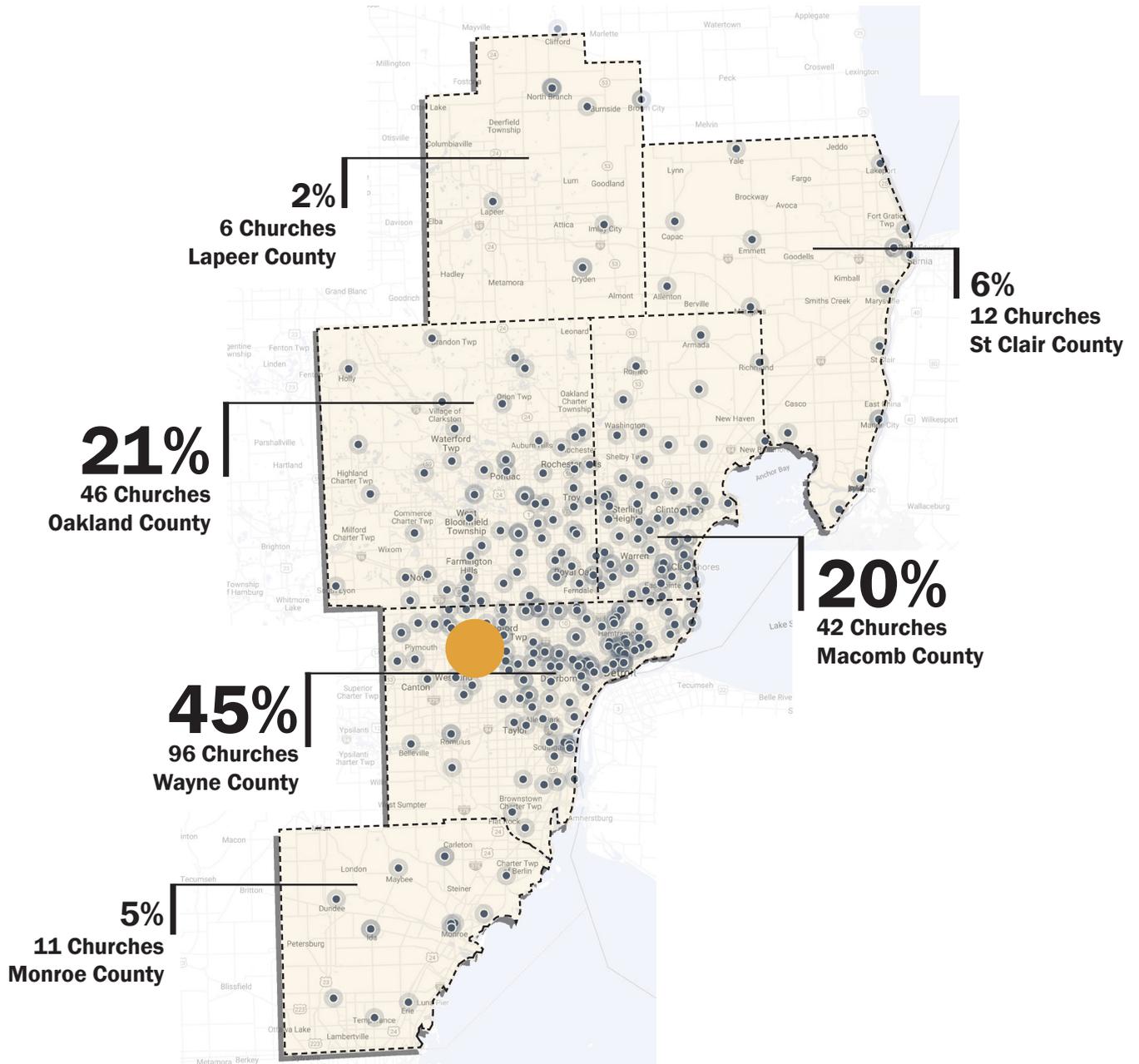


Figure 3.1: Archdiocese of Detroit Catholic Churches

# Saint Aidan Catholic Church

## Perceptual Narrative of Observed Details

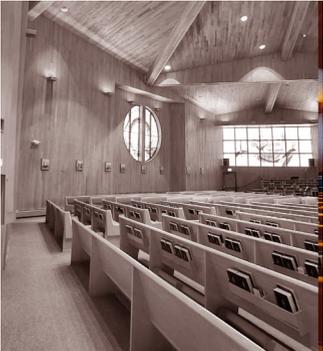
The atmosphere within St. Aidan's church is **without focus**. The **emphasis within the space is placed on the people** as the light from either side of the sanctuary pours in on the pews. Light also enters from a skylight sitting at the ceilings peak. Materiality and color within the space is unvarying, which contributes to a **monotonous or mundane atmosphere**. There is a use of removable furniture and folding walls that imply the space has a temporary function or adaptability. The pews almost form a circle that allows people to observe others within the space.





Photographs Taken by Author

The sanctuary seems to blend into the environment somewhat unnoticed.



# Saint Colette Catholic Church

## Perceptual Narrative of Observed Details

There is a clear **attempt at unity within the room**, however, the choir space **abruptly divides the room in the middle**. This division infers separation and the notion that the two sides are in fact two different rooms. A **sense of hierarchy** is found in regards to the height of the space. Along the sides of the room there is **intimacy that quickly changes when entering the middle of the room**. The ceiling punches further up where there is the placement of a cross above the sanctuary. One's eye may be drawn to this location in the room. However, competing for