

Research Article

Defining Sacredness in a Masonic Temple Can Be Defined by PARTY

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Abstract

This case study is focused on the Scottish Rite Cathedral. Built in 1929, it was the largest cathedral of the Scottish Rite. The building was used to house meetings and ceremonies of the Freemason Fraternity. In recent years, the building has had issues with funding, resulting in the space being opened to the public. This has caused several issues, such as misuse of the space and a misunderstanding of the building. This research explores the ways in which religious organizations are forced to change to maintain their original identity and to educate people about the impact they have when they visit. Architecture plays a key role in defining religious spaces, as such, this research will also highlight certain spots within the cathedral that are especially noteworthy. It defines identity, religious/sacred spaces, and belief using a qualitative method of inquiry: interviews, documentation, and observations. These were then analyzed to answer the following research question: What makes a place sacred? The acronym PARTY (Personal experience, Architecture, Resources, Theology, and Years) is used to describe the findings of this research. PARTY represents the general themes and categories found in correlation to the research and analysis of religious spaces. The findings reveal sacredness is created by the memories people make in space, the type of experience someone has, and the history of the building.

Keywords

Sacred, Religion, Memories

1. Introduction

What makes a building sacred? What gives a space identity? What is the building environment and what is the behavior of those in the building? Gaining insight on these topics affords a base understanding with which to build.

The 'sacred' refers to those representations that are set apart from society or everyday life and revered due to an association with holiness which transcends understanding; the profane is everything else [5, 13, 7, 4, 14, 2, 1]. So, what makes a building sacred? Sources reveal several different options that could answer this question. The first was the "semiotic answer:

that buildings do not do anything. They have meaning because architects endow them with meaning and skilled observers can decipher it." [10]. The second was "the (orthodox) sociological answer, holds that buildings do not do anything, but users do something with buildings, and this may symbolize a worldview" [10].

The third definition refers to "a building, conceived as a building type, connects a building to differentiated spheres or functional systems; the designation of church links a building to the functional system of religion" [10]. This last definition

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was most applicable to our topic and would be the basis for how we would define a building's sacredness. This source further explained the previous definition by conducting a case study on a church turned library in Germany.

This library was in what was previously known as a Christian church to the community. The conversion from a religious space to a public, “multifunctional space” was rejected by some of the previous religious users of the church, and they would come in and sing which “enacts, through and with the space, a sacred atmosphere” [10]. A small sign outside of the building lets people know that there is a library inside but “the classical church form and the tower, which looms high over the skyline of the town” continues to identify the building as a sacred space [10]. This case study reveals that repurposing a building does not change its associated usage if the exterior looks like something commonly associated with a different type of use: such as churches or religious spaces. We also found sources that supported the idea of experience being enough to invoke the feeling of sacredness, like what the people singing in the library were doing; “The experience of the sacred vibrates the deepest parts of our being; it brings our realization of just how rich the music of our lives is. In my own life, those moments when my instrument has opened to the reverberations of the sacred stand almost as a different state of being from my more usual, narrower band of receptivity.” [9].

The second question, what gives a space identity? Identity is the qualities, beliefs, or ideas that make an individual feel as though they are different from the collective. Identity has a direct correlation to architecture with many buildings having specific spatial identities that separate them from the surrounding buildings.

This preliminary research enabled a definition of the environment and behavior in spaces. Environment is “the aggregate of social and cultural conditions that influence the life of an individual or community” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) [3]. Behavior is “the way in which something functions or operates” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) [8]. These definitions allowed for a deeper understanding of how spaces function in relation to the people using them.

2. Research Questions

Based upon our preliminary review, questions surfaced... “Does changing the usage of a space change its identity?” and “Why do sacred spaces exist?”. What gives a space identity? Do repurposed spaces get a new identity? Can a space's identity ever be fully changed? To what extent does a space's identity affect how it can be used? For the second question our supporting questions were; What is sacred? What is the difference between a place and a building? How does something being sacred affect a building/place? Does sacredness stem from the physical location? These supporting questions allowed us to see the full picture of what our research questions were trying to answer. Primarily, what effect does a space's

identity have on a space's purposes? What makes a place sacred/what makes a building sacred?

