Sacred Environments

It may seem unusual to introduce the sacred into a discussion of aesthetics. The one presumably deals with ultimacies and the other with appearances, although a certain resemblance between religious and aesthetic experience has occasionally been remarked on. Perhaps it is more plausible to consider the sacred when exploring aesthetic values in environment, for every culture consecrates certain places, such as houses of worship, tombs, and, by extension, national monuments and memorial buildings. Even so, sacred seems an unlikely term to apply to environment, for an environment is less a place than a situation, less a location than a context. Convention, however, has no monopoly on meaning but rests only on general agreement about the significance of a term, when such agreement exists. And the authority of convention depends only on the extent of agreement, not truth. Given the approach to environment that this book has developed, it is not surprising to suggest that, convention notwithstanding, such notions require rethinking—environment no less than place, sacred no less than aesthetic.

To the extent that a philosophical inquiry can be empirical, let us begin by considering four cases, each representing a particular type of sacred environment. Together they provide the grounds for a more general understanding of the environmental experience and meaning of the sacred.

FOUR SACRED ENVIRONMENTS

The first of these sacred environments centers on an object, in this case Brancusi's *Endless Column*, a large outdoor sculpture in Tîrgu Jiu, Romania. Set in a circular grass plaza, the column
I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.²

What makes the view from Jefferson Rock so extraordinary is not any sense of power that comes from dominating the scene, such as the feeling mountain climbers report on achieving a summit. It is rather the awareness of being at the heart of an immense space and the source of its coherence. One stands at the center of a world that radiates outward. Although at a great height, the viewer is not above and beyond the scene but part of an immense universe that he or she orders and is enfolded within. Instead of feeling pride at so powerful a position, the viewer is characteristically overtaken by a deep sense of humility. Perhaps this comes from being encompassed by such greatness, perhaps from recognizing how small and vulnerable one truly is. In this form of sacred environment, the human presence creates and orders space on a cosmic scale, while at the same time being dependent on and integrated in it, as, on the microcosmic level, a nucleus is in its cell.

The final kind of sacred environment does not involve a relation with a particular object or place but centers on an experience of a dynamic and integrative character. This form of sacredness is perhaps more modest than the others, and its occasions may be more familiar and common: strolling through a Japanese garden, paddling down a quiet stream, walking along an unfamiliar woodland trail rich in detail, perhaps even driving at a leisurely rate along a scenic country road in the first green of spring. An evocative landscape, rich with interest and detail, may be absorbing but is still incomplete; it requires our thoughts, associations, knowledge, and responses. If an active interpenetration of person and place develops, a fusion may emerge that depends on our personal contribution, on how we activate the environment by engaging with its features and bringing them into meaningful juxtaposition with our memories and associations. When this fusion occurs with focus and intensity, the experience may acquire the peculiar yet charmed humility we associate with the sacred. And because its quality lies in an extraordinary experience rather than an extraordinary place, this type of experience leads us to find the sacred in many environmental situations. But what is it that makes them sacred?

**WHAT MAKES AN ENVIRONMENT SACRED?**

Although it is useful to identify these different types of sacred environments—and there are surely others—it is important to recognize that they refer not to kinds of places but rather to different settings of experience. They make it clear that these places, without a human presence, are neither sacred nor even environments, for an environment results from a joining of person and place. Nor is the experience of such an environment simply an internal occurrence. Rather, such places succeed because they encourage active physical and perceptual engagement. Is there anything common to these kinds of environments that leads us to find them sacred?

A characteristic that appears both in the experience of art and in sacred environments is the sense that the occasion has a distinct and special significance that makes it unique. One is centered, perceiving things with enhanced acuteness and concentration. This is sometimes described as a magical moment in which the world becomes intensely vivid. One experiences such a close personal relation to the place that one’s thoughts, attention, body, and senses are intimately engaged. A powerful feeling of connectedness displaces the protective distance we usually impose between ourselves and the places we encounter, a distance not only physical but psychological. This distance is sometimes cultivated in art as the “psychical distance” that is thought necessary for appreciation, but in art as in environment, it sacrifices the direct bond of
engagement in order to focus on an object. Moreover, it is a false exchange, since perceiver and object are not discrete and separate but mutually supportive. Particularly in environment, one has the sense of being taken up, of being immersed in the situation, engaged in a total, binding condition. And at its most intense, such a situation evokes an aura of reverence. The very air seems hushed and charged; the environment has become sacred. This condition has a curious corollary in the transformation that takes place in the self. The sense of being disparate and detached diminishes and even vanishes, and the participant becomes inseparable from the place and the occasion.

Although we can consider the sacred from the standpoint of the participant’s experience, we can also approach it from the conditions of such experience. Many features characterize a sacred environment, especially the strong sense of value that pervades the situation. Sometimes the historical significance of a place may put one in a reflective, reverential mood, receptive to associations with earlier personages, inhabitants, or events whose aura still lingers. The features of the place, indeed its very ground, possess a sense of importance, a preciousness in themselves. We experience the space as charged, intense with its own energy, not static but active. Such a space possesses a magnetic attraction, drawing us into its power and encouraging us to reciprocate by rapt attention and perhaps by movement. The conditions of the sacred develop a continuity with those who participate in it and become absorbed and integrated into the space.

