

Fullness and Emptiness. Contemporary Architecture as a Meeting Point of Christian Religious Concepts with the Religious Concepts of the Far East


Plenitud y vacío. La arquitectura contemporánea como punto de encuentro de los conceptos religiosos cristianos con los conceptos religiosos del Lejano Oriente

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze prominent examples of contemporary Christian architecture in the Far East, and the influence of religious and architectural concepts of sacred architecture of the Far East on contemporary Christian architecture built there. Numerous examples show the influence of the permeation of that area's cultural, traditional, and religious heritage with the Christian cultural and theological framework. Christian sacred architecture is based on the monotheistic concept of faith in one incarnated God that opens to humanity the path to salvation achieved in the afterlife. Religions of the Far East share common concepts of processuality described as Tao, the governing principle in the background of all life. It is the principle of continuity in an eternally changing universe. The intention of this paper is, therefore, to direct the view towards the permeation of cultures that encourages Christian sacred architecture towards the search for a new, authentic identity.

KEYWORDS

Sacred Architecture, Religion, Architecture, Christianity, Far East Architecture.

RESUMEN

Este texto pretende analizar ejemplos destacados de la arquitectura cristiana contemporánea en Extremo Oriente, y la influencia de los conceptos religiosos y arquitectónicos de la región en la arquitectura cristiana contemporánea construida. Numerosos ejemplos muestran la influencia de la impregnación del patrimonio cultural, tradicional y religioso de esa zona con el marco cultural y teológico cristiano. La arquitectura sagrada cristiana se basa en el concepto monoteísta de la fe en un Dios encarnado que abre a la humanidad el camino de la salvación alcanzada en la otra vida. Las religiones del Lejano Oriente comparten conceptos comunes de procesualidad descritos como Tao, el principio rector en el fondo de toda la vida. Es el principio de la continuidad en un universo eternamente cambiante. La intención de este trabajo es, por tanto, dirigir la mirada hacia la permeabilidad de las culturas que alienta la arquitectura sagrada cristiana hacia la búsqueda de una nueva y auténtica identidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Arquitectura religiosa, religión, arquitectura, cristianismo, arquitectura del Extremo Oriente.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Christian sacred architecture erected in the Far East shows the influence of the permeation of that area's cultural, traditional, and religious heritage with the Christian cultural and theological framework.

In contemporary examples of Christian sacred architecture in the Far East, it is possible to read the omnipresent symbols of the religions of the Far East, which in the Christian interpretation acquire a new meaning and Christian intonation. This paper intends to direct the view towards the permeation of cultures that encourages Christian sacred architecture towards the search for a new, authentic identity.

INCARNATION AS THE CENTRAL CONCEPT OF CHRISTIANITY AND ITS REFLECTION ON THE CONCEPTION OF SPACE

The long history of the Abrahamic Judaic-Christian tradition relies on the concept of the ontological difference between God and man and the fact that human life has its eschatological goal in the afterlife (Rebiae 1982). These religions have a backbone in professing faith in one God that communicates with man and it is revealed to him through the prophets. The culmination of the communication in Christianity is the moment of the gift to humanity of the incarnate God - Jesus Christ.

Belief in the incarnation of Christ who is *identical with the Father*, ie identical with the *distant, separate* God, becomes the foundation of the Christian faith. The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity becomes the central mystery of the Christian faith and life. The mystery of the Trinity combines the concept of God the Father, God the Son (Christ), and God the Holy Spirit. God the Father remains the source of everything because everything comes from him; The Son is not born of anything but of God, he is not a created being but an offspring of the Father. It does not arise from the Father's creative action, but his essence. The Holy Spirit, as the third Divine Person, is the Spirit who is at work in creation and who has spoken through the prophets and is constantly present in the world introducing the creature to the truth.

But, regarding the interpretation of Benedict XVI (Ratzinger 2020), the doctrine of the Trinity does not claim to have understood God. It has the meaning of a gesture-symbol that refers to what cannot be named, and it is by no means a definition that places something in the compartments of human knowledge, nor a term that would give a thing within reach of the human spirit.

