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## Nothingness: The Golden Word for Japanese Sacred Architecture in the Modern Ages

How do architecture convey a sense of the eternal and the sacred?

How do contemporary sacred spaces inspire spiritual contemplation, meditation, and introspection in a secularised world?

Word Count: 5594

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## ABSTRACT

Sacred architecture has been a taboo subject for architects for decades. Due to its architecturally immeasurable, unquantifiable, and uncontainable nature, sacred architecture is often avoided or resisted in architectural discussions. (Lepine, 2016) However, in an era marked by a significant rise in personal spirituality, accompanied by concepts such as “mindfulness” and “meditation,” sacred architecture may acquire a distinctive role beyond its traditional religious functions. Thus, this paper investigates the relationship between sacred architecture and spirituality within the broad context of profane secularisation.

Specifically, the paper focuses on analysing sacred architecture in contemporary Japanese society, examining The Church of Light, designed by Tadao Ando, as a case study. It begins by addressing the historical impact of iconoclasm on sacred architecture and its affinity for spatial emptiness, tracing its localised reinterpretation in Japanese society. The case study exemplifies how the Christian legacy of reductive emptiness in the Western iconoclastic tradition converges with the Japanese ingrained notion of “nothingness,” first articulated by Kitaro Nishida as a philosophical foundation in the Japanese art movement known as the School of Things, was later introduced into the architectural field for shaping sacred design. (Baek & Ando, 2009) Japan’s unique cultural synthesis of Western knowledge and complex indigenous Japanese traditions profoundly informed Ando’s design approach to the church. Hence, the paper investigates the architect’s position on designing sacred spaces by analysing Ando’s nuanced methods of negotiating the architectural tensions between religious belief systems and eventually creating a new social imaginary.

To comprehend Ando’s design approach to the Protestant church, the paper delves into his architectural and subjective attitude towards sacred architecture, which involves a complex interplay of logic and emotion. (Furuyama, 1993). This is evident through the Church of Light analysis, where design decisions embody these conceptual frameworks. The paper further articulates the Japanese architect’s unique perspective on sacred architecture that amplifies the sense of sacred emptiness and facilitates spiritual transcendence.

In its final section, the paper reflects on the contemporary significance of sacred architecture within the modern condition of secularisation, examining its potential to address the growing demand for individualised spirituality. To sum up, the thesis evaluates the evolving role of contemporary sacred architecture in fostering spirituality, with The Church of Light as a case rooted in the philosophical principle of “nothingness.”

## KEYWORDS

Sacred Architecture | Spiritual Transcendence | Secularisation | Modernism | Meditation

## INTRODUCTION



Figure 1: Exterior of Duomo di Milano

What is sacred architecture? Some may immediately think of medieval Gothic and Renaissance cathedrals or churches easily recognised across Europe. One of the common features among these religious buildings is their extravagant appearance: colourful stained-glass windows, pendant lamps, statues, and other ornate details. (Figures 1 & 2) While these structures represent significant cultural heritage worldwide, their grandeur can sometimes feel disconnected from modern society. This typology of overly flamboyant architecture often contradicts modern architectural principles, which emphasise functionalism and the elimination of excessive ornamentation. This contrast raises my question: How do we define contemporary sacred architecture, and how should architects design religious spaces for the modern world? Therefore, this paper seeks to explore the architectural language of contemporary sacred spaces within the framework of modernism.



Figure 2: Interior of Cologne Cathedral

Architecture is a discipline that principally reflects the temporality of its era, addressing the evolving needs of each generation. This principle applies equally to sacred architecture, where the directional influence from cultural context is profound. Accordingly, this paper examines the impact of iconoclasm on sacred architecture and its historical evolution. For Tadao Ando, great architecture must cultivate a dynamic living environment that embodies the temporality of space. Silence and light are essential elements in creating such an environment, imbuing a space with soul. To justify these architectural strategies, this paper investigates The Church of Light (Figure 3), a Christian church completed in 1989 in Ibaraki, Osaka Prefecture, as a case study demonstrating Ando's philosophy of simplicity, spirituality, and the interplay between light and space in sacred architecture, all grounded in the Japanese philosophy of "Nothingness" articulated by philosopher Kitarō Nishida. Situated in Japan, where Buddhism accounts for the majority, the Christian church exemplifies cross-cultural synthesis. By exploring Ando's masterful integration of nature, light, shintai and geometry, this paper discusses the spiritual experience within The Church of Light, reflecting the profound role of architecture in shaping contemporary sacred aura.



Figure 3: Exterior of Church of Light

Sacred architecture has always intrigued me in that it involves designing spaces that serve as a bridge between human beings and the intangible. While critics often compare religious spaces to classrooms, pointing to similarities in floor plans and intuitive functionality, the two evoke profoundly different spatial qualities and emotional experiences. This distinction has fueled my interest in exploring this architectural typology and deepening my understanding of this unique field. Furthermore, the discussion of sacred architecture has remained taboo in the architectural discourse for decades owing to its uncontainable nature. Yet, considering the rising awareness of spirituality, sacred architecture may extend beyond its religious function to serve as a form of respite in the modern world. Therefore, the paper attempts to discuss the role of sacred architecture in nurturing spirituality within the urban context.

