

# I became aware of the power of architecture as a child sitting in church.

This was in suburban Connecticut, in what was then the small town of Stamford. We were members of the First Presbyterian Church, an institution my father picked simply because he liked the Sunday school, he told us; I'm sure the warm, friendly, accepting atmosphere of the congregation was appealing to a newcomer from Kentucky with a wife from Casablanca. My father was in charge of our religious education; my mother stayed home with the babies, except on holidays. My sister and I would be dropped off at Sunday school while my father did his rounds at one hospital; then he would pick us up for lunch at the cafeteria of another. So, right off the bat, going to church meant a special outing.

The classroom part of Sunday school left no impression on my memory. Chapel was another thing. Grade-school children were herded into an intimate space—away from the main church, in which the grown-ups prayed—for 15 or 20 minutes of “beginner” worship. The chapel was a dimly lit, cool space; the floors, as I recall, were stone, and the ample, clean-lined wooden benches had a solid feel. There was a wooden cross, also unadorned, as well as a pulpit and an altar. I didn't know a thing about modern design versus traditional design, and I certainly wouldn't have had the critical capacity with which to judge the place in which we sat. I just knew that I loved going there.

It was quiet, and that was a welcome respite from the noise of school and a house full of babies and piano practice and battles. The quiet in the chapel had a special force; it wasn't like the anxious, droning quiet enforced by a teacher during a test, nor was it the humming quiet of the house when I was lying in bed late at night. It was more like the quiet of the thick woods behind our house, a quiet that settled over my shoulders as soon as I climbed down the shaded hill and reached the sparkling sunlight of the river, a quiet full of significance, out of which anything might spring. A quiet of anticipation, and discovery—that's what the chapel, which came to mean prayer, felt like to me.

The chapel was also beautiful. Its quiet nature was expressed in the handsome, strong, simple lines of everything in it; that somehow had the effect of quieting the mind. The plaster was smooth and looked burnished. The stones set into the walls were old and worn and interesting; they had been sent from other sacred places around the world. Their inscriptions referred to mysterious, faraway, and exotic places. Later in life, when I learned about modernism, I could not understand how it came to look so “cold.” My first experience of modern architecture was one of a place of simple, warm, glowing grace.

I went away to school, and then moved to Texas. I forgot all about church—and didn't return to it for

many years. When I did, I was divorced, the mother of two children, and looking for solace. The moment I walked into the chapel again, peace settled over my shoulders, as it had always done, and I felt soothed by that familiar, embracing quiet. By then, too, I could appreciate the craft of the design around me, as well as the value and refinement of the materials.

I didn't consider the impact of that space on my aesthetic sense, though, until about ten years ago, when I began to think about the pages of *House & Garden*. When I was asked to become the editor of this magazine, I decided to include in its coverage a column called House of Worship. I wanted the magazine to reflect a recognition that houses and gardens encompass much more than the private places in which we live and play. There are houses and gardens that belong to a community as well, and they can become the most significant factors in our experience of home.

I wanted to explore the connection between spirituality and design. How do architects create prayerful spaces? How do they create places that allow people to open their hearts and minds to some sense of a greater being or a higher purpose? I believe that anyone can worship anywhere, and that a prayer whispered under a canopy of redwoods is as powerful as one that rings out in a cathedral. But churches, and synagogues, and mosques, and temples, and meetinghouses have to do with building a community of worship or study; once the decision is made to fix a place, everything is called into question. What will it look like? What values will it express? What will its relationship be to light, and to darkness? What kinds of materials are appropriate? What is the connection between scripture and architecture? And above all, what is the nature of a spiritual quest; what quality of space best serves it?

We are publishing a book on this subject, called *House of Worship*, just in time for the holiday season. In its pages you will meet talented and dedicated designers and parishioners. You may find your own place of worship represented here; you may find inspiration, wisdom, and guidance for creating new places of worship. While we may not have the abundance of Europe's ancient stone cathedrals, we are blessed, in the United States, with an abundance of variety and imagination in our sacred buildings. It is perhaps not too much to hope that we can gain, from our visits to houses of worship, some appreciation for the infinitude of angles that grace any spiritual path.



Dominique Browning, EDITOR