The incarnation of Christ and his work of redemption in Christianity is understood as the mysterious contact of God and man, as the redemptive act of God's love for man by which man acquires divine dignity. The concept of the Incarnation, God's visibility in Christ bridging the gap between the visible and the invisible, becomes the original position of understanding the Christian liturgy and the art that grows out of it.

The Christian liturgy, a rite, becomes a place of permanent actualization of the events of incarnation and redemption. The liturgy reflects in architecture what it carries within itself. Ritual symbols are inscribed in Christian architecture. Space and ritual act form unity. The space becomes a ritual element of the liturgical celebration (García-Lozano 2011). Christian architecture becomes and remains a trace of the meeting of human and divine presence that is actualized through the rite, it is the meeting place of the two sides (greek *synballein* – put together), a symbol that through the material reveals a foretaste of the mysterious. Divine incarnation opens the space of the *corporeality* of Christian art - architecture, painting, and sculpture are participants in divine theophany and take on a symbolic physiognomy.

Christian sacred architecture thus becomes a place of *structuring the fullness*, revelation, knowledge of the otherworldly life revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. It is the place of the permanent contact of heaven and earth that takes place at the altar. The altar becomes the focus, the place where the event of incarnation and redemption is actualized each time in the rite.

In the longitudinal buildings of Christianity (most common in the West), the altar in the apse is at the end of a longitudinal path thus emphasizing a linear, directed understanding of existence that has

its beginning and its eschatological goal. Sometimes the altar and the entrance are not placed on the same axis, but still, the altar is the center to be discovered (Vukoszávlyev 2013). In centrally conceived buildings the altar is sometimes placed under the dome but in Eastern Orthodox Christianity the altar is centered behind the iconostasis. The iconostasis physically separates the space of the altar and the space of believers but in fact, it connects two realities earthly and otherworldly, and the iconostasis together with the dome opens the eschatological dimension of the faith which occurs vertically.

So, Christianity is essentially focused on its eschatological dimension - the ultimate goal of earthly life. This dimension appears through two types of architectural structures: longitudinal which are accented by apse and central which are accented by domes or domes and iconostasis. The altar focuses on the strongest place that points to the eschatological dimension of time and space.

Christianity, therefore, structures sacred space in a way that intentionally separates it from the world, and through architectural elements liquefies the *new space*, the space that is between the existing, everyday space of the world and the eschatological, transcendent space. The dynamics of the *new space* that builds the sacred architecture of Christianity is primarily focused on the revelation of the novum - the *space of fullness*, the new ontological level of space sui generis (Fig. 01).

PROCESSUALITY AS A CENTRAL CONCEPT OF EASTERN RELIGIONS AND ITS REFLECTION ON THE CONCEPTION OF SPACE

Unlike the Abrahamic religions, the religions of the East are divided into two groups, Dharmic, and *Taoic* religions. Dharmic religions are a family of religions that have originated from the Indian subcontinent. *Taoic* religions are the religions that focus on the East Asian concept of *Tao*. This group includes Chinese religion overall, which further includes Ancestral Worship, Chinese folk religion, Confucianism, Taoism, and so-called organizations (such as Yiguandao and Weixinism), as well as ele-

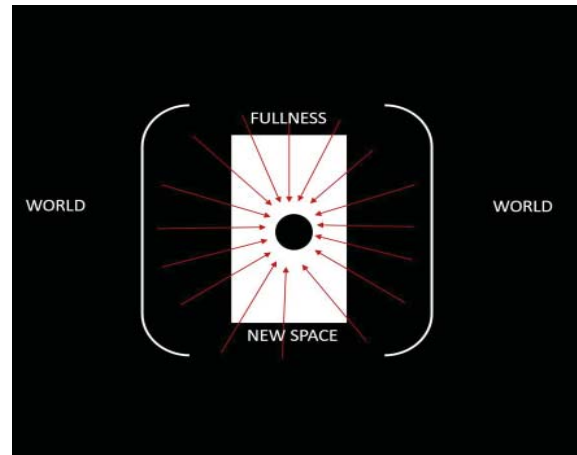


Fig. 01. Christian concept of space.

ments drawn from Mahayana Buddhism that form the core of Chinese Buddhism and East Asian Buddhism at large. The group also includes Japanese Shintoism and Korean Muism. In this paper, the focus is on the religions of the Far East the *Taoic* religions.

