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Transcendence and Interiority in Architecture

A study of Hagia Sofia, 532-537

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The late historian Robin Evans, takes up the debate symbolised between Wölfflin, proposing that meaning is directly accessible through the form of a building, and Wittkower, arguing that meaning lies behind the form of architecture, in other texts and ideas. The focus of their argument is the centralised church of the Renaissance, which holds a special place in the history of architecture for all three historians. Evans' argument makes detours into the histories of theology, geometry and mathematics attempting to find how architecture participates with these fields. He concludes that architecture, in its singular artistic physicality "suspends our disbelief in the ideal", offering a world that does not reflect culture, in all its fullness, but rather supplements culture's incompleteness. Architecture, like art is able to resolve that which in society and in other fields remains a contradiction, giving a picture (albeit fictional) of a harmonious and unified order. Does architecture aspire towards transcendence, if so, what is transcendental value in architecture? In this essay I want to turn to Hagia Sofia (Istanbul, 532-537), a church that marks the beginning of a Christian empire relocated to the East of Rome, in Constantinople, built one thousand years before the Renaissance churches; and a building that symbolises the shift towards a domed centralised form, away from a basilica form. Hagia Sofia is an architecture, observed and described in an almost devotional manner, as though addressing the architecture of the church is equivalent to a pious person addressing the church itself, and more significantly, addressing the Divine figure of God, through the architecture of the church. What role does Hagia Sofia play in the kind of artistic mastery that Evans is proposing?

Descriptions of art and architecture have been accompanied by mysticism and a sense of exaltation, and in some of the very best examples, the critic becomes a medium for transmitting the transcendental value of the work. In western architectural history, devotional and reverend descriptions of churches are elaborated in a manner as if addressing the architecture of the church is equivalent to a pious person addressing the church itself, and more significantly, addressing the Divine figure of God, through the architecture of the church. The Hagia Sofia, regarded as one of the greatest buildings in the history of western architecture, is approached in this way. Historians¹ refer to Procopius of Caesura, the court historian of the Emperor Justinian, who devoted a whole volume, *De aedificiis* (*Buildings*) to documenting the vast scale of building in the period between 527 and 568. Procopius states of Hagia Sofia:

Indeed one might say that its interior is not illuminated from without by the sun, but that the radiance comes into being within it, such an abundance of light bathes this shrine... [the dome] seems not to rest upon solid masonry, but to cover the space with its golden domes suspended from Heaven... ... And whenever anyone enters this church to pray, he understands at once that it is not by any human power of skill, but by the influence of God, that this

*work has been so finely turned.*²

*... and so his mind is lifted up toward God and exalted, feeling that He cannot be far away, but must especially love to dwell in this place which He has chosen.*³

The characteristics which have defined Hagia Sofia are evident from the beginning: light as a presence and as an architectural condition within the building; the lightness of the building and its defiance of gravity; an indescribable beauty that is often associated with an intervention of divine mastery; a place not only for human habitation but one in which God, the divine can dwell. Present day historians also speak a language mesmerised by the interior so much so, that the question, "what gives architecture in general and in particular this building such transcendental value" might be further examined.⁴

Historians have examined the centrality of Hagia Sofia and the deviation from the basilica form at the time. Centrality, Evans states is a defining property and can go unstudied. In chapter 1, 'Perturbed Circles' of *The Projective Cast*, Robin Evans presents a study of the centralised churches of the Renaissance, departing from a comparison between the work of architectural historians, Wittkower, who argues that meaning lay behind the form of architecture, and Wölfflin, who proposes a formalist argument that

meaning was directly accessible through the form of the building.⁵ The question of the centre of a centralised church is elaborated through a drawing of a plan and a section (and photograph) on which are located, not one, but nine possible centres of the church of Sant 'Eligio degli Orefici (Raphael Sanzio, Rome, 1509).⁶ Interwoven with this pursuit is the idea of centrality as an ideal form (in mathematics) and as a real form (in architecture). Evans firstly investigates geometry in the field of abstract mathematics; followed by geometry within Christianity, its symbols, rituals and pictorial representation; and thirdly, geometry in the field of physics, astronomy, and astrology. Through each of these detours away from a strict focus on architecture, Evans provides a complex and multifaceted picture of the times in which the centralised church was explored, and yet each detour takes him back to the place of architecture, highlighting architecture's singularity and autonomous properties, not because it avoided participation with the ideas pursued in other fields, but because these ideas pursued in several fields at once, were given a particular shape in architecture. Evans concludes that "Neither geometry, nor cosmology, nor theology could, in the event, turn ideal forms and relations into plausible models of reality without embarrassing contradictions," and that only in central churches was it possible to achieve this.⁷

