A CARMELITE MONASTERY

AN EXPLORATION OF AFFECTIVE PRESENCE IN ARCHITECTURE

JUDD E. STOREY
SPRING 1994
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Abstract

The goal of this thesis design was to explore whether or not architecture can have an affective presence on people in today's modern (electronic) world and indeed it can. An affective presence can be achieved in the search for singularity. A singular expression of existence is found through an appeal to the human senses in relationship to the climatic factors and materials surrounding us. In this relationship, the building becomes a mediator between the human and his environment. It is in this mediation that the potential for an affective architecture can be found.

The monastery houses 20 sisters and includes all the necessary support spaces for living, working and spiritual needs. It is located in an area known as the Crest at Eagle Creek Park in Indianapolis, Indiana. The actual site is at the end of an east facing peninsula, which fingers out into the reservoir. The site sits roughly 40 feet above the water line in a very densely wooded setting.

Overall the site provides isolation and a strong connection with nature that enhances the sister's life-style. The design of the monastery is based on the play of geometries in relationship to the topography. A second driving force is the separation of secular and sacred. The physical structure of the building serves as a mediator between the sister's lives, God, and the environment around them. Throughout the monastery this dialog is carried out to enhance and heighten affective presence of the building. The overall form of the monastery is made much more affective by expressing many of the important functions individually. Elements such as the secular functions, chapter house, the chapel and the contemplation space are juxtaposed against each other to make the overall complex more dynamic and interesting. In essence the facility enhances and promotes each sister's sense of spirituality and their individual relationship with God by creating dynamic and affective space.

Right isometric of the site and monastery.
Background

In order to begin the delineation of the concept behind Carmelite Monastery, it is first necessary to have a better understanding of the nuns and their order. The Carmelite Order was originally founded about 1099 by a group of hermits on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Some of the hermits remained and lived atop Mt. Carmel, where they followed the prophet Elijah. Slowly a way of life developed that balanced solitude with the supportive aspects of community. The way was affirmed and written by Albert Patriarch of Jerusalem between 1206 and 1214. Then in 1238 some of the hermits started to migrate back to Europe. Upon returning to Europe women started to become involved with the order while living in private homes and in 1452 the first community of nuns was formed. During the Golden Age of Spanish Mysticism the order was reformed by its two great saints Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. For many years the Carmelite order had been drifting and the saints where able to bring the order back to the teaching of Elijah. They skillfully articulated the interior journey which is central to the order and leads to divine intimacy. In 1790 Carmel came to the United States and slowly spread across the country. Finally in 1922, a foundation was created in New Albany and it moved to Indianapolis in 1932.

Today the order has modernize in some ways by foregoing the traditional dress and emphasizing a democratic community, but the strict entrance requirements and vows still apply. To enter the monastery, a woman must have a good range of life experiences and at least a college education or equivalent. Upon entering the Carmelite Order, it take approximately six years until final vows may be taken. The final vows include that of poverty (leading the simplest of lives), chastity (abstaining from sex and more importantly maintaining the appropriate relationships) and obedience (to God and the community at the monastery). As important as the traditional vows are the Four Pillars of Life which help to guide the sisters at Carmel of the Resurrection in Indianapolis. They are Prayer, Solitude, Community, and Contemplative Presence, from these ideal the daily life of the sisters proceeds. Their daily routine (see page describing routine) is a careful balance between solitary prayer and community activities. The fourth pillar, contemplative presence, is the most important concept in their lives. In defining contemplative presence, they believe that it is being very present to or mindful of everything one does throughout life. For the nuns contemplative presence is the deepest aspect of person and it becomes the center of the Carmelite way of life. It is the capacity for union with God (divine intimacy). Through prayer and contemplative presence they are able to achieve the dynamism of intimate communion with God. Now with a better understanding of the users and
their beliefs the overall concept and its relationship to the user can be discussed.