The religions of the Far East are a rich collage of different traditions (Sharot 2001). Unlike the Judaic-Christian tradition, the religions of the Far East do not know the concept of the ontological difference between God and man. Far East Asian religions include many theological stances but it dominates pantheism and agnosticism. The classic colors of Confucianism are balanced with the spiritual shadows of Buddhism and the romantic nuances of Taoism. But all religious concepts focus on the concept of the *Tao* (Way).

The *Tao* cannot be understood as a transcendent reality, ontologically differentiated from this reality, as God is understood in the Abrahamic religions. The *Tao* is a transcendent principle that is immanent to this reality. It is the path of the universe, the norm, the rhythm, the driving force of nature, the governing principle in the background of all life. It is the principle of continuity in an eternally changing universe, a principle that is inherited from life that permeates

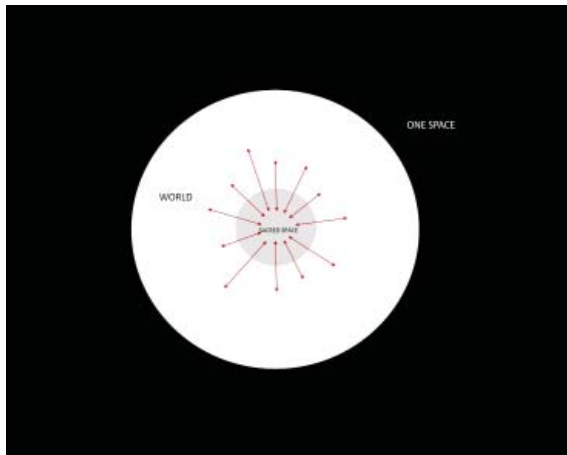


Fig. 02. Concept of space on the Far East.

life. Everything is in this reality. Reality is rearranged in a circular, eternal return of the same (Chow 2013).

The *Tao* is usually described in terms of elements of nature. Nature is the source in which the flow of the *Tao* can be observed. In nature, the concept of transience is reflected because it is (like a man) subject to the cycle of birth and death. Change transcends both man and nature and they share the same destiny. So, nature is the place of divine experience. The religions of the Far East can therefore be called *religions of nature*. Natural elements are, therefore, in a symbolic or a real sense, ubiquitous in the architecture of the temples of the Far East (Wu and Gambardella 2019).

The term *sūnyatā* denotes emptiness—a term in Buddhist philosophy present in all *Taoic* religions, which says that the whole existence is dependent on the causality hidden in the *Tao*. Since causality factors are constantly changing, there is no static phenomenal existence. All phenomena are relative and dependent on other phenomena and are, therefore *empty* (Kadowaki 2002).

Unlike the Abrahamic religions, whose architecture is characterized by the *structuring the fullness* of revelation, the architecture of the religions of the Far

East is therefore characterized by the *structuring of emptiness* of the impossibility of cognition.

In the phenomenon of architecture, this *structuring of emptiness* is reflected in the concept of cyclicity. Consequently, the most common type of plan is a circle because a circle is a geometric figure that has no beginning or end. The circle is a symbol of movement, cyclicity, and endless rotation without beginning, end, and goal. Many temples have a mandala (Sanskrit *mandala* - circle) in their base.

As Far Eastern religions do not know the otherworld other than this world, but only the concealment or revelation of the *Tao*, there is no concept of different ontological levels of space. There is only one space, always the same, and it shows its aspects in the event of cyclical processuality. The space bounded by the architecture of the temple is understood in the same way as the space that surrounds the temple and in which the temple is placed. The temple is a place that reminds and points to the nature of the circularity of the world, the world which never brings an ontological novel to man in eternal circulation, but is a field of dynamics of the visible and invisible aspects of the same space (Fig. 02).

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN THE FAR EAST AS A PLACE OF PERMEATION OF THE CHRISTIAN CONCEPT AND THE CONCEPT OF EASTERN RELIGIONS

Contemporary sacred architecture in the Far East is a meeting point of two cultures and religious concepts (Commans 2018; Yangwen 2017). It evidences numerous examples of contemporary sacred architecture. Here are some examples:

Chapel of the Holy Sacrifice

University of the Philippines, Diliman, Philippines, 1955, by Leandro V. Locsin.