Is this a placing of architecture as the 'transcendental threshold' for culture, for religion, and the pure sciences? Architecture, like the other arts, Evans argues, resolves the contradictions of society unable to be resolved outside art, not by reflecting "a culture in all its fullness," but by "supplementing culture's incompleteness with a compensating image."⁸ Evans is resisting the haze that accompanies our retrospective image of the Renaissance or Justinian's early Christian Empire as untroubled and coherent compared to a present modern environment explicit of its uncertainty and fragmentation, and turns around the historical tendency that perceives architecture as reflecting society. Thus these buildings are not 'transcendental' because they are from a mythical past, but because they were able to balance the uncertainties and the disharmonious conditions of their time and culture. The association made between architecture and art in the place of 'transcendental threshold', albeit in a footnote to the main text of the chapter, is of particular importance, and opens Evans' argument to other fields of enquiry. Briefly, I want to note the theories of Julia Kristeva, proposing that the poetic text (as exemplary of artistic practice) is the process in which "the semiotic enters the symbolic."⁹ Kristeva's semiotic defines the primary processes associated with earliest childhood and drives of life and death and the symbolic is the world of codified language, signs and law and order. The artist's process is potentially one of sublimation as s/he enters a process of the field of repressions (and the repressive aspects of culture) and yet can become a transformation of the unconscious. Kristeva does not claim that art is a form of salvation, but that artistic practice is important in its role to counteract effects of repressive states, and that in history

"artistic revolutions are tantamount to social revolutions."¹⁰ The individual artist's process of sublimation becomes associated with the potential transcendental value of the art or architecture.

According to Evans this is not achieved because architecture partakes in a transcendental mysticism, expressing belief in an ideal or an ideology, but through a "suspension of our disbelief in the ideal."¹¹ The complexity of this statement is restrained by its own poetics and subtlety—Evans is suggesting that people do not believe in an ideal and perhaps know that such an objective is an illusion and is false. But art, elaborated by Kristeva, can offer a "harmonization of the crisis", a relative response to what the artist may perceive as untruths.¹² Unlike ideologies (like God, empires or bourgeois democracies) that tempt with absolute shelter and escape, art is a momentary suspension of the crisis. It achieves this through its awareness of the crisis in the first place.

In the best of examples, architecture is able to suspend our disbelief in an ideal. Evans states that such a moment is fictional, not in the sense of a lie or to restore social order, but "as a numinous diffusion of all power."¹³ Evans is referring to the ability of the centralised churches to transcend the representation of the social and religious hierarchies on which they are founded, but also perceived in his text, is transcendence within the orders of architecture. Centralised geometries and deadweight of materials might just as easily have reinstated the hierarchies, and it is the particular 'artistry' of the architecture that has tended towards 'diffusion'. In this sense, architecture does not aspire towards dissolution of its materiality, but through the complexity of transcribing the geometries of pure circles and spheres into structure, ornament, spatial order, interior and exterior articulation, architecture operates at levels of physicality that interweave symbolisation and pure knowledge. The conflictual relationship between the real and the ideal is thus held in balance in architecture through its particular materiality.

Recognition of this particular nature of architecture, restores an autonomy and uniqueness to its purpose, architecture is thus not inadequate or less pure in relation to other fields. In response to Wittkower and Wölfflin, Evans is arguing that the making of architecture involves engagement with the ideas, and ideologies or critique thereof, of the times (in support of the Wittkower), and that architecture is not limited to a transliteration of these from other fields (in support of the Wölfflin), a careful ambiguity of meaning that offers an alternative way of seeing architecture.