Within each of these overarching research questions a brainstorm session supported questions to help understand what would be found via our research.

3. Building Selection

After we had our research questions, we began the search for what building we would be using to collect data from. In our search for what building would fit the project, we had certain requirements that the building had to fulfill in order to qualify. These requirements established it had to be a building that is currently a religious space but was not originally designed for that purpose, or a building that has been repurposed into something but used to be a religious space. We were also looking for a building that was within easy travel distance to ensure that we would be able to physically visit it during the data collection period. In the end, two buildings fit within our requirements: the Scottish Rite Cathedral and the North Church Venue. Knowing we only wanted to pursue one of these options, background research on each building was conducted to determine which one we would pursue.

The North Church Venue is an event center that used to be known as the First Christian Church. The church was built in 1902 and abandoned in 2000. The history regarding exact usage and information regarding the attendees of the church are hard to come by and unknown on the internet. The majority of information about the building can be found post renovations of the North Church Venue.

The Scottish Rite Cathedral is a masonic temple built for freemason usage. The building is still currently used for this purpose, but it also hosts a multitude of different events and allows the building to be rented and used by non-mason members. The building was built in 1927 and cost \$2.5 million to build. This is one of the largest masonic buildings in the world and is the largest Scottish Rite. It has been described as one of the finest examples of Neo-Gothic architecture in the United States. The building has a rich history and a wealth of information to draw from.

Based on upon our initial research, we ended up deciding to choose the Scottish Rite Cathedral as the focus of our research. The main reason for this choice was a personal connection to the building and the more extensive history available compared to the North Church Venue.

4. Data Collection

We collected data on the Scottish Rite Cathedral through qualitative research. Our qualitative research was collected in three main ways: observations, interviews, and documents. We collected observations of the space in active and passive use: active use by attending an event held in the space and passive use by going on a private building tour when it was

empty. Interviews were conducted with the building operations manager, the executive director of the Scottish Rite, and several people in attendance to the event. We also conducted interviews with each other after each observation through memos, which helped us understand what our thoughts on each experience were. We collected documents from the building tour, such as pictures of important artifacts, floor plans, and interior spaces.

5. Observations

In February 2024, we were given a private tour of the building by the facilities manager. While walking through the building we listened to the personal experiences of our tour guide and a condensed history of the building. The Scottish Rite is a branch of freemasonry; freemasonry was created by the British and Scottish Rite was created by the French. The building has never been a church but rather a space for members to meet. The architect who designed the building, George F. Schreiber, had each aspect of the building fit intervals of 33; to symbolize the 33 years of Christ. All the ceilings were hand carved plaster and all the ornamentation on the walls was plaster mold. It only took 24 months from groundbreaking to finishing touches for the building to be finished.

The building used to be exclusive to members of the Scottish Rite, but due to a decrease in members and expensive operational costs, the building had to be let out to events and organizations to make money. They used to move furniture for members out of rooms for events to be held and move it back in after, but this caused the furniture to deteriorate over time; now these rooms sit empty, waiting for the next event. An interesting story he told us was about Taylor Swift crashing a wedding that was being held in the South Lounge. She saw the space and wanted to record a music video there, so she promised the couple that if they would move all their decorations out and let her record her video, she would sing at their wedding. Her video can now be found on YouTube.

In March 2024, we attended an event being held in the auditorium. This event was a Taylor Swift candlelight concert. Attending this allowed us to gain insight into how people treat the space and what it is like full of people. The event itself consisted of an ensemble of four orchestra players performing Taylor Swift songs while surrounded by candles. After this performance we were able to conduct several interviews with those in attendance to gain an outsider's view of the building and their experience in the space.

6. Interviews

6.1. Building Operations Manager

The first interview we conducted was with the building operations manager after the building tour. We started off by asking him what his history with the building was and how he

came to work there. He said “I am the third generation as a member. My grandfather joined in 59, my father joined when I was eight. Back in that day it was just for members and their wives (not really kid friendly). They did do a Christmas and Halloween event for the kids. I basically grew up here. I became a master mason in 85 but didn't join until 92. I became busy with my family, but I became active again in 2001. Then I became the head usher for the auditorium. I was also an officer here for 2 years. Then I became the facilities manager in August of 2017. Both of my boys also became [masters] and are now the 4th generation.”

