SAKRÁLNÍ PROSTOR • SACRAL SPACE

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“Above all, it is light through which the world touches us and we touch the world.” Juhani Pallasmaa

Sacral architecture is not in the centre of contemporary architectural considerations. However, this does not mean that it will disappear completely or is deteriorating in terms of quality. The Sacral Space ex- hibition presents 25 chapels in the main area of the gallery. This not too extensive architecture is mediated through small-scale models with their immediate surroundings and especially by photographs of the interiors. The play of light can be impressively captured in an image, however, direct spatial experience is more accurate. That is why an object on the borderline of architecture and fine arts dominates the exhibition premises. It is a fragment of architecture with a mosaic of selected examples of lighting composition in the space of contemporary chapels.

Our attention focuses on the main aspect of the sacral area, i.e. the definition of the space itself, and specifically one of its fundamental properties: daylight. Treatment with natural light determines the char- acter of the place, making it recognisable at the most basic level. It applies to most sacral architecture that the role of light is essential for the creation of an impressive scene. Everyone, believer or non-be- liever, receives the full experience of a supreme religious building upon entering into the area of the Roman Pantheon. The large, airy, central space dedicated to all the gods terminates at the top of the dome with an open vista of the heavens (oculus). The coveted intense experience is evoked by a combination of a large stationary space and a wandering cone of light on the walls. This reflects the fun- damental orientation of man in the world, biological rhythm, while at the same time displaying the unavailability of light — the basic experience of something that exceeds the dimensions of human exis- tence. One can say that this exceptional building stands as a backdrop to all other buildings (although already previous builders were able to link the symbolism of architecture and the sky, such as in Ancient Egypt). This is also true for the symbolic grouping of light by Abbot Suger and the conversion of it into forms of architecture in Saint-Denis near Paris in which the Gothic was born. The same applies to the masterful – literally theatrically-scenographic – conduction of light by Gian Lorenzo Bernini and the light dramas of his Roman Baroque contemporary, Francesco Borromini. Both were aware of the possibil- ities of light in architecture and fully utilised them: Bernini brings to the altar the mysterious light from a hidden source, such as in the church of Sant’ Andrea al Quirinale. And Borromini, just a few metres further in Via del Quirinale, lets the dome of the church of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane be carried by the light flowing into the vertical infinity. Careful observation will also recognise a comparable use of light in modern architecture. A thoughtful sketch, highlighting some recurring luminous compositions of sacred architecture in the second half of the 20th century (but not only) is outlined in the quick his- torical introduction.

Current construction, among them projects by architects Peter Zumthor, Mario Botta, Christian Kerez, Marte.Marte studio and others, are further additions to the long line, and their quality is often not in

The novelty of form and material, but in the ability to emphasise the archaic power of light. Indeed, the role of sacred space is one of the most enduring in the history of architecture. In an age of disenchant- ment with the world, to use the fitting designation of the rationality of the Max Weber society, taking advantage of these experiences caused by the strong emotional charge of light may sometimes seem cynically manipulative, as if the effect was created for the effect itself. In other words, the fulfilment of a superficial desire for a spectacle. However, the boundary is not sharply defined between authentic creation with escalated light composition and a spectacular falsehood.

Finally, it should be recognised that light controls a space like music does. Although it is impossible to catch in one’s hand, the hands of great architects know how to lead and focus it in order to create a moment of uniqueness that shapes our experience of architecture and evokes in us, in the best case, a quiver of infinity, or dizziness from the power of the space. The tension between immaterial light and matter emphasised by light is the core of the exhibition. None of this would be meaningful without our own involvement, rational as well as emotional, our mental and physical experiencing of space and place that gives sense to these buildings.

Filip Šenk