attention are the clear windows stretching either side of the room allowing the person's gaze to wander outside of the room. In view are the parking lots and people walking to or from their cars, which eliminates some of the ceremonious features in the room. Attention is brought to the unglamorous lighting that lines the beams from the ceiling.





Photographs Taken by Author

Features in the room provide an unceremonious environment.



# Saint Edith Catholic Church

## Perceptual Narrative of Observed Details

Upon first entering the church, one's attention may be drawn to the large cross resting above the altar space. Many of the elements of the room appear to be converging and guiding the viewer towards this cross. Some of these elements may include the **ceiling that uplifts** as it approaches the sanctuary, the pews all pointing one's attention in this direction, or the light that illuminates the wall in which the cross sits. The listed **features imply importance worthy of my attention**. With the limited natural light entering the space through stained glass windows, there is an **ethereal atmosphere**. To support this, the sound of water falling comes from the holy water fount **applying a calming perception** to the space. In contrast, the use of small hexagonal tiles and carpet for flooring adds domesticated features to the space.





Photographs Taken by Author

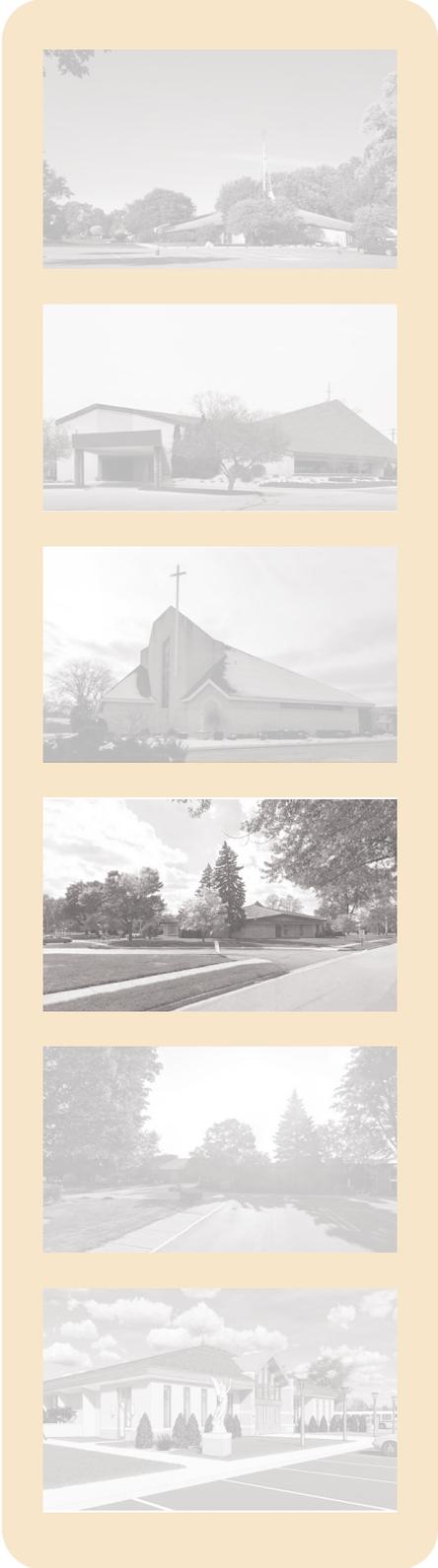
The Removable chairs and cushioned pews invite a home-like treatment to the space and possible adaptability.



