

THE IMPORTANCE OF SACRED SPACES

In an increasingly secular world, the importance of sacred spaces may seem negligible at best, or at worst, a source of conflict due to competing claims. However, being able to identify and understand spaces infused with religious meaning is integral to both appreciating 'place' historically, and comprehending the complexity of current political tensions. Much of any country's values and landscape are underlain by an intricate bedrock of belief. On some level, most people understand this: few would visit Athens and not tour the Parthenon because they don't believe in the Greek gods, or forgo Istanbul's Hagia Sophia mosque because they aren't Muslims. Both the Parthenon and Hagia Sophia mosque are too beautiful and too much a part of the local cultural fabric to ignore. Sacred spaces, through placement, architecture, and embellishments tell the story of the artists and the believers.

A discussion of the geography of religion, frequently focuses on the range of distribution of particular re-

ligions. However, some religions are deeply embedded in particular places, and their spiritual rites, customs, and traditions are intrinsically linked with sacred spaces and particular geographies. This leads to the question of how regular spaces become linked to spiritualism.

Sacred spaces are not limited to edifices built for worship. For example, **Uluru**, sacred to Australia's Aboriginal population was once simply a massive sandstone rock. Thousands of years ago, the myth developed that Uluru was formed by creation ancestors, who in their travels left marks in the land and made laws for the tribes to keep and live by. Uluru became a place for rituals; tribes continue to paint inside its caves today as they have for thousands of years.

Rocks, mountains, rivers, or nearly anything can become holy ground for animistic religions or for larger, more institutional religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The famous **Dome of the Rock**, a disputed religious site, sits on the highest peak of the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem where two ancient Jewish temples once stood. Built in the style of a Byzantine church, Muslims constructed the Dome of the Rock on the site where the Prophet Muhammad is supposed to have ascended to heaven from, intertwining the two religions' histories. The Jews believe it to be the spiritual connection for heaven

and earth—the site where Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his son, Isaac. The site is also important to Christians who believe that Jesus visited the Second Temple, which stood there during his lifetime.

Protected within the Dome of the Rock is the **foundation stone**, the actual peak of the hill. It is also called the pierced stone due to the small hole in the southeastern corner that serves as an entrance to the cavern beneath, the Well of Souls. The foundation stone is the holiest site in Judaism and the third holiest for Muslims. Jews, who until recently were not supposed to ascend the hill, worship at the Western Wall or Wailing Wall below, a remnant of the retaining wall around the ancient Second Temple.

The symbolic nature of the site stirs political tensions, and neither Israeli nor Palestinian controlled areas have separation between church and state. While Jewish history with the site dates back to 957 B.C., the Palestinians have held the site since the Dome of the Rock was built in A.D. 689. As updated archaeological data point to a different temple configuration than Jews previously believed, visiting the Temple Mount, once considered sacrilegious, now isn't. That doesn't change the fact that Muslims don't want Jews visiting in large numbers or praying on the site. The Wailing Wall, which usually receives 10 million visitors a year, is likewise experiencing unwelcome visitors; women, with Torah scrolls, clad in praying shawls or wearing phylacteries, have long been banned from praying at the wall but now attempt to do just that. How sacred sites are used changes as people change.

While sacred sites are often linked with religion, they're also connected to loss and memory. Many find peace in cemeteries, clearly delineated spaces where the living and remembered dead come together through special rites such as Memorial Day, a time to leave flowers or a wreath. Likewise, the Mexican Day of the Dead is when people pray for

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and remember family members or friends who've died. They also bring food and possessions of the dead as offerings.

Cemeteries placed on a bluff, situated in a park, along a river, or that provide an aesthetic landscape are sought after. Some cemeteries are exclusive or religion-specific. Class and wealth remain intact in death, visible by placement of the grave and whether the dead is entombed in a mausoleum, has a statue, or a simple head marker.

As we mark the 70-year anniversary of the Holocaust, the worst of the concentration camps, Auschwitz,

remains intact (view drone footage of Auschwitz **here**). This reflects a different type of spiritualism, connected with cruelty, grief, and interrupted lives. Likewise, Ground Zero, the site of the twin towers in New York City, is a memorial to those who tragically lost their lives. Land values in Manhattan are staggeringly high, yet the collective national loss associated with 9/11 makes building a skyscraper there intolerable.

These are a handful of the millions of places that matter to cultures across the planet. What makes them tricky is that they don't mean the same thing to everyone—even within that one culture. Underused

churches in Europe are being sold with some becoming skate **parks** or restaurants. This adaptation of sacred space pleases some and upsets others. The importance of sacred spaces is that it connects people to their identities on several levels: family, community and world. In these instances, place becomes how we are socially connected. Because sacred spaces weave us into a larger tapestry, understanding and valuing them remains important in creating an educated worldview.

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QUESTIONS

1. Think of a religious site you visited while on vacation. What did you learn about the city/country from the visit?
2. Where is your sacred space?

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