

Article

Sacred Architecture and Public Space under the Conditions of a New Visibility of Religion

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Received: 8 June 2020; Accepted: 17 July 2020; Published: 23 July 2020



Abstract: Embedded in the paradigm of the “New Visibility of Religion,” this article addresses the question of the significance of sacred buildings for public spaces. ‘Visibility’ is conceived as religion’s presence in cities through the medium of architecture. In maintaining sacred buildings in cities, religions expose themselves to the conditions of how cities work. They cannot avoid questions such as how to counteract the tendency of public space to erode. Following some preliminary remarks on the “New Visibility of Religion,” I examine selected sacred buildings in Vienna. Next, I focus on the motifs of the city, the “ark” as a model for sacred buildings and the aesthetic dimension of public space. Finally, I consider the contribution of sacred buildings to contemporary public spaces. What is at issue is not the subject that moves in public and visits sacred buildings with the aim of acquiring knowledge or with the urgency to act, but rather the subject that feels and experiences itself in its dealings with public space and sacred buildings. In this context, I refer to the experience of disinterested beauty (Kant), anachronism, multi-perspectivity (Klaus Heinrich), and openness (Hans-Dieter Bahr).

Keywords: sacred architecture; public space; city; ark; Vienna

1. Preliminary Remarks: Visibility and Concealment of Religion

The following considerations address the question of the *significance of sacred buildings for public space*. I assume that sacred buildings¹ represent a significant impact on urban space—and this is the case independent of the question of whether people are moving away from the binding power of religions in the context of secularization processes or whether they are returning to them in the sense of the so-called *return of religion* (cf. [Vattimo 1995](#), pp. 75–89). Certainly, the question of the shaping force of sacred buildings for public space cannot be separated from the analysis of power relations and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, but it cannot be reduced to them either. The more fundamental perspective—and in this I wish to follow the paradigm of the *New Visibility of Religion*—is the question concerning the complex *ways in which urban space is shaped by sacred buildings*. The following considerations are based on the conviction that regaining public (urban) space as human living space [humaner Lebensraum] is currently one of the most urgent social challenges.

My contribution partakes in the research design of the *New Visibility of Religion* paradigm and will therein focus on the task of architectural visibility, which is closely connected to the question of public

¹ In this article, “sacred buildings” are considered as places built, adapted or (re)dedicated for regularly carrying out religious rituals within a community in the framework of a certain publicity. They are not just assembly rooms which can sufficiently be described by their functional dimension. Their architectonic (visual, acoustic . . .) appearance is in close interaction with the core of the respective religious belief: The architecture is expression of the religious message and, vice versa, transforms the latter as well. Some sacred buildings may convey their religious imprint even after being secularized or being used for other purposes.

visibility. In the first paragraph I point out, by referring to some examples from the history of religions, that public visibility of religions is not naturally given but presupposes a step beyond concealment. However complex the entanglement of visibility and concealment may be, this step reaches a new level and commitment when architectural visibility comes into play. All the following considerations of this contribution on sacred buildings will be based on this connection of visibility/concealment and public space, which remains the reference point of the entire article. In order to give those abstract terms more concrete significance and illustration, I take a closer look at selected sacred buildings in Vienna in the second paragraph. By referring to sacred buildings from different epochs—from the Middle Ages to buildings which are currently in the planning stage—I will show that the connection of visibility/concealment and public space remains a valid category of analysis whenever a religion seeks presence in cities through the medium of architecture. Afterwards, I will deal with the motifs of the city, the “ark” as a model for sacred buildings and public space in three consecutive paragraphs. Whilst the approach to city and public space is philosophical, referring to Hans-Dieter Bahr’s theory of city and Kant’s theory of the act of judgement, especially the aesthetic judgement, the approach to sacred buildings as arks is a theological one. What these philosophical and theological approaches have in common is that they fit in the connection of visibility/concealment and public space. These hermeneutic approaches are based on the interpretation of texts and do not meet the expectation of providing empirical data. In the final paragraph I ask about the contribution of sacred buildings to contemporary public space. If the considerations reveal the necessity of further empirical research, I am happy that philosophical and theological discourses can still be a stimulation for research in other realms of knowledge, especially in today’s leading sciences.

When Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward tried out a new approach in the study of religion in numerous colloquia and the resulting publication “The New Visibility of Religion” (2008), they were above all interested in an appropriate examination of current forms of expression of religion² as a phenomenon. Models that merely hypothesize a “re-emergence of something that has been in decline in the past and is now manifesting itself once more” (Hoelzl and Ward 2008, p. 1) are to be replaced by a much more differentiated examination, which cannot always already presuppose the substantial identity of something that disappears and returns. It rather “emphasizes a new awareness of religion. Religious believing might always have been there, but not visible in the ways we see it today” (Hoelzl and Ward 2008, p. 2). In this context, the new ways of religion becoming visible do not necessarily have to involve an increased influence of religions on social processes (cf. Hjelm 2014, p. 204 et seq.). I interpret the paradigm of the *New Visibility of Religion* primarily as an aesthetic approach, by which I mean aesthetics in the sense of the Greek *aisthesis* (“perception”³). It is about the question of the awareness and perception of religious forms of expression and representation as they present themselves today: “visible in the ways we see [them] today” (Hoelzl and Ward 2008, p. 2). This leads to the fundamental question of the visibility and concealment of religion.⁴

Religions are faced with a fundamental decision regarding the question of visibility or concealment. Not every religious community seeks a form of visibility and thus publicity at all times. There can be external reasons for this: Visibility must be avoided because it could put a religious community in danger. In the history of most religious traditions there probably are examples of how religious life was only possible in seclusion and how visibility would cause repression or even extinction. One need only

² The time span considered cannot be indicated precisely, but seems to be the period after the Second World War. Within this period, the editors refer on the one hand, to different discourses on religion like the secularization-thesis and the discourse on a return of the sacred/the religion, and, on the other hand, to historic events like the Second Vatican Council, the Iranian Revolution or the fall of the Berlin wall etc.

³ (Cf. Pöltner 2008, pp. 13–16). For a detailed overview on aesthetics of religion (cf. Cancik and Mohr 1988). However, as pointed out in Section 5, my understanding of aesthetics is more based on Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (cf. Kant [1790] 2000; Deibl 2019).

⁴ Before addressing the topic of architectural visibility of religions I will start with a more generic examination of the complex relation between religion and visibility which leads me to take into consideration the relation of religion and concealment as well.

think of the Jews, for whom throughout history and in so many places the cultivation of religious life was only possible in secret. Some separated a visible (e.g., Christian) from an invisible (Jewish) identity, as in Marranism (cf. [Charim 2014](#)). Even today, due to recurring anti-Judaism even in countries that grant freedom of religion as a fundamental right, Jewish communities are faced with the question of whether they want to reveal their identity and the places where they meet. In the Roman Empire, for a long period of time, Christian communities could only meet in secret. In the former communist countries, many priests kept their identity secret and had different professions. Frequently, there was distrust between a monitored visible and a hidden church. For Alevi believers, who had to remain hidden for centuries, currently in many European countries—in the context of freedom of religion guaranteed by the rule of law—the question arises whether and in what way they now want to make their religious convictions public.