These ideas resemble the Native North American understanding of human life in nature considered earlier. Many of these tribal societies express views that are fundamentally religious in character. We are too willing to dismiss as primitive animism the sense that all creatures, things, and places have spiritual characters. Yet as our environment deteriorates, responsible governments and individuals are beginning to question the narrow faith in the technological domination of nature. This has led many to reconsider the ancient view and to recognize the profound insight such an idea embodies. We have begun to rediscover the preciousness of land, water, and air as a result of the often irrecoverable harm done to our environment by small interests and short-term objectives. Because environment is socially created and almost always common to many inhabitants, any damage to it has social as well as physical effects. The Native American grasp of the sacredness of the land is not a case of primitive piety but a deep and inescapable insight.

**IMPLICATIONS OF SACRED ENVIRONMENTS**

Grasping the nature of sacred environments has some curious consequences. Such environments, such events, tell us something about what all environment is. Not a place but an occasion, it is the world we experience. This makes the difference between environment and place clearer. A place is a physical location that we can enter and occupy. It is there independently— impersonal and self-sufficient—and a person who approaches and penetrates it is distinct and separate. We can describe places in impersonal terms because they do not depend on a human presence, for any such presence is merely contingent and irrelevant. An environment is different. It is more than surroundings, as environments are usually construed, more even than a relation with surroundings. An environment is a continuity of person and place, a situation that is more than the sum of its parts but a distinct, complete, and integral whole. This is intimated in what is sometimes called a sense of place—that is, place that has the special, binding quality I am ascribing here to environment.

Recognizing their differences also helps us distinguish between a sacred environment and a sacred place. A sacred place is a location that is honored or institutionally valued, such as a cathedral, synagogue, temple, sacred grove, or memorial. Its value presumably rests in itself, quite independent of anyone who visits it. A sacred environment, in contrast, engages and binds us as participants with a force and intensity that result in the kind of powerful occasion described earlier. Sacred places are sacred by decree. They may or may not evoke the kind of intense engagement that would transform them into environments; and if they do not, they are only formal objects of ritualized veneration and indifferent feeling.
rather a sense of being expanded and uplifted, rendered precious through the radiance of the sacred. The fearsome thrill of the sublime is replaced by the warm suffusion of affirmation—perhaps joyful, perhaps tearful, but always positive. The sublime may be either positive or negative. The sacred is always positive, and the profane is its negation.

A parallel has sometimes been drawn between aesthetic and religious experience. Both are intensely absorbing, personal, and immediate. Both extend their directness and intimacy to bring one into a region of being that far exceeds the private domain attributed to subjectivity. This discussion of the sacred in environment is only tangentially related to religious experience and important differences remain between them: yet the aesthetic and the sacred share another characteristic: both have moral as well as aesthetic dimensions.

As in the experience of art, aesthetic value suffuses the sacred environment. Certainly both art and environment share our vivid perceptual interest. At the same time, the qualitative experience they generate has not only immediate value but also effects that extend beyond the perceptual present. Experiencing an environment as sacred may change our sense of the world and affect how we live and act. To regard the world as sacred and everything that is part of it as inherently valuable can change our decisions and alter our actions. It can also sensitize us to the profanation of the world and render unacceptable practices that we formerly ignored or acquiesced in unthinkingly. Recognizing and conserving environmental values, then, takes on ethical import and becomes a moral obligation. Moreover, there is a social interest in sacred environments—and, if all environments are potentially sacred, in every environment—just as there is a social interest in great art. As one can claim that the "owner" of such art has a moral obligation to preserve and share it, so one can hold that everyone who participates in an environment in any way has an interest in it and an obligation toward it. In environment, as in art, possession is never absolute; one is always answerable for one's treatment of it. Because moral and aesthetic values appear to some degree in all environments, both place an obligation on us individually and socially.

Sacred environments may develop, then, from the space generated by a radiant object, in an enclosed space charged with value, in open space made coherent through the human presence, through the dynamic interdependence of an active perceiver and an environmental order, and in still other forms. Moreover, since such environments are often not set apart from the ordinary course of experience, we can no longer regard them as rare and different. And because environments are sacred in varying degrees, our participating presence both contributes to their sacredness and influences its extent. Insofar as this confers a godlike power on humans, it confers on us an equally powerful obligation.

Although we may have begun by thinking of environment as a special, limited notion, these explorations have shown that it encompasses the entire human realm. In the process, the idea of environment has not lost meaning or clarity; rather, it has gained in resonance and value. Developing the idea has also expanded the reality, for we have ended by sacralizing the world and the human participation that is inseparable from it. The very grandeur of this conception of environment testifies to the value of its successes, the tragedy of its failures, and the endless richness of its possibilities.