Between mysticism and industry: Breuer, the Benedictines and a binder

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Art has become a word for something more spiritual […] I believe that handicraft, as well as industry, can and does produce art.
Josef Albers, 'The Meaning of Art,' (1940).[2]

I. Introduction: mechanics, symbols and history

On November 28, 1959, Baldwin Dworschak (1906-1996), the Abbot of the Benedictine religious community in Collegeville in Minnesota, wrote a letter to the Bauhaus artist and educator, Josef Albers (1888-1976). The letter contained a rejection of Albers's design proposal for the north stained-glass window of the abbey church, which was under construction at the time (1953-1961). Although Dworschak conceded that if the 'decision could have been limited to the question of artistic merits or excellence of design', the decision would have been an 'easy one for the Committee to make', Dworschak was adamant they were not going to choose Albers's design.[3]

Dworschak's rejection appeared at the end of a series of committee meetings over a three-year period between 1956 and 1959. Among those present at the meetings were twelve Benedictine monks from different professional backgrounds, architectural consultants, and representatives of the Marcel Breuer Office.[4] The purpose of the meetings was to make architectural decisions based on discussions and the advice of independent surveyors. These decisions were also informed by research conducted by both parties on architectural modernism, and on Benedictine

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[2] Albers, 'The Meaning of Art', in Box No. 16 (Professional Papers, Albers, Josef & Anni, Pamphlets/Writings), Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Libraries, NY, 3.
[3] Letter. Abbot Dworschak Baldwin to Josef Albers, November 28, 1959. Available online: http://breuer.syr.edu/. Accessed 29/01/2019.
[4] Hilary Thimmesh, *Marcel Breuer and a Committee of Twelve Plan a Church. A Monastic Memoir*, Collegeville, Minnesota: Saint John's University Press, 2011, 4-6. Among the consultants were the artist, teacher and former Benedictine Oblate, Frank Kacmarcik (1920-2004), who was the primary art consultant, the abstract painter and camouflage artist, William Saltzman (1916-2006), the stained-glass consultant, Emil Frei Jr. (1896-1964), and the onsite architectural supervisor, Val Michelson (1916-2006). See Thimmesh, *A Monastic Memoir*, 125-126. The two members from the office present were Marcel Breuer (1902-1981) himself and his assistant, Hamilton Smith (1925).

history and aesthetics.[5] The debate over the content and form of the main window, and its function vis-à-vis the broader architectural and religious context, was a consistent source of contention for a period of over one year between August 1958 and November 1959.[6]

What was at stake in Dworschak's rejection letter to Albers was how religious meanings were to be conveyed in a functionalist architectural setting. As the architectural historian Adrian Forty has observed, the concept of 'functionalism' has a problematic and contradictory history. From the eighteenth-century on, the concept of function in architectural discourse has been used to designate mathematical, biological, and sociological ideas. However, there was never any unified theory of 'functionalism' until the late 1960s, when architects and critics started to distance themselves from modernism. The context which Breuer would have been trained in, namely Bauhaus, would have been closest to one of the three German renditions which Forty highlights (of what only appears in English as 'function') namely, *Zweckmässigkeit*: 'The German word "*Zweck*", literally meaning "purpose", was used by German-speakers both to signify immediate material needs – utility, but also in the sense of inner organic purpose, or destiny – the sense of "function" used by Sullivan'.[7] Within the rubric of *Zweckmässigkeit*, Forty includes Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Hannes Meyer's architectural philosophies, both of whom were directors of the Bauhaus. Throughout this article, when I refer to architectural functionalism, I am therefore drawing on the semantics of *Zweckmässigkeit*, i.e. purpose as material needs.

Throughout the meetings, there were concerns over the extent to which the Albers design proposal could be considered religious.[8] But religious in what sense? Benedictine theology has a long history which dates back as far as the sixth century, when Gregory the Great spread the 'rule' of Benedict of Nurisa. Unlike other Catholic denominations such as the Jesuit or Dominican variants, it was never considered an 'order', but rather a confederation of congregations of monks and nuns, who followed the rule of Benedict.[9] Throughout its history, there have been varying degrees of how strictly and literally Benedict's rule was interpreted, which

[5] For Breuer's research on Benedictine history and the principles of sacred art, see Box 98, Folders 47, 48, and 49 in Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Libraries, NY. On the architectural research which the Benedictines conducted and the different architects which they considered for commissioning the master plan of Saint John's, see Victoria Young, *Saint John's Abbey Church. Marcel Breuer and the Creation of a Modern Sacred Space*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014, esp., 'The Twelve Apostle's. Selecting an Architect', 21-65.

[6] The discussion over the main window began in the summer of 1958 and concluded in November 1959. See Thimmesh, *A Monastic Memoir*. On the first discussion of the window designer, see page 49.

[7] Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000, 181.

[8] See for instance, the comments of the editor of the Benedictine religious arts journal *Orate Fratres*, Father Godfrey Diekmann (1908-2002), when he said he was 'permanently opposed' to Albers's design because he lacked religious faith. In his eyes, Albers was a *technician*. See Thimmesh, *A Monastic Memoir*, 85. Also see 50, 101.

[9] Thomas Wallnig, *Critical Monks, The German Benedictines, 1680-1740*, Leiden: Brill, 2019, 9.

engendered different versions of Benedictine concepts, ways of life, and consequently different church buildings.[10] Following a period of perceived corruption of Benedict's rule in many congregations across Europe during the late eleventh-century, a reform movement known as the Cistercians (from the church of Cîteaux) emerged in the mid-twelfth century.[11] This reform movement was characterised by a need for a return to apostolic poverty and simplicity, and the necessity of manual labour for all members of the community.[12]

In a similar manner, amidst a perceived crisis of spiritual values in mid-twentieth century America,[13] certain members of the Benedictine community at Saint John's appealed to this reform movement. It was on this basis, that many of the Benedictine monks threw Albers's design ideas into question.[14] Throughout the 1950s, Benedictine monks thought that the dignity of work had been lost in capitalist society. In 1951, the Benedictine Dom Rembert Sorg captured the atmosphere of the time which placed Benedictine spirituality at odds with American free-market capitalism: 'our liberal economics puts everything to the ignoble service of selfish greed. Ignoring the way it vitiates the higher fields of culture – education, philosophy, science, art, religion – and how in particular the way it commercializes and desecrates the corporeal and spiritual works of mercy'. Labour, which was once an honourable spiritual activity, had 'become a marketable commodity, valued in dollars and cents'. The Benedictine community at Saint John's sought to construct a monument which would affirm the spiritual dignity of labour, and a collective work ethic amidst an increasingly individualistic American modernity.[15]

[10] R. Kevin Seasoltz O.S.B., 'Benedictines', in Mircea Eliade, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Volume 2, New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987, (96-98).
[11] John Van Engen, 'The "Crisis of Cenobitism" Reconsidered: Benedictine Monasticism in the Years 1050-1150', *Speculum*, 61: 2 April 1986, 269-304.
[12] Constance Hoffman Berman, *The Cistercian Evolution. The Invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth-Century Europe*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000, 225; Giles Constable, 'Renewal and Reform in Religious Life. Concepts and Realities', in Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable, *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982, (37-67); Dom Rembert Sorg O. S. B., *Towards a Benedictine Theology of Manual Labor*, Lisle, Illinois: Benedictine Orient, 1951.
[13] Helen White, 'The Inheritance of St Benedict', June 2, 1952. Box 89, Folder 16 (The Order of St. Benedict) in Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Libraries, NY.
[14] For example, see: [n/a] 'Our Parishes: the Plants Take Root'. Originally published in the Benedictine journal *Scriptorium*, Vol. VII, 1946, 29-42. Appears in Box 89, Folder 16 (The Order of St. Benedict) in Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Libraries, NY.
[15] At Saint John's, the Benedictine anti-consumerist perspective transpired in the context of discussions over the main bell banner. As Timothy M. Rohan explains: 'Concerned about such worldly distractions, the monks raised questions about what the bell banner represented when they reviewed the project with Breuer in December 1956. Reflecting fears about advertising's growing dominance, some thought the raised concrete wall too closely resembled the billboards proliferating across America'. Timothy M. Rohan, 'Breuer's Ancillary Strategy: Symbols, Signs, and Structures at the Intersection of Modernism and Postmodernism', in Barry Bergdoll and Jonathan Masset, *Marcel Breuer: Building Global Institutions*, Zurich: Lars Muller Publishers, 2018, (292-317), 302.