However, remaining outside the realm of visibility can also be for reasons that belong to the core of the respective religious convictions, i.e., that do not depend on external coercion. Examples from antiquity include the Eleusinian, Dionysian, Attis, Isis, and Mithraic Mysteries (Cf. [Klauck 1995](#), p. 77). “Mystery cults shy away from publicity; they take place in secret, often at night. They are not open to the general public, but are reserved for a special group of initiates.” ([Klauck 1995](#), p. 80) To this day, the idea that the innermost convictions of a community cannot be represented and must be kept pure from profanation by the ignorant and *semi-believers* (cf. [Vattimo 1996](#); [Deibl 2013](#)) continues to have an appeal.

In the time of the Reformation, a specific constellation of visibility and invisibility with regard to the way the church is conceived gains great importance. The motif of invisibility or hiddenness is asserted as a critical corrective to the visible church. What becomes visible as church does not have to be an expression of true faith in Christ: “The hidden church is hidden in the visible church” ([Tietz 2011](#)).⁵

There are countless further examples regarding the question about the relationship between visibility and concealment that could be given from the history of religion and would have to be examined in each individual case with regard to the concrete form that the tension between those poles takes there. At this point I would like to show how the emergence of the first forms of Christian community, as it is presented in the New Testament, can also be described starting from the question of the visibility of religion: Jesus’ disciples gather behind closed doors after his death and even after their first encounters with the Risen One (John 20:19 and 26; Acts 1:13). At Pentecost, when they experience the Spirit of God filling them (Acts 2:1–11), they come out of hiding and begin to speak prophetically. At first, they are thought to be drunk. Would it be unreasonable that they were associated mystery cults that considered intoxicating states as part of their ceremonies (Acts 2:12 and seq.; cf. [Ebner 2012](#), pp. 236–73)? Indeed, in the Acts of the Apostles the evangelist Luke repeatedly describes encounters and confusions of the slowly developing Christianity with different religious phenomena from the Hellenistic-Roman context⁶ and is interested in making the newly emerging religion visible in contrast to this background. In the scene described above, the apostle Peter immediately opposes an interpretation of the events in the context of any mystery cults: he is prepared to publicly explain his faith, as he demands of the faithful in the Diaspora in the first of his two letters (1 Peter 1:1 and 3:15 et seq.). He begins by pointing out that it is morning and not night, the time when hidden cults are practiced (Acts 2:14 et seq.), and then explains the event within commonly accepted rationality, presenting it as a fulfilment of the prophetic words of Joel (Acts 2:16–21). Thus, in the process of the slow emergence of the early Christian communities, a decision is made in favour of visibility in principle. This is the precondition for the construction of sacred buildings when circumstances permit.

⁵ Keynote lecture by Christiane Tietz at the 33rd Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag 2011.

⁶ For an overview in which, however, Acts 2:13 and 15 do not appear, (cf. [Klauck 1995](#), p. 26).

Our tentative conclusion is that religion is not necessarily bound to public visibility. However, the question of visibility is an important instrument if we wish to gain a differentiated view of religions. Religious phenomena can be understood as situated in a field of tension between visibility and concealment. Concealment can result from an externally imposed compulsion or it can itself be sought in order to protect from contamination that which is sacred for a community. It can also become a critical corrective for visible manifestations of religion.

Based on these considerations, I will now address the question of sacred architecture and public space. I would like to present the following thesis: When a religious community begins to appear in public space via buildings, it wants to participate in and shape public space through architectural design. This is an almost irrevocable step towards the visibility of religion. A religious community can be forced by political pressure to go underground for a certain period of time; groups can form at its margins, seeking the secrecy of the small in-group—but once it has begun to express itself through architecture, it cannot, in principle, avoid the question of its visibility in public space and must adopt a stance towards it. It is confronted with the question of what contribution it can make to the shaping of public space.⁷ The question of the visibility of religion inevitably leads to the question of public space.

Public visibility in the sense of architectural visibility is not necessarily bound, neither to political and social influence nor to visibility in current public discourses. Maybe a secularized church in a city is no longer connected to any contemporary public discussion and there are no religious leaders with any political impact anymore, but it still transmits a part of the city's history and it is perceived by all the people passing by, regardless of their religious affiliation and commitment. Vice versa, religious activities carried out in clandestine can gain a high amount of public interest—not at least because they are hidden. Moreover, it would be worth taking into consideration that the complex interaction of the relation public/private and visible/invisible can appear in many different configurations. However, this article only focuses on the fact that religions express themselves visibly by means of architecture and, therefore, are in interaction with public space. These processes may be transformed but do not end if a religious community abandons a building, as long as it is simply there.

2. Public Space—City—Ark: An Approach Using the Example of Vienna

Sacred buildings are a way for religion to manifest itself visibly in public space. However, how can we approach the relationship between public space and sacred buildings if, in the context of the new visibility of religion, we cannot trust that a continuity regarding the understanding of religion is guaranteed? If we do not want to replace a lack of a common religious horizon of understanding with merely functionalist categories like the usefulness of sacred buildings, we need (with all the limitations that this entails) the images, metaphors or symbols that can offer us an initial access to those phenomena. In order to approach the question of public space and sacred buildings, I will take up the motifs of the city and the ark and substantiate their connection first of all by looking at important churches in Vienna. Subsequently, I will discuss the public space, city and ark in separate sections.

I have selected churches that stand out as part of public space in a particularly striking way. They reflect a path that leads from the city centre to the periphery and from the past to the present, while at the same time making the limitations of this article clear. Despite its interreligious openness, the focus lies on Christian sacred buildings. This is related to the fact that for centuries in large parts of Europe these have decisively shaped the urban as well as the rural environment. The fact that synagogues were victims of destruction again and again and that many disappeared from the texture of the city in the 20th century is a terrible tragedy and, in addition to all the suffering associated with it, also means an impoverishment of urban space.⁸ Recently, the number of mosques throughout Europe

⁷ I consider as “contribution” the assumption of responsibility for the shaping and preservation of public space without the attempt to gain control over it. The opposite configuration of religion and public space is the stance of a culture war.

