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Between sacred and secular

Walter Klasz*

ABSTRACT

Questo scritto vuole affrontare le tematiche che riguardano le differenze architettoniche e le caratteristiche comuni fra spazi sacri e secolari nel contesto del mangiare insieme. Nella fede cattolica, il rito più importante è quello di trasformare pane e vino nel corpo di Cristo e di mangiare e bere insieme durante il sacramento della comunione. Questo rituale di comunione aiuta le persone a vivere una vita migliore in luoghi secolari, come case familiari, luoghi di lavoro e pubblici. Le chiese sono state fra le progettazioni architettoniche più difficili per centinaia di anni. Contemporaneamente una quantità sempre più in aumento di tali costruzioni non viene più utilizzata e mancano i fondi per poterle restaurare e preservare. È palese la crisi che ha colpito queste architetture e molti esperti e professionisti teologici e architetti dedicano il loro interesse professionale a questo argomento. L'articolo vuole dimostrare che il desiderio di spazi religiosi in Europa di recente trasformazione e realizzazione è in aumento e che nuovi concetti di spazio sacro possono essere pensati in stretta collaborazione fra teologi, artisti, architetti e persone interessate al sociale.

This paper deals with architectural differences and common features between sacred and secular spaces in the context of having meal together. In the catholic tradition, the most important ritual action is to transform bread and wine into Jesus, and to eat and to drink together in communion. This ritual of communion helps people to live a better daily life in secular places like family homes, working places and in the public. Churches have been the most challenging architectural tasks for hundreds of years. Contemporarily an increasing amount of such buildings are not in use any more, and money is running out to preserve them. There is an ongoing crisis of this building typology and only very few theological and architectural scientists and practitioners dedicate their work on this topic. The thesis of this paper is that the desire for newly transformed religious spaces in Europe is increasing and that new concepts of sacred spaces may emerge in close collaboration between theologians, artists, architects and social oriented people.

Celebrating around the altar - Before Christianity was allowed officially, people met secretly in secular spaces like private homes, in nature or in catacombs to talk, to pray and to celebrate together the Eucharistic ritual. As soon as the Catholicism became the official state religion, Christians used for their first public celebrations the profane roman basilicas. They put the altar in the former position of the judge at the front and not in the middle of the space. It took almost 2000 years until Christians changed the position back into the middle of celebrations. The Mariendom in Linz (Fig. 1 - left side) represents a courageous reorganisation of a neo-Gothic church. The Berlin architect Kuehn-Malvezzi and the Viennese Artist Heimo Zobernig redesigned the building into a communicative ritual place, where a new cubic altar marks the centre of the celebration in the middle of the church.

Two years before, in 2015, until now the most recent new church building in Austria was finished in Rif-Taxach¹ in the south of Salzburg (Fig. 1 - right side). The form of the Altar and the form of the building were designed simultaneously in the same language but in different materials. People sit around the centre, whereas the only natural light from above marks the second important place in the church, the tabernacle – the place where the holy bread and wine is stored.

In the newly designed chapel of the monastery Stift Wilten in Innsbruck (Fig. 2 - left side), the tabernacle presents the visual centre of the space, whereas the spatial centre is marked by the ambo. This is why the monks celebrate three times a day in this chapel to read out of the bible and to sing together. The celebration of the Eucharistic ritual is done in the church behind of the wall, where the tabernacle is situated. Jesus is present in the form of the bread, while the monks are singing the choral songs.

The design of the wooden table-like altar in the church Sistrans in Tirol highlight the understanding of the Eucharist as Holy Communion. Table and chairs – the so called sedilia – are manufactured out of oak and bronze.

In the baroque church Kematen in Tirol (Fig. 3) the new Altar from the year 2008 was kept in the classical area in the presbytery, but located in such a position that 50 chairs are situated circular around it. As such, small Eucharistic celebrations can be realized in a very communicative way closely around the Altar. The priest changes position and looks towards the front side to the people in the presbytery. The newly designed church is in use for over 10 years and especially families and young people appreciate the new constellation increasingly.

