
Moving between spaces – uncovering ritual use of ancient architecture through the senses

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Résumé

This session seeks to broaden the way sacred spaces are defined and discussed, focusing on the intersection between formal and informal uses through time. Of particular interest are techniques of spatial interrogation that use sensory methods.

Architectural forms in sacred spaces embody the formalized ritual intents and relationships designed by original users, be it in enclosed structures or urban routes employed in processions. The architecture housed and guided certain interactions through its layout and sensorium; design features such as differential massing, orientation, ambulatory direction, access hierarchies, and entry sequencing can still signal a differentiation from profane space and thus ritual purpose to a contemporary viewer. But these formalized elements function as the authorized narrative of such spaces, spaces that were actually defined and delineated equally by the rituals practiced there and the informal interactions by all participants and observers. This level of site use is greatly defined by sensory cues based in contrast or difference: sightline manipulation, shifts in acoustic texture or sound sources, elevation changes while walking, light and temperature changes, or olfactory stimuli are only a few possible variations.

With such differences playing a defining role in sacred spaces, how might we reconsider their boundaries, including within assemblages of multiple structures and the interstitial landscape or topographical setting? If a sacred structure is a physical expression of what ritual uses were intended in that space, then what inherent meanings are we missing by not considering the atmospheric context of its surroundings and transiting through them? Furthermore, how might we shift our understanding by considering past users who did not follow prescribed sequences of interaction? How can attention to sensory detail reveal such differences in ritual intension and experience within sacred spaces? Of course, many sacred spaces were used by generations of people, who changed both their practices and the architectural forms themselves. How might we trace the resulting shifts in sensory contrasts over time, and how do these affect our contemporary interpretations of past uses?

The session brings together papers that use sensory sensitivity to investigate how ancient sacred spaces were used. The discussion is open to multiple scales, from individual structures to sacred landscapes. Movements to and through them were ritualized and greatly influenced by environmental factors, which a sensory focus can address directly. Experiential aspects of place can also offer different delineations and boundaries between spaces, uses,

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and access than what is formally programmed into the physical forms of architectural expression. Ritual activities within a sacred structure may be unavailable visually but publicly accessible through sound reverberations, for instance. One of the added benefits to a sensory focus on spatial and activity organization through time is that it requires a three- and four-dimensional perspective, rather than a two-dimensional consideration of a structure's remains. Papers that address this complexity, both in terms of investigation and visualization, are especially welcome.

Mots-Clés: senses, sacred landscape, phenomenology, movement, architecture