We wanted to understand what this space meant to him, when we asked him, his response was “This is my life. My favorite place on earth to be at. For the membership to trust me to take care of it, it's my legacy. The bad part is I don't know all the members, but they all know me.”

During the building tour he had mentioned misuse of the building, such as couples sneaking off and people breaking the stained glass windows, and we asked what his thoughts were on things like that happening. He said “I wish the Scottish Rite had enough money to close it off to the public again. Keep the tours but close the rest. I guess I'm greedy. My father was able to have this space for himself. To non-masons this is just another building, we've had vandalisms, couples find spots to “have fun”, they don't respect the building. I wish I could pick and choose well-mannered people who would treat the building well. I wouldn't mind. I try to tell everyone that this is a living museum, people pay to take a tour, I don't want them to see a mess. It makes me feel like I'm not doing my part. Everyone here needs to be detail oriented.”

6.2. Taylor Swift Candlelight Concert Attendees

Three interviews were conducted after the Taylor Swift Candlelight Concert with people from varying age groups. We asked each person what their thoughts on the building were and what they thought about this event being held in a masonic temple. The first interview was conducted with an older woman, she said, “Beautiful, old building. They don't make buildings like that anymore. Chandeliers were pretty, beautiful building” and, “I think it was great for the old building with the small performance and candles.” The second interview was conducted with a younger female and she said, “The chairs were too squished, it was pretty, I guess. It looked old, it looked like it was about to crumble, too many people in a small area.” and “It was fine”. The final interview conducted with another young female, she said “It's beautiful, a little small. The woodwork was impressive. They don't make stuff like that anymore. I wonder how long this took.” and “It made me want to sneak through the halls and find all the secrets. The masons are secretive”. It was interesting to see how people in different stages of life viewed the event and building.

6.3. Executive Director of the Scottish Rite

After our interview with the building operations manager we asked if there was anyone, he knew that could give us further information on the building, he recommended his friend, the executive director of the Scottish Rite. We asked him the same questions as the facilities manager, his response to the first question was “My history with the building goes back to 1927 when the ground was broken. My grandmother married a gentleman who joined here and so they would be on the dance floor in the ballroom. I didn’t actually set foot in the building until I was a Junior in high school, a friend of mine was running for queen pageant for the Masonic Youth Organization. She was running the DeMolay Sweetheart, so we came up for a dance for that and it was the first time I had ever been to the building. Then I turned 21 I joined the Masonry and joined the Scottish Rite Immediately after that. I’ve worked in this building off and on since 2003 in membership and then was hired on as Executive Director in September 2022. My work background, I was in an old home restoration. I wasn’t flipping houses; I was restoring old historic buildings. So, this is kind of the pinnacle of all the historic buildings I’ve been in.”

When asked about his thoughts on the alternative uses of space he said “It’s a necessary evil. We use it to offset our dues, the amount we must pay in a year, and we get the revenue off it. But it’s one of those buildings that people look at behind the weather channel on the news when they’re showing the forecast and there’s a picture of the Scottish Rite Cathedral and everybody talks about what a beautiful church it is. As long as people are calling it a church, I think we need to open it up to people so that they know it’s a fraternal space. And so, when we do have large events like Penske when he hosts the pre-race and they have a big party and bring people from all over the world, it’s a necessary evil but getting people into the building and learning about it and seeing how beautiful it is, I’m all for that. You’d be surprised how many people come in and want to see the sanctuary. Well, there is no sanctuary but there is a nice auditorium.”

We also asked him if he considered the space sacred and his reply was “Absolutely. It’s the first and largest building in the US that was built for Scottish Rite Masonry. I mean just for the fraternity. It’s sacred and it’s been entrusted to us since 1927, and we have an endowment which helps keep the building up. To me, anytime something breaks or needs repair, we fix it. I don’t wait. It’s got to be fixed. And I’ve found that in my working years, it costs more money to fix something that breaks than it does to perform preventative measures. We’ve got over 4,000 members that call this building home, and we’ve got to keep their home looking nice. With all the symbolism and the icons of who we are, you know, it’s not a church but I believe it should be considered just as sacred.”