**Thesis Statement**

Throughout much of the course of history the architecture that man has created has had a distinct presence and affect. This is very evident in cases such as the acropolis in Athens with its controlled approach and view designed to invoke a certain affect of those visiting the temples or in a Gothic cathedral with its light filled nave and uplifting form. This ideal of distinct presence and affect held true through much of the modern era. This all changed with the debasement of modern architecture and the beginning of the electronic age, these factors together have caused architecture to change from a strong media to a weak one. Today people are collectively affected by their televisions more than they are by the buildings they use. This alters an individuals concept of affect as well as his behavior. Today people find reality in a television and other electronic media. We can watch people die live via CNN and then see a few commercials telling us which car to drive or soda to drink. This creates a loss of the affecting aspects of individual expression. So, the question becomes, how can architecture as a weak media have an affective presence?

An affective presence may be achieved in the search for singularity (an individual no longer able to live within the realm of generality). The singular expression of existence outside the realm of generality can be found through an appeal to the human senses in relationship to the climatic factors surrounding us. Thus the building becomes a mediator between the human and his environment.

In the mediation between the two, the architect creates an affective presence which be felt on a singular level.

In the case of the Carmelite Nuns one has found a group in which each person chooses to live outside the realm of generality. Their singular expression of existence is found in the divine intimacy with God. So the challenge becomes the creation of a monastery which has an affective presence that enhances the existence of the nuns and their relationship with God.

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The Ecasty of St. Tresea by Bernini
An Argument

JS: In order to facilitate an interesting discussion I would like to remind you of a few pertinent facts.

Voice: Ah, that would be most helpful to me.

JS: The order for which this monastery has been designed is Carmel of the Resurrection. The nuns of this order live a diacritic life style in that they spend their days in both solitary and community activities. At the heart of their existence is a belief in each person’s contemplative presence. This takes place through the individual’s mystic journey inward toward God. Many of the greatest Carmelites have articulated their experience through powerful metaphors such as that of a mountain, spring or inward journey.

Voice: The Carmelites seem to lead and very spiritual and monastic life style. But tell me, where is this new monastery located?

JS: The new monastery will be located at the northern end of the Eagle Creek Reservoir at a place called the crest. I have chosen this site, because it offers both isolation and pleasing views of nature, as well as, a close proximity to the population it serves with altar bread baking.

Voice: Continue....

JS: In searching for an architecture of affective presence, I started with two intersecting grids that formed the traditional cloister, along with the rest of the building proper.

Voice: So, you feel that one of the overriding themes in creating an affective presence is the use of grids to create dynamic spaces.

JS: Ah, no. Let me explain further. In this instance the grids and geometries serve as a starting point, in which one sees a change from static and boring to affective and dynamic with a very powerful presence. In the transition, the grid slips into the background serving only as an organizer and a mediator. The geometries become an important but subtle part of the design.

Voice: I see. Could you now tell me more about the final design and how you arrived at it?

JS: In looking at the final design and its transformation, one of the most important steps was the separation of the secular from
the scared. I pulled those functions which required interface with the secular world out of the monastery proper to create a strong sense of division and other worldliness.

Voice: That would work very well, expect that you seem to destroy the sense of separation by directly connecting the secular functions with one of the most sacred places in the monastery: the chapel.

JS: You may be able to argue that, but let me explain how I viewed that sequence of events in the design. In this instance the axis serves as a connector between the secular and the scared. The primary reason for this path is to allow guests of the sisters to reach the chapel, so they can attend mass with their relative (a sister). By creating this axis, the guests have a way to reach the chapel without directly entering the monastery proper. The separation between secular and sacred is maintained by forcing guests to move through the semicircular transition space that serves a control point for access to the cloister. As the guest (members of the secular world travel along the axis to the chapel they are afforded views of the monastic life without actually engaging it. Metaphorically speaking the axis bisects the overall plan and represents the diacritic life style of the nuns as well as the duality of the body (secular) and soul (sacred). Thus, instead of hindering the sense of separation the axis serves to reinforce and enhance the overall design.

Voice: Hmm... Seems reasonable, but let us explore the concept of this axis a little more. I notice that both the nuns and the guests are forced to walk outside in order to reach the chapel. Why is this so?