# Saint Genevieve Catholic Church

## Perceptual Narrative of Observed Details

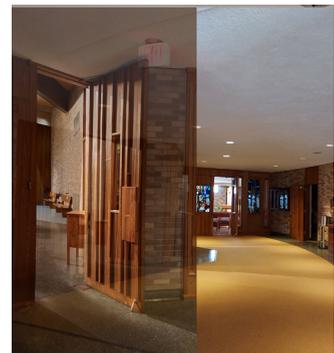
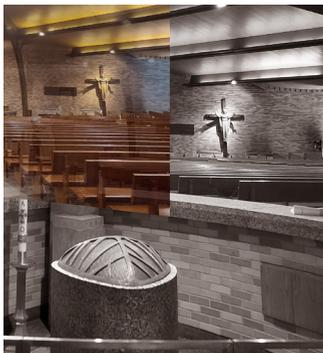
St Genevieve has a large and circular plan making someone *feel like one of the many*. One of the first physical encounters with the materials of the room is the smooth marble table that greets the individual entering into the space. Carved from the table is a shallow bowl of holy water as one continues through the space and toward the pews. There are small experiential details found with the materials in the room. Texture is added to the walls behind the altar that denote a slight change in how the area surrounding is perceived. The stained glass window seems like an element of importance. The floor declines somewhat creating a *sense of importance or grandeur toward the altar*. Little to *no distractions or major points of interest in the room*. A *sense of warmth* comes from the materiality and color found in the space.





Photographs Taken by Author

An atmosphere of transcendence is prompted by the natural light that streams into the sanctuary from a hidden source.



# Saint Priscilla Catholic Church

## Perceptual Narrative of Observed Details

The narthex and the nave of the church is left open and undivided. This allows the sound from the back of the church to travel through the space creating an unceremonious environment. There is a lack of detail within the space which allows one to enter into a state of absent mindedness. The roof hangs low throughout the space and compresses the nave of the church. There is a sudden release as the roof projects above the sanctuary, providing an illuminating atmosphere. This is supported by the sense of mystery and enlightenment coming from the natural light. The use of wood throughout the space adds warmth. Because the roof remains low, there is a strong sense of horizontality within the space. The pews form a semi-circular formation around the sanctuary that can lead your eye around the space.





Photographs Taken by Author

An atmosphere of transcendence is prompted by the natural light that streams into the sanctuary from a hidden source.



# Saint Michael Catholic Church

## Perceptual Narrative of Observed Details

As you enter the church, there is **strong directionality that guides you physically and visually into the space**. Despite the scale of the room, the space can provide a **sense of intimacy, especially as one approaches the altar**. The domesticated features of the carpet, muted tones, and the dim lighting implies that **the individual is meant to be comfortable and at home within the space**. This is contrasted with the elevated sanctuary as well as the cool interior and **lack of any noise**. The sanctuary is demarcated in a manner that implies the space is off limits to the visitor. As the spotlight hits the cross hanging above the tabernacle and the wood panels rise toward the space, the sanctuary appears to be held to a higher regard than the nave of the church.





Photographs Taken by Author

Light floods on both sides and emphasizes the horizontality of the space.



# Spatial Findings

The investigation into the six suburban parishes led to an understanding that the shift toward contemporary design has resulted in minimalistic and domesticated features. Within these sacred spaces, one might observe the subtle use of heirarchy and minimal use of details in the spaces. The roof plays a key role in organizing the room.