The way Benedictines thought that the spiritual dignity of labour could be recuperated was through the liturgy. It was in this manner, that the Anglican scholar Peter Hammond argued in favour of a conception of symbolism not centred on colours and images, but rather via 'the development of a new and exciting techniques of building and a theological recovery within the Church of the full biblical meaning of the *ecclesia* and its liturgy'.[16] Hammond's ideas concerning the nature of the symbol permeated the discussions at Collegeville. Symbolism must also be informed by an understanding of the nature of the Christian community, and its history. In this way, it must go beyond forms of representation which are grounded in imagery. On this point, Hammond is clear: 'Sacred Art must do far more than provoke an aesthetic or emotional frisson. Its function is to make manifest under the form of sign and symbol the presence of the New Creation – that new order of reality which entered into the cosmos as the fruit of Christ's strange work'.[17] The Benedictine conception of 'symbolism' was therefore deeply connected to a theological understanding of the liturgy. Such a conception of symbolism enabled a degree of conceptual elasticity among twentieth-century Benedictine theologians, who could appeal to both a modernist discourse of functionalism and to their own intellectual tradition. When I use the term 'symbolism' throughout this article, I am primarily drawing on this sense of the term.

We often think of mechanical and spiritual attitudes to oppose each other. This is a view which is played out in much of the literature on the spiritual revival in early twentieth-century art.[18] Many of the key claims made in this literature base their idea of the 'sacred' on a key distinction which the historian of religion, Mircea Eliade made between the 'profane', and the holy.[19] Yet, if we survey much of the discourse in a Benedictine context, functionalism and mechanisation were legitimate means to experience the divine. Moreover, these concepts were scrutinised, negotiated, and navigated across the divide of their respective intellectual formations. The meeting between these two parties was borne out of a shared agenda, but it was through contesting specific architectural decisions, which in turn, brought their conceptual commitments to the fore. Moreover, there were occasional

[16] Peter Hammond, *Liturgy and Architecture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, 161.
[17] Hammond, *Liturgy and Architecture*, 161.
[18] Mark E. Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity. Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; Maurice Tuchman, ed, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, New York: Abbeville Press, 1986; Rosemary Crumlin, ed, *Modern Art and the Religious Imagination*, The National Gallery of Victoria, 1998: Mike King, 'Concerning the Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art and Science', *Leonardo*, 31: 1, 1998, 21 – 31; John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2000; David Morgan, 'The Enchantment of Art: Abstraction and Empathy from German Romanticism to Expressionism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 57: 2, April 1996, 317-341; David Morgan, 'Concepts of Abstraction in French Art Theory from Enlightenment to Modernism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 53: 4, October-December 1992, 669-695.
[19] See Bert Daelemans, *Spiritus Loci: A Threefold Method for the Theological Assessment of Contemporary Church Architecture*, PhD thesis at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, 53.

conceptual overlaps. This is evident in two main sources which I will draw on throughout this article. First, a binder which contains a plethora of documents Breuer collated for the project, ranging from detailed logistical plans for individual buildings to scholarly literature on the history of Benedictine theology and aesthetics. The second main source which exemplifies these complex conceptual tensions are the committee meetings alluded to at the beginning.[20] The central questions which guide this article are therefore the following: first, what were the theoretical conditions which made such a meeting possible in the first place? And second, what light does this shed on our understanding of the Bauhaus after it disbanded?

As the philosopher Paul Guyer has observed, 'in architecture, mysticism and industrialism battled for the soul of the Bauhaus.'[21] This article will therefore scrutinise the conceptual implications of this complex negotiation between mystery and industry. Examining the moments of conceptual overlap on the one hand, and discontinuity on the other, the article will examine the potentially hidden religious dimensions of aesthetic modernity. Looking back at the Saint John's church from a conceptual angle suggests that both Catholic ideas in a twentieth-century aesthetic context, and Bauhaus conceptions of industrial design were contested and recalibrated in numerous ways. This process of contestation complicates either any homogenous narrative of re-enchantment (placing religion in a dialectical

[20] The proceedings of the committee meetings were recorded and edited by Hilary Thimmesh who was present at the meetings. See Thimmesh, *A Monastic Memoir*.

[21] Paul Guyer, 'Aesthetics Between the Wars: Art and Liberation', in Thomas Baldwin, *Cambridge History of Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 72. As Mark C. Taylor observes, the mystical elements of the pedagogical programme at the Bauhaus were largely the result of Gropius's appointment of Johannes Itten. Profoundly interested in mysticism, Itten 'viewed the Bauhaus as a "secret self-contained society" whose members were dedicated to spiritual goals'. See Mark C. Tylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992, 122. Many of the students observed how Itten's imposition of ascetic discipline on the students became increasingly at odds with Gropius's materialism. The emphasis on spirituality did not continue in Dessau under Gropius and withered away completely under Hannes Meyer and later Mies van der Rohe. Both Breuer and Albers were students under Itten in Weimar and were therefore familiar with Itten's variation of mysticism. As Maria Stavrinaki has argued in her article on Breuer's African chair, an artefact which she perceives to incapsulate much of the religious, political, and ontological commitments of the early Bauhaus years, the search for new forms of spirituality within the Bauhaus under Itten was largely the result of the experience of disenchantment which emerged in the aftermath of the 1914-18 war. As Stavrinaki writes in a footnote: 'Within the Bauhaus, *community* was considered the perfect antonym of *society*; it included the critique of the political and cultural process of equalization, autonomization, and individualization in modern societies' (footnote 18, page 107). Later on in the article, Stavrinaki argues that in the early years of the Bauhaus, ritual became central to this search for new forms of spirituality and as an antidote to the nefarious effects of industrial modernity: 'Especially during the first three years of the Bauhaus, Gropius and Itten insisted on the formative function of play and rites. Beyond theatre as such, ritualism was cultivated in many instances, the most striking of which was the *Richtfest*, a celebration of the inauguration of the Sommerfeld Haus's construction on December 18, 1920'. See Maria Stavrinaki, 'The African Chair or the Charismatic Object', *Grey Room*, 41, Fall 2010, 88-110.

opposition to technology in the manner of Eliade), or any narrative that processes of modernisation within the architectural sphere were devoid of religious aspects. Rather, both trajectories interacted with the other, without this hybridity forming a new 'master narrative'.

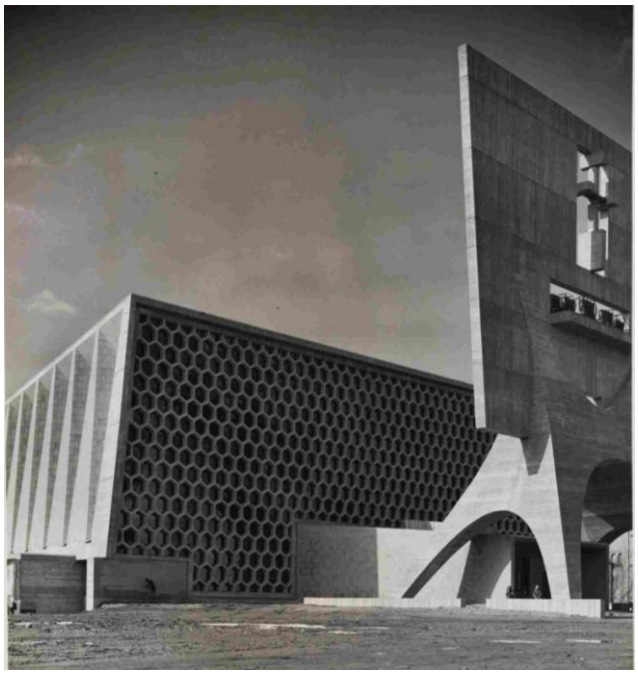

Figure 1 Photograph of Marcel Breuer's St. John's Abbey Church, Collegeville, Minnesota, United States (1953-1961). General view from the north-east showing hexagonal tracert of north wall set with stained glass, atrium wing, and bell-banner. Photo courtesy of Marcel Breuer Papers, Special Collections Research Centre, Syracuse University Libraries.

My approach therefore aims to take a distance from two contexts of analysis which have previously dominated the literature on the Saint John's abbey church (fig. 1). Firstly, since this has already been amply covered by Victoria Young, I will not be engaging with a technical analysis of the building itself.[22] Rather than examining theological principles up against the technical aspects of the building, my focus is on the drafting and research phases of the Saint John's project, where numerous ideas were exchanged between Bauhaus modernism and traditional Benedictine concepts. Secondly, I do not intend to examine how the Saint John's church contributed toward the broader historical narrative of the intellectual transformations which led to the Second Vatican Council. The emergence of functionalist modernism within the context of the modernisation of the Church has already been accounted for in significant detail elsewhere.[23]

[22] Young, *Saint John's Abbey Church*.