⁸ For an interactive map depicting the synagogues of Europe, those that are still used as synagogues, those that are used for other purposes and those that disappeared (cf. [Foundation for Jewish Heritage 2020](#)).

has been increasing rapidly, which can certainly be seen as a sign of the “New Visibility of Religion” (cf. [de Wildt et al. 2019](#), p. 5 et seq.). The role that the sacred buildings of other religions will play in Vienna, in Austria, in Europe in the future cannot be predicted at all at present. Even if I limit my considerations to churches for the most part, I still hope that the selected narratives and symbols are open to be used in the context of the examination of sacred buildings of other religions. I consider the remarks on the significance of churches for public space as a small contribution to a broader dialogue that should include Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but also other religious traditions and civil society.

The starting point of the subsequent walk through Vienna is St. Stephen’s Cathedral which was probably first consecrated as St. Stephen’s Church in the year 1147. However, there was probably already a sacred building at its location much earlier (Cf. [Buchinger et al. 2013](#), pp. 315–401; [Hofer 2013](#), pp. 402–7). As the most important church of Vienna, St. Stephen’s Cathedral has been a part of the history of the city for centuries, it is a national symbol and landmark, is celebrated in Viennese folk songs and today rises out of the city landscape like an anachronistic sign. St. Stephen’s Church was built outside the area of the former Roman camp of Vindobona, on the site of which Vienna’s built-up area was concentrated in the 12th century, and was obviously an essential component of an urban expansion (cf. [Opll 2019](#)). An enlargement of the church still in the 12th century, which “corresponds to the early, quite dynamic urban development of Vienna”, resulted in a “building of considerable dimensions” ([Opll 2019](#), p. 179) the *nave* of which, like an ark, could probably accommodate the entire population of Vienna, i.e., of today’s first district. The cathedral thus creates an urban public sphere *par excellence* and gives the impression of representing the city in its totality. But what about the Jews living in Vienna at the end of the 12th century, who can partly be identified by name and who probably already had their first private synagogue? Are they, as the others, excluded from this totality, in which they find no form of representation? Sixteen of them were murdered by a mob of crusaders in 1196; some of the murderers were executed as a result (cf. [Brugger 2006](#), pp. 126–29).

The neo-gothic Votivkirche (consecrated in 1879, planned by Heinrich Ferstl) represents a counterpart to the gothic St. Stephen’s Cathedral. In the *Allgemeine Bauzeitung* of 1886 it says about the image of the Votivkirche: “What is certain is that it is engraved in the heart and mind of every Viennese as the second beloved landmark of the beloved hometown next to the lofty and boldly towering, time-honoured Stephan’s Tower.” ([Köstlin 1886](#), p. 6). Just as St. Stephen’s Cathedral is the church of Vienna, the Votivkirche, which was built as a token of gratitude for the failure of an assassination attempt on Emperor Franz Joseph, was intended as the cathedral of the Monarchy: a cathedral of nations uniting the peoples of the Danube Monarchy. As the foundation charter states, it was to be “a monument of gratitude to the latest grandchildren of all the peoples of this vast empire” ([Thausing 1879](#), p. 9). Just as all animal species are represented in Noah’s Ark, the countries of the Danube Monarchy and their patron saints are depicted in the paintings on the glass windows of the church. Following the example of Westminster Abbey and other famous churches, the Votivkirche was also to take on the function of an “Austrian Hall of Fame” ([Thausing 1879](#), p. 89; cf. [Fahrngruber 2012](#)). It neither gained that unifying function nor did it become a memorial place, yet the church, a masterpiece of the Gothic Revival (cf. [Laule et al. 2005](#), p. 157), represents the highlight of Vienna’s classicist church buildings. Unlike St. Stephen’s Cathedral, it is no longer completely embedded in the built-up urban structure, but rather stands like a solitaire in an immense open space between busy traffic routes. In clear contrast to the medieval St. Stephen’s Cathedral, it thus already anticipates modern urban planning. In his well-received book *Der Städte-Bau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen (Urban Construction according to its Artistic Principles)*, Camillo Sitte speaks of the Votivkirche as being lost like in a lonely “sandy desert” ([Sitte \[1889\] 2003](#), p. 161 et seq.), “exposed in an almost unbearable way to all the adversities of wind and weather, the heat of the sun and dust, as well as the noise of the streets and the eternal ringing of the tramways” ([Sitte \[1889\] 2003](#), p. 161). The start of the construction of the Votivkirche (the foundation stone was laid in 1856) coincided with the demolition of the city walls that had surrounded the inner city. With the Emperor’s permission, the church was the first building to be erected on the open area of the glacis, which at that time was still subject to a construction ban for military reasons. A little later,

with its repeal, the way was cleared for the building of the Ringstrasse. Like St. Stephen's Cathedral, the Votivkirche, which is visible from afar, also represents the beginning of an important phase of Vienna's urban expansion (cf. [Thausing 1879](#), p. 7).

Between 1878 and 1918, when Bosnia-Herzegovina was under Austrian influence, students of those architects who, like Heinrich Ferstl, shaped the Viennese building scene of that time, also built mosques in addition to numerous other public buildings in the occupied or annexed territory. In doing so, they developed a specific *orientalizing style*⁹. The architects initially combined elements of classicist architecture with those from the Muslim context especially from Cairo and Andalusia (cf. [Hartmuth 2019](#), p. 12 et seq.; [Rüdiger 2019](#)). This was followed by a stronger orientation towards specifically Bosnian traditions, but they also kept in contact with developments in Vienna (Otto Wagner).

At the same time, the so-called "Schiffschul" was founded in Vienna, an orthodox Jewish centre with a synagogue, a Torah school and other facilities, which was named after its location in Schiffgasse. In 1892 the Jewish architect Wilhelm Stiassny, who was one of the most important figures in the field of Jewish religious architecture in the Danube Monarchy, carried out the construction of the synagogue. He was a student of Friedrich v. Schmidt, who not only held a professorship for architecture but the office of master builder [Dombaumeister] of St. Stephen's Cathedral as well. Stiassny is rooted in the Ringstrasse architecture, but also adopts new ("secessionist") elements and sometimes uses a "Moorish Oriental style" for Jewish sacred architecture ([Stiassny 2017](#)). Even if the restitution of the Schiffschul after the expropriation and partial destruction in 1938 was slow and not completed, the Schiffschul became an important centre of orthodox Jewish life in Vienna again after 1945. For several decades following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, it was a contact point for Jews from Iran who wanted to travel to other countries. The *Wiener Zeitung* described this function of the building by means of the symbol of the ark, probably following the motif of the ship ("Schiff") in the name "Schiffschul": "Viennese Schiffschul as Noah's Ark for Iranians" ([Wiener Zeitung 2015](#); cf. [David. Jüdische Kulturzeitschrift 2003](#)).