The chapel is an example of the Catholic Church of the Far East in which it is possible to recognize the permeation of religious concepts of the Far East and West.

The choice of a central circular plan is very often used in Far Eastern sacred architecture. It evokes the circular nature of this reality. But in this example,

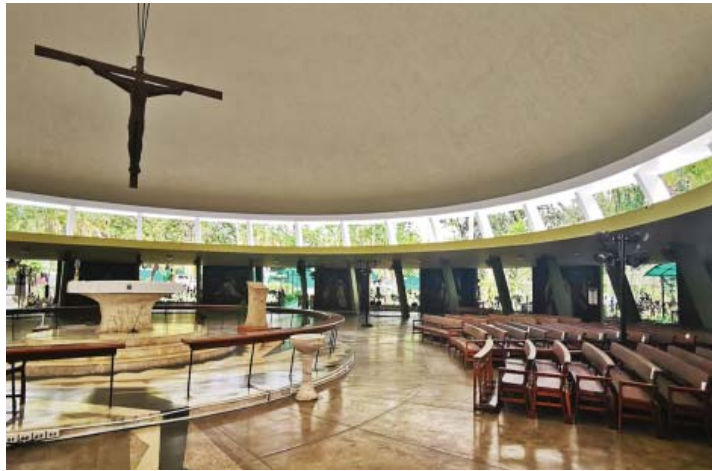
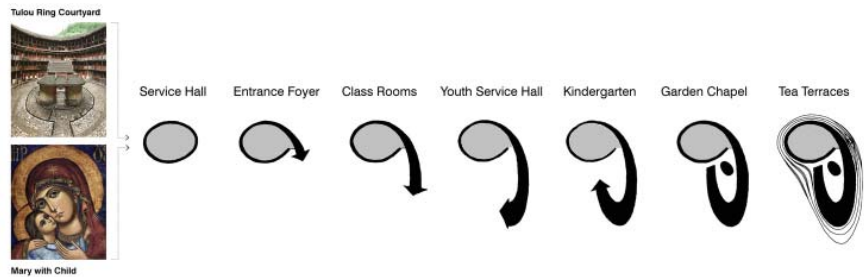


Fig. 03. Leandro V. Locsin, Chapel of the Holy Sacrifice, University of the Philippines, Diliman (Philippines), 1955.
 Fig. 04-05. INUCE-Dirk U. Moench, Anglican Church, Luoyan Country (China), 2019.

Vernacular Typology and Religious Symbolism
 Integrating a complex functional program with the dignified presence of a place of worship



this concept gets its orientation towards the vertical. The large dome covers the entire space focusing the believer in the inner space. The dome is open in the center, introducing the sky into the space, a sky that paraphrases other ontological dimensions. In that center the architect positions the cross with the crucified Jesus - the link between earthly and otherworldly reality.

The large dome hovers over the space from which it is separated by a stroke of large windows. It is possible to recognize here the concept of Eastern religions - the intention to let the permeation of inner and outer space because in the religions of the Far East this connection reminds us that the *Tao* flow to every part of nature, every part of the space.

But in Christian interpretation, in the praying hall, the architect doesn't allow the uninterrupted flow of space in the level of believers' perspective. He separates inner and outer space with parts of the wall leaving the believer focused on the space of rite. The uninterrupted flow and permeation of inner and outer space are allowed only in the upper level, under the dome. In that way, it seems as the dome is flying emphasizing the celestial dimension of the dome.

The crucified Jesus Christ powerfully placed in the center of space, and the altar are the focuses that direct attention toward the event of salvation actualized in Holy Mass (Fernández-Cobián 2020) (Fig. 03).

Luoyan Anglican Church

Luoyan Country, China, 2019, by INUCE-Dirk U. Moench.

The Anglican Chapel is located in Fujian a province of China famous for its Hakka minority which brings to the town its way of doing dwellings unique in the mountainous areas in southeastern Fujian. These typical dwellings are called tulou, and they are usually large, enclosed, and fortified buildings, most commonly circular, ring shape in configuration. This chapel is also an example of the permeation of local and Christian concepts.