[23] Catherine R. Osborne, *American Catholics and the Church of Tomorrow. Building Churches for the Future, 1925-1975*, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2018; Robert Proctor, *Building the Modern Church. Roman Catholic Church Architecture in Britain, 1955 to 1975*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014; Jay M. Price, *Temples for a Modern God. Religious Architecture in Postwar America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; Rajesh Heynickx & Stéphane

By taking this distance, I intend to examine a whole series of conceptual issues, made by both parties either side of the diasporic Bauhaus-Benedictine divide. Such issues, drawing on the central thematic of the meeting between mechanics and spirituality, will be guided by the following sub set of questions: What is at stake in the meeting of mechanics and symbols? How do Benedictine and Bauhaus conceptions of symbolism differ? How did the Benedictine conception of the liturgy contribute to an idea of history which made it compatible with functionalism? And finally, what exactly does a mechanical attitude without spirituality look like, and why was this something which both parties vied to avoid in the modern world?

II. Navigating the divide. Breuer and the Benedictines on architectural symbolism

As Catherine Osborne has observed, the Benedictine community at Collegeville saw themselves as a forward-looking institution, and were committed to the idea that their new church 'should be of a form valid for the future, and expressive of contemporary technology'.[24] Benedictines were not totally averse to modern technological developments and the use of modern materials such as concrete, plexiglass and plastics.[25] It enabled Benedictine monks to appeal to widely used modernist architectural tropes and currents, such as functionalism and abstraction. Rather than perceiving technology and abstraction as inherently opposed to their aesthetic lineage, the Benedictine monks of Collegeville discerned strong links between functionalist modernism and their own history of Cistercian architecture.[26]

Symons, 'A Matter of Interactions – Religion and Architectural Modernism, 1945-70: Introduction', *The European Legacy*, 22: 3, 2017, 251-257.

[24] Osborne, *American Catholics and the Church of Tomorrow*, 88-89.

[25] Osborne, *American Catholics and the Church of Tomorrow*, 108-111.

[26] After the 1939-1945 war, many Benedictine art critics argued that aesthetic abstraction could be a viable means of promoting sacred art. This became central to the curatorial programme of the Benedictine monks at the Abbey of Sainte-Marie de la Pierre-qui-Vire in France. This is explored by Janet T. Marquardt in her book *Zodiaque: Making Medieval Modern, 1951-2001*. Recognised as a Dominican art critic whose life and ideas in many ways mirrored another important Catholic art critic, Marie-Alain Couturier (1897-1954), José Surchamp argued in favour of the use of abstraction in a church context. In Surchamp's text, 'Note sur l'art abstrait' (1948), he 'revisits the question of how sacred art can help propel the viewer toward an understanding of the divine, and pits the spiritual potential of abstraction against the "pornographie" of much popular academic art, calling for the viewing public to relearn to appreciate – to truly look, to see – form and beauty, reassessing the fundamentals'. Janet T. Marquardt, *Zodiaque: Making Medieval Modern, 1951-2001*, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015, 46. In 1945, Couturier wrote an article titled 'Note sur l'abstraction', where he also argued in favour of the use of artistic abstraction in churches. See Marie-Alain Couturier, 'Note sur l'abstraction (1945)', in *Art et liberté spirituelle*, Paris, 1958, 63-67. Another scholar and art critic who promoted the use of aesthetic abstraction was the Benedictine monk Samuel Stehman. On that, see Rajesh Heynickx, 'Epistemological Tracks: On Religion, Words, and Buildings in 1950s Belgium', in Rajesh

This placed the modernist architect in a privileged position to design a building consistent with Benedictine history. In 1953, Dworschak wrote that 'the modern architect with his orientation towards functionalism and honest use of material is uniquely qualified to produce a Catholic work'.[27] Following this call for a modernist design, the Abbot of Collegeville contacted twelve internationally renowned architects, among them Marcel Breuer, Walter Gropius, Rudolf Schwarz and Eero Saarinen.[28] After deliberation the Benedictines chose Breuer to design the master plan for their new church, and Breuer promptly accepted.[29]

Prior to Breuer's arrival in the United States in 1937, Breuer studied at the Weimar Bauhaus under the direction of Walter Gropius (1883-1969) in the furniture and carpentry workshop between 1920 and 1924. After a brief interlude spent in Paris, in 1925, Breuer returned to the Bauhaus, which was by then based in Dessau.[30] It was during second half of the 1920s that Breuer established his reputation with his innovative Club chair B3 (later referred to as the 'Wassily'), earning him the title of *Jungmeister*.[31] While working at the Bauhaus, Breuer was mostly recognised for his abilities as a furniture designer.[32] Later, when he moved to England to work in Gropius's London office in 1935, Breuer steadily developed his profile as an architect with commissions in domestic architecture in London and Bristol.[33]

In 1937, he was invited by Gropius to teach at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, where he also continued to work on small scale architectural commissions with Gropius.[34] In contrast to Gropius's teaching style, which was described by students as philosophical and discursive, Breuer preferred a more

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Heynickx and Stéphane Symons, *So What's New About Scholasticism*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018, 59-75.

[27] Taken from Abbot Baldwin Dworschak's well known letter to the prospective architects taken into consideration for the commission of the master plan of Saint John's abbey church, written on March 7, 1953. Quoted in Osborne, *American Catholics and the Church of Tomorrow*, 94.

[28] Young, *Saint John's Abbey Church*, 45.

[29] Young, *Saint John's Abbey Church*, 63.

[30] On the influence of geographic displacement on design concepts in a Europe - US context, see Elana Shapira and Alison J. Clarke, 'Introduction – Émigré Cultures and New Design Dimensions', in: *Émigré Cultures in Design and Architecture*, London : Bloomsbury, 2017, 1-26.

[31] Margret Kentgens-Craig, *The Bauhaus and America: First Contacts 1919-1936*, Cambridge MASS and London: The MIT Press, 1999, 143.

[32] Breuer did have one architectural commission early in his career. In 1932, Gropius offered Breuer the opportunity to remodel an existing apartment for Paul Harnischmacher, a wealthy industrialist from Wiesbaden. See Robert F. Gatje, *Marcel Breuer: A Memoir*, New York: The Monacelli Press, 2000, 17-18.

[33] Gatje, *A Memoir*, 21-22.

[34] Jill Pearlman, *Inventing Modernism. Joseph Hednut, Walter Gropius, and the Bauhaus Legacy at Harvard*, Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2007, esp. 'Bucolic Paradise', (180-187). Also see Breuer's monograph *Sun and Shadow. The Philosophy of an Architect*, New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1956 for examples of his earlier architectural commissions in the UK and the US which are employed to serve the concepts Breuer articulated in the book.

direct and pragmatic approach to architectural solutions.[35] Following a dispute with Gropius in 1941 at Harvard, Breuer established his own architectural firm in New York City in 1946.[36] After he had been commissioned to design the UNESCO headquarters in Paris in 1953, working with the Italian engineer, Pier Luigi Nervi (1891-1979),[37] Breuer began to work on his master plan for Saint John's abbey in April, 1953.[38] With these two buildings, of high civic and cultural significance, Breuer's career was noted to have taken a distinctly different turn.[39]

Throughout the 1950s, we notice Breuer increasingly seeking to distance himself from a perceived sense of dogmatism of functionalist architectural discourse. Rather than employing 'generously used slogans, (…) and set dogmas of an established modern architecture', Breuer aimed to 'emphasize (…) the philosophical implications underneath'.[40] Breuer's dissatisfaction with the modern movement also extended to a perceived lack of historical scope. 'We are interested here', Breuer wrote in his 1956 text, *Sun and Shadow* (1956), which he wrote alongside working on the Saint John's project, 'not in passing "success," but in historic achievement. We are interested in long range improvement, in long range progress – and not in passing successes that are achieved by shortcuts of narrow action'. Great art, Breuer claimed, was based on incorporating tensions over long distance perspectives: 'That is the kind of tension in concepts – that is the sun and shadow that makes Greek architecture great'.[41]

By the time Breuer began working on the Saint John's abbey project, he was at a stage in his career where he sought to expand the depth in content on the one hand and broaden the historical scope of his architectural vision on the other. This did not entail a complete abandonment of the functionalist aesthetics he had been trained in. As one of the Benedictine monks, Father Cloud Meinberg recalled, 'He was not at all opposed to functionalism – quite the contrary – but wanted more depth'.[42] Accordingly, the Benedictine encounter propelled Breuer to expand his architectural vocabulary. Functionalism was no longer irreducible to the achievements of the so-called modern movement but was a malleable category which morphed through the *longue durée* of past and present architectural achievements. Moreover, for Breuer, it was not a homogenous category which