Photographs Taken by Author

**Summary of Findings:**

hierarchy

- Light illuminates important features
- Subtle spatial hierarchy
- Gradually decline of floor
- Ceiling organizes the space
- Domesticated scales
- Spatial Consistency

Focus

- Roof adds focus to the space
- Ceiling gathers the space
- Homogeneous organization
- Spatial repetition
- Absence of focus
- Minimal use of small details
- Strong directionality

Materiality

- Soft materiality
- Natural materials
- Warm colors
- Limited color palette
- Carpet dampens noise

# Experiential Findings

The unceremonious environments have left these spaces feeling home-like and functional. Because of the choice in materiality and lighting, the spaces feel both approachable and domesticated. Within some of the churches, there is a sense of importance placed toward the sanctuary. Overall, there is a perception of unity coming from the organization of the rooms.



Photographs Taken by Author

**Summary of Findings:**

hierarchy	Sense of hierarchy
	Calming perception of the space
	Monotonous or mundane atmosphere
	Mystery and enlightenment from the natural light
	Unceremonious environment
Focus	No distractions
	No points of interest in the room
	Light sets the tone of the space
	Sense of importance or grandeur toward the altar
	Intimacy from the height of the space
Materiality	Perception of unity within the room
	Quiet environment
	Approachable
	Impression of warmth
	Home-like treatment to the materiality
	Quiet movements

# Social Findings

Consistent among the six parishes is the visual connectivity that provides unification. Sitting in the pews, it is easy to feel like one of the many. Similar to the experiential and spatial findings, the attributes of the churches contribute to a welcoming and accepting atmosphere.



Photographs Taken by Author

**Summary of Findings:**

hierarchy

Feel like one of the many

Focus

Visual connectivity

People in focus

Materiality

Open to interact and communicate with others

Accepting environment

Welcoming atmosphere

# Summary of Analysis Findings

My findings concluded with an understanding that the domesticated features and scale have resulted in a minimalistic, approachable, and unceremonious environment. The intentionality behind the community has resulted in a feeling of being one of many and the perception of unity. However, my thesis argues that the subtle hierarchy and lack of focus results in a monotonous, mundane atmosphere that does not support an encounter with transcendence.