Although it was based on the tradition of building circular tulou, the architect choose an ellipse for the plan, a geometric figure with two focuses.

The entrance is located on one side and the altar on the other. A clear orientation towards the altar along the longitudinal axis of space is a Christian concept based on faith in alterlife, the eschatological goal of this life. The space designed in this way focuses, directs towards its central focus - the altar.

But the perforation of the membrane points to the smoldering aspiration of the Far East to open outwards because nature is a reflection of the vibrations of life. However, the architect stops and interprets the perforated wall as a stained-colored glass window through which changed light enters the space, light that does not belong to this reality, which is the concept of Western Christianity. It seems to be more about creating senses of endless and eternal space than opening it. The author does not allow nature to penetrate the space but modified light that allowed believers to pretaste the Eternal light, never able to completely recognize it. Authors say:

Depicting a source of light as it develops from the most fragile flame into a powerful aura mirrored in both directions to infinity, the image symbolizes the Holy Spirit as it passes from one person onto another and unites Christendom across the world (Archdaily 2018).

Furthermore, in the situation plan reflects the relationship between full and empty - inner and outer space, the idea of the ying-yang principle can be seen, which the authors themselves describe as a symbol of the dualism of reality, its concealment and its openness in eternal circulation (Fig. 04-05).

Church on the Water

One of the most famous contemporary examples of the encounter of Christian and Far Eastern concepts is the Church on the Water (Shimukappu-Mura, Japan, 1985-88, by Tadao Ando).

The value of this chapel lies in its clear concept of design where it is possible to recognize themes like perspectivity, enclosed/open space, technical/natural but, as the chapel is in the wedding use which may have a religious connotation, we can also recognize the synergy of the religious concept of the Far East and the West.



Fig. 06. Tadao Ando, Church on the Water, Shimukappu-Mura (Japan), 1985-88.

Fig. 07. Tadao Ando, Church of the Light, Ibaraki-Osaka (Japan), 1985-89.

You can't simply put something new into a place. You have absorbed what you see around you, what exists on the land, and you use that knowledge along with contemporary thinking to interpret what you see (Coulter 2014, 11).

To capture nature, to feel the *Tao* flowing through nature is the original concept of the religions of the Far East. Opening to a large body of water, a concept in which architecture is the starting point and nature is a distant perspective, is a Far Eastern concept. Man is placed before the stage of a life that is in constant change.

Once inside, it appears to be resting on the water. Verandas are a central feature of traditional Japanese architecture, the place where the outside and inside become one, without glass. The outside and inside meet here (Ando 2021).

Ando imagined a church space without glass. For him, glass is just an unfortunate functional necessity.

Light and wind, in short, natural elements, have no meaning if they are not introduced inside the house, secreting them from the outside world. A pinch of light and air evokes the entire natural world (Mazorra 2014).

His architecture is based, not on confrontation with nature, but its existence within it.

But on calm, quiet, and infinitely strong and always renewable water, a focus appears - a cross that points to an eschatological focus, a point that is a symbol of revelation in Christ and to which, according to Christianity, a changeable existence aspires. In this way, this architectural work becomes a place of meeting and synergy of different religious concepts (Fig. 06).

Church of the Light

Ibaraki, Osaka, Japan, 1987-89, by Tadao Ando.

It is the main chapel of the Ibaraki Kasugaoka Church, a member church of the United Church of Christ, which is the largest Protestant denomination in Japan. But unlike the Church on the Water, which following the religious concept of the Far East opens space, emphasizes nature, and makes space part of nature, Ando uses a different concept when designing

a Christian church. The Church of the Light distances itself from space and points to the goal, the space at the end of the longitudinal axis where the focus is the ambo (about protestant architecture, see Kilde 2017, Fernández-Cobián 2017, Gonçalves 2017). Orientation directs us to a cross inscribed with light in architecture (Vukoszávlyev 2017). The cross becomes a place of the drama of east-west dialogue. The cross is a void, it is not inscribed in the wall but dissolves the wall, making visible the change of nature that penetrates through it. Thus the concept of shintai is manifested in the emptied cross - the voluntary renunciation of the self as a place of conceptualization, for the self to be emptied for the penetration of the world that manifests the *Tao* (Baek 2004).