[35] On the differences between Breuer and Gropius's pedagogical methods, see Pearlman, *Inventing Modernism*, 111.
[36] Pearlman, *Inventing Modernism*, 114-115.
[37] On that, see Guy Nordenson, 'Marcel Breuer: Structure and Shadow', in Barry Bergdoll and Jonathan Masset, *Marcel Breuer: Building Global Institutions*, Zurich: Lars Muller Publishers, 2018, (116-139).
[38] Young, *Saint John's Abbey Church*, 63.
[39] Barry Bergdoll, 'Marcel Breuer and the Invention of Heavy Lightness', in Barry Bergdoll and Jonathan Masset, *Marcel Breuer: Building Global Institutions*, Zurich: Lars Muller Publishers, 2018, (34-63) 43.
[40] Breuer, *Sun and Shadow*, 10.
[41] Breuer, *Sun and Shadow*, 32-33.
[42] Breuer comment quoted in 'Notes and Observations on a Visit of Mr. Breuer to St. John's'. Typescript, Folder 4, Box 5, Building Committee, Comprehensive Plans and Report, St. John's Abbey Archives, Collegeville, MN, quoted in: Bergdoll, 'Invention of Heavy Lightness'.

negated contrasting elements. Rather, it was to be a category which embraced contrasts, contradictions, and disparate elements within a single architectural composition.

Breuer's pre-modern imaginary

Breuer's interest in architectural settings with symbolic and pre-modern forms did not arise from a vacuum. As a student of the Bauhaus under the direction of Johannes Itten, Breuer was exposed to ideas which sought to re-invigorate the modern artefact with a redemptive capacity, in a world otherwise ruled by abstract reasoning.[43] To counter what Itten perceived to be an impoverished modern experience ruled by instrumental rationality, and following the footsteps of contemporaneous theorists such as Robert Vischer and Heinrich Wölfflin, Itten endorsed a vitalist understanding of *Einfühlung* (empathy) as a legitimate source of knowledge. One of Itten's methods centred on inviting his students to feel, in an embodied manner, the 'vital' syncopations of previous masters' art works.[44] As many early students of the Bauhaus recalled, Itten's attempt to project himself into older art works aimed at the complete abolition of the exteriority of the self. The radically contemplative, yet simultaneously visceral experience of the artwork, propagated by Itten, was described by the fellow *Bauhäusler*, Paul Klee, as akin to a mystical experience, a process which Itten instilled in his courses at the Bauhaus.[45]

It was within this atmosphere, informed by Itten's pedagogy, that Breuer, in collaboration with Gunta Stölzl, designed what was to become known as his 'African Chair' of 1921.[46] In 1926, following the success of the already mentioned tubular-steel chair, Breuer introduced the chair to the public within his montage *A Bauhaus Film*. The aim of the film was to display the evolution of his aesthetic from heavy, self-enclosed forms, captured in the African Chair, toward more dematerialized, open-ended forms, conceived by the mind, yet realised through technological means. The African Chair, made of wood and fabric, appeared at the beginning of the film, and was the only work displayed to be filmed frontally. As the art historian Maria Stavrinaki has argued, this is due to the form and the shape of the chair, which is augmented by a high back and a vertical axis which is linked to a crown at the top. The chair, which displays aesthetics similarities with the primitivism conveyed by expressionist painters of the 1920s, clearly resembles anthropomorphic forms, with the central axis of its spine, linking the crown at the top to the splayed legs at the base. The shape of the chair in many respects resembles a throne and contains hieratic components that resonates with many pre-modern art forms, which, while not containing any specific clues about which pre-

[43] Stavrinaki, 'The African Chair', 90-91.
[44] Stavrinaki, 'The African Chair', 93.
[45] Stavrinaki, 'The African Chair', 93.
[46] The chair was initially referred to as the 'Romantic Chair.' It was not given the title of the 'African Chair' until after Breuer referred to it as such in a 1949 conversation with Peter Blake. See Christopher Wilk, 'The Marcel Breuer and Gunta Stölzl: "African" Chair. 1921', in Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman, *Workshops for Modernity*, New York: MoMA, 2009, (100-103).

modern society it could have been derived from, does, according to Peter Blake, contain some formal Hungarian properties.[47]

Breuer's interest in pre-modern forms can also be located in his architectural commissions. For instance, many architectural historians have noted structural similarities between Breuer's late work - with its use of shadow, contrast, and folds - and Baroque architecture, for example.[48] Scholars have also highlighted aesthetic continuities between Breuer's housing commissions from the late 1930s and early 1940s, and his larger scale building projects from the 1950s onwards which employed symbolic forms. These housing projects can be found in the pages of Breuer's 1956 monograph, *Sun and Shadow*.

In 'Marcel Breuer and the Invention of Heavy Lightness' (2018), the architectural historian Barry Bergdoll articulates the pre-modern sources for Breuer's modern pavilions and houses he designed while working with Walter Gropius in England. As Bergdoll explains, in 1934, and following Breuer's displacement from Germany after the Nazi rise to power, Breuer travelled through Morocco, Spain and Greece, where he developed an interest in traditional forms of architecture. For Bergdoll, Breuer's use of rustic textures and minimalist interiors owes much to the 'farmhouse architecture' which Breuer became intrigued by during his travels in 1934. A good example of this is his design for the Crofton Gane's Pavilion for the Bristol Agricultural fare of 1936 (fig. 2).

Figure 2 Photograph of Marcel Breuer's Gane's Pavilion, Bristol, England (1935/1937). Photo courtesy of Marcel Breuer Papers, Special Collections Research Centre, Syracuse University Libraries.

[47] Wilk, '"African" Chair. 1921'.
[48] Nordsenson, 'Structure and Shadow'.

This experience not only influenced Breuer's conception of visual forms, but also his way of thinking about the built space, i.e. his design methodology. Breuer's interest in farmhouse architecture transpired into the idea of the monastic cell as a module of design at Saint John's.[49] As the architectural historian Thomas Coomans explains, the monastic cell as a unity of architecture dates as far back as the late third-century in Egypt and was 'the archetype of the relationship between material and spiritual that characterises monastic architecture and life'.[50] The longevity of such a structure in terms of history appealed to Breuer's pre-modern imaginary.

During the drafting and research phase, Breuer analysed Benedictine building structures to see how they could innovate contemporary architectural issues, by offering geometrical models for spatial thinking. This becomes clear in one of the research documents on Benedictine architectural history which Breuer read for the Saint John's project, titled 'The Chapter House in the Benedictine Tradition'. On Breuer's version of the text, there are several architectural elements which appeared to have interested Breuer, suggested in the passages highlighted in the text.[51] The text itself includes an outline of the religious function of the house, and how that religiosity is transposed architecturally. The passages which Breuer highlights include the geometric forms of these buildings, (octagon and the parallelogram). Other elements of the building that appealed to Breuer were the use of simplicity and lack of ornamentation in these buildings.

Another way in which Breuer was interested in symbolism is exemplified in his use of anthropomorphic forms. This was a strategy which Breuer developed in the early 1950s. In line with his aim to enrich functionalist structures, Breuer sought to re-introduce organic and expressive elements, which can be found in his African Chair, this time, into his architectural vocabulary.[52] This included incorporating sculptural techniques into his building aesthetic which added to the poetic dimension of the buildings. Evidence of this stems from the structure of the chimney in the Gagarin house Breuer designed in Litchfield, Connecticut from 1954 (fig. 3). As the architectural historian Timothy M. Rohan observes, although the representation of the human form was evidently abstract, one can discern a squat

[49] Bergdoll, 'Marcel Breuer and the Invention of Heavy Lightness', 48.

[50] As Coomans continues, he explains how 'the cell is a closed room, devoid of any physical distraction, within which the member of the religious order is alone and in silence, away from his or her community to perform his or her spiritual tasks'. Yet, this solitude was not considered a rejection of the world. Rather, it was understood as the space where the believer underwent a transformation, after which, the believer would implement Christian principles through work and prayer. See Thomas Coomans, *Life Inside the Cloister: Understanding Monastic Architecture: Tradition, Reformation, Adaptive Reuse*, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2018, 26.