Some characteristics of the architecture of the Hagia Sofia are well detailed and described by other historians. Here I try to draw out the significance of these details. The shape of the building, which oriented the classical basilica with longitudinal axis towards a centralised form, is evident in the plan. Yet the plan of Hagia Sofia does not make this

shift clear cut, resulting in an ambiguity that is noted but not further pursued by these historians. My thesis is that the perception that Hagia Sofia is a centralised building results from complex architectural projections in three dimensions as well as in plan. Peculiar upwardly directed photographs of Hagia Sofia in Kostof and Mango give image to the importance of its three dimensional quality.¹⁴ The large-scale central dome some 50m above the floor, is surmounted on a square not a circular base and perceived as an engineering feat, especially as its structural capacity had failed the first time.¹⁵ Not only was the dome supported on pendentives, which are able to transfer the load from a circular to a square form for the first time known at this scale, but also the square space below opens out onto further spaces. On the east and west, the space flows uninterruptedly into the area beneath the two huge semi-domes, above the lower semi-circular apses on the east. On the north and south sides, two storey screens of marble columns carrying arches allow the space to permeate and billow into a circular form. The structure of the building requires rationality in geometry and resolution in materials and construction, and yet the structure does not make itself explicit. Rather than cast their gaze on structural logic or tectonic order, the eyes become more like sensory instruments that are led by an aesthetic order. Structural innovation was the result of other ambitions rather than something in its own right. In all descriptions, the light—as “myriad shafts of light,”¹⁶ or as the “flickering contrast of light and shade,”¹⁷ becomes the veil which further masks the extent of the form, the structure or the shape of the space, producing a layered mystery and poetic ambiguity.¹⁸

In a similar way that centrality might go unstudied, because it is a defining property, so might interiority in architecture. Evans's examination and analysis of the Renaissance centralised churches was circumscribed by their interiors. But where does the focus on the interior of architecture come from? Watkins proposes that the Pantheon stands mid way both chronologically and stylistically between the Parthenon, a building that is virtually all exterior, and the Hagia Sofia, where the exterior is merely the inside-out of the interior.¹⁹ My thesis is that Hagia Sofia is noted as a great building because it is pivotal to a turn towards the interior of architecture, offering Western architectural history interiority as the site of architectural expression and manifestation. Hagia Sofia offers an exemplary interiority. The obstruction and dismantling of the approach through a great court on the western side of the church, and its monumental western façade of Proconnesian marble has further undermined the place of the exterior of the building.²⁰ The magnificence of the interior makes the exterior, with all its additions, repairs and odd rendering, appear as something of an afterthought. The exterior is a shell that accommodates the creative effects of the interior, an outcome of all its centrifugal and centripetal forces. Kostof, aligned with Wittkower, describes this divergence from the Classical in symbolic terms, “we are now in the realm of what modern philosophers will call the *sublime*.”²¹ Kostof is taken aback by the aesthetic order

of Hagia Sofia. Kostof's use of the *sublime*, a term used in architecture in the 18th century to describe the terror and awe aroused, and the limitless magnitude and greatness, associated with the work of Ledoux and Boullée. It reveals the struggle faced by historians, to ‘place’ Hagia Sofia within the dominant narratives of Western architecture, which divides a strict classicism of antiquity and the Renaissance from everything else. It misses the architectural unity of Hagia Sofia—a ‘multiplicity into unity’ to paraphrase Evans—in which multiple balances of columns (sometimes outside a strict classicism) and multiple centres and classical symmetries, produce atmospheric affects beyond the classicism of ancient Greece and Rome, in a way not dissimilar to the centralised churches of the Renaissance.²² It assumes that the architecture of Hagia Sofia is not concerned with a ‘classical’ grace and beauty, and misplaces the architecture historically. The earlier Sts. Sergius and Bacchus (527 – 536) can be seen as a precursor to Hagia Sofia, architecturally rather than historically, in the way that the former, infinitely smaller church, “produces a sense of noble spaciousness inside.”²³ A similar aesthetic agenda that defies the interior of its finite edge, and opens the central space beyond its expected perimeter is observed in this church.²⁴ Significant ‘tell-tale’ details are symptomatic that tectonic articulation was no longer the prime aesthetic order.²⁵