For Ando, it is important the idea of emptiness, a void that leaves room for the flow of life. Ando's idea was to leave the cross empty, without even glass, to let the flow of nature:

The opening is now filled in with glass but I originally wanted it to be empty. This proved inconvenient. It would get very cold inside. Many people were against it. I wanted to get rid of the glass later on but the pastor immediately opposed it. Mr. Ando, the glass stay. I am still adamant about removing it someday (Ando 2021).

The emptiness here becomes the meeting point of the Far East and Christianity in the double coding of symbols, once referring to the eschatological meaning of existence, and secondly invoking the emptiness that points to the eternal process of the flow of life through changing reality (Fig. 07).

MULTI RELIGIONS SACRED SPACES AS A PLACE OF THE SYMBIOSIS OF THE CONCEPTS OF THE FAR EAST AND THE WEST

In the Far East, there are many sacred buildings erected for use of multiple religions. Even in architectural concepts, they want to be the places that materialize the symbiosis of the concept of the Far East and West. Here are some examples:

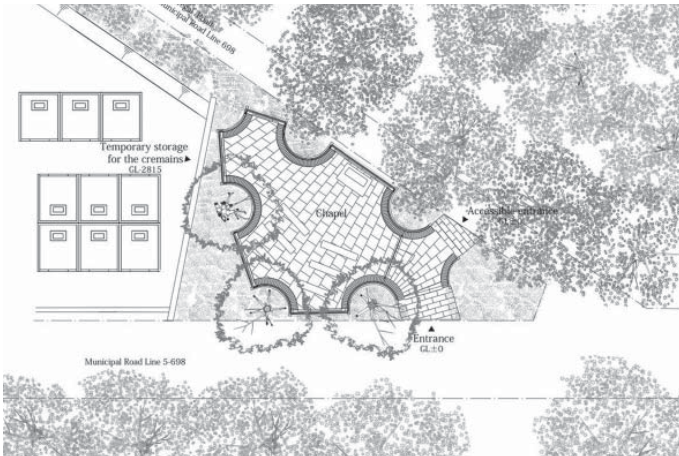


Fig. 08. KATORI archi+design associates, Chapel near Westin Miyako Kyoto Hotel, Kyoto (Japan), 2020.
Fig. 09-10. Hiroshi Nakamura & NAP, Sayama Forest Chapel, Saitama (Japan), 2013.
Fig. 11. Yu Momoeda Architecture Office, Agri Chapel, Nagasaki-shi (Japan), 2016.

Chapel near Westin Miyako Kyoto Hotel

Kyoto, Japan, 2020, by KATORI archi+design associates.

The Westin Miyako Kyoto is a hotel settled in the foothills of the Kyoto Higashiyama district. The chapel is a separate building on the hotel property. The chapel is a result of renovation after the earthquake using the existing framework and adding a wooden ceiling of the original Japanese way of building.

The clear longitudinal orientation towards the focus of the ritual space is emphasized by the rhythm of the wooden roof on which the play of light and shadow emphasizes the dynamics of the orientation. But the space in the background of the focus pours into nature through a window at the top of the wall. The variability of nature is present (Fig. 08).

As a show of respect for the abundant natural surroundings, rock and wood take center stage in this sacred space imbued with a traditional Japanese aesthetic (Kaufman 2021).

Sayama Forest Chapel

Saitama, Japan, 2013, by Hiroshi Nakamura & NAP.

Forest Chapel is settled near Sayama Lakeside Cemetery on the small triangular plot of the land. It is located on a direct edge of the forest which becomes its highlight. The authors explain the project:

I envisioned an architecture that reflects on the way of life as it lives by the water conserved by the forest, and eventually returns to this place after death. Thereupon, I found the forest to be the subject of prayer that is mutual to various religions and conceptualized an architecture that prays to the forest while surrounded by trees. I have decided to create a space that devotes to the forest that is transcendent in its existence... (ArchDaily 2016).