[51] As the text explains, the Chapter House played an essential role in monastic life. It was the place where the rule of Benedict was read, and prayers were delivered ahead of the day of work. See [N/A, possibly Frank Kacmarcik], 'The Chapter House in Benedictine Tradition', in Folder 48. Research II. Principles of Sacred Art, Box 98, Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Libraries, NY.

[52] Bert Daelemans points out that the use of organic forms was quite prevalent in 1950s modernist church designs. As an exemplary case, he draws our attention to Le Corbusier's famous Ronchamp. See Daelemans, *Spiritus Loci*, 6.

human form raising its swaying arms above a sturdy torso supported by splayed legs.[53] It was in this sense that the chimney of the Gagarin house resonated with the hieratic aspects of the African Chair. However, the chimney had taken the logic of abstraction further, and complicated any identification with traditional pre-modern forms. In this way, Breuer's refusal to represent the human form on a representational order entails that he remained a modernist.[54]

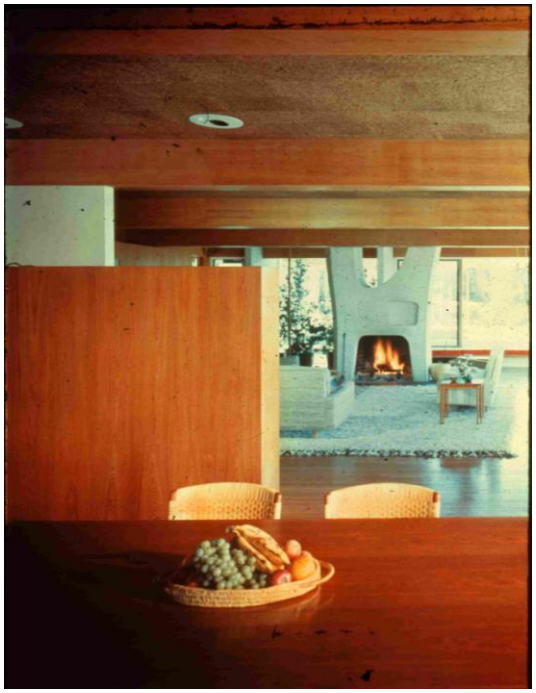

Figure 3 Photograph of an interior of Marcel Breuer's Gagarin House (1956). In the background, one can discern the chimney which exemplifies Breuer's interest in pre-modern forms. Photo courtesy of Marcel Breuer Papers, Special Collections Research Centre, Syracuse University Libraries.

[53] Timothy M. Rohan, 'Breuer's Ancillary Strategy', 296.

[54] Maria Stavrinaki conveys the ambivalence of Breuer's adoption of pre-modern forms in the context of the African Chair astutely: 'The primitivist aspect of this "throne" betrays a longing for traditional communities (*Gemeinschaften*), for their imagined "organic" political and social identity and the "authentic" experience they were supposed to offer to their members. Endowed with a chief, rites, and a supposedly "genuine" artistic tradition, the idealized remote community - remote either temporally, somewhere in the Middle Ages, or geographically, at an unspecified "placeless" primitive location - was the reversed image of modern society (*Gesellschaft*). Modern charisma was conceived as a rupture with the present, the paradox consisting in the fact that it claimed the capacity to restore traditional values, the only values presumed to be authentic, precisely because it was devoid of any traditional or hereditary legitimacy. As a design pretending to have "authenticity", as a metonymy of the "chief", and as an object having a strong ritualistic character, the African Chair turns out to be the quintessence of a charismatic object. For these reasons it epitomizes the teaching of Breuer and Stolzl's teacher, Itten.' Stavrinaki, 'The African Chair', 92. Such a tension, between the search for an artistic language derived from the past which cohered with a set of spiritual values, and the contemporary adoption of such a language, yet devoid of those spiritual values of the past, would continue to be at work in Breuer's approach during the Saint John's project.

Breuer's architectural symbolism: tension-structures

In 1963, in the context of the early revisionist historiography of modernist architecture, the architectural historian William H. Jordy argued that, even from its earliest manifestation, there was a 'symbolic essence' to functionalist modernism.[55] For Jordy, the 'symbolic essence' of modern architecture resided in an almost mythic celebration of the concrete conditions of contemporary experience.[56] Jordy's analysis is based on examining the shift in the status of a cluster of words which were central to modernist aesthetics. Terms such as 'fact,' 'type', 'standard', 'simplicity', 'object', and 'pure form' transformed from contingent terms into absolutes: 'from the blunt out there of non-art to the mysterious in-here of art, which nevertheless holds on to the factual starting point'.[57] According to Jordy, the combination of technological fact and visual purism 'contributed to the metaphysical essence of symbolic objectivity for modern architecture.'[58] This conceptual horizon orientated a novel way for spatial thinking, '[h]ence the repudiation of Beaux-Arts composition with its emphasis on gravitational mass […]. In the new dynamic composition on the other hand, weightless elements pulled against one another, in a tense, asymmetrical equilibrium, creating a force field out of their spatial continuity'.[59]

One prominent example Jordy cites, where we can discern the transformation of a brute, factual reality, into a sign, which in turn, becomes a mechanism for organising movement through spatial continuity, is Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's famous 'I-beam'. As Jordy explains, architectural symbolism operates by incorporating many different associations within the same semiotic register:

> The I-beam conjures multiple associations: a material (steel) *and* a technology (skeletal framing of prefabricated parts) *and* an aesthetic (a clear linear reticulation in the hierarchy of sizes and thickness) *and* a tradition (the full panoply of Renaissance theory as it evolved around the column in an equilibrated relation with horizontals) *and* a philosophy of order – all because the I-beam ultimately remains itself. […] The emanative potential of the object (contributing to Mies's "more") depends on its remaining very intensely the object that it is (his "less").[60]

Many of these components would also develop in Breuer's evolving architectural language. Crucially, this included the ambiguity between 'the emanative potential of the object', and it 'remaining very intensely the object that it

[55] William H. Jordy, 'The Symbolic Essence of Modern European Architecture of the Twenties and its Continuing Influence', in *"Symbolic Essence," and Other Writings on Modern Architecture and American Culture*, edited by Mardges Bacon, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005, (135-150).
[56] Jordy, 'Symbolic Essence', 138.
[57] Jordy, 'Symbolic Essence', 139.
[58] Jordy, 'Symbolic Essence', 140.
[59] Jordy, 'Symbolic Essence', 140.
[60] Jordy, 'Symbolic Essence', 143.

is'. Breuer's architectural language would be one guided by such paradoxes and tensions in meaning. Furthermore, if there is a metaphysics at work in Breuer's architectural language, it is in his ability to subsume multiple, contradictory associations within one architectural space. After visiting Breuer's house in Massachusetts, which Breuer himself had designed, one student recalled the disparity of elements within one space:

> I was dazzled by the sureness of this touch – Breuer's ability to combine totally dissimilar elements and materials and yet not crowd the space. And I felt that his architecture was somehow like the Paul Klee paintings in which disparate objects float in space… all unrelated yet held together by their exact placement. This quality of tension and contrast seemed to be a true expression of our lives at the time.[61]

If Mies's symbolism resided in a rationalist synthesis, Breuer's could be situated within contradiction and juxtaposition.[62] Breuer's monograph, *Sun and Shadow* in many ways was an attempt to theoretically understand his own vocation as an architect. It attempted to show how elements from pre-modern and contemporary sources could coalesce and aimed to expand the horizon of functionalist architecture, thereby incorporating poetic elements into the built space. As Breuer explains in the introduction to *Sun and Shadow*, such a principle of contradiction is contained in the motif of the title of the book:

> The real impact of any work is the extent to which it unifies contrasting notions – the opposite points of view. (…) The Spaniards express so well with their motto from the bull fights: *Sol y sombra*, sun and shadow. They made a proverb out of it – "sun *and* shadow" – and they did not make it sun or shadow. For them, their whole life – its contrasts, its tensions, its excitement, its beauty – all this is contained in the proverb *sol y sombra*.[63]

One way in which Breuer widened the possibilities of functionalist design was through an incorporation of organic motifs. Breuer's use of organic, expressive components, yet operating on a highly abstract level, became a key strategy at the Saint John's abbey. In many aspects of the church design, Breuer navigated between the human and the mechanistic, the figurative and the abstract. One prominent example of this paradoxical aesthetic resided in the bell-banner at the entrance of the church. The splayed legs at the root of the structure hold up an abstract, grid-like rendition of one of the cornerstones of Benedictine infrastructure, the bell-tower (fig. 4).