Following the Votivkirche, the transition to modern church construction was initiated at the beginning of the 20th century by Otto Wagner's famous Steinhof Church. For whom was this first Art Nouveau church in the city, initially rejected by many, built and whom was it supposed to accommodate like an ark? It was built on the site of the large-scale hospital built between 1904 and 1907 on Baumgartner Höhe, a hill on the outskirts of Vienna (at that time still outside the city). Otto Wagner wanted the building to meet the highest artistic, architectural and hygienic standards to serve the sick. However, the ark of the new church was not only intended to provide a dignified representation for the sick. Otto Wagner wanted to unite a Catholic and a Protestant church and a synagogue under one roof. It is sad that this unique project could not be realized due to lack of funds. The second large Art Nouveau church in Vienna is located at the Vienna Central Cemetery and was planned by Max Hegele (consecrated in 1911). Both are transition projects that were still strongly rooted in tradition in terms of monumentality and rich decoration, but they were far ahead of their time in terms of the use of new forms, materials and construction methods.¹⁰ At the beginning of the 20th century, the renewal of church construction in Vienna started from places of precarious publicity—from where the sick were taken in and where the dead resided.

With the Steinhof Church built by Otto Wagner, even though it was only partially realized, a century of innovative church construction began in Vienna, which was marked by intensive building activity especially after 1945 (cf. [Buchner 2016](#); [Gärtner 2018](#)), and which came to an end with the Danube City Church "Christ, Hope of the World" designed by Heinz Tesar (consecrated in 2000 as Vienna's last church so far). The Danube City Church displays the character of the ark even more distinctly in its architectural design than many other churches. It looks like a box, in Latin *arca*, black

⁹ Cf. the research project Islamic Architecture and Orientalizing Style in Habsburg Bosnia, 1878–1918 (Cf. [Universität Wien 2018](#)).

¹⁰ "With Art Nouveau, new forms, materials and construction methods, penetrate church buildings in part against church regulations." ([Raspe 1996](#), p. 1486).

on the outside, as if sealed with pitch (cf. Gn 6:14), inside it is made entirely of wood with portholes to look out of. The Ark has been placed between the motorway A22 and the station Kaisermühlen of the underground line 1 underneath the UNO City building (Vienna International Centre) not far from the Donauturm and the DC Tower, Vienna's tallest buildings. The church does not tower above the cityscape like a solitaire as was the case with the Votivkirche, it is not built on a hill visible from afar like the Steinhof-Kirche. Instead it is the lowest building in the area, from the urban environment it is hardly visible. From the perspective of urban planning, it is not able to structure the surrounding space. However, whoever enters the church immediately notices how the interior acoustically stands out from the urban surroundings and how the view towards the outside rearranges the surroundings. Through the portholes, the tall buildings in the surrounding area become visible in very peculiar perspectives. Talking to visitors of the Danube City Church, I learned that believers from all parts of Vienna, who see their faith represented precisely in the simple architecture of the new church, visit this place, as does the lively Filipino Catholic Chaplaincy in Vienna. Architecturally it is almost invisible, yet quite "visible" in urban discourse and practice.¹¹

Between the 1950s and 1970s, the construction of the large housing complexes on the outskirts of Vienna, which were home to thousands of people, included the construction of a church (Per-Albin-Hansson-Siedlung, Großfeldsiedlung, Am Schöpfwerk, Wohnpark Alterlaa). Unlike St. Stephen's Cathedral and Votivkirche, these churches are no longer at the forefront of urban expansion, but blend in as part of it. This is particularly visible in the Am Schöpfwerk housing estate, which was planned by a team led by Viktor Hufnagl and built between 1976 and 1980. The associated church takes up the staircase building design typical of the housing estate but stands out in terms of colour, layout and height. It is the lowest building in the surroundings. As part of the city expansion at Leberberg, a Catholic and a Protestant church were planned corresponding to each other architecturally; however, only the Protestant project (architect Christoph Thetter, 1997), the community centre "Arche" (Ark), was actually realized (cf. Kühn 1998). At the moment, there are plans to build not a church but a "Campus of Religions" in Aspern Seestadt, the latest development area of the rapidly growing city of Vienna. The religious communities involved are to construct their own buildings there. At a meeting with representatives of the Roman Catholic, Protestant, New Apostolic, and Greek Oriental churches, the Israelite, Buddhist as well as the Islamic and Sikh religious communities in February 2019 the Mayor of Vienna, Michael Ludwig, announced:

"There are parts of the world where religions are used to arguing out conflicts and even waging wars. In Vienna, however, we will create a campus that enables an exchange between religious communities and will show that religions can pull together across their borders."¹²

Cardinal Christoph Schönborn (Roman Catholic Church) assured that it was "not a fortress of religions, but a campus, an open field" (Die Presse 2019). This metaphor is a vivid contrast to when the Votivkirche was built, its purpose said to be "a strong fortress of ideals amidst the hustle and bustle of a modern metropolis" (Thausing 1879, p. 89). Perhaps it will actually be possible to achieve what Otto Wagner had hoped for. However, the question remains whether in the design of the overall complex there is also a well-thought-out joint programme that does not leave the architectural interaction of the buildings to chance.

It would be interesting to write a history of the urban space of the (former) metropolis of Vienna, based on the narratives associated with the city's sacred buildings: How are the stories of their foundation interwoven into the history of the city? What do the sacred buildings represent? Which power relations become visible in them? Which metaphors, images or symbols can be used to understand these sacred buildings? What processes of inclusion and exclusion take place? What about

¹¹ I want to thank the anonymous reviewers whose comment I adopted here.

¹² Quoted from the official website of the city of Vienna: ("Campus der Religionen" 2019).

their visibility in urban space? What can they contribute to the recovery and design of urban space in the future? Let us ask how to think the “city” in this next section.

3. The City as Open, Complex and Permanent Space

Cities are particular forms of settlement (cf. Fouquet et al. 2018, pp. 9–18; Monnet 2018, pp. 19–33). As Hans-Dieter Bahr points out, they can only be described as open, despite their tendency to exclude certain groups, to shut themselves off from the outside world and to potentially deny the right of residence in them (cf. Bahr 1994, pp. 305–22). They are composed of an unmanageable abundance of different filters, which through their opening and closing allow or prevent passing. City gates, entry roads with or without traffic lights, the streets, alleys and paths between buildings and blocks of houses, the tunnels, underpasses, stairs and passages, the doors, windows and corridors, and finally the ventilation shafts and air conditioning units that serve to exchange air, the data lines, firewalls and access points all behave like filters of varying sizes that regulate the potential passageways. There is no identifiable system, “no program of programs” (Bahr 1994, p. 306) underlying this.