In Christianity, the ultimate goal for believers is to attain eternal bliss with God in heaven through a spiritual experience that transcends time and the profane nature of this world. Historically, sacred architecture has served as an unadulterated space for collective congregation. However, in light of the growing secularisation of contemporary society, does a need for sacred architecture in a physical form for public gatherings remain? The atheistic condition of the era is reflected in academic studies documenting a decline in religious adherence over recent decades. Despite the data from the Government of Japan in 2018 indicating that almost 70% of the population practises Shintō, 66.7% practise Buddhism, 1.5% practise Christianity, and 6.2% practise other religions, many Japanese tend to identify with no religious affiliation. (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2021) A survey conducted by Nippon Hoso Kyokai in 2019 reported that 62% of responders stated no personal religious belief. (Scroope, 2021) This highlights the secular condition in Japan, where religion is more likely a way of life rather than a connection to the divine. Given this growing trend towards secularisation, does sacred architecture still hold relevance? Is there potential for contemporary architecture to foster healing and enrich spirituality in today's world?



## METHODOLOGY

In examining the evolution of Protestantism and its influence on architecture, I relied on *Nothingness: Tadao Ando's Christian Sacred Space* by Jin Baek as a key literary resource. This work has guided my exploration of how Ando seamlessly integrates elements of Japanese Buddhism into Christian church design through his masterful use of natural elements. To better understand the origins of Ando's philosophy, I have consulted *Tadao Ando: Complete Works* by Francesco Dal Co and *Abstraction and Transcendence* by Pham Thanh Hien. These sources provide further insight into Ando's design principles and his profound connections to Japanese culture and philosophy. In discussing the creation of sacredness, I have examined Ando's seminal work, *The Church of Light*, which highlights the role of natural elements in shaping a spiritual environment that bridges human experience with the intangible. To include the contemporary relevance of sacred architecture, I have explored academic articles, including *Constructing the Ineffable* by Karla Britton, *The Architecture Review*, and *The Sacred becomes Profane* by Michael J. Crosbie. These works provide valuable insights into the relationship between religious spaces and the modern world.

## CHAPTER 1: CULTURAL GROUND OF RELIGION

### 1.1 Influence of Iconoclasm on Sacred Architecture

The impact of iconoclasm on sacred architecture is crucial in shaping the foundational principles of modern church design. (Figure 1.1) The concept of iconoclasm can first be traced back to the eighth-century Byzantine Empire, where heated debates arose regarding the use of figural images and decorative ornaments in churches in response to the biblical Word, “The Most High God does not dwell in temples made with hands.” (Acts 7:48) The Byzantine iconoclasts referenced both the Old and New Testaments where the former forbids the worship of graven images (Exodus 20:4) and the latter states, ‘No one has ever seen God’ (1 John 4:12). These passages provided a theological justification for the devoid of religious imagery. Moreover, God, considered the Supreme Being, should not be depicted physically. The fear of misdirection of personal veneration towards images rather than the invisible God on believers further encouraged the promotion of iconoclasm, triggering the destruction of icons in regions such as Constantinople and Nicaea (Brooks, 2001). Since then, the crucifix, the only accepted decorative element in Byzantine churches, marked the beginning of a tradition of reductive sacred spaces.