The renewed focus on interiority through the architecture of Hagia Sofia is specifically a focus on ‘space’, the stuff between the walls, between the structures, the inside of the dome. This notion of space does not imply that ‘space’ did not exist in architecture prior to Hagia Sofia, but that the focus of the architecture was on space, rather than on form, or the rationality of structure, or even the interior as interior ornamentation. All these other dimensions of architecture were in the service of the creation and production of the ‘space’. Space might be more readily envisaged as the negative emptiness between forms, structures, and walls. Here it is rendered positive, it is an imaginary three-dimensional matter of varying intensity, around which the domes, colonnades, apses, and walls are placed, almost like a circumscription of the surface of the internal matter of space. ‘Matter of space’ is to suggest that the space is like ether, not merely thin air, not invisible void, and has substantiality about it.

Further, the interior of Hagia Sofia is not only a formal focus on space as projection of abstract geometry but manifests an exploration of space, or what might be called ‘spatiality’. Descriptions of Hagia Sofia are infinitely attentive of its mystery, as though the rationality of its structure and the order of its geometry are concealed by a veil, or as I am suggesting another order of architecture. This is the order of spatiality; less studied and subtler than the orders of form or structure. Here we might find the many centres that Evans has identified in the centralised churches of the Renaissance—at least four in the ground floor plan can be identified, and four directly above the projected centre of the dome. Through multiple centres, Evans argued, the

architecture of the churches holds together contradictions between the ideal of geometry and the literalness of the structure. The scope of the architecture is its capacity to transcend the limitations of each—to exceed the limits of pragmatic structures (in effect rather than technology) and to avoid the totalisation of pure geometry. It is in this sense that architecture can act as a threshold for transcendence. Points of centrality also measure the complex orders of spatiality. Precisely the identification of several points in the vertical and horizontal plane is what demonstrates the so-called ambiguity of Hagia Sofia, but like the centralised churches of the Renaissance, it is also what indicates that Hagia Sofia is an architecture of harmony, poise, and unified order, rather than an architecture of confusion or fragmentation. Hagia Sofia is designed around centres and symmetries; that there are several significant ones and many others, contributes to the transcendental affect on the observer.

Many of the Justinian architects got their training on the Persian front where military defensive architecture was prevalent, and this is one reason for their more experimental bold forms, and their predilection for Eastern forms, suggests Mango.²⁶ The question about Hagia Sofia as an architecture that has an ambivalent place in Western history is one that recurs implicitly through its historical studies. The idea of a circular dome on a square base may have come from Persia, though it had not been used on the scale of Hagia Sofia. The architects, Anthemios of Tralles (an eccentric and famous mathematician) and Isidorus of Miletus (a highly skilled scientist), are not trained in the classical principles of architecture. While historians praise the architects for their precision in laying out the complex plan, and marvel at the unprecedented domed structure, which not even skilled Byzantine architects could have calculated, they tend to cringe when this also affects a “disregard for ‘classical’ norms that pervades” the building, and when “within the broad design guidelines of the overall design, there is endless variation and improvisation—at times even sloppiness.”²⁷ For example Mango has noted that there are six columns in the gallery and only four on the ground level of the north-south screen. However, Mango does not elaborate on what constitutes this deviation: the overall dimensions of the opening lines up between the gallery and ground level; the central opening is aligned on all three levels, including the window in the tympanum, giving more an effect of receding scale associated with fractal geometry rather than a classical order of antiquity. If we appreciate and understand the spatial agenda of the interior, to articulate a strict classical tectonic and structural order to the north-south wall would have undermined the centralisation of the church, and emphasised an east-west basilica axis.

Many of the ‘deviations’ from the classical orders are details by which the architecture re-balances the otherwise predominant east-west basilica style axis, and this is especially evident in the colonnaded screens allowing space to flow north-south, circumscribing a more circular plan, generating a plan that tends towards circularity

and centrality. Openings in the western narthex entry are not aligned to avoid delineating the east-west axis. Predominant pendentives counteract the difference between the large semi-domes to the east and west, and the north and south tympanum walls. The three smaller apses cascading below the large east half dome, two placed on the diagonal, reinforce centrality. Detailing like the capitals or the golden mosaics (even in their diminished state) emphasise surface, texture and fabric, extenuating the continuity of space, and avoid expressing an architectonics of structure, as if this were to make explicit the points of disconnection.