[61] Pearlman, *Inventing Modernism*, 182.
[62] On the metaphysical sources of Mies's architectural ideas, see Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless World: Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art*, London and Cambridge MASS: The MIT Press, 1991. Also see Rajesh Heynickx, 'Conceptual Debts: Modern Architecture and Neo-Thomism in Postwar America', *The European Legacy*, 22:3, 2017, 1-20.
[63] Breuer, *Sun and Shadow*, 32.

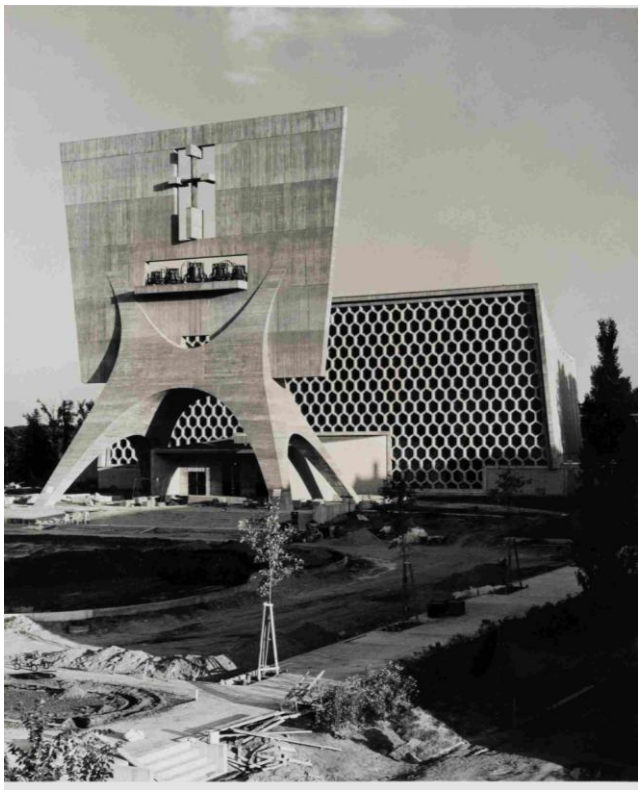

Figure 4 Photograph of Marcel Breuer's St. John's Abbey Church, Collegeville, Minnesota, United States (1953-1961). General view of the main approach side showing the bell-banner with abbey cross and bells, atrium-entrance wing below and hexagon wall of church beyond. Photo courtesy of Marcel Breuer Papers, Special Collections Research Centre, Syracuse University Libraries.

The issue of symbolism and its place in an increasingly consumerist America were at the heart of the discussions between Breuer and the monks at Saint John's.[64] From the perspective of the monks, the main fear was that if the bell-banner was too abstract, and did not adhere to a traditional rendering of Christian symbolism, it could be perceived as a commercial road-sign. Part of this fear resided in the fact

[64] While Breuer was influenced by architectural elements outside the remit of the modernist paradigm, this does not qualify Breuer's post-Bauhaus architectural imagination as symbolic per se. Before examining the exact sense in which Breuer's post-1945 architectural imagination could be considered 'symbolic', a slight qualification is needed here as to what exactly a Bauhaus idea of 'symbolism' could mean. The conceptual ground for an idea of the symbol is entirely different from the Benedictine one. Rather than being based on the notion that the material sign is a symbol of a spiritual substance, the idea of a 'symbol' in a modern architectural level rather works on the level of *aisthesis*: that is, it purely operates according to laws of sensory perception, wherein, an architectural or structural element of a building, can 'symbolise' its broader meaning. This is a technique which Rohan attributes to Breuer's design for the Whitney Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Here, the canopy at the entrance of the museum, so he argues, is an 'example of the highly plastic, multivalent pendants Marcel Breuer often designed in order to express, symbolize, relate, or elaborate upon some aspect of the buildings he erected behind them'. Appears in Rohan, 'Breuer's Ancillary Strategy', 292.

that Breuer opted in naming the structure a 'banner' and not a 'tower' as it had conventionally been named. As Rohan explains:

> Reflecting fears about advertising's growing dominance, some thought the raised concrete wall too closely resembled the billboards proliferating across America. The large flat surface inscribed with a cross could be read from a distance like an enormous sign, but one that seemed unstable to them in representational terms. One monk remembered his brothers asking if it was a 'Christian symbol or a commercial symbol'. As experienced interpreters of symbols, they feared that Breuer's banner would discredit their church by associating it with the roadside commercial signage used to advertise stores, tourist attractions, and filling stations.[65]

The bell-tower was central to the Benedictine ordering of the day, and was a sonic announcement of God's presence. As one document from Breuer's research papers titled 'The Bells of Saint John's' read: 'Thus to these missionaries conquering the land of Christ came an instrument for taking possession of the air also for the Lord, a brazen tongue to accompany their own voices in praising the Creator, a signal to the surrounding countryside that God was present'.[66] However, amidst esculating fears of assimilating with commercial signage, Breuer reassured the monks that there was enough traditional forms of Christian representation contained in the banner for it not to be confused with a roadside banner.[67] Organic forms were also present in the church itself. As Frank Kacmarcik, the chief art consultant for the committee discussions, observed, Breuer had 'produced a strong structure that is powerful with guts and physique and its pure articulation of its parts'.[68]

Kacmarcik, a 'minister of sacred art' and 'deacon of visual theology', was a pivotal figure in the Saint John's project.[69] For the remainder of his life, Kacmarcik

[65] Rohan, 'Breuer's Ancillary Strategy', 302.
[66] [N/A], 'The Bells of Saint John's' in Folder 14. Research St John's History, Box 89 Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Libraries, NY.
[67] For more on the issue of how many of the European avant-garde diaspora navigated within the new horizon of American commercialism, see Henning Engelke and Tobias Hochscherf, 'Between Avant-Garde and Commercialism: Reconsidering Emigres and Design', *Journal of Design History*, 28: 1, 1-14.
[68] Frank Kacmarcik, 'Critical Observations and Recommendations for the Great Window of the new Abbey Church' appears in Folder 48, Research II. Principles of Sacred Art, Box 98, Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Libraries, NY.
[69] Born in Saint Paul, Minnesota on March 15, 1920 to a pious Catholic family with Slovak-Polish heritage, he developed a robust interest in the arts from a young age. When he was 18, he won a scholarship to attend the Minneapolis School of Art and Design. Here, he developed a fascination for bookmaking, design and typeface, which would become one of the hallmarks of his aesthetic vocation throughout his life. After three years at art college he became a novice at Saint John's Abbey. Following a stint in the American Army, and serving in the 1939-45 war, he returned to Saint John's in 1950 to become a Professor of Art at Saint John's. R. Kevin Seasoltz, 'From the Bauhaus to the House of God's People: Frank

became one of the chief experts in the US on modernist church aesthetics, and consulted for a number of religious buildings.[70] On May 6, 1958, Abbot Baldwin proposed that Kacmarcik would act as the artistic intermediary between Breuer and the rest of the committee.[71]

Breuer's framing of the architectural symbol, as an incorporation of disparate elements resided in a materialist conception of structure. In other words, while Breuer wanted to go beyond a reductive functionalism, he remained metaphysically committed to material reality. In *Sun and Shadow*, Breuer articulated the material condition of the 'inner logic' of things:

> Why do we like to express structures? Is there any particular reason why structures should be identical with the architectural form? I think there is to a great extent. Everybody is interested in seeing what makes a thing work, in seeing the inner logic of things […]. It is interesting to see the movement of bones and muscles under the skin.[72]

If poetry was an end for Breuer, innovations in engineering were the primary means. 'The great change in construction over the past few decades', Breuer wrote in 1956, 'has been the shift from simple compression structures to continuous fluent tension-structures'.[73] Poetic and symbolic elements integrated within a functionalist context were made possible by innovations in engineering. This placed poetry and technology in conversation with one another. In the past, Breuer maintained, builders 'always used gravity to defeat gravity. The best symbol of their method is the Egyptian pyramid – very broad at the bottom and narrow to a point at the top'.[74] However, throughout time, mankind developed new technological means to reconfigure mass.[75] The symbol of Breuer's time, the cantilevered slab, aimed to invert the logic of the Egyptian pyramid:

> As a result of this continuous structure, in which tension and compression forces alternate and flow into each other along predetermined lines, we can now cantilever structures way out in the air […] The "new structure" in its most expressive form is hollow below and substantial on top – just the

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Kacmarcik's Contribution to Church Architecture and Art', *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 15: 1, Winter 1997, 105-122, 105.