Transformation from secular to sacred - The transformation of materials into a sacred place needs architectural and artistic qualities as well as the help of symbolism and rituals. The religious dimension of life is the main difference between humans and animals. The transformational process has no general receipt, but it happens as a gift of the artistic process in combination with benediction by a priest. There is no scientific proof of concept, but the acceptance of children may be a sort of objective sensor for quality. There are not many cemeteries or graves, where children want to be and stay longer then they must to do. The image (Fig. 4) shows a snap shot of a five-year old girl touching a painting of a sheep² – symbol for Jesus. This area of the cemetery is a memorial for unborn children. It is not only the architecture and the paintings, why people want to sit down and stay there. It may be also the rituals hold by the relatives and priests, which influences the holistic quality of the space. The transformation is a process of several players on eye-level and not hierarchically.

In 1999 in the south of Linz, a former textile factory was transformed into a catholic church and dedicated to Marcel Callo, a resistance fighter against the National Socialism. The Architects Schremmer and Jell from Linz changed and redesigned very little but important things and areas. Whereas the old chimney still marks the building from far away, a small new clock tower was realized at the entrance. Chairs can be transformed in position easily by the people according to the use of the space. Eucharistic rituals take as well place as music, seminars and drinking wine in a respective atmosphere (Fig. 5).

Fig. 1 Left: The Altar of the Mariendom in Linz by Heimo Zobernig (photo W. Klasz); right: Wood-Church Rif-Taxach by Architect Walter Klasz (photo W. Klasz, 2015).



Fig. 2 Left: Chorkapelle Stift Wilten, Innsbruck 2012, Architect Walter Klasz in collaboration with the Sculptor Josef Hamberger (photo W. Klasz); right: New Altar in the historical Church Sistrans, Tirol 2008, Architect Walter Klasz (photo W. Klasz).



Fig. 3 Redesigned Church Kemaaten in Tirol, 2008, Architect Walter Klasz.



Fig. 4 Urn grave Wilten, Innsbruck 2011, Architect Walter Klasz.



Fig. 5 Catholic Church Marcel Callo during the Symposium "Kirche weit denken" (Thinking church widely). Photo upside right hand: Walter Klasz leading a Workshop about Dialogue-based Design; the former factory is reused as a church since 1999. Architects Schremmer and Jell.

The two days lasting interdisciplinary conference³ in this remarkable church proved that profane meetings and actions can take place in a dedicated church as long as there is kept a respectful behaviour and attitude from the participants. In the final dialogue people expressed that the seminar didn't reduce but enforce the identity and the atmosphere of the church. In other words, secular actions may even help sacred spaces to increase their holistic quality in the human perception.

In 2001, in the St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, a transportable floating platform was located to bridge the gap between presbytery and people (Fig. 6 – left side). Cardinal Christoph Schönborn and Chiara Lubich, founder of the worldwide spread *fokolare*-movement were sitting on it talking to about 5000 young people. The multifunctional platform was developed by Walter Klasz to create a place of lightness and communication. It wasn't primarily planned for the Viennese Cathedral, but the small architectural intervention turned out to be successful in terms of transforming the gothic church with minimal means for the youth-meeting. The image (Fig. 6 – right side) shows the same platform in the mountains of Tyrol as a cocktail bar after the wedding of Walter and Elisabeth Klasz in 2004. The use of architecture is part of its holistic richness. The boundary between secular and sacred seems to become unimportant. The platform serves for communication and sometimes 'holy' moments happen, if the users have the appropriate attitude and dedication.