JS: You are very preceptive. The fact that the chapel can not be reached directly via indoor passages is an important aspect of the design. The whole axis (secular, entry, chapter house and chapel) is symbolic of the journey towards God. This sequence plays a large role in creating an affective presence. It does so by taking the user from the very enclosed secular building to the more open entry and finally to the wide open cloister with its play of various architectural forms. In moving from building to building the user is forced to engage nature and the environment around them. By creating this sequence the presence of the architecture and its ability to affect the human senses is heightened. The user is forced to realize and become aware of both the natural, as well as, the man-made. By experiencing the one in juxtaposition to the other both realms are emphasized and start to take on a much more affective presence then architecture often does.

Voice: So after 50 or more years of the modern approach of separating man from the
Main Floor Plan

Lower Level Floor Plan
environment by sealing him off, it seems that you are forcing people to once again experience nature, as well as, the built form in a much more active way. Am I correct?

JS: Correct! In looking at the modern era it has had a numbing affect on the on the human senses. The human’s perception of reality changed drastically when he was sealed off from the environment and given a television to look at.

Voice: I tend to agree, but now I have another question for you. The history of monastery planning and form has a long and old tradition ranging from St. Gall to La Tourette, how has this effected your design/planning for this Carmelite Monastery?

JS: My influences in the design and planning of the Carmel of the Resurrection Monastery came from a number of sources. First and foremost I consulted the Rule of St. Albert, which all Carmelites follow. It emphasizes individual cells, a common refectory and a centralized chapel. As to the ideal plan developed at St. Gall I started using that general conception, but found that I quickly moved forward looking for solution that better fit the problems of the site and took advantage of its natural beauty. In terms of the physical structure of the monastery I found myself influenced by both LeCorbuier’s and Ando’s use of concrete. I find concrete to be simple and austere, yet very beautiful. Finally my interest in complex spaces is derived from the likes of Meier, Ando, and Corbu as well as the texts of Eisenman.

Voice: Your research is very thorough and many of the influences are apparent. Now tell me tell me two things: first you talk about a number of planning issues but, you do not seem to follow any of them. Why is this so? Second, I would like you to tell me more about the overall form you arrived at?

JS: In doing my research I found a number of precedents and influences which where factored into the design, but ultimately I wanted to work towards a new end. In looking for an affective architecture I found myself moving and manipulating elements in a way that best suited the goals of my thesis and the needs of the sisters, thus strict precedents and influence faded into the background.

Voice: Humm, I see.

JS: Now to address your second question about the overall form of the building. The design started with a traditional square plan which faced due east, from there I manipulated the forms to create dynamic and affective space. A second major design decision, after pulling the secular functions out of the building proper, was to shift the living quadrants subtly based on queues from the topography as can be seen in the south wing. The east wing shifts to become tangent to the
View of the chapel looking towards the altar.
refectory arc which based on the curve of the land. This decision had two major benefits. First it allowed the sisters to have a better a wider view then the might have otherwise. Second, these shifts help to make the cloister more dynamic and affective. The refectory was allowed to break out of the angular forms of the monastery to emphasize its importance. The curve also provides the sisters with a much more sweeping view of the landscape while they are dining. In essence it offers another way to view and interact with nature. In the secular portion of the monastery the same technique is used with excellent results. A concave arc is cut out of the building, which affords the sisters and their guests a wonderful view over the natural landscape. Along the western edge of the monastery the storage and loading facilities are shifted drastically for two reasons. First it is aligned with the guest portion of the complex to represent its interface with the secular world. Secondly, it is shifted to allow for easy access for service vehicles. So as you can see there are both pragmatic and esthetical reasons for the orientation of these elements. A final important of the physical structure is the curved entry which opens the user up onto the cloister.

Voice: It seems that you have placed a great deal of emphasis on the monastery proper, but I am interested to know how it relates to the cloister?