6.4. Memos

We each did memos about what our personal thoughts and

experiences were in space. We each answered three questions; What were your thoughts on the experience? How would you define the sacredness of this space? What were your thoughts on the misuse of the space?

Hays answered the first question with “My high school prom was held in the ballroom this past April 2023. During the tour, it was interesting to see the Cathedral in a new way, but also to gather info on how certain individuals felt about how the space was used. In a sense, I almost felt ashamed that a place so sacred to a group could be used as a dance floor for high school students. On the other hand, the venue was treated with respect by my fellow students and me. But it was very neat to see how the space is used for the Masons, and I loved getting a “behind the scenes” look at the bell tower and pipe organ.” Purdue answered the first question with “I had never been to this place before, so it was interesting to go from knowing nothing about it to getting the insider scoop immediately. I would say I had the non-traditional experience by getting to go places and learning things that most people don’t know about. I thought a lot about what he said about growing up in this space and it made me reminisce about the church I grew up in as a child and how much it has changed today. I felt like I could see through his memories and imagine all the different things he was describing that are now long gone. It made me wish I could have seen it back in its prime.”

Hays answered the second question by saying “As stated in our interview with [the building operations manager], this building is the entire life to certain people. And to obstruct that is to harm the purpose of someone’s livelihood. The history of the Cathedral is everywhere. It’s in the limestone carvings outside, in the Roman marble columns, and the steel bells that make up the carillon. But the true sacredness lies in the people who care about the building on a level deeper than outsiders may understand.” Purdue said “I would define the sacredness of this space as something that is fueled by memories. The idea of what used to be in this space when it was in its prime had a strong emotional tie to Dale Wheatley and that influenced how I viewed it. I feel like these memories are tied to the experience that he had as a child and the feeling of something greater than himself. I think other people can also experience that sacred feeling without firsthand experience. The building’s architecture is very intricate and makes you feel small. With it being as empty as it was when we toured it, I felt like the building itself was a sacred, quiet place to be in. I know that there will be and have been many occurrences where the building is full of people and loud and I think this is where the sacredness from experiencing something comes from. Something special, like candlelight concerts, or children’s holiday events have the ability to impose a unique memory onto someone and cause them to reminisce. I think this causes something like a pause in time when you think back on your memory and find it to be something that you treasure, something sacred to who you are.”

For the final question, Hays responded “Unfortunately, due to lack of proper funding, building officials were forced to

open to the public as a rentable venue. While those individuals provide the funding needed to remain open, there are also the drawbacks of those who might not use the space properly. A place might not mean anything to you, but it is everything to someone. To disrupt that peace would be a major transgression. In our interview with the building manager, he expressed concern about weddings specifically, talking about how certain people just don't respect the history and integrity of the space. It's an unfortunate game, because the pros and cons of the situation just create an environment that's not ideal for the building and its history." Purdue's response was "Personally, I think that while it is unfortunate that people misuse the space and cause harm to the building, that is just another way for people to make memories in the space. He mentioned that over the years furniture has caused the building to be chipped and things to be broken and he wished that things could just stay clean and well put together like they had been at the start. I disagree with this. I think chips and cracks are a sign of a building that's been lived in, that's had humans occupy it. Perhaps the window being broken was done by friends who were messing around. While what they did was wrong and they shouldn't have done it, that action now forever connects them to the building. They could think back fondly on their memory one day and think about the crazy things they did as kids (this is just an example). This goes the same for the couples who have found dark corners together. I understand the need to keep the place pristine and maintained but I think some of the less ideal uses of the space give it history and add to the character of the building."

Hays also completed a memo focused on his experience with his high school prom. He answered what his initial thoughts of the building were back then as "It was breathtaking. My friends and I took a limo to prom so when we arrived it kind of felt like royalty. It was nice to have that escape for the night. We were only allowed in the main hall and the Ballroom, but what I remembered most was the beautiful wood detailing and chandelier.". He compared that experience to his experience with talking to the building manager and how his thought process had changed; "I have a lot more sensitivity to the sacredness of the building. I now understand that this building is quite literally the life of certain individuals, and to infringe upon that is wildly disrespectful. With that said, I understand that the building needs to include rentable space in order to remain open, but the occupants should understand the sacredness of the space."