The case study Lauretana in Vienna (Fig. 7) represents an industrial building, which was transformed into a living and working place for a religious communion. The main diagonal axis from the entrance leads to the kitchen, where daily life happens. A huge table marks the centre of the design. Here the community have dinner and lunch together, when guests take place. The table is also used for meetings and dialogues. The presence of god may happen at this important central place as well as in the small chapel in the corner without daylight. The chapel was designed together with the graphic artist Georg Lebzelter⁴ based on the concept to create a catholic ritual place which is also open for other religions. The feedback of visitors and users shows that Jews, Muslims and Hindus appreciate the Lauretana including the chapel as a space of bridging the gap between the religions. The design emerged by a dialogue based process lead by Architect Walter Klasz. The dialogue helped the users to develop a high level of identification with the place from the very beginning of realization.

A new Openness of Catholicism without losing but winning identity - Changing old structures is a risk. If monasteries will become hotels and if mountain-chapels will be designed as places for high-level picnics for tourists it would be a lost of culture and religious richness. The boundary between banality and the finding of new high quality architecture in the context of religion is small. The architect plays an important role not to follow tendencies but to understand and to react to desires of contemporary society by creating new qualities without losing the main issue of catholic places: The personal relation with god and the celebrating of communion. The architect and the artist can contribute with the tool of spatial and sculptural qualities, which may help to stir up humans to rethink their lives and to appreciate time by just being there. Architecture has the power to change people's mind, to break prejudices and to open new avenues of communication. Tradition means careful transformation. As follows, two empiric examples will illustrate this attitude.

The baroque monastery Stift Wilten in Innsbruck was founded about 800 years ago. Over centuries, the monks dedicated their lives besides their religious traditions always towards different tasks in the society, like teaching at the University of Innsbruck, leading a school, practising high quality religious music and producing special agricultural products. Since 2019, there is an intense dialogue about the dedication of one wing of the building, which will be out of use in two years. To make a normal touristic café with a nice view from the roof would probably work financially, but it would be a banal solution. Besides the monastery would lose identity.

The emerging concept is different: The religious community offers space for a non-profit café with rooms for meeting and working to develop a new culture of open communication sharing one goal: Improvement of the dialogue between different people looking for a sense in their lives. Christoph Grud, the founder of the

sociocultural innovation “Die Bäckerei”⁵ is as well included in the process as many different religious groups from Tyrol. The risk consists in the decision to keep the development quite open. The program of the house would emerge by the people using the space in a not hierarchical way. This attitude is supported by a an art work of the sculptor Lois Anfidalfarei⁶ – a huge head lying next to the new small entrance, marking the door at the same time. A kind of rift or crack in the baroque building brings more day light into the dark roof area and attracts attention of visitors, inviting them to go there and see, what happens. It would be a space, where visitors don’t wait for a waiter but cook together sharing food and ideas for a better live. As easy as that and at the same time as risky as that. Probably the process needs some more years to be realized and for sure, details will change in the way as people change. The architectural intervention has the same goal as the concept for the new use of the building wing: Winning identity and not losing it. Losing control and power in the process after having started the dialogue and after developing the first conceptual sketches (Fig. 8) may be my personal part of contributing to the new openness in design processes and a new openness of Catholicism.

The second example for a careful transformation of a regional traditional building typology is the chapel Rauschbrunnen (Fig. 9) above Innsbruck. The association of young farmers of Tyrol have asked me for a design of a contemporary catholic chapel dedicated to the heart of Jesus, which is a characteristic topic of this mountain region having a long tradition of different rituals like making fire on the mountain tops one night a year. The concept for the new chapel bases on the idea, that the whole building can be perceived as the heart of Jesus, which is broken and as such open for people. One fragment of the building skin leans on the architecture. As a result, it marks and it protects the emerging entrance-gap a little bit against rain. Entering the space, there will be nothing else but 11 wooden blocks inviting the visitors to sit down in a communicative way with an open centre. The twelfth chair is lacking on purpose. The religious number 12 describes for example symbolically the quantity of Apostles. Since Pope Francesco the female Maria Magdalena is regarded officially also as one of the Apostles and there may have been others. The lacking chair and the open entrance illustrates the open heart and the open community inviting new people to come in and to stay there for a while. The user of the space won’t focus visually to a religious symbol in one direction, but their bodies – sitting in a curve – will stress the communicative ritual space. The heart of Jesus is symbolised by the curved open space in the traditional but reduced form of regional chapels. But, in contrast to the tradition, the walls are curved positively to each other to increase the inviting gesture. Walls and the steep roof are treated in the same way using wooden shingles outside and rough-cut wood inside. The space will surprisingly confront the visitors with themselves, as there will be no classical front to look at. The space invites and promotes to experience the presence of good.