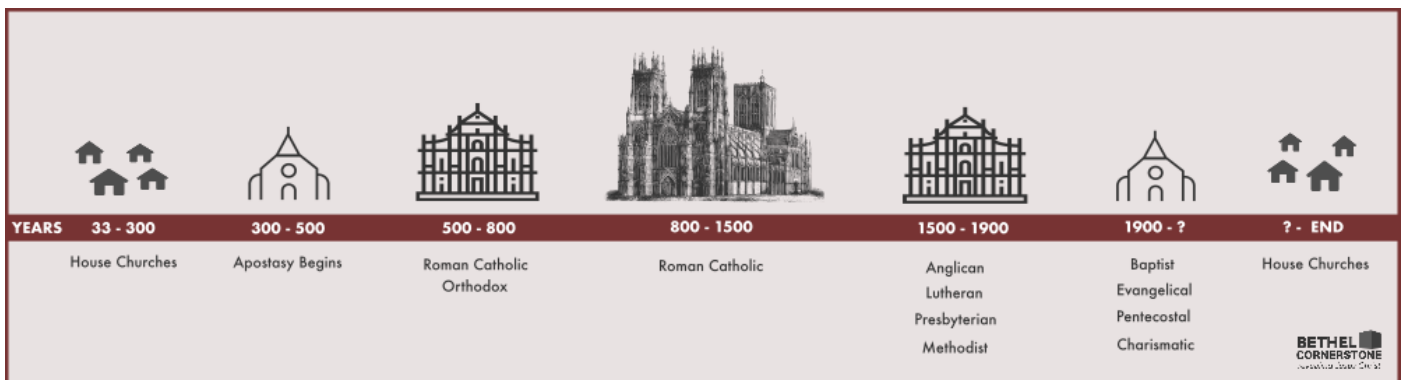


Figure 1.1: Evolution of Sacred Architecture

In the 16th-century Reformation, Reformists such as Martin Luther and Jean Calvin continued to support iconoclastic measures, marking a turning point in the design of Protestant sacred architecture. Despite its pedagogical value for religion, iconoclasts believed the destruction of religious images was necessary, as it reflects the shallowness of faith and marginalises the Word’s primacy (Baek & Ando, 2009). The enthusiastic iconoclast Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt went so far as to advocate for the “total abolition of statues and paintings in churches” (Christensen & Stayer, 1969), further reinforcing the reduction of ornamentation in Protestant churches.

Entering the 19th century, the German art historian Erwin Panofsky observed the profound impact of Protestant iconoclastic tendencies on the emergence of spatial emptiness. The emphasis on individualism in spirituality and introspection should arise from a deep, insurmountable feeling within the soul. Therefore, individual interpretation of the Bible and personal veneration were further embraced (Baek & Ando, 2009). The “eloquence of silence” fostered an intimate communion with God, marking a transition in worship from a traditional collective gathering to a more private spiritual connection. The impact of this theological shift on sacred architecture is reflected in the removal of clamorous elements, such as stained-glass windows and sculptures in Catholic churches, leading to aesthetic purity and a profound sense of spatial emptiness.

In the chaotic context of the 20th century, the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich argued that historical events directly shaped the concept of spatial emptiness in Christian architecture. The collective scars left by world wars and extreme imperial regimes fostered an atheistic condition and a deep sense of emptiness, symbolising the vast distance between humanity and the hidden God, which can only be bridged through the divine Word. In this sense, spatial emptiness represents a hope for God’s return. (Tillich, 1965) It is a condition of transcendence that can only be consciously realised when architects skillfully evoke the numinous essence of space.

This idea of sacred emptiness discussed by Western theologians, finds a parallel in the history of Japanese sacred architecture. The concept of “nothingness,” first articulated by philosopher Kitarō Nishida in 1920s, has a profound impact the evolution of architectural development in Japan. The following chapter explores how this localised interpretation of spatial emptiness has shaped the design of sacred spaces within the cultural context of Japan.

Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet.

- Acts 7:48 (KJV)



## 1.2 Nothingness

The idea of nothingness became a philosophical foundation for the Japanese art movement known as the School of Things (Figures 1.2 & 1.3), gradually influencing the Japanese architectural field in the 20th century. Distinct from Western interpretation, nothingness in Buddhist philosophy is not merely an empty, meaningless void. Instead, it plays a significant role in cultivating interconnection and impermanence within spatial environments. (Baek & Ando, 2009) By common consent, sacred architecture possesses the quality of connecting human beings to the divine grounded in the principle of impermanence. Within this context, nothingness emerges as a fundamental element in religious buildings. This section draws upon Kitaro Nishida's lens to explore the concept of nothingness from a Japanese point of view.

According to Nishida, nothingness is rooted in a condition called 'pure experience', a process of understanding where facts are understood according to the facts themselves without any fabrication (Nishida, 1990). This empirical approach involves immersing the self in the surroundings without self-centred subjectivity. It serves as a mirror, allowing room for introspection and encouraging openness to co-emerge with others while respecting their own self. Through this process, the self is dissolved for internal freedom, leading to a true state of religious experience that reveals another spiritual dimension (Nishida, 1947). The self then comes to a twofold structure - the temporal self that acts and the external self that sees the emergence and the termination of the first self. To attain the transcendental state that connects with the other world out of reality, one must experience nothingness liberated from personal subjectivity. Thus, the existence of the eternal self that sees is grounded in self-negation, promoting a transcendental activity in the ultimate world.



Figure 1.2 (Left): Phase of Nothingness

Figure 1.3 (Top): Phase of Nothingness – Black

Later, in the post-war era, Nishida incorporated modern Western theology into his perception of nothingness and further refined its religious implications. It can be argued that the 'pure experience' that Nishida proposed resembles the moment of regeneration in Christianity. (Baek & Ando, 2009) In Nishida's thought, one has to dissolve the surface self for transcendence to achieve the process of 'pure experience'. Much like the Christian notion of regeneration, the new, spiritual birth allows for communion with the divine, as expressed in the biblical passage: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." (2 Corinthians 5:17-18) Both concepts address the spiritual moment where the other self encounters the power of the universe. For Nishida, God represents the concrete 'pure experience' rather than an abstract conception. (Carter, 1990) Because God is the foothold of the universe and the individual, one can experience infinite, unconditional love. In Christianity, this love of Agape is recognised during the self-awakening moment within the place of nothingness. A self-delimiting horizon allows for the discovery of the bottom self with a complete acceptance of all things, including the love of God. (Nishida, 1947) Thus, to truly perceive the deeper self and connect with the divine, one must engage in the world of religious enlightenment with a full self-negation.