JS: I believe that the monastery proper and the cloister are of equal importance in my design. It may seem that the cloister is secondary because it is formed by the physical structure of the monastery, but it plays a very important role in creating an affective presence. As one moves through the monastery the relationship to the cloister changes depending on the functions. Along the south and east sides of the building, the nuns do not have direct views of the cloister, but light is allowed to flow in from low placed windows. The relationship in these areas is weak, because the focus here is on the cell as a place for living and contemplation. On the north and west sides of the building a strong visual relationship with the cloister is created through a band of windows. These parts of the monastery are much more active and consequently offer more engaging views.

Voice: OK. Now tell me, what is the importance of the various architectural elements that are within the cloister? It is my understanding that traditionally the cloister spaces were small and fairly empty.

JS: You are correct many cloisters are both small and empty. In studying them, I also noticed that they tend to separate man from nature. Thus in order to make the cloister more enticing and dynamic, I added a variety of architectural elements and enlarged the size of the cloister. By giving the sisters opportunities to engage the cloister it raises
View of the chapel from the altar.
their awareness of nature in juxtaposition to the built architectural forms. It also enhances the sister's understanding of their individual existence in the world. There are a number of ways in which the sisters can engage the cloister. The first way is from the entry vestibule. A sister or guest can walk along a path bordered by a columnar screen on the south side to the chapter house and chapel. The importance of the chapter house is denoted by cutting an arc out of it which is based on the apse curve of the chapel. This curve is carried out in the building form and is highlighted by a sculptural element that intersects the columnar screen. The area in front of the chapter house is enhanced by a small reflecting pool which continues the line of the path to the chapel. The second major way to access the cloister is from the overlapping arcs on the southern boundary of the space. The arcs serve a number of functions. They break up the long corridor with a contemplation space (small arc) and circulation space (large arc) which allows one to either go to the lower level or out into the cloister. Once in the cloister the sisters can follow curved path that leads to a large gathering space at the highest point on the site for outdoor mass or meals. This space is visually separated from any guests who may be walking to the chapel, by an imposing concrete wall. At this pinnacle a number a number of thematic geometries are carried out to enhance the design. The large reflecting pool is based on the curve of the apse. The connecting stream between fountain and reflecting pool follows the angle of the path to the chapel. Each of these elements serves to focus the monastery as a whole and give it a dynamic unity. The fountain and reflecting pool in the upper portion of the cloister symbolize the Springs of Carmel as a place of life and rebirth. The soft sound of the flowing water is also another way in which the sisters are forced to engage the both nature and the architecture in a more dynamic way. So as you can see, both the physical building and the cloister work to create an affective presence.

Voice: You make a very persuasive argument with both your image and your descriptions. In order to convince completely me though you will have to answer just a few more questions. First, given the inward looking nature of monastic orders, why do break the cloister wall and place one of the most scared elements, the chapel, protruding out of the break?

JS: You have brought up a number of important issues. The break in the western portion of the monastery is symbolic of the Carmelites mission to question what is happening in the church and in society. The break is then filled with the chapel, a place were the sisters, their relatives (the secular) and God all meet and become one. The break also affords the sisters views from the
View looking into the contemplation space.
upper cloister to the natural surroundings outside the monastery’s walls. The chapel was nestled into a swale in the earth to take advantage of the site. Inside the chapel a number of things happen to create a dynamic and affective presence. Upon entering the chapel proper, the user is dramatically affected by the play of light on the sloping curved walls, as well as, soft wash that covers the altar. The affect is also heightened by the shift in orientation of the nave versus the actual building. While the building is shifted the orientation of the pews and altar is due east, which conforms to traditional Catholic dogma. By creating this juxtaposition the architecture has much more meaning and is definitely more affective. A final important element in the design of the chapel was the placement of the apse outside the walls of the monastery proper. The subtle placement of the apse symbolizes the sisters starting to transcend their earthly bounds to attain a divine union with God.

Voice: I seem to have been mistaken, You have some very valid reasons for your actions that support your thesis. Now I have one final question for you. Could you please describe for me the meaning and purpose of the cylinder that completely outside of the monastery.