Purdue did a memo after the Taylor Swift event and compared the experience of that to the experience of the private tour; "I felt like I saw the building come to life when it was filled with people. During the tour I only had the memories of our guide and my imagination to fill the space. Seeing everyone there changed how the building felt. I saw the things he spoke about regarding people not respecting space. Some people were putting their feet up on the chairs in front of them, using their flash to take pictures, talking through the performance, coming and going during the performance, and several

other distractions that took me out of the moment. After the lights were turned off and the concert started, it lost its sense of sacredness. It started to feel more like a random concert hall typical to this type of performance."

7. Documents

We collected a variety of documents during our research and tour of the building. During the research of the building, we visited the building archives in Ball State's College of Architecture and Planning and found a file containing some information on the Scottish Rite Cathedral. The file had a book and several pamphlets that we documented photos of and stored away for future reference if needed. We also took photos of the building during the tour and saw historical artifacts of the building, like the tools used for the ground-breaking and the original blueprints the architect created, which were useful for our supplementary visuals during our presentation.

8. Data Analysis and Findings

To begin data analysis of our qualitative research, we first identified the common themes found throughout each method of research. We compiled all these words into a list, which is as follows: history, memories, personal experience, architecture, building usage, familiarity, detail, construction, stonework, music and theatre, Freemasons, sacredness, money, connections, emotions, respect, light, ancestry, craftsmanship, and beauty. From there, we found commonalities between the categories and narrowed them down to a more cohesive and readable acronym.

Using a grounded theory level of analysis, we were able to come up with five main categories to represent our research. These categories were then fit together into the acronym PARTY, so as to tie back to the prom theme of the research. "P" stands for personal experience, and this, we feel, is one of the most important identifiers of religious spaces in general. The memories that live on through generations are testaments of belief, and the building that those memories are held can be a large indicator. The "A" stands for Architecture. The field of Architecture is important to include because it is how people visually recognize and perceive a space, therefore affirming the distinction of religious spaces. "R" stands for the resources that are needed to maintain these buildings that mean so much to groups of people. Much like the Scottish Rite Cathedral, which currently must rely on the funding of outside reservations of the building, and many others who have also fallen onto difficult times. It is important to recognize the significance behind these buildings, so that they may last for generations to come. The "T" in PARTY stands for Theology. It is imperative to note the actual faith that makes up sacred spaces. The Scottish Rite Masons are a fraternity, but it delves deeper into belief systems and specifically focuses on the

relationship with God. Finally, the “Y” stands for years. To tie into “P” or personal experience, you must acknowledge the history. The Scottish Rite Cathedral contains over a hundred years of history itself, with the brotherhood dating back even further. It is important to remember those who came before you and learn from their wisdom, a teaching of the Scottish Rite that is applicable in every aspect of life.

9. Conclusion

Based upon our research, we have found that the answer to our research questions (What effect does a spaces identity have on a spaces purpose? What makes a place sacred/what makes a building sacred?) is that the sacredness of a space is determined by personal experience and memories related to your experiences in a space. Significance of these places can be due to the qualities of the place or “place-centered sacredness” or due to persons or “person-centered sacredness” [6]. Sacredness is something that is determined both by the individual and by the collective (churches being considered sacred because they are churches, as decided by the collective, but an event happening inside the building being considered sacred based off an individual's personal experience and beliefs). Architecture references something beyond the built form. McNamara [12] says, “Architecture is the built form of ideas, and church architecture is the built form of theology”.

Seen within this case study, the built form can be a reflection of the culture, and can evolve through transitions and evolutions. Human beings attached meaning to built environments and can differ based on the varying groups that occupy the space. Architecture can serve as, “reflections of the spiritual narratives embraced by particular [religious] groups” [15]. Therefore, sacredness can be found everywhere and within any experience, one just must be willing to live and reflect.

Abbreviations

US United States

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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