The city proves to be highly capable of absorbing what comes in (herein lies its innovative power), and yet it can still close the filters and temporarily present itself as partially closed. However, it can never be described as an impermeable monolith, it is always a manifold composition of the most diverse filters of varying degrees of permeability and can only be described in terms of its openness, which makes the circulation of different flows, i.e., flows of goods, money and traffic, etc., possible in the first place. The controlled interplay of opening and closing filters makes it possible to create stable spaces (like rooms) which can neither be open on all sides nor completely closed. The resulting “rooms basically take on a double function: they serve on the one hand as a dwelling place and on the other hand as a means of opening up other rooms” (Franck 2014, p. 49) that are connected to them (via filters). When religions with their sacred buildings engage with *cities* and visibly position themselves in them, they take on their conditions: It can’t be avoided to think of their sacred buildings from the perspective of a fundamental openness, considering them in terms of the processes of filtering and taking into account their interplay between dwelling and opening up other spaces.

Cities have a size, complexity and diversity that no longer allow them to be viewed from a centre. There will always be zones that are beyond control, it will never be possible to monitor all the processes of filtering completely, they will always rearrange in an unpredictable way (cf. Bahr 1994, pp. 305–22). They embody an “ambiguity” and demand a “multi-perspective view” (Heinrich 2015, p. 7) that cannot be reduced to one image. Klaus Heinrich views this precisely as the utopian aspect of the city:

Namely, the utopia of a city, in which one wanders from perspective to perspective and, when looking at the buildings, some of which are old, some of which are outrageously new, and which transport the flickering light from somewhere else, one also comes to grasp to some extent the history of the species that one carries forward. The utopia of a city in which one tries to find the most peaceful solutions possible and to deal with contradictions.¹³ (Heinrich 2015, p. 7)

Walking through the city, one notices buildings from different times. One experiences oneself as part of a public space that presents itself as complex and which is built contradiction. It never belongs to just one group, never to just one specific time. If sacred buildings are part of the urban space, they too have to engage with the complexity and multilayeredness of the time structure of cities and transport something of it.

However, cities are not merely unwieldy aggregates without a centre whose elements constantly interchange and a constantly changing flow of different streams. Cities have an astonishing constancy in many respects. First of all, they stand for a stable form of settlement that rests in a particular

¹³ Regarding the utopian character of cities (cf. Frantz and Hoelzl 2005).

place; they can be expanded, centres can shift, but their location is fundamentally not interchangeable. Furthermore, certain functions “can be found in the first cities of the third millennium as well as in the city of the 21st century, which may legitimize calling these forms of settlement ‘cities’, even though separated by five thousand years” (Jansen 2014, p. 75). Certain basic spatial forms such as straight and curved streets, and square, round and oblong squares remain unchanged throughout the ages (cf. Jansen 2014, p. 75). In terms of time, cities are characterized by the fact that certain movements are repeated, rhythms are formed and cycles of renewal become discernible (cf. Franck 2014).¹⁴ Centres (in the plural) are formed, which could also be described as “nodal points” (Stölzl 2005, p. 43) of various flows (cf. Marchart 2014). Sacred buildings are “distinctive places” (Böhme 2014, p. 15) that shape public space and urban flows to a certain extent and often lead to the formation of such nodal points: “When, in one’s imagination, one climbs a hot air balloon and floats over Europe, the steeples become apparent as a constitutive element of our world, structuring the scenic text like exclamation marks.” (Stölzl 2005, p. 43) They are part of Europe’s urban landscapes and participate in the processes through which urban space is constituted. Today, however, it has become very clear that they have no control over this process. I would dare to say that, because of the complexity of cities that are not based on a “programme of programmes” (Bahr 1994, p. 306), this control was already only presumptuous and putative in the past. But how can we approach the importance that sacred buildings nevertheless have in urban space?

4. The Ark as a Temporary Residence

As an image for the sacred buildings in the city, I use the motif of the ark, which fits well with the metaphor of flowing streams used above. This is not only one of the oldest and most powerful images for the church and not only a central biblical image (Gn 6–9), but, as Peter Sloterdijk shows, a motif of far-reaching transcultural significance:

The insight that the outer ground can be taken away and has to be replaced by the ground of a floating inner world, has been expressed in various ways throughout the genre of mythology. Obviously, the idea of the deconstruction and repetition of the ground in the endo-foundation is as old as the Flood, which is probably the most important common memory trace in the world’s cultures. (Sloterdijk 1999, p. 252)

The most powerful of these narratives, which of course is itself based on older narratives that have been developed further, is the biblical story of Noah’s ark (cf. Ebach 2001, pp. 24–153). At the beginning of the Bible, the poem of the creation in seven days tells how orderly living space is created in chaos (Gn 1:1–2:4). When this order is threatened by a relapse into destructive chaos, the reappearing waters of chaos, the ark (in Hebrew *teva*: “box”) as a protective space ensures the survival of creation in miniature form. It contains representatives of all living beings¹⁵. The diversity of life has to be preserved.

The biblical image of the ark is elaborated in two ways: in terms of text and in terms of architecture. As a literary motif, it continues to have an impact in countless stories that carry it forward—biblical and non-biblical;¹⁶ from an architectural point of view, it is a model for the construction of various buildings

¹⁴ There are daily routines that are constantly repeated like commuting to work, delivering goods and disposing garbage and less frequent routines like cleaning and renovating the streets and the buildings. Moreover, social and religious life (like attending religious services) often represents a circular structure. For instance, every Friday/Saturday/Sunday believers go to a certain mosque/synagogue/church.

¹⁵ Fish constitute an exception since they can swim.

¹⁶ I just want to mention one reference to the motive of the ark from outside a religious context. In the James Bond movie “Moonraker” (1979), the criminal magnate Sir Hugo Drax plans to poison the entire population of the earth. He himself takes a space shuttle and goes to a space station he has built secretly somewhere in the universe. He is accompanied by a group of selected couples, men and women from all over the world. When Bond and CIA-agent Holly Goodhead, who joined them secretly, see the couples, they have a dialogue referring to the story of the ark: Bond: “The animals went in two by two.” Holly Goodhead: “What do you mean by that?” Bond: “Noah’s ark. This operation.” After having turned

(cf. Ebach 2001, pp. 219–39). Both forms of reception, however, cross over repeatedly. Architectural reception hardly ever attempts to directly reconstruct the ark; it rather provides the literary model for the description of other constructions that are built subsequently.

The *ark* is the first building in the biblical text to be described in detail. It is not a naturally given environment but a construction and is linked to the other important buildings of the Bible: the tower, the tent sanctuary, and the temple. Together with the Tower of Babel (Gn 11:1–9), it is, as part of the primeval history, a model for every form of architecture, the ark having a positive connotation and representing salvation, whereas the Tower of Babel has a negative connotation and stands for dominion. Its length, width and height, its material, its pitched sealing and its equipment, its roof and entrance area (Gn 6:14–16) are described (cf. Ebach 2001, pp. 58–61). Its enormous dimensions correspond to individual details of the tent sanctuary from the book of Exodus (Ex 25–31, 35–40) and also to the temple as it is described in various passages of the Bible (cf. Fischer 2018, p. 420 et seq.). The ark and the tent are the only buildings whose architecture is described in greater detail in the *Torah*. In the words of Jürgen Ebach: “This cross connection makes the ark a special, almost sacred building. The subsequent history of the ark, which made it a model for the temple and the church, remains embedded in it.” (Ebach 2001, p. 61). The literary connection between the ark and the tent sanctuary inscribed a sacred element into the ark, which subsequently predisposed it to be *replicated* both in the temple and in the churches.