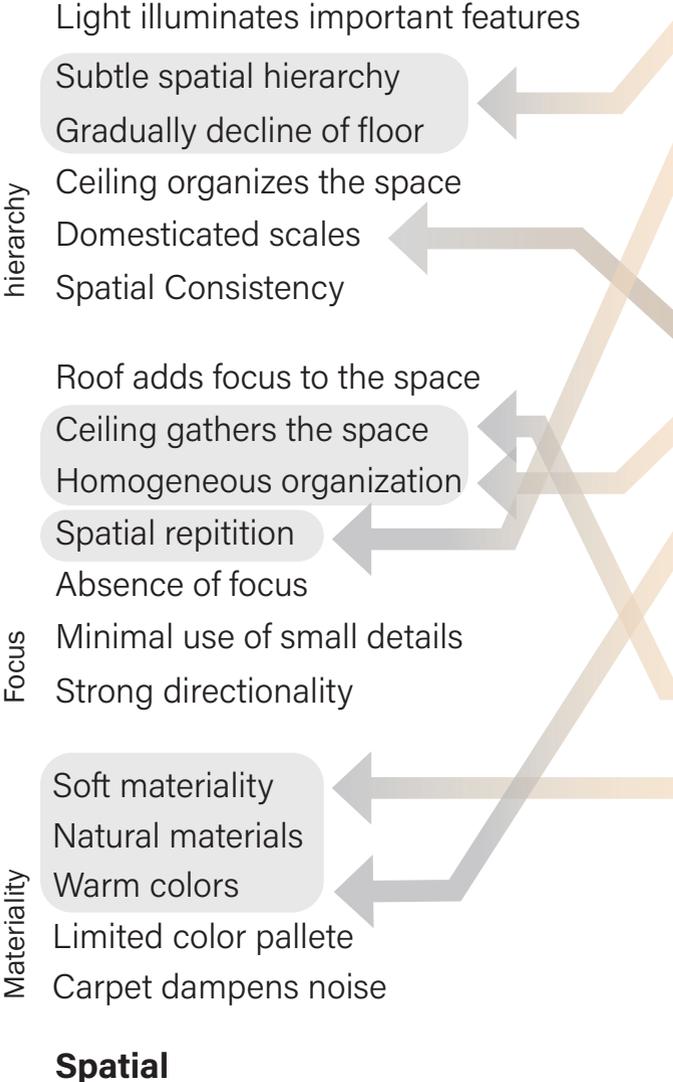
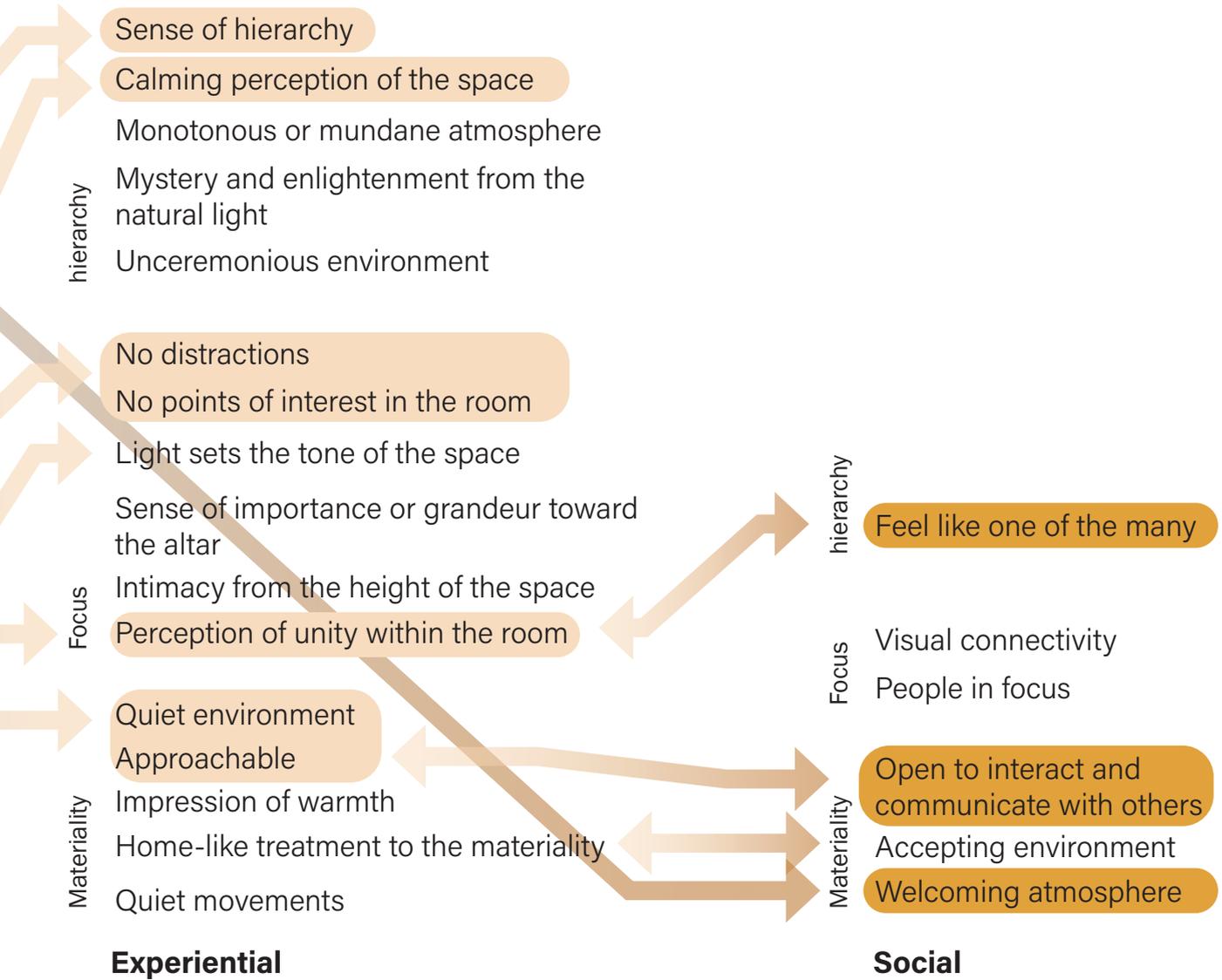


Figure 3.2: Spatial, Experiential, and Social Findings





# Imaginative Scenarios.

To honor God, because, though He does not need our worship nor our temples of stone, He deserves them greatly.

