Sacred, but Imperfect: A Postmodernist Paradox?

Vitruvius, philosopher-master builder favored by the Emperor Augustus in first-century CE Rome, codified the practice of architecture with his treatise *De Architectura* (or *The Ten Books on Architecture*). Vitruvius dedicated this treatise to his patron Emperor, who employed him to spearhead the marble rebuilding of Rome. Roman pragmatism tames the previous Greek exploration in these *Ten Books*, setting best practice rules that give structure to subjectivity. Attempting to apply logic to the creation of sacred space, Vitruvius linked Temple design to the perfect symmetry and proportioning of the “finely-shaped human body.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Is the sacred, then, to be embodied solely by rigid, measurable perfection? Vitruvian tenets of sacred placemaking guided the planners of religious architecture for centuries, surviving in written and built forms to influence the canon of works which still inspire architects today. The postmodernists of the late twentieth century asked probing questions, however; all conventional wisdom became fair game for scrutiny. Robert Venturi, the architect credited with initiating postmodernism as a distinct school of thought in 1966, spoke for ‘messy vitality over obvious unity’, implying that humanity is imperfection.[[2]](#footnote-2) Paul Goldberger, architectural critic, asserted that when we talk of sacred structures in sacred terms, ‘we talk of space, and light’ – not adherence to codified proportion or Order.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Marlon Blackwell is a contemporary architect whose works professedly draw upon the contradictions of place.[[4]](#footnote-4) Faced in 2009 with the challenge of the sacred program and limited budget of the St. Nicholas Orthodox Church in Springdale, Arkansas, Blackwell produced an award-winning building. Overtly asymmetrical and rooted in existing imperfections, it seems well outside Vitruvian parameters for built sacredness. I propose to make a study of this building’s success relative to its denial of, or adherence to, Vitruvian guidelines. I will analyze its ordering systems, proportions, materials, and symbolism through the use of CAD software, by researching Vitruvius’ principles and those which guide practice today, and by interviewing the architect. I believe it is likely that Vitruvius made his mark on this church, whether or not Blackwell intended for him to. Indeed, it would be ironic if Blackwell’s work has a Vitruvian undercurrent; popular perception of his work is summarized in an ArchDaily interview introduction: “Blackwell’s portfolio consists of pristine architecture inspired by the vernaculars, seeking to transgress conventional boundaries of architecture.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Such reverence for the locally-inspired and the unconventional would seem to crowd out Vitruvian idealism, instead embracing postmodernist ideals which value the expression of inherent flaws as the expression of truth.

It is the third of the *Ten Books* in which Vitruvius handles sacredness, seeking to “speak of the temples of the Gods and…set them out in detail in a proper manner.”[[6]](#footnote-6) He contends that just as common measurements (the foot, etc.) are derived from the human body, so should temple proportions be derived, and that this can be observed in the work of the ancients.[[7]](#footnote-7) He further implies that the ancients were aware of the enduring quality of their temples, taking care that correct design be demonstrated in them so that it might be passed down.[[8]](#footnote-8) Vitruvius’ literal interpretations extol the ancients as having been the ultimate guides to sacred design, the source of unsurpassable wisdom that can only be absorbed and emulated- not altered.

As Paul Goldberger says, “In the quest to create sacred space, then, architecture is in a way working against itself, working against its nature, we might say, since it must struggle to use the material to express what transcends the material.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The very practice of architecture is a paradox; we unite immateriality with material. Far beyond facilitating function, sacred architecture seeks to reflect, complement, and even aid human attempts at grasping that which explains the physical world- a hidden grain of meaning forever lying just out of reach even for the most devout priest. I perceive both methods to be valid- both postmodernist expression of contradiction and Vitruvian regulation of perfection. I think both attempt to materialize an ultimate truth, but through inclusiveness and exclusiveness respectively.