As there won’t be a Holy Mass regularly, catholic building regulations don’t allow to build an altar. People will be asked to behave in a respectful way, but sharing food in silence won’t be forbidden, although the space is dedicated primarily for praying. It has nothing to do with the transubstantiation done by a priest, but sharing the architectural space and probably also food in silence may support holy moments.

Conclusion - In the context of catholic religion, architecture and sharing-food have in common, that neither the one, nor the other, are sacred on their own. It needs the ritual of consecration and the knowledge of symbolism to connote a deeper meaning. Without consecration and knowledge about symbols, high quality architecture and food can nevertheless touch people deeply, as the attitude of the designer or the cook may be perceived through the secular means.

Human love, beauty and power of expression is limited in space and time, whereas the love of god may be endless in space and timeless. Obviously, god needs humans to get a contour on earth. The empiric research proves that the boundary between sacred and secular architecture is increasingly vanishing, whereas simultaneously the identity of Christianity may get richer. Holy experiences in the sense of Christian Bauer⁷ are not dependent on architecture, but architecture has the chance to be perceived by humans using or entering it as a contributing part for holy moments.

Fig. 6 Multifunctional Plattform, Realised diploma-project by Architect Walter Klasz, 2001; left: Cardinal Christoph Schönborn and Chiara Lubich sitting on the Plattform in St. Stephen's Cathedral, Vienna 2001; right: the same platform used as cocktailbar in the alps during the wedding of Walter and Elisabeth Klasz, 2004.

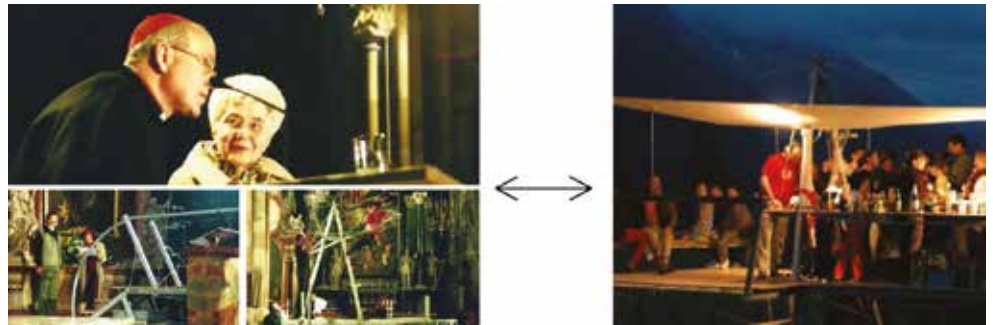


Fig. 7 Redesign of a Factory Building for the Lauretana. A place where six men from the catholic Fokolare-Movement in Vienna live and work together. The spatial concept and architectural design was developed by Architect Walter Klasz. Realization 2011-2013.