The authors use a traditional Japanese Gassho-style structure. Gassho is the pose Japanese people assume when they bring their hands together to pray to the gods, and the houses were named Gassho-style houses because the shape of the large roofs resembles this pose. The roof is composed three-dimensionally as two leaning beams set against each other are developed in every direction. The roof is covered with

cast-aluminum tiles with ripple-like textures each made by the hands of craftsmen.

The chapel and its surroundings permeate. It seems as if the chapel is just one of the trees that surround it. The space is not directed. The geometry of space has no intention of creating focus. The concave game of membrane constantly redirects the focus, leaving the visitor to the vibrations and interactions of nature and architecture (Fig. 09-10).

Agri Chapel

Nagasaki-shi, Japan, 2016, by Yu Momoeda Architecture Office.

The Agri Chapel is not explicitly intended for any religion. It is simply a meditation chapel. But it is, from the conceptual point of view, a meeting place of East and West. According to the architects, the chapel was inspired by the old Gothic chapel in Nagasaki, which is the oldest wooden Gothic chapel in Japan called *Ohura-Tenshudou*. With modern constructive elements, the authors evoke the constructive beauty of Gothic solutions. Like in Gothic architecture, the constructive elements here become elements of design. The wooden unit is inspired by fractal geometry - it becomes a kind of lace that has both a constructive and design role. Constructively

it is created a pendentive dome by peeling up a tree-like unit that extends upward by shrinking * 1 and increasing. Starting by four 120 mm square pillars units, the second layer is composed of eight $(4 + 1/2 * 8)$ 90 mm square pillars units, and the last layer by sixteen 60 mm. square pillars units. In that way, it is provided usable open space by reducing the pillars near floor level. These tree-like units are constructed by a Japanese wooden system (ArchDaily 2017).

Shaped wooden lace evokes the natural context, the forest, nature, a theme so beloved by the religions of the Far East. The nature that surrounds the chapel is translated into the interior by evoking the forest and in the interior. The light structure of the interior allows the inner and outer space through which the *Tao* flows to permeate. The space has no focus, no direction, there is not a single liturgical element in it.

The space is directed outwards and the outer space is directed inwards.

The structure of historical Gothic architecture created the possibility of shaping large glass walls. But in the West, in Gothic buildings, glass is colored, often with figural representations. Light reaches the interior, but the figural representation stops the thought separating the believer from the surrounding space, leaving him in the *new space* that is between the existing, everyday space of the world and the eschatological, transcendent space. In contrast, in Agra Chapel glass, window, the wall is just protection from the atmosphere, it allows the flow open to eternal change, the circularity of space, the concepts inherent to the religions of the Far East (Fig. 11).

CONCLUSION

The West and the Far East are the heirs of different and almost contradictory religious concepts. The West, relying on the Abrahamic tradition, in Christianity conceptualized the idea of the afterlife revealed to man in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, thus giving life in this reality its goal in the afterlife, its eschatological dimension. The Far East, in a collage of different spiritual traditions of mostly pantheistic or agnostic provenance, conceptualized the idea of processuality, the eternal change of reality manifested through the flow of *Tao*.

Christian architecture directed towards its eschatological goal structures the sacred space towards the focus - the altar - the place where the event of salvation is actualized anew each time emphasized by apse or dome. Sacred Christian architecture intentionally separates space from the space of the world, and through architectural elements liquefies the *new space*, the space of its own ontological level between the existing, everyday space of the world, and the transcendent *eschatological space*.

The architecture of the religions of the Far East directed towards the flow of the *Tao* and its eternal return, creates spaces that are part of reality, the space that more clearly articulate and points to the human position in this world - they open the observer to nature through which the *Tao* flows and which shares the same destiny of transience as a man.

Contemporary examples of Christian sacred architecture or multireligious sacred spaces built in the Far East analyzed in this paper show that architecture is a meeting place of different religious positions and the synergy of cultures and religious traditions.

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Fig. 03. DMCI Homes

Fig. 04. INUCE

Fig. 05. Shi Kai/INUCE

Fig. 07. Attila Bujdosó

Fig. 08. Tomohiro Sakashita

Fig. 09. Hiroshi Nakamura & NAP

Fig. 10. Koji Fujii / Nacasa & Partners Inc

Fig. 11. Yousuke Harigane