-- Duncan Stroik



# Aesthetic Transcendence

This thesis argues that, when referring to contemporary suburban parishes, there is an underutilization of aesthetic transcendence as a tool for spiritual unification, social bonding and even conversion. Duncan Stroik writes about the importance of sacred places that promote the separation from everyday action and experience and reflect upon the beauty and mystery of divinity. Returning to the four modes of transcendence originally established by Gregory Gorelick, aesthetic transcendence also has the potential to leave us more open to epistemic and theory of mind encounters.

The space helps us understand the action.

Gregory Gorelick believes that we are more open to the revelation of truth when we are visually or audibly engaged with the information being offered. My thesis did not address the audible engagement aspect of transcendence but rather remained focused on the visual.

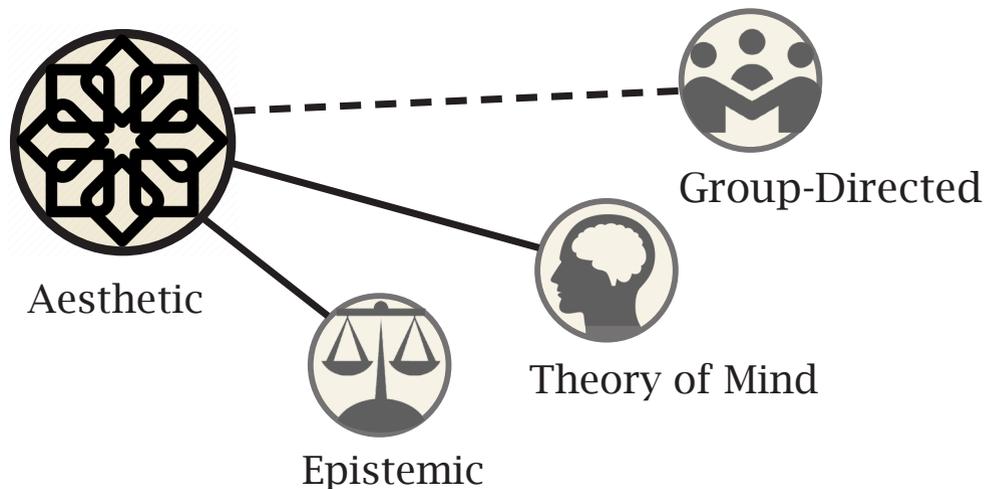


Figure 4.1: Aesthetic Transcendence — 65 —

# The Perception of Vastness

Moving forward with the importance of aesthetic transcendence, I used St. Michael's to produce imaginative scenarios to test my ideas of these experiences. It is understood that aesthetic transcendence is achieved through many possible means, however based on my findings of suburban parishes and specifically St Michael's, it is the perceived vastness that is most missing. Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt analyze the perception of awe and write that it "is a complex emotion associated with perceived vastness and it provokes a change in the structures that we ordinarily use to understand the world – a form of cognitive realignment (Dein, 2020)" In order to achieve such a perception of vastness within these contemporary parishes, my thesis argues that there should be a removal of subtle hierarchy and lack of focus, and reorientation of the attention toward the altar and sanctuary. It is important to be adding detail in the spaces to provide context to the vastness of the space and visual reminders of the presence of divinity in support of spiritual transcendence. In addition, allowing the materiality to reflect grandeur and importance makes an impression that this space holds divinity and truth.