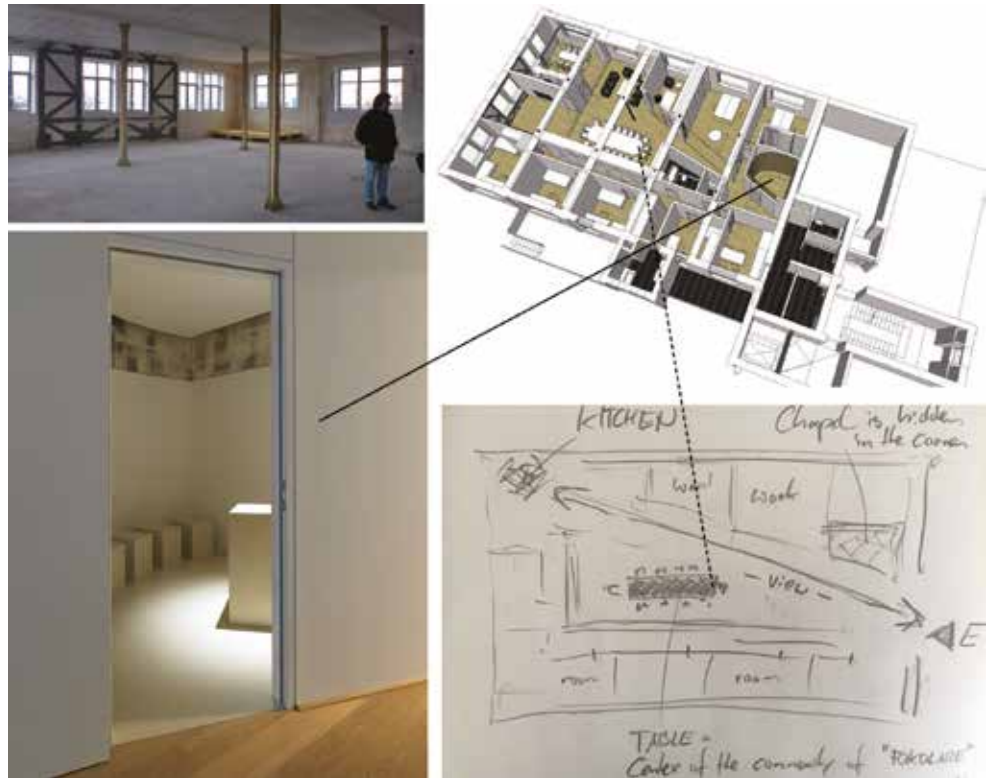
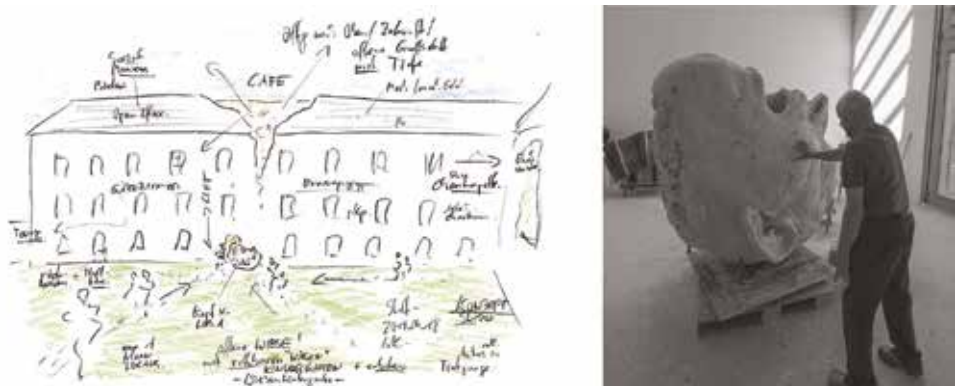


Fig. 8 Left: Stift Wilten, Innsbruck, sketch after a dialogue process lead by Walter Klasz; right: Lois Anfalfarei working on the sculpture (photo W. Klasz, 2019).