[70] Charlotte Anne Zalot OSB, *Revisioning Liturgical Space and Furnishings in American Roman Catholic Churches, 1947 – 2002: The Pioneering Role of Frank Kacmarcik, Artist-Designer and Consultant in the Sacred Arts*, PhD Dissertation, Drew University, Madison New Jersey, October 2004.

[71] Thimmesh, *A Monastic Memoir*, 46.

[72] Breuer, *Sun and Shadow*, 70.

[73] Breuer, *Sun and Shadow*, 68.

[74] Breuer, *Sun and Shadow*, 68.

[75] Following the German art historian, Heinrich Wölfflin, Guy Nordenson claims that Breuer's aims in the 1950s to reconsider architecture in terms of light and shadow rather than mass, was an innovation which can be located in the Baroque period. See Nordsenson, 'Structure and Shadow', 127.

> reverse of the pyramid. It represents a new epoch in the history of man, the realisation of one of his oldest ambitions: the defeat of gravity.[76]

As Breuer notes, cantilevered structures, were an innovation brought about largely in the context of suspension bridges, enabling rigid structures, usually a beam or a plate, to carry heavy weights. In the context of Saint John's, Breuer drew on this innovation to construct the many folds which appear on the side of the building. Breuer derived this method from his experience working alongside the Italian engineer, Pier Luigi Nervi for the UNESCO headquarters in the early 1950s. At UNESCO, Breuer and Nervi made use of a folded reinforced concrete structure with reflected arch ribs. As the architectural historian, Guy Nordsenson explains, this use of folded concrete to produce contrasting lighting conditions, became a staple of Breuer's architectural language: 'In this sense the project produces considerable ambiguity by its different uses of concrete – cast-in-place and precast – to project a muscular plasticity, as well as to play with light, but also to confuse the expression of the underlying structure'.[77] Central to Breuer's aim of expanding his functionalist vocabulary was a part of a continuous attempt to develop what Barry Bergdoll has termed a 'heavy lightness'. This, so Bergdoll explains, was conveyed in Breuer's 'marked taste for strong contrasts – between open and closed, grounded and projected or even levitating, between parallel and perpendicular, between glazed and open'.[78]

The ribbed structure of the UNESCO building closely resembles the spatial effects achieved by Saint John's abbey church, in terms of its side lighting and the pleated structure. In both cases, it produced a strong *chiaroscuro* effect, where sharp contrasts in lighting were achieved. Central to Breuer's evolving architectural vocabulary was a focus on geometric ideas as governing the contour of mass.[79] Breuer's use of geometric concepts, placed in relation of tension, was intended to create a sense of continuity within space. This was equally intended to enable the mobility of humans through space. As Breuer writes in *Sun and Shadow*:

> It is interesting that the two most important single developments that underlie our new architecture have at their base the concept of flow, of motion: the flow of space which toward a continuity of space; and the flow of structural forces which leads to a continuous structure. There seems to be an inherent logic in our approach which manifests itself in several related phenomena – space and structure, floating continuous.[80]

This was the aim, then, of Breuer's 'compression-structures': creating a sense of flow and facilitating the movement of bodies through space (fig. 5). Breuer's stress on a lack of ornamentation and structural forms which enabled movement

[76] Breuer, *Sun and Shadow*, 69.
[77] Nordsenson, 'Structure and Shadow', 119.
[78] Bergdoll, 'Invention of Heavy Lightness', 38.
[79] John Poros, 'The Ruled Geometries of Marcel Breuer', in Kim Williams, *Nexus VII: Architecture and Mathematics*, Turin: Kim Williams Books, 2008, (233-242).
[80] Breuer, *Sun and Shadow*, 71.

was precisely why Breuer's architectural ideas appealed to the Benedictine committee. This expanded the possibilities of what could be incorporated within the context of modernist functionalism. As Breuer would comment in a discussion with the Benedictine monks in 1953, 'the modern man in general has a great thirst for works of content, if you want, for the spiritual. He is looking for something that expresses more than pure functionalism, for a deepening of content.'[81]

Figure 5 Photograph of the interior of the main conference building of the UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, France (1958). Photo courtesy of Marcel Breuer Papers, Special Collections Research Centre, Syracuse University Libraries.

Liturgy and labour

As the architectural historian Robert Proctor's analysis of Catholic architecture after the 1939-45 war has astutely shown, the discourse on functionalism became increasingly mobilised in a church context.[82] In the years following 1945, a plethora of modernist churches emerged to more effectively facilitate liturgical movement. As Proctor explains, this was closely tied to the various social reforms which the Church had been undergoing from the 1930s onward. At the centre of this reform movement was the conviction that it was the mass, the religious community, who formed the body of the church. Indeed, etymologically, the word 'liturgy' means

[81] Breuer comment quoted in 'Notes and Observations on a Visit of Mr. Breuer to St. John's'. Typescript, Folder 4, Box 5, Building Committee, Comprehensive Plans and Report, St. John's Abbey Archives, Collegeville, MN, quoted in Bergdoll, 'Invention of Heavy Lightness'.

[82] Proctor, *Building the Modern Church*, 135.

'work of the people'.[83] As Proctor notes, as early as the 1930s, this had strong social overtones. By placing the altar at the centre of the congregation, modernist churches would eliminate hierarchical structures, to enable Christianity to become a religion of the common man once again.[84]

During the twentieth-century, the symbolic component of the Benedictine collective work ethic resided in liturgical processions. While work and collectivism were central to Benedictine religion, without the liturgy, the focus on labour would be a blind and mechanical process without a goal.[85] The performativity of the liturgy was therefore strongly tied to the means of transforming society: a symbolic rendition of their spiritual labour. As the Benedictine theologian Rembert Sorg explains: 'The integration of manual labour with the liturgy according to which monks support their Divine Office, by the labour of their own hands, shows how the work itself may become love of God, as they once called it, "a service to God".'[86] This intention to dignify labour, so Sorg held, had a strong social dimension: 'It is a fundamental trait of Christ's revolution, which exalts the humble, deposes the proud, and erases the distinction between slave and free'.[87] The telos of labour was therefore spiritual enlightenment. This discloses a key facet of Benedictine spirituality in comparison with other forms of Catholicism. For Benedictines, activity and interaction, and not primarily contemplation as one finds within the Dominican tradition, for instance, were the primary vectors through which human beings communicated with God.[88]

Benedictine symbolism, form, and function

Before Breuer began working on the master plan for Saint John's abbey church, in April 1953, he requested a variety of literature on Benedictine history and key concepts.[89] Many of these texts were gathered in one binder, which Breuer kept as a reference point throughout the project.[90] The text which comprehensively outlines a Benedictine aesthetics was written by Cloud Meinberg, titled 'Principles of Sacred

[83] Catherine Pickstock, 'Liturgy, Art and Politics', *Modern Theology*, 16:2, April 2000, 159-180, 163.
[84] Proctor, *Building the Modern Church*, 142.
[85] Sorg, *Towards a Benedictine Theology of Manual Labor*, 89.
[86] Sorg, *Towards a Benedictine Theology of Manual Labor*, 92.
[87] Sorg, *Towards a Benedictine Theology of Manual Labor*, 99.
[88] For an example of Benedictine criticism of the Dominican conception of sacred architecture, Janet T. Marquardt alludes to the French artist, Albert Gleizes: 'Gleizes was favourably disposed toward the Benedictines and their combination of manual work in the world and intellectual work in the arts, disdaining the thirteenth-century ascent of the Dominican Order (to which Aquinas belonged) and its emphasis on more conceptual practice. For this reason, he did not support much of the most avant-garde religious art of the period – such as the collaborative modern decoration in the church at Assy, Henri Matisse's chapel at Vence, and Le Corbusier's buildings at Ronchamp and La Tourette – since all were arranged or commissioned by Dominicans'. Marquardt, *Zodiaque*, 32.
[89] Young, *Saint John's Abbey Church*, 70-72.
[90] Box 97, Folder 41. Office Records – Office File in the Breuer Papers of the Syracuse University Archive, NY.

Architecture'.[91] Meinberg was a member of the committee who discussed many of the architectural decisions made for the abbey church. As a former architect, Meinberg became a key interlocutor between Breuer and the Benedictine committee members who were not so well versed in architectural history.[92] The text is an illustrative mapping of architectural and theological principles, thereby forming one of the theoretical fundaments for the Saint John's abbey church.