From early Christianity onwards, the ark has been one of the most important images to the church—the church in institutional, symbolic and architectural terms. The motif of the ark takes on a *bridging function* between *text* (the biblical narrative), *organization* (which requires symbolic representation) and *architecture* (the construction of concrete buildings), thus enabling a complex act of translation in these three areas: With the motif of the ark, the church can be conceived both in its institutional form and in its architectural manifestation, while always maintaining a connection to the biblical text. Hugo Rahner speaks of the “type [Typus] ark = church” (Rahner 1964, p. 506).

In his writing *De Baptismo* from around 200, Tertullian combined the biblical ship metaphor with the biblical concept of *ekklesia*—a connection that does not occur in the New Testament. Tertullian alludes to the story of the disciples’ nocturnal voyage, in which their boat, like the ark, is besieged by violent waves. Jesus approaches the boat, walking on water, and gets in, whereupon the wind dies down (Mt 14:22–33).¹⁷ Tertullian sees the boat as a symbol for the Church: “*navicula illa figuram ecclesiae praeferbat*”¹⁸ (“that little boat anticipated the shape of the Church”). In the house church of Dura-Europos (cf. Kraeling and Welles 1967) from the 3rd century, which is often called the oldest church building, there is a picture of precisely this story on the north wall, which proves to be very fitting for a sacred space. For it ends with a liturgical gesture, the disciples falling down *in* the nave, accompanied by the acclamation: “Truly, you are the Son of God.” (Mt 14:33). A text that probably dates back to the 4th century and whose author is called Pseudo-Ambrosius shows how these aspects overlap in the image of the ark:

Peter’s vessel swims above the high waves of the world in such a way that, when the world falls, it saves all those it takes in unharmed. We see the example of this ship in the Old Testament. For just as the Ark of Noe saved all those whom she took in when the world was shipwrecked (*nafragante mundo*), the Church of Peter will present to God unharmed all those whom it protects when the world burns [. . .].¹⁹

the Earth into a completely inhospitable planet, Drax wants to establish a new civilization on a small scale. Like the ark, the space station represents a self-sufficient microcosmos (Holly Goodhead: “An entire city in space.”) amid or beyond the destroyed environment. The narration of the ark is used to interpret a situation far from the biblical context.

¹⁷ “Tertullian’s baptismal booklet is the first to interpret the apostle’s nave as referring to the church.” (Rahner 1964, p. 476); cf. Tertullian, *De Baptismo* 12, 6 et seq.

¹⁸ Tertullian, *De Baptismo* 12, 7.

¹⁹ Pseudo-Ambrosius, quoted from (Rahner 1964, p. 504).

Augustine regards this connection as completely self-evident. He imputes the great work of translation accomplished by early Christian theology to the New Testament: “None of us doubts that the Ark of Noe also prefigures the Church [. . .]. This might seem like a purely human idea, if the Apostle Peter had not already indicated the same thing in his letter.”²⁰

With the adoption of the metaphor of the ark or ship, the church has consciously entered public space, since the “*ship of state*” is a common term in Greek and Roman antiquity (cf. Dunshirn 2010). From an architectural point of view, the term “nave” (*navis*) has taken root (at least since the Middle Ages) and is used today in numerous languages.²¹ The previously indicated ability of the motif of the ark to connect (translate) areas that are not directly connected with each other becomes even greater when it turns into a *mappa mundi* in the Middle Ages, i.e., the re-construction of a model that encompasses history, (urban) geography and the history of salvation (cf. Ehlers 1972).

The *ark* is a temporary phenomenon, a place of transition in times of threat. It does not provide a model for permanent residence. Only if Noah leaves the ark again will God make a covenant with him and all living beings (Gn 8:20–9:17, especially 9:8–10). In contrast, for Sloterdijk, the ark is an image of total immunization against the outside world, a “self-sealing floating body” (Sloterdijk 1999, p. 256) that embodies a clear distinction between inside and outside. Regarding the sealing of the ark with pitch (Gn 6:14), Sloterdijk says that it “not only makes the side of the ark absolute and no longer allows for a real exterior—it also no longer makes a secret of the fact that salvation can only be found by those who have been able to get hold of one of the few boarding passes for the choice vehicle” (Sloterdijk 1999, p. 261). If, moreover, one considers sacred buildings as arks in the city, which manifest themselves under the conditions of urbanity, the absoluteness and impermeability of the ship’s side must be questioned. The ark, too, must be thought of in terms of the principle openness of the filter; it cannot be thought of as a space that only grants residence but does not open up other spaces; it cannot be thought of as merely floating about unperturbed in the streams without the latter leading through them. It is a place of transit, but not a model of a permanent living space. A religious community might wish to seal itself off completely, but if it accepts visibility by showing itself through buildings in the city, this phantasm proves to be shattered. All of this has an important consequence for the understanding of sacred buildings designed according to the model of the ark: They have to embody the *universality* of the covenant and thus an openness that has always already transcended the borders of their own group. They do not belong solely to the believers of one denomination.

Sacred buildings are like *arks* that have emerged from the waters and found a place in the ocean of houses. They interact with their surroundings, are changed by them and, conversely, also shape them. Arks are places of transition, which allow a temporary stay, but then have to be left again. One stays in them for a certain period of time, they create a form of shared public sphere at their location.

5. The Aesthetic Dimension of Public Space

Public space is not a naturally given and unlimitedly available resource but rather an achievement that has to be defended in the face of resistance and requires care and critical accompaniment.²² It is a

²⁰ Augustinus, *De unitate Ecclesiae* 5, 9, quoted from (Rahner 1964, p. 505).

²¹ Italian “navata”, Spanish “nave”, French “nef”, German “Schiff”.