Tadao Ando reflects this philosophical sensibility in his assertion, "If you give people nothingness, they can ponder what can be achieved from that nothingness." (Ivy, 2002) This statement can be interpreted as viewing sacred architecture as a canvas with architects as framework designers that evoke a sense of nothingness, offering believers a contemplative space to discover their personal religious meanings. The following chapter will analyse Ando's masterful techniques for incorporating the notion of nothingness into architectural design to foster religious enlightenment with the example of the Church of Light as a case study.

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature:  
old things are passed away; behold, all things are  
become new. And all things are of God, who hath  
reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath  
given to us the ministry of reconciliation;

- 2 Corinthians 5:17-18 (KJV)

## CHAPTER 2: THE CHURCH OF LIGHT

Unlike medieval Gothic cathedrals, which often rely on grandiose structures to evoke a sense of the divine, Tadao Ando's Church of the Light embraces a minimalist approach, adhering to the concept of being "devoid of ornaments" (Ando, 1990). Ando prioritises spatial purity through geometry, allowing nature, light, and shintai to enrich the sacred experience. This chapter delves into the themes of nature, light, shintai and geometry as sacred devices that foster an intimate connection between humanity and the divine, situated within a cross-cultural dialogue of Christianity and Zen Buddhism.

### 2.1 Nature



Figure 2.1:  
Water Temple on Awaji Island

Tadao Ando believes a sacred space should be connected to an architecturalised form of nature (Ando, 1989). Nature plays a fundamental role in Tadao Ando's work. Projects such as the Water Temple on Awaji Island and the Koshino House in Ashiya (Figures 2.1 & 2.2) exemplify his reverence for natural elements in creating contemplative environments rooted in traditional Japanese culture. This section explores Ando's integration of nature within his architectural designs and its significance in cultivating the sacred qualities of holy spaces.



Figure 2.2:  
The Koshino House in Ashiya

Ando's relationship with nature is deeply influenced by Japan's two major religions, Shintoism and Buddhism, which emphasise an intrinsic connection between humans and the natural world. Shinto is an animistic belief that treats natural elements as divine, emphasising harmony and respect for nature, while Buddhism perceives nature as a living being that serves as a medium for transcendence and enlightenment (Hien, 1998). Drawing inspiration from both philosophies, Ando conceptualises nature in two distinct forms: the tangible and the abstract. Tangible nature refers to its physical presence: landscape, water, or sky, while abstract nature derives from the impermanence and transient qualities of natural environments. He advocates for architecturalized nature, in which natural elements are carefully controlled to heighten emotional and spiritual experiences (Ando, 1989). The dynamic interplay between architecture and nature ensures that his structures remain vital to the ever-changing natural environment. This recalls the qualities of a traditional Japanese garden, which informs the passage of time through subtle landscape transformations; Ando's architecture welcomes natural changes not only for aesthetic purposes but also to enhance a holistic spiritual experience that reflects the importance of temporality in architecture. This sensitivity resonates with the beliefs of German architect Rudolf Schwarz,

who argued that architecture should maintain a close relationship with the present condition and the meaning of our time (Schwarz, 1958). A sense of belonging and intimacy can only be evoked when architecture is associated with its contemporary context, ultimately heightening the sacred experience.

In the Church of Light, tangible and abstract nature manifests, reflecting Ando's unique architectural philosophy in religious settings. The material palette is limited to concrete, glass, and light, (Figure 2.3) intentionally directing attention towards the spiritual dimensions of space. The simplicity and raw, naked concrete illustrate his modernist influences, emphasising functionality and purity. The interior (Figure 2.4) is almost entirely enclosed by concrete walls, creating a deep darkness. Here, the outdoor light is architecturalised to create a delusion where the illuminated cross seemingly floats in darkness, intensifying the spatial tension that evokes a sense of sacredness. The austere atmosphere with dim light in the church may initially evoke physical discomfort, but this is indeed a deliberate design choice related to Buddhist teachings. In Buddhism, enlightenment is attained through rigorous self-discipline and reflection (Hien, 1998). The church's uncomfortable environment challenges worshippers to engage deeply with their consciousness. Ando's architecture does not prioritise comfort but cultivates a heightened awareness of one's surroundings and spiritual existence.