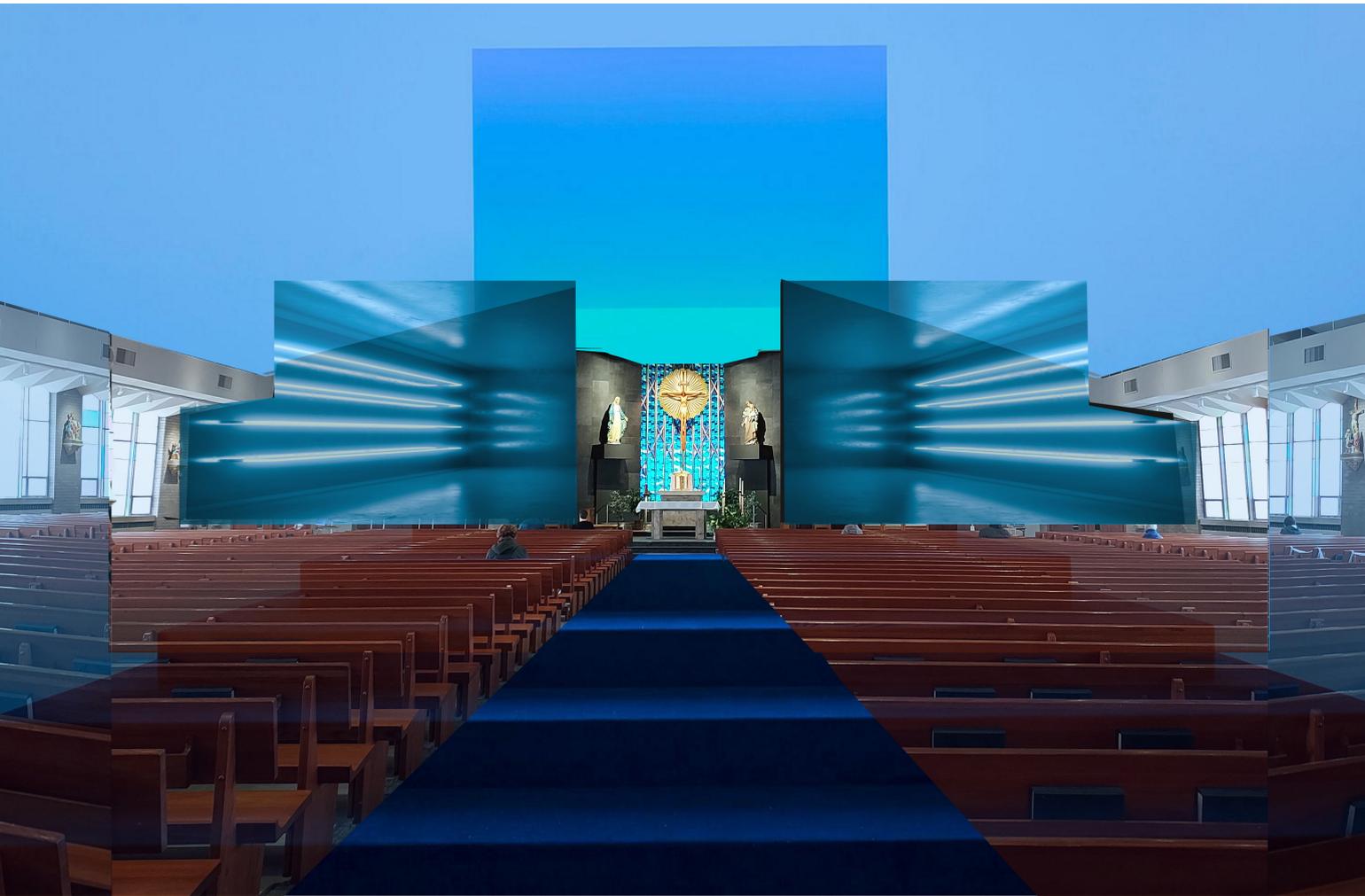
# Testing Ideas of Representation

These drawings are not necessarily intended to reflect realistic intentions toward renovation, but rather test ideas of representation of hierarchy, focus, detail, and materiality through imaginative scenarios. It is about approaching feelings of awe and astonishing beauty.











# Conclusion.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there are many understandings of transcendence that begin to describe the experience through a variety of lenses. What most definitions have in common is the understanding that trance like states are “ego-dissolving” states of selflessness where the individual or collective loses focus on the self. These encounters are not limited to spiritual revelations, but spirituality and transcendence have been known throughout history to be tightly linked. Sacred spaces have the power to support such experiences.

Built into the very beliefs of the Catholic Church, it is important for a spiritual community to harness a deep connection with divinity. Grounded by this belief, this thesis argues that there is an underutilization of aesthetic transcendence in order to achieve such a connection. The perception of vastness allows the community to embrace the beauty and mystery of the sacrament, as well as adopt a more universal perspective. Contemporary suburban parishes should approach and invite feelings of awe and astonishing beauty.





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