JS: The cylinder is a space for contemplation and it is one of the most important elements in the whole monastery. Its form is derived from the traditional power found the circle. Throughout history, the circle has been seen as the center of the universe and the point at which man and god meet. This place becomes the point of singular union with God, beyond the realm of the church and any other individual, thus it is its own entity. When the sister crosses the bridge to the contemplation space she symbolically leaves the physical world behind to embark on the journey inward. Inside the contemplation space the sound of soft running water can be heard again symboling the Springs of Carmel, in addition to this the truncated roof is open to the sky. These factors together create a very affective presence which allows the sisters to become one with themselves, nature and God on a singular level.

Voice: Ah, you have created yet another space that makes a strong argument for an architecture of affective presence. It has with stood the pressures of dissection and has come through magnificently.

JS: Thank you. I would like to close with a reassemble of the parts. I feel that I have created a dynamic and affective architecture that brings together man, nature and God. In the overall design we see a movement from secular, to union within the realm of the church and ultimately divine union on a singular basis. I feel that this truly captures the spirit of the Carmelite belief.
View looking up out of the contemplation space
View down cloister hallway to the cells.

View of the cloister looking toward the chapter house and the chapel.
View of the cloister from the chapel.

View of the looking out at the reflecting pool and gathering space.
Outline Program

The monastery will house 20 sisters permanently plus visiting sisters and relatives. The monastery will also include all the necessary support spaces for living, working and spiritual needs. Beyond spiritual and living needs, the order’s means of support are the baking of alter bread wafers and creation of non-gender specific prayer books for publishing. An emphasize in design should be place on the living and spiritual areas of the monastery, as that is where a majority of the sister’s time will be spent. The physical structure of the building should serve as a mediator between the sister’s lives, God, and the environment around them. In the mediation between the two, an affective architecture will be defined that allows the sisters to exist on a singular level (within themselves and with God). In essence the facility should enhance and promote each sister’s sense of spirituality and their individual relationship with God.

Space Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Room</th>
<th>Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>turn room</td>
<td>100 sqft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>visiting room</td>
<td>260 sqft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guest room (x3)</td>
<td>714 sqft</td>
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<tr>
<td>cell (x20)</td>
<td>2000 sqft</td>
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<tr>
<td>infirmary (x2)</td>
<td>396 sqft</td>
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<tr>
<td>kitchen</td>
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<tr>
<td>dining room</td>
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<tr>
<td>storage room (x15)</td>
<td>1350 sqft</td>
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<tr>
<td>recreation room (x1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>art room</td>
<td>255 sqft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>library</td>
<td>650 sqft</td>
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<tr>
<td>exercise room</td>
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<tr>
<td>chapel</td>
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<tr>
<td>sacristy/vestry</td>
<td>299 sqft</td>
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<td>small chapel and assembly</td>
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<tr>
<td>contemplation space (x1)</td>
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<td>alter bread workroom</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>laundry room</td>
<td>368 sqft</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>11,846 sqft</strong></td>
</tr>
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</table>

View of the site.
Site Analysis

The Carmelite Monastery is located in an area known as the Crest at Eagle Creek Park in Indianapolis Indiana. The actual site is at the end of an east facing peninsula, which fingers out into the reservoir. The area around and leading up to the site is a densely forested landscape. The site sits roughly 40 feet above the water line in a natural setting. The only symbol of the outside world (non-secular) is a freeway that is seven or eight miles from the site. This element of the outside world can be seen from the site, but the traffic cannot be heard. Overall the site provides isolation and a strong connection with nature. Each of these elements has an important role in providing the appropriate atmosphere for the monastery. The site allows the sisters to have the silence needed for contemplation and a strong connection to nature, which is central to their lives.

The cultural context of the Indianapolis as a mid-western city is very important. Because of the cities and for that matter the states conservative outlook, the sister a good market for their products. A sizable number of catholic in the city and surrounding area gives the monastery plenty of business in the area alter-bread wafers.
Bibliography


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View of the refectory and monastery from the water.