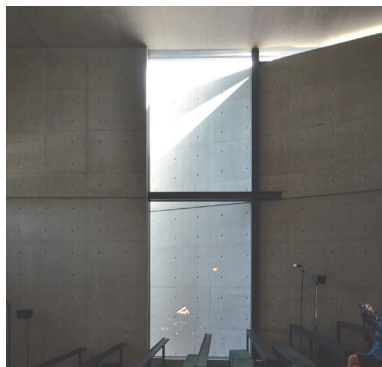


Figure 2.3: The Material Palette of Concrete, Glass and Light

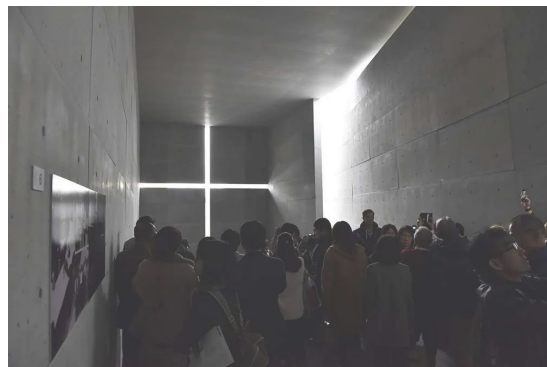


Figure 2.4: Interior of The Church of Light

The most iconic feature of the Church of Light is probably its cruciform cut into the concrete wall on the southern elevation. The slot window (Figure 2.6) allows natural light to enter, forming a glowing cross that illuminates depending on the sun's movement. Here, light becomes the essence of spirituality established in nature, representing both divine presence and the passage of time (Britton, 2011). Its changing quality of light reinforces Ando's belief in architecture as a living experience. Removing non-essential elements embodies the concept of nothingness, creating a space where worshippers are encouraged to focus on the present time. The emptiness of space acts as a medium for contemplation to encourage visitors to fill the void with spiritual meaning by engaging with nature. Ando invites worshippers to admire the changing nature of light rather than merely the permanence of its concrete walls; this aligns with the biblical words: "for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal." (2 Corinthians 4.18) The intangible, impalpable nature (light) encourages a sense of transcendence for a spiritual experience beyond the material world. In this way, Ando fosters a poetic dialogue between nature and built space by utilising both tangible and abstract nature to orchestrate human spiritual experiences by crafting aesthetically powerful and spiritually enriching environments.

While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.

- 2 Corinthians 4.18 (KJV)

## 2.2 Light

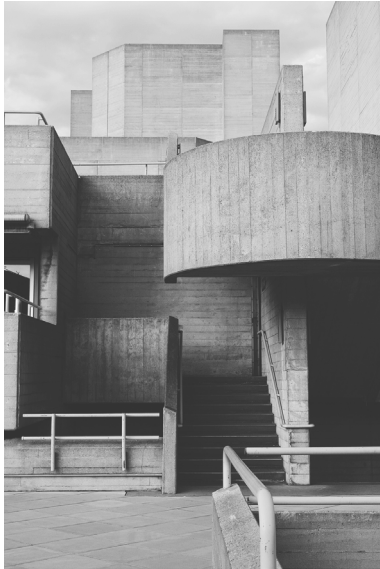


Figure 2.5:  
Béton Brut Concrete Surface



Figure 2.6:  
Detail of Slot Window

Another prominent element visible in Ando's work is the use of light. In Ando's view, architectural space is crafted through the condensation and purification of light's immense power. His experiences with both Eastern and Western architecture deeply influence his perception of light. This section discusses Ando's skilful approach to light and its profound impact on sacred spaces.

"Light is the origin of all being" (Ando, 1993, p.470). Without light, one could not identify anything in the universe, let alone the interrelation between things, thereby affirming the significance of light in shaping all conditions of existence. This stance resonates with Christian scripture, "I(Jesus) am the light of the world" (John 8:12), justifying the centrality of light in Ando's sacred architecture. The sophisticated combination of concrete and light can be easily observed in Ando's architecture. For him, the dialectic between light and shadow plays a fundamental role in evoking a sense of sacredness. The transition of light from invisible to visible provides emotional stimulus, amplifying the spiritual experience of space. (Ando, 1990) Therefore, the manipulation of light receives extra attention in his design process. In this sense, the effect of light, its reflection and refraction becomes pivotal. Ando's innovative treatment of concrete serves as a crucial vehicle for enhancing this effect. Unlike the traditional technique Béton brut (Figure 2.5), widely employed in Japan, which gives an uneven, rough texture, Ando has developed a distinctive method for maximising the smoothness of the finish. This dedicated effort to improve the material quality reflects Ando's rooted Japanese sensibility to subtlety and helps enhance the interaction between natural light and the built surface.

Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

- John 8:12 (KJV)



Considering the case of the Church of Light, Ando employs a minimalist material palette consisting merely of concrete, glass, and light. The practical performance of each material was cautiously calculated so that they intertwined to achieve a sense of spatial emptiness, which enhances the religious experience rather than simply presenting it in a void. While the rough surface of the exposed concrete wall absorbs light particles, the smooth finish encourages their reflection and refraction to the emptied space. (Baek & Ando, 2009) With this meticulous treatment, the concrete surface is no longer presented massively but looks luminous as if gilded. The secretive self-effacing procedure that the earthy material has undergone favours a situational transcendence. As Suger, a French abbot and statesman, suggested, light only evokes one's perception, leading to a higher realm of spirituality when interacting with gilded sacred objects. (Denis, Panofsky and Panofsky-Soergel, 1979) Here, the polished concrete plays this sacred role, imbued with the luminous qualities of gold, elevating the spiritual atmosphere in conjunction with the play of light.