²² Kurt Appel elaborates the critical momentum inherent in public space with regard to religions, especially to Christianity. He states “that public space lives from an ethos that evades both the dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion as well as the totality claims that annihilates all particularities and thus the body of the other. Rather, public space begins precisely where these dichotomies and fantasies of power are undermined, and openings emerge in the representations of dominating power (and their places and times).” These “subversive openings [must] come together to be creatively molded into a stream of shared narratives” (Appel 2019, p. 528). Appel identifies three contributions of Christianity (or religions in general): Firstly “a tremendous affective and narrative register [. . .], an aesthetic programme which can be made fruitful for civil society” (Appel 2019, p. 526). Secondly, religions have preserved the knowledge “that the dead [. . .] are to be given an appropriate place in the constitutive narratives of civil society” (Appel 2019, p. 528) and must not be excluded from the public sphere. Thirdly religions can offer a variety of “exit-strategies” to closed systems that subvert “definitive borders and self-identities” as well as the “dichotomy between inclusion and exclusion” (Appel 2019, p. 527).

place for learning how to deal with dissent and plurality as well as for searching for forms of balancing out the most diverse demands: “The continuous clashing and negotiation of different interests and values, of—contradictory—attributions of meaning is what makes up public spaces.” (Wildner 2003) As opposed to merely particular interests, its cultivation produces forms of *general* thinking, at least rudimentarily. Democracy is intimately linked to public space—in a tangible, concrete, analogous sense (cf. Denk 2016). Even though it is possible to state—negatively—what threatens public space or even makes it disappear, it is never possible to count exhaustively—positively—the ways in which public space can be used. The ways of its use cannot be derived from a superordinate principle. Therein lies the utopian-anarchic nature of public space: It subsists on guiding people to new and unpredictable inventions of its use.

Public space is a sphere that is freely accessible to all people and in principle does not impose any restrictions on access. However, its commercialisation means that people are increasingly only able to spend more time in it as consumers. Thus, for example, railway stations are often converted into shopping centres with trains departing from them; they offer fewer and fewer seating areas that allow people to linger without consuming anything. “The privatization of public space, for example through shopping centers or cafés, connects access to central areas with consumption, and thereby excludes the less financially strong” (Frantz and Hoelzl 2005, p. 100). One is no longer represented in public space as a free citizen but instead is confronted with the distinction between being able to participate in consumption or not. Public buildings become the property of corporations, squares are used as event stages, facades for advertising purposes. *Privately owned public spaces* increasingly blur the dimensions of public and private (cf. Garrett 2015). There is growing legal overregulation of life in public places. The terrorist threat, which often targets public space, is met by its total surveillance (Harvey [2012] 2013, p. 47 et seq).²³ The corona pandemic has brought to light the fragility of functioning structures of public space around the world.

Moving on from this phenomenological approach, let us consider public space as a project of the Enlightenment in order to differentiate it more precisely. While public space has existed for much longer—just think of the *agorá* in Athens or medieval town squares—the Enlightenment is a movement in which the question of a commonly shared public sphere acquires new broad appeal and urgency. In the following, I will refer to Kant whose demand for a *public* use of reason is groundbreaking for the further tradition of the Enlightenment. The critique of knowledge that guides Kant’s philosophical work must *also* be viewed in the context of the horizon of the public sphere. It is not the abstract theory on an isolated, unworldly subject.

For Kant, the basic operation of human faculties of cognition is the act of judgment, which connects subject and predicate. The structure of every sentence follows this form. The ego can only be conceived in relation to this act of synthesis of subject and predicate. In his *Critique of Judgement* Kant distinguishes between three forms of judgment, namely *theoretical*, *aesthetic* and *practical* (moral) judgment.²⁴ This distinction proves helpful in differentiating what public space can mean. The individual must also be represented in public space through these three forms of judgment. Public space is the sphere in which these three operations take place and which is constituted by these three components in the first place.

I will now outline these three forms of judgement regarding their connection to public space: (a) The theoretical judgements relate to the question of the possibility of object cognition. The determination of what we can know, as well as the limits of knowledge, must in principle be of public nature. Schools, universities and libraries are part of public space. There is a public nature of cognition, as is currently demonstrated not least by the Open Access forms of publication. (b) The practical or moral judgments relate to the question of the generalisability of human action. Action is never merely individual in

²³ Harvey refers to the “right to urbanity” proclaimed in 1968 by Henri Lefebvre.

²⁴ Kant writes that “all our judgments, in accordance with the order of the higher cognitive faculties, can be divided into theoretical, aesthetic, and practical” (Kant [1790] 2000, p. 28).

nature but always has a general dimension. In this way Kant transfers the reflection on the principles of action into a public space.

Man must be represented in public space as a cognizant and moral being. Public space constitutes itself as shared knowledge and place of coexistence. To this, however, Kant adds *aesthetic judgments* (taste judgments) in the *Critique of Judgement*. These do not deal with the question of object cognition as is the case with cognitive judgments, nor with the question of will as is the case with moral judgments. They concern neither what is nor what should be, not the world as it is, nor action as it should be. Aesthetic judgments are about how “the subject feels itself as it is affected by the representation” (Kant [1790] 2000, § 1). The subject feels, i.e., it enters into an affective relationship with itself. It feels by being confronted in a certain way with the question of the aesthetic dimension of the world. This opening in the subject, this tension or distance that opens up in it, cannot be explained or closed by means of either object cognition or morality (cf. Kant [1790] 2000, § 1). One could call this opening, which manifests itself in the conception of the subject, an aesthetic receptivity that is expressed not least in forms of art and religion. Going beyond Kant, I will speak of an aesthetic subject that is open to a certain experience of the world.

How is this to be understood? The aesthetic judgement does not relate to an object but to the *subject* with regard to its aesthetic receptivity. “Beautiful” is not a predicate ascribed to an object but rather has to do with a disposition of the subject. For Kant, however, this does not mean that we are dealing with purely individual and incommunicable experiences. He rather insists on the *general dimension* of the aesthetic judgement: “That is *beautiful* which pleases universally without a concept.” (Kant [1790] 2000, § 9) Aesthetic attributions such as beauty cannot be derived from a given conceptual framework (“[. . .] which pleases universally without a concept”) but rather playfully refer to a form of *freedom*. As *purposiveness without purpose*, they follow neither specific purposes nor particular interests but rather indicate the inner coherence of the cognitive process. Their aim is not to realize possibilities nor to establish unequivocalness but to open up an unpredictable, unlimited wealth that causes much thinking but “can never be grasped in a determinate concept” (Kant [1790] 2000, § 49).

Kant’s reflections on the aesthetic judgment are part of his struggle for a public use of reason. It follows from this that the I does not only have to be represented as recognizing and acting in public space but that it is also a matter of indwelling it aesthetically. In addition to cognition and morality, public space also has an aesthetic dimension. Hölderlin realized this which is why, following Kant, he speaks of the *higher Enlightenment* as also including art and religion (cf. Hölderlin 2009, p. 237).