Marlon Blackwell believes architecture can happen anywhere and on any scale- essentially refusing to be exclusive.[[10]](#footnote-10) The firm describes the St. Nicholas Eastern Orthodox Church as a ‘…generic shop building [transformed] into a place of worship and fellowship.’ [[11]](#footnote-11) Blackwell sought to transcend the existing structure’s secular nature directly through reorientation and demarcation. A modest western addition ‘folded’ the narthex at the western main entry, reorienting along the traditional east-west axis. The tower demarcates the chapel threshold, with ‘red light pour[ing] down…giving a moment of pause before entering to worship… [and serving as] a beacon for arriving parishioners.’[[12]](#footnote-12) More indirect were his finish choices- an exterior shell of upgraded box rib metal that nods to the metal building vernacular, and simple interior finishes.[[13]](#footnote-13) The orthogonal forms and quality materials express humble roots and sacred intent on a budget, but Blackwell’s client also required a degree of reference to the past.

The client is a part of the Antiochian Orthodox Church, who declares herself to be the oldest of Christian churches, the original first recognized by Jesus Himself, with teachings and practices intact after 2000 years.[[14]](#footnote-14) The passing of years is marked by continuous ritual, underscored by a changing of colored ritual cloths.[[15]](#footnote-15) The church interior explicitly must include: a dome bearing the special depiction of Jesus as Pantocrator (omnipotent lord of the universe); an eastern altar; a three-part scheme of narthex (or church entry), nave (or body of the church), and sanctuary (or altar); and a physical barrier separating nave and sanctuary called the iconostasis. This barrier must contain depictions of icons for veneration and three gates for passage between the heavenly and earthly realms.[[16]](#footnote-16) [[17]](#footnote-17) Numbers (especially 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 13) are also symbolic in Orthodox church design.[[18]](#footnote-18) Blackwell had to adhere to these guidelines, as the church must maintain the regional Bishop’s blessing to be legitimate.[[19]](#footnote-19)

In an interview with Architectural Record, Blackwell was asked about the process involved in creating the St. Nicholas Church. He stated that a combined understanding of the Antiochian Orthodox Church and the budget led to reference of ‘classical Greek proportioning’ rather than traditional ornament, masonry, and form.[[20]](#footnote-20) I asked Blackwell what specific proportions and precedents he utilized, and he pointed to ‘golden’ proportioning, a modernist Antiochian church (Santa Maria Church in Marco de Canaveses, Portugal by Alvaro Siza), and a traditional Antiochian church (Saint John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church in Chicago, Illinois). Both precedents divide façades into thirds and employ golden proportioning heavily in massing and façade work.

Working from plan, section, and elevation, the Greek proportions reveal themselves. In plan, the ten-foot western addition formed halves: two golden sections side by side, east-west oriented. The south half contains entry, support, and overflow, while the north half holds narthex, nave, and sanctuary. By superimposing two more golden sections oriented north-south, the narthex-nave and nave-sanctuary thresholds are located – the physical divisions between earthly and heavenly realms in a holy three-part scheme. The overflow doors echo the golden section; instead of being equal, one is larger. The swinging-arc origins of the golden section itself are referenced through the swinging motion of the doors. In section (with cut taken interior to the western façade), another three-part division of spaces is found, but with three squares as its base. The south third contains the densest portion of support spaces, even extending into a second story; the middle third gives form to the transition from worldly to holy by canting the narthex ceiling plane down across a golden section within the square toward the base of the tower; the north third is most clearly controlled by the golden section, with a smaller square inscribing the turn from narthex to nave at the tower’s base, and with golden sections stacked twice atop the small square to form the tower. In elevation, along the western façade where principal entry is made and which faces the interstate, the three-square division is subdivided by golden sections which dictate the locations and sizes of the corner windows and main door. Also notable is Blackwell’s incorporation of liturgical colors within the Greek geometries by way of colored glass and interior paint: yellow (or gold) at the entry for the Lord, red at the tower for the Cross, blue at the choir for the Theotokos (Mary), and white at the eastern altar for Jesus Christ resurrected.[[21]](#footnote-21)

As the Antiochian Orthodox Church continues its traditions across millennia, so does Blackwell continue the tradition of classicism in church architecture. However, he returned to fundamental proportions instead of emulating superficial attributes found in the canon of works. His St. Nicholas is at once exclusive and inclusive, celebratory of both its secular past life and the Orthodox culture of correctness. By straddling that divide, Blackwell transcended postmodernist and Vitruvian principles, capturing a moment of architectural transformation that is at once dignified and humble.

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