In contrast with the mainstream religions in Japan, such as Shintoism or Buddhism, Christianity is relatively new and foreign to the Japanese. From the martyrdom at a hill overlooking Nagasaki Bay in 1597 to the political isolation of Sakoku during the Edo period, Japanese Christian history experienced a significant pause. According to a recent report from the Government of Japan, nearly 70% of Japanese practise Buddhism. (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2021) In light of this cultural background, incorporating the traditional cruciform in the Church of Light, which was constructed in modern Japan, seems inappropriate due to the contrasting religious perception between Buddhism and Christianity. While the suffering of Jesus on the cross is regarded as inhumane and cruel, the mortification in Buddhism is seen as a lofty act. However, the cross remains the most indicative symbol of Christianity and serves as an indispensable element in churches. To reconcile this tension, Ando's innovative approach to the cross helps to refute the accusation of inhumanity. Instead of using a physical signifier to represent the cross, he places a cruciform slot window on the southern wall, allowing light itself to define the cross. In this way, the luminous cross (Figure 2.7) is shaped in a soft and gentle manner, aligning with Japanese aesthetic sensibility, which is often unconsciously influenced by Buddhist values. Ando's rendering of light fulfils the symbolic expectation of Christianity and showcases his thoughtful consideration of Japan's rich cultural context.

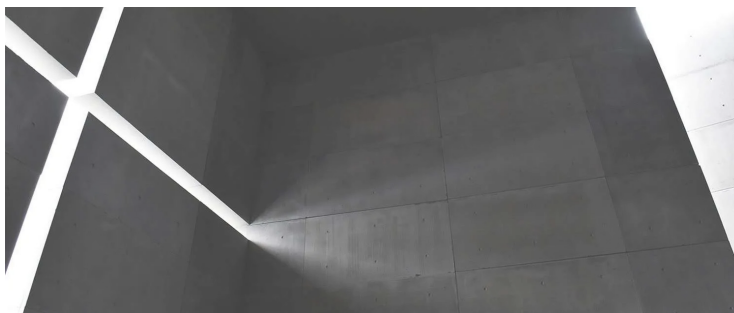


Figure 2.7: The Luminous Cross

## 2.3 Shintai & Geometry

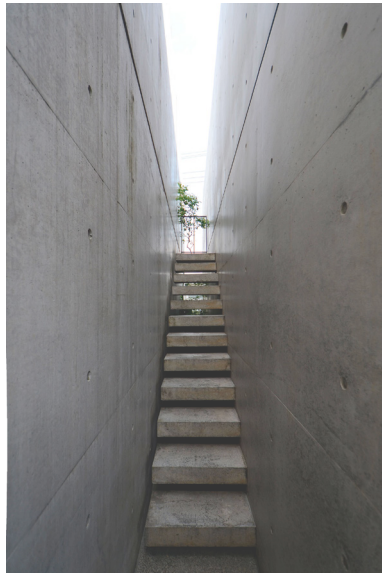


Figure 2.8:  
Stairs at Church of Light



Figure 2.9:  
The Diagonal Wall

To cultivate a spiritual experience, the concept of shintai plays a crucial role in discussion. In direct Japanese translation, shintai means “the god body.” However, Ando interprets it differently, understanding it as the union of spirit and flesh (Ando, 1988). The reciprocal relation between a body and the world dynamically shapes both and ultimately forms shintai. It addresses the interaction between the body, spirit and the environment (architecture). For Ando, architecture should be experienced through the mode of shintai to open one’s depth to the real experience. (Baek & Ando, 2009) In this way, architecture stands as a medium that articulates the world through geometry about the human body. Thus, the integration of shintai and geometry emerges as an essential element in evoking emotions; a relationship will be explored in this section, particularly concerning sacred architecture.

In Ando’s view, shintai provides a key to connecting architecture to the city, community and, most importantly, the human interior. This is because shintai is the only medium through which invisible orders such as history, culture and religion can be obtained. (Hien, 1998) Therefore, in the design of religious spaces, shintai must be considered to provoke the openness of the inner self to the intangible forces and establish a spiritual experience. In this sense, Ando’s unique perspective on geometry assists in achieving this goal by bringing order to space and representing the intangible theory of life. While nature and human presence introduce dynamism to architecture, geometry provides self-discipline and tranquillity (Ando, 1990). It cultivates a specific atmosphere for contemplation and introspection in spatial environments, which induces a sense of inwardness for sacred purposes. However, this requires extra attention to the balance between geometry and shintai. Architecture with an overly focus on geometry risks hindering the acceptance of invisible orders perceived through shintai. Therefore, geometry in architecture functions merely as an instrument to enhance the bond between shintai and the world. This justifies Ando’s frequent use of simplified geometrical forms for heightening perception and promoting a meaningful life. (Hien, 1998)