6. Conclusions

The starting point of our reflections was the decision or simply the contingent historical development through which a religion achieves presence and visibility in cities by means of architecture. In doing so, it exposes itself to the complex conditions of how cities work (cf. Wenzel 2013): The sacred buildings that are built in the wake of that decision have a share in the filtering function of the cities, position themselves in their streams and reflect their peculiar temporality. They cannot avoid the question as to their contribution to public space, especially as to how its tendency to erode is to be counteracted. In order to understand their meaning, i.e., to set in motion the process mentally grasping them, images are needed that can be connected to various discourses and accomplish a work of translation but can also be dismissed again if they prove to no longer be helpful. The motif of the ark that ended up in urban space has accompanied our explanations serving precisely as such a metaphor. In the following section, where I will try to bring together the threads that I have picked up so far and ask about the potential contribution of sacred buildings to contemporary cities, I will focus on the aesthetic dimension of public space. What is at issue is thus not the subject that moves in public space and visits a synagogue, church, mosque or temple with the aim of acquiring knowledge or with the urgency to act but the subject that feels and experiences itself in its dealings with public space and its sacred buildings. In this context, I would like to refer to the experience of disinterested beauty, anachronism, multi-perspectivity and openness.

First of all, one notices that sacred spaces offer a certain resistance to the progressive commercialization of public space. Even though there occasionally are sacred buildings that can only be visited outside of ritual celebrations in exchange for an entrance fee, and even though small merchandise stalls can occasionally be found in sacred spaces, this is usually only intended to support the costly preservation of the buildings but in most cases does not represent a profitable source of income. The flows of goods and money that penetrate almost all pores of the city are essentially filtered out well by the sacred buildings thus creating a public space that is only moderately commercialised. The status of the consumer, whose one-dimensional aim is the constantly renewing Now of consumption, is suspended in the space of the ark. Perhaps in this way can some of that disinterested and free pleasure that Kant associates with the beautiful come into view? (Kant [1790] 2000, § 5).

When the constantly renewing Now of consumption fades into the background, the subject can open up to a more differentiated experience of time and enter an *anachronistic horizon* through its perception of the sacred building. Synagogues, churches, mosques, temples, etc., are architectural structures that take on a visible form that is designed to last. They thus fall back on a basic motif that is characteristic of cities in general: As has been shown, there is no city without a certain constancy and permanence. The durability of sacred buildings is possible not least because the requirements for their use have hardly changed over the centuries. For example, in an ancient basilica or a medieval cathedral, worship can still be celebrated without there being any elements of celebration missing. As long as sacred buildings are not secularised, communities with tried and tested strategies for passing on their beliefs will remain responsible for them for more than just one generation and ensure that they are used continuously and consistently so that they do not become the expression of constantly changing interests (cf. Wehdorn 2006). In this way, sacred buildings can form a space *that consciously expands into the past and future*. Many sacred buildings have been built over decades or even centuries, they have been extended, changed, restored. In this way, they become an *embodiment of different eras of the past* which overlap and become visible in them. Even if sacred buildings are newly built today, they are designed to be highly durable, if the financial possibilities allow it. This is apparent, for example, in the use of noble and durable materials. By contrast, in the case of quite a few buildings in our public space, which like the sacred buildings we use only temporarily without remaining there permanently (supermarkets, petrol stations, etc.), a date for their demolition and possible new construction has already been taken into account. This is highly problematic, not only for ecological reasons,²⁵ it also does not convey any dimension of future for those just passing by or entering them. By contrast, the durability of sacred buildings conveys the *utopia that the future should be* as these buildings are constructed in a way that also future generations will be able to look at them or even to use them.

Their continuity makes sacred buildings a mirror of different times and endows them with an anachronistic dimension. They never belong to just one generation or epoch. Rather, they are woven into the often eventful history of their neighbourhood: What (urban) political statements are associated with the construction of a sacred building? Sacred buildings are often erected in the course of urban expansions and reflect a new beginning, but their state is also an indicator of emigration and desertion of individual districts. There is always the question of how a religious community meeting at a particular location deals with current crises: social inequality, the reception of refugees, or, more recently, supporting people during the COVID pandemic. What strategy for revitalizing the environment does the community gathering in a sacred building adopt? All this shapes sacred buildings over the years, decades and centuries. They are capable of embodying as one building that “ambiguity” or “multi-perspective view” (Heinrich 2015, p. 7) which Klaus Heinrich calls the

²⁵ “There are actually only few, even more wasteful processes than tearing away old building fabric and replacing it with a completely new building. And although this procedure involving an outrageous misuse of energy (grey energy) and material is the norm today, an alternative approach of continuing to use demolition materials has developed [. . .]. Buildings erected in this way often contain quotations and memories of times past, of (perhaps) ‘better’ times and of course a connection to the context of the place.” (Reischer 2017).

utopia of the *city as a whole*. In the face of different times—their different pasts and their future—one becomes, as Klaus Heinrich puts it, somewhat aware of the “history of the species that one carries forward” (Heinrich 2015, p. 7). This process of becoming aware of oneself constitutes an aspect of the Enlightenment that has to do with public space in aesthetic terms. The ego, which in its aesthetic receptivity feels itself and develops a form of self-consciousness, experiences how it is opened up by a wider temporal horizon. It is freed from the fantasy of having to be completely comfortable in the now. A vision for the contribution of sacred buildings to public space could be formulated like this: Sacred buildings can like arks that move through time with a high degree of stability. In their spatial capacity, they can represent the invasion of temporality *into space*. Whoever visits sacred buildings, be it for religious or other reasons, can live an anachronistic, multi-perspective experience condensed in a *single* place.

Churches—but I would like to raise the question whether this does not apply to a certain extent to sacred buildings in general—embody the type [Typus] of the ark. The ark serves to preserve the diversity of life and is closely related to the idea of a universal covenant of God with humanity and creation. Sacred buildings that consider themselves to be arks therefore never belong to only one particular group of believers; no one inhabits them permanently, everyone there is there as a guest who stays temporarily and then moves on again. Sacred ark-like buildings must be open to the uncontrollable variety of people who visit them for whatever reason they may have, and in doing so, reinvent their use again and again. Irrespective of whether their visit is associated with an authentic religious interest, it is about the creation of a shared space. Characteristic elements of sacred buildings, which can be used for both religious and secular purposes and which define them as arks in an ocean of houses, could be: the silence, the differentiated landscape of sound and sight that they offer, the changed climate, their space not being tied to consumption, the disinterested perception of beauty, the changed sense of time that encompasses both the past and the future, their opening up a multi-perspective view.²⁶ At this point, our considerations would have to move on to a precise analysis of concrete sacred buildings in order to show how each of the aforementioned aspects presents itself.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: I want to thank Natalie Eder for translating and Faye Taschner for proof-reading.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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²⁶ These characteristics show an overlapping zone of sacred buildings with museums and concert halls (cf. Vattimo 1997, pp. 89–92). I consider the main difference the community that is (or was) committed to carry out religious rituals exactly at this place (the sacred building).

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