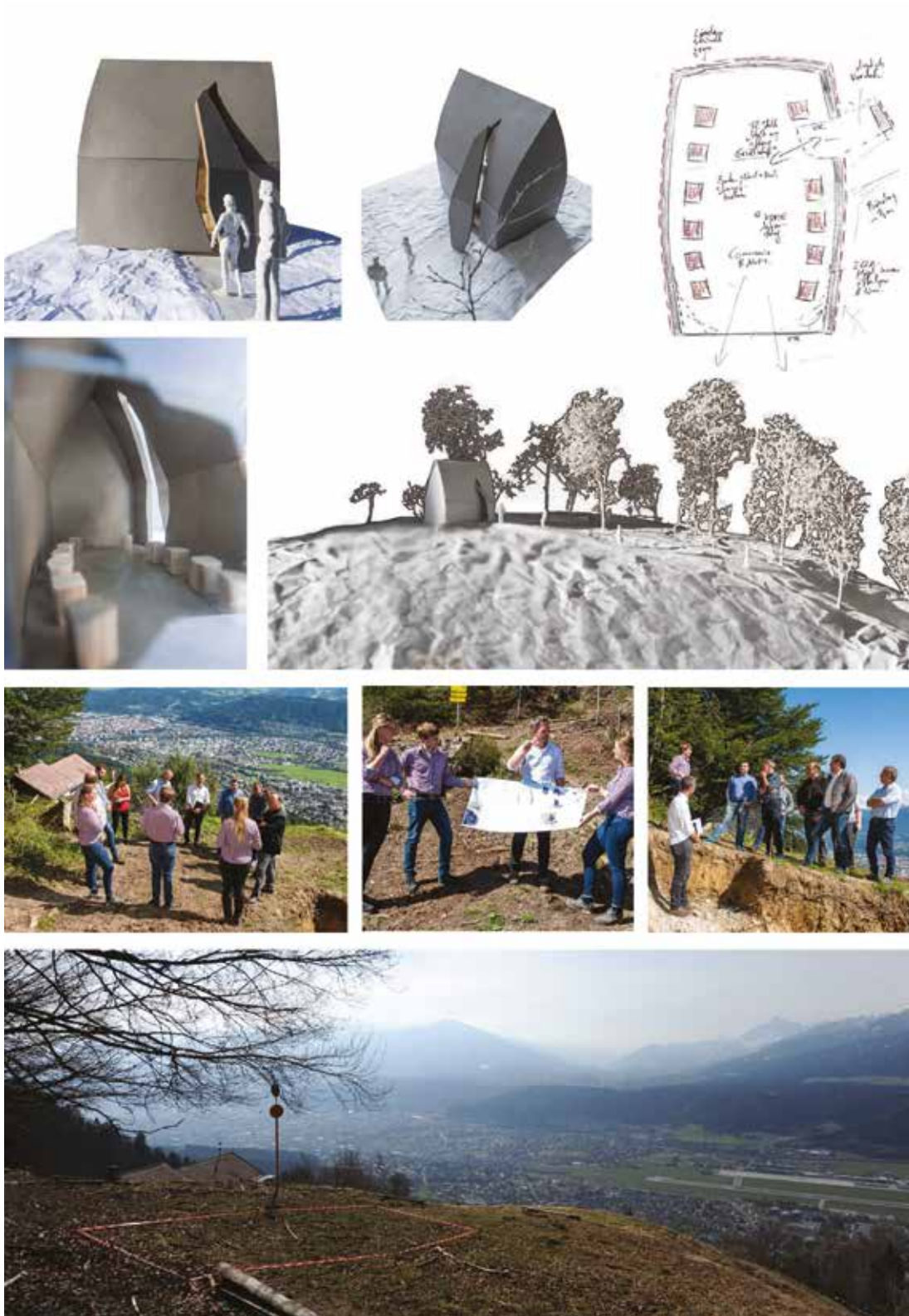


Fig. 9 : Rauschbrunnen above Innsbruck, documentation of the starting building process; photo of the Models and the building site by Walter Klasz. Other photos: Association of young farmers of Tyrol.

NOTE/REFERENCES

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- 2) Jutta Katharina Kierchl, *Tyrol*; see: <http://www.kierchl.com/Person.html>.
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