The notions of shintai and geometry are observable in the case of the Church of Light. One of the striking features is the freestanding 15-degree diagonal wall (Figure 2.9), whose role extends beyond the superficial function of excluding the chaos of urban context. More essentially, it creates tensions and emotions as a sacred element that encourages inward reflection, resonating with Buddhist concentration practices. Along with the interplay of light and shadow, Ando enriches the monotone space in terms of movement and emotions, effectively promoting a sense of transcendence and deepening the religious experience. Another prominent architectural tactic is the labyrinthine passageway leading to the Christian church. Ando intentionally locates the access point through a small street east of the site, lengthening visitors' walking experience to the church's entrance. This approach not only evokes a feeling of pilgrimage but also performs as a filtering process wherein visitors "re-tune" themselves, clearing their minds and "sublimating themselves toward a corporeal unity of shinai (Baek & Ando, 2009). Under this mode of shintai, visitors commence a descending journey within the church at the highest spot. The interior gradually slopes downwards to the south, guiding visitors towards the cross of penetrating light that symbolises the holy. The cross of light standing at the lowest point resembles the humility of the divine, aligning with the biblical words, "and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross". (Philippians 2:8) In this sense, the humbling of visitors encounters the loftiness of God, marking the culmination of the spiritual experience. Ando reinterprets the concept of shintai and geometry with the legacy of both Christianity and Buddhism, offering a unique sacred experience in the Christian church.

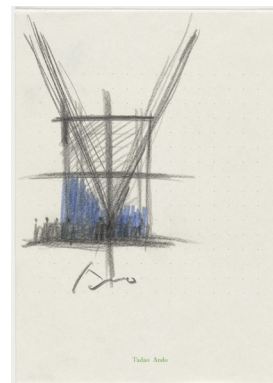
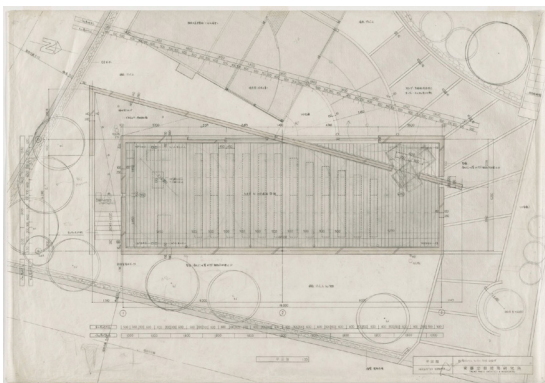


Figure 2.10 (Left):  
Project Floor Plan

Figure 2.11 (Right):  
Sketch by Tadao Ando

And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

- Philippians 2:8 (KJV)

## CHAPTER 3: DISCUSSION - THE SHELTER FOR SOUL



Figure 3.1:  
Notre Dame du Haut by Le Corbusier



Figure 3.2:  
First Christian Church by Frank Lloyd Wright

In this era, the approaches architects adopt in designing sacred spaces, and the necessity of religious buildings remain an ongoing debate. Although the physical structure of sacred architecture can be precisely measured and analysed, the elusive emotions it evokes often go beyond rationale, making it difficult to define what constitutes a tremendous holy space. Returning to one of the earliest questions, how architects create sacred spaces that embody spiritual significance, the case of the Church of Light by Tadao Ando stands as a convincing exemplar, demonstrating the architect's masterful ability to weave the traditional philosophy of "nothingness" into the spiritual language of a Christian church. In this context, it is essential for architects to incorporate their subjective lens associated with the idea of sacredness during the design process. Art historian and theologian Ayla Lepine suggests that the sanctity of religious buildings should be grounded in the architect's personal holy vision rather than a shared or universal one (Lepine, 2016). The capability to move oneself becomes the prerequisite for moving others. This is reflected in Ando's belief that "all relations as determined by the interaction of light and dark" are rooted in his own spatial experience (Ando, 1990, p. 458); the definition of sacredness differs among architects according to their individual spiritual experiences. However, it can be summarised that in pursuing sacredness, humanity must remain the locus, a principle embedded in the religious architecture of 20th-century architects. For instance, Le Corbusier's notion of "ineffable space" (Figure 3.1) is achieved through proportion and harmony; Frank Lloyd Wright's sense of holiness (Figure 3.2) is rooted in the presence of nature; and Tadao Ando evokes spirituality through the interplay of light and natural elements. These architects imbue their work with their interpretation of holiness, creating a unique sense of sacredness while keeping the sense of humanity in mind. Ultimately, the responsibility of architects is not to create religious experiences but to provide a setting with an aura of transcendence for the sacred to transpire. Sacred architecture cannot generate spiritual experiences alone; it can only serve to enhance it.

The shifting landscape of faith has become increasingly visible in recent years. Referring back to the aforementioned demographic data of Japan, although a significant proportion of the population engages with religious practices, few identify themselves with specific religious beliefs. This condition perhaps explains the striking contrast between the past's Gothic churches and today's sacred architecture. It is not that contemporary architects are incapable of replicating historical forms, but rather, the absence of collective faith in the urban context renders them untimely from the present. As the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer noted in the 19th century, the construction of the uncompleted Gothic churches, remnants of medieval devotion, seems to be an act of "embalming a Christianity that has expired". (Schopenhauer, 1966) In this light, the emergence of distinctive contemporary sacred architecture responds to the secular condition and represents the current spiritual needs. Reflecting on the secular condition in Japan, where the Christian cross is often romanticised, churches have been reduced to merely wedding venues, stripping out its cultural significance and even posing a threat to the religion. (Baek & Ando, 2009) This raises an urgent enquiry on how we could revive and meaningfully engage with this decaying cultural and spiritual condition.