The people of the Roman world, looking for a deeper faith had often found themselves beckoned by strange cults from the East and Christianity was such a new mystery cult.²⁸ Like Mithraism (derived from Zarathustra), it went towards the interior, in the former, converting the interior of private houses, and in the latter in caves.²⁹ Christianity had engendered interiority with a new meaning, associated with the interior of the self now linked to the soul. Christianity had become the new official religion of the Roman Empire, in Constantinople, its Eastern capital. Hagia Sofia offered a new notion of sacredness through the tangible symbol of the Dome of Heaven, an image of the ideal universe unified under a magnificent dome.³⁰ While the dome envelopes the church, light radiates as if from the dome itself, producing an interior that is an enclosure and yet also an expansion of space, thereby ‘resolving architecturally’ the dilemma between envelopment and emanation in Christian theology.³¹ Altogether, the circumstances and context surrounding Hagia Sofia point to a ‘classical architecture’ that borrows from Eastern traditions, removed from a Western Empire centred in Rome. While late Roman examples of interiority such as the Caracalla (212–216)³² preceded and might have influenced the design of the Hagia Sofia, like the Pantheon, these are edifices that are about weight and thick masonry walls from which spaces are scooped out. The image in Hagia Sofia is an expansion of space from the inside outwards; so much so that the whole structure from the outside appears it is about to burst.

Significant to the development in Hagia Sofia is a unique symbolisation of Christianity as it enters a world stage—the balance between a longitudinal basilica axis and a centralised plan is further universalised by a vertical axis towards the dome of heaven. This combination and subtle poise remains significant to Byzantine churches to the present day.³³ It is perplexing that Mango, among other historians, has pointed to the ‘singularity’ of Hagia Sophia, stating that it had no antecedents, but also no following descendents, until the Ottoman mosques of the sixteenth century.³⁴ Questions about exchanges between East and West, beyond the scope of this paper, surface. The centralised plan of San Vitale in Ravenna (534–545) also belonging to Justinian’s Christian Eastern Roman Empire³⁵ perhaps exemplifies this exchange as precedent in the West. Historians point out that the central plan was an exception in Byzantine architecture, and yet more often

the examples illustrated are either centralised or a hybrid such as Hagia Sofia. The representation of Hagia Sofia as singular and 'difficult to classify' is symptomatic of a much larger problematic inherent in the western narrative in which exchanges or influence on the West from the East are rarely explored.³⁶

Hagia Sofia is either too fantastic or it does not measure up to the classical orders. Kostof elaborates that the immensity of this architecture meant, "individuals count for nothing," unlike in classical buildings where "the architecture is an extension of our limbs."³⁷ The balance and harmony within Hagia Sofia is not made visible through structure and elements (limbs) but through space and permeation (skin, depth and air), not an anthropomorphic metaphor, but an embodiment of space. Through an ontological projection and a sense of being. If Hagia Sofia is recognised as a great building it is because the architecture is able to induce an equal dose of ultimate humility and extensive capacity, and thereby diffuse all hierarchies and powers. The interior of Hagia Sofia does not place the 'individual' or 'man' at the centre of its objective, a question that is central to the ideal and ideology of classicism. The Renaissance centralised churches bought back the question of 'man' or God at the centre, and architects struggled with this tension through transcriptions of ideal geometry.³⁸ The multiple centres of Hagia Sofia, like the centralised churches of the Renaissance (a millennium later), have the same objective to suspend this moment of crisis and conflict. The challenges for Hagia Sofia included the representation (and hierarchies) of the (new) Christian empire with its capital in Constantinople, and within architecture, the conflict between the preceding basilica plan and a dome of heaven.

The spatial interior of Hagia Sofia becomes a medium of devotion between self and other.³⁹ In this sense, the architecture of Hagia Sofia brings into appearance a transcendence that becomes mediation between individuals, a fictional moment, as Evans has stated, in which all power, authority and division that went into producing the church is diffused.