Figure 3.3: Japanese Shinto



Figure 3.4: Caravan and Ruined Wall at the Hermitage



Figure 3.5: Faith in Cubicles



Observing the growing trend of moving away from the organised orthodoxy towards more individualised forms of spirituality, I question whether a physical sacred shelter is still necessary in our increasingly non-religious society. If the essence of Christianity lies in communion with God through a movement of self-transcendence, as the German philosopher Karsten Harries provocatively asks, should religious life involve a movement of introversion, “a turn away from the world, into the depths of the self”? (Harries, 2011) If so, what role remains for contemporary religious buildings whose primary function has traditionally been public congregation? This dilemma invites a reconsideration and redefinition regarding the notion of contemporary sacred architecture. Within a broad context shaped by secularisation, the responsibility of sacred architecture today may transcend its traditional function of facilitating religious liturgies, instead offering a spiritual respite from the chaotic modern world, a sanctuary not only for the body but also, as Harries insightfully claims for the soul (Harries, 2011). I believe spirituality has always been a common ground that humans would inevitably seek regardless of religious belief. If the principle of sacredness is rendered by activity, then it becomes conceivable that sacred architecture could emerge under any context. This is illustrated in examples such as Brother Harold Palmer, who lived over 50 years as a hermit in a caravan (Figure 3.4), praying on a hill in Northumbria, or in historian Kathryn Lofton’s thought-provoking proposition of transforming office cubicles into sacred spaces (Figure 3.5) (Lepine, 2016). Sacredness as an ever-present spiritual necessity should not be bounded by physical expression. While it may be argued that a physical shelter for the soul is not necessarily a requirement of life, it is undeniable that the connection between architecture and religion remains reciprocal, as they have the potential to enrich each other by “bringing the transcendent to a new level of meaning”. (Goldberger, 2011) Therefore, when architecture engages with the sacred, it no longer solely serves the liturgical but becomes a medium where the spiritual dimension of life can be reinterpreted and reimagined.

“Not only the body, the soul, too, needs a home.”

- Karsten Harries



## CONCLUSION

Sacred architecture has always been deeply intertwined with the cultural sphere, a relationship evidenced in the discussion on the influence of iconoclasm on the development of sacred architecture. When the concept of spatial emptiness entered Japan, a nation rooted in intricate cultural traditions and philosophies, it was transformed and localised into the idea of “nothingness” articulated by Kitarō Nishida in the 20th century. This cultural reinterpretation highlights the importance of the temporal quality of architecture in responding to the spiritual needs of its time. Its significance with sacred architecture lies in fostering a holistic spiritual experience that engages with the divinity. The exploration of the case study of Tadao Ando’s Church of Light in Ibaraki in this paper illustrates this dynamic. The thoughtful use of architecturalised nature, light, shintai and geometry demonstrates how temporal qualities can be orchestrated to evoke transcendence for spiritual experience beyond the material dimension.

Informed by the case of the Church of Light, it becomes evident that sacred architecture in the contemporary world may require a kind of reconciliation. Located in Japan, a predominantly Buddhist-based cultural environment, the Christian church transcends the conventional Protestant design principles, striking a delicate balance between religions while preserving the essence of Christianity and Buddhism. This convergence justifies the inevitable subjectivity embedded in the design of religious spaces, as the creation of sacredness is tied to unique spatial experiences. The works of architects like Tadao Ando or Le Corbusier exemplify how their personal interpretation of holiness shapes a sense of sacredness. For this reason, sacred architecture remains an elusive subject within the architectural discourse. Nevertheless, a common consensus emerges through this paper: the integration of a sense of humanity within sacred spaces. Architects do not create religious experiences but act as mediators between human beings and spatial environments, transforming daily unattended perceptions of matters into a heightened perception of reality to transpire a sense of sacredness. Thus, subjectivity becomes acceptable so long as the spiritual experience remains grounded in humanity.

In the context of profane secularisation in modern society, where the concentration of personal spirituality over traditional orthodoxy, sacred architecture alone may hold no power to halt this cultural shift. However, as this paper suggests, its potential extends beyond traditional liturgical functions to serve as a shelter for the soul. Although orthodoxy may fade, the human search for endures across eras. The mobility of spirituality in an urban context encourages the emergence of a new form of sacred space. Whether physical or intangible, what ultimately defines sacred architecture is its capacity to act as a sanctuary for the soul. While sacredness may not require architecture, their reciprocal relationship undeniably enriches the spiritual dimension of human experience. The exploration presented in this paper seeks to offer fresh perspectives on the responsibilities of contemporary sacred architecture, advocating for spaces that remain attuned to both the spiritual and human condition.

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