NOTES

1 A central question of this paper is the place of Hagia Sofia in architectural history in general, and for this I look at Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture: Settings and rituals*, 2nd ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1995; David Watkins, *A History of Western Architecture*, London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1986; and Banister Fletcher, *A History of Architecture*, 18th ed., New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975, as historians of architecture in general. Cyril Mango, *Byzantine Architecture*, New York: Rizzoli, 1978, is recognised as a historian specifically of Byzantine architecture.

2 Watkins, *A History of Western Architecture*, p. 78.

3 Kostof, *History of Architecture*, p. 264.

4 This paper is part of a larger study that examines what is transcendental about a small contemporary church of vernacular Byzantine form, in Zavoj, a village in the Republic of Macedonia, there returning to the history of the Byzantine centralised church and its influences on that region.

5 Robin Evans, *The Projective Cast: Architecture and its three geometries*, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1995.

6 Evans, *The Projective Cast*, p. 10.

7 Evans, *The Projective Cast*, p. 43.

8 Evans, *The Projective Cast*, p. 44.

9 Julia Kristeva, *Julia Kristeva Interviews*, edited by Ross Mitchell Guberman, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 211.

10 Kristeva, *Julia Kristeva Interviews*, p. 211.

11 The architects have more likely suspended their disbelief in the ideal when producing these churches, unlike the historians who are more gullible about causal relations, Evans suggests in *The Projective Cast* (p. 43).

12 Kristeva, *Julia Kristeva Interviews*, p. 215.

13 Evans, *The Projective Cast*, p. 377.

14 Kostof, *History of Architecture*, facing p. 245; Mango, *Byzantine Architecture*, fig. 88.

15 The original dome was some 20 ft. lower than the present dome, and 6.5 ft. wider from north to south.—Mango, *Byzantine Architecture*, p. 61.

16 Kostof, *History of Architecture*, p. 264.

17 Watkins, *A History of Western Architecture*, p. 77.

18 Mango, *Byzantine Architecture*, p. 64.

19 Watkins, *A History of Western Architecture*, p. 77.

20 Mango, *Byzantine Architecture*, p. 68.

21 Kostof, *History of Architecture*, p. 264 (his italics).

22 Antony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, rev. 2nd ed., New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979.

23 Mango, *Byzantine Architecture*, p. 59.

24 Mango, *Byzantine Architecture*, p. 59.

25 Mango as above meeting of dome/octagon avoid overhang

26 Mango, *Byzantine Architecture*, p. 57.

27 Mango, *Byzantine Architecture*, p. 65.

28 Kostof, *History of Architecture*, p. 247.

29 Kostof, *History of Architecture*, p. 249. Death in Christianity was ritualised through 'sleeping places'—cemeteries—as cremation was out of the question, and in some cities with limited open-air space, Christians followed pagan and Jewish precedent and went underground for their dead.

30 Kostof, *History of Architecture*, p. 264.

31 Evans, *The Projective Cast*, p. 23.

32 Kostof, *History of Architecture*, p. 252.

33 See St. Sofia, St. Kliment, and St. Jovan, Kaneo, all in Ohrid, Republic of Macedonia. See also Aneta Serafimova, 'The Middle Ages', in *Macedonia: Cultural Heritage*, Skopje: Misa, 1995. Krym Tomovski, *Srednovekovnata Arhitektura, Umetnichkoto Bogatstvo na Makedonija*, Skopje: Makedonska Kniga, 1984.

34 Mango, *Byzantine Architecture*, p. 61.

35 Confusion over when the Byzantine period begins is evident in many architectural histories. The more pragmatic Banister Fletcher places Hagia Sofia within the Byzantine period, as a part of Byzantium and the move to Constantinople as the new capital of the Roman Empire in 330. See Fletcher, *A History of Architecture*, p.371.

36 The volatility of the history between the East and West (within Christianity) may have influenced this 'black spot' of western history.

37 Kostof, *History of Architecture*, p. 264.

38 A sketch by Leonardo da Vinci, 'Place for Preaching', offers an ironic representation of 'both' God and man at the centre.—Evans, *The Projective Cast*, p. 12.

39 This may suit the Christian doctrine that God resides in each individual, and that the objective of the church is to enable each individual to see God (in the other individual, and through that extension, in one self). Its effect goes beyond Christianity, as is evident in its influence on Islamic architecture.