The first principle outlined the Benedictine conception of symbolism, which can be summarised as: the symbolism of a building follows the form. Rather than following the style of previous church architecture, a sacred building should follow the specific purpose of that building. As Meinberg explains: 'Its form follows its function. This same principle is further applied from the field of use to the field of meaning, from concepts of quantity to those of quality. The symbolism follows the form. Here is no artificial symbolism of a cross horizontal to the ground. Here is a symbolism achieved by the very articulation of the structure itself'.[93] True to the history of Benedictine church design, Meinberg presents an idea of symbolism based on analogy, and not derived from allegorical signs.[94]

For Meinberg, a religious building operates on a different semiotic register to other art forms, such as painting. In 'The Monastic Church', which appeared in Breuer's binder, Meinberg explains that buildings represent the relation between God and mankind analogically: 'Other architects', Meinberg wrote, 'forgetting that a building is not a statue, or a painting have misunderstood architectural symbolism. A building cannot picture Christ as a statue or a painting does. It can only symbolise God-man analogically. The strength of its lines must suggest His virtues, the honesty of its materials, His truth, the freedom of its spaciousness'.[95] This was a baseline of the Benedictine justification for the choice of Breuer at Saint John's. As Benedict Avery would write in 1963, '[t]he monumental strength and almost severe simplicity of Marcel Breuer's architecture are a challenge to the artist to produce a contemporary sacred image possessing devotional approachability as well as gravity and universality'. Breuer's architecture, 'rich with theological content', contained a 'symbolic power to evoke and express the essential and the supernatural'.[96]

[91] Box 89, Folder 13. Project Description, Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Libraries, NY.
[92] Thimmesh, *A Monastic Memoir*, 4.
[93] Cloud Meinberg, 'The Principles of Sacred Architecture', (No Date), Box 89, Folder 13. Project Description, Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Libraries, NY. There is no date on this document. It appears in a folder titled 'Project Description' and is likely to be one of the first documents which Breuer read when commencing the Saint John's project.
[94] As Charlotte Anne Zalot explains: 'The earliest Cistercian churches, a mirror of the (…) monk's ideals, were identified with extreme simplicity, both in their structure and scheme, there was no ornamentation and only windows of clear glass. It (was) an austerity that (was) functional. (…) Void of distraction, the environment is free to lead the monk to full and deep contemplation'. Zalot, *Revisioning Liturgical Space*, 278-279.
[95] Cloud Meinberg, 'The Monastic Church', in Box 97, Folder 41. Office Records: Office File, Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Libraries, NY.
[96] Benedict R. Avery, 'The Crypt Furnishings of the Abbey Church of Saint John the Baptist', Attachment for a letter to Doris Caesar, May 2, 1963. Appears in Doris Caesar Papers, Box 1,

Key to conveying the earthly-divine link was a concept of analogy, which has a long history in Benedictine thought.[97] In Meinberg's text, 'The Principles of Sacred Architecture', he further elaborates the idea of analogy in architecture: 'Here is a true architectural symbolism, analogical and not pictorial in character, which achieves its effect from the association of ideas, not from the representation of images. The very structure of the church accomplishes the symbolism'.[98] As Meinberg insisted, no decoration should appear for its own sake, but only if it served the purpose of worship.

The second main principle was tied to the social initiative of the church. Based on the principles of monasticism, the function of the church was to provide the proper environment for the sacramental liturgy and public prayer. In line with the liturgical reforms which were occurring in the middle of the twentieth-century, Meinberg advocated for an architecture which incorporated the entire congregation: 'We have, then', Meinberg wrote, 'three groups in the one Christian community: Priests and Clerics, Brothers, and Laity. They are all gathered around the altar (…) gathered together in Christ'. And it was the form of the church which would enable that integration. Meinberg proposed the use of a concrete shell to be wrapped around the entire congregation.

Moreover, Meinberg justified the social function of the church as it provided the basis for the spiritual needs of the student community and the people of the surrounding region. Meinberg articulates the integral communal role the church should play through his analysis of the function of two cloisters which run parallel to the main axis of the church.[99] It is in this passage where he draws on the modernist tendency to blur the boundary between the inside and the outside to create, in a manner reminiscent of Breuer's aesthetic principles, a 'flow of space': 'The inside-outside space relationship, so characteristic of modern architecture, has here been applied to a church and in much the same manner as in earlier cloisters'.[100] In this way, Meinberg celebrates this innovation through an allusion to the medievalist and socialist, William Morris: the proposed cloisters 'follow the

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Correspondence. Subject File: Saint John's Abbey (Collegeville, Minnesota), 1959-1965, Syracuse University Libraries, NY.

[97] Wallnig, *Critical Monks,* 185-186. In the early eighteenth-century, at the Benedictine University of Salzburg, Thomas Aquinas's ideas formed the basis of their metaphysical claims. As Wallnig explains: 'Salzbergian propagators of "ontological realism" claimed that concepts were "real" in nature. However, they conceded to nominalist philosophers the limited nature of concepts, in that, concepts could never thoroughly enclose reality *metaphysically*.' (186).

[98] Meinberg, 'The Principles of Sacred Architecture'.

[99] In a folder from the Breuer papers titled 'Research: St John's History', there is a document which lists the many ways in which the Benedictines of Collegeville contributed to the local community. This included a variety of initiatives such as setting up an Institute for Social Justice, the establishment of a department of Sacred Art, and the establishment of a Mental Health Institute, among many others. See [N/A] 'Some Ways in which the Community of St. John's Abbey and University has pioneered in scientific, social, intellectual and religious ventures: 1856-1954', in Box 89, Folder 14. Research: St John's History, Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Libraries, NY.

[100] Meinberg, 'The Principles of Sacred Architecture'.

character but not the style of the old monastic architecture which William Morris called "the fairest, kindest buildings old earth ever bore".'[101]

Meinberg's focus on the social role of the church was grounded in the symbolic unity of the liturgy. In architectural terms, this was conveyed in the concept of the axis. Throughout the text, Meinberg stresses it as an organising principle, both in architectural and in theological terms. For Meinberg, it was therefore the principle of the axis which links the medieval and the modern. Yet, while Meinberg does offer formal aesthetic comparisons for this extended diachronic link between the medieval and the modern, when we examine the metaphysical claims which substantiate that link, the conceptual contradictions between Breuer's 'architectural symbolism' and the Benedictine conception of symbolism come into play.

While Meinberg justified the use of functionalist aesthetics, the principles which underlie this are based on Benedictine theology, derived from ritualistic elements and the logic of participation. Here, the concept of the axis becomes central. As Meinberg explains, the concept guides the narrative thread of its eschatological component, and each of the architectural elements of the building contains symbolism which coheres with that narrative:

> As Christian life and liturgy are essentially participation in the sacraments of the Church, so the sacramental axis is the basis of the planning. The sacramental life begins with baptism, which is the entrance of the Church. The beginning of the sacramental axis of the architecture is the baptistry. As from baptism one proceeds to the other sacraments to consummation of the sacramental life in the Eucharist, so the altar is the focal point.[102]

As Frédéric Debuyst, the editor of the Catholic arts journal, *Art D'Église*, has demonstrated, historically, '[t]here can be no real understanding (of the) (…) inner logic (of the sacraments) except by direct participation'.[103] To follow the inner logic of the sacraments is to understand participation in them as 'a gift of time and space, a renunciation of ordinary functional time and ordinary functional space, a renunciation of work and money-earning', to enter the 'inexhaustible freedom and richness of creation itself'.[104] The liturgy, so Debuyst argues, elevates work and communal participation beyond the realm of the mechanical and the mundane. The aim of the axis, then, is to bring nature into harmony with the eternal, and it is the liturgical processions which are intended to facilitate such a process.

Meinberg's ontological grounding of the concept of the axis as a link between nature and heaven foregrounds one of the central clashes between Breuer's constructivist ontology and Meinberg's natural theology. For Breuer, '[a] building is a man-made work, a crystallic [sic.], constructed thing.'[105] Whereas for Meinberg, the

[101] Meinberg, 'The Principles of Sacred Architecture'.
[102] Meinberg, 'The Principles of Sacred Architecture'.
[103] Frédéric Debuyst, *Modern Architecture and Christian Celebration*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1968, 13.
[104] Debuyst, *Modern Architecture and Christian Celebration*, 15.
[105] Breuer, *Sun and Shadow*, 38.

church building is guided by St. Paul's metaphor of 'living stones': 'The etymology of the word will tell us what the nature of the church must be. First of all the church is the *ecclesia*, the gathering of the people of God. St. Paul tells us that God does not dwell in temples made by human hands. Rather, the Church is made of living stones'.[106] In other words, the Benedictine concept of architectural symbolism is grounded in an ontology, where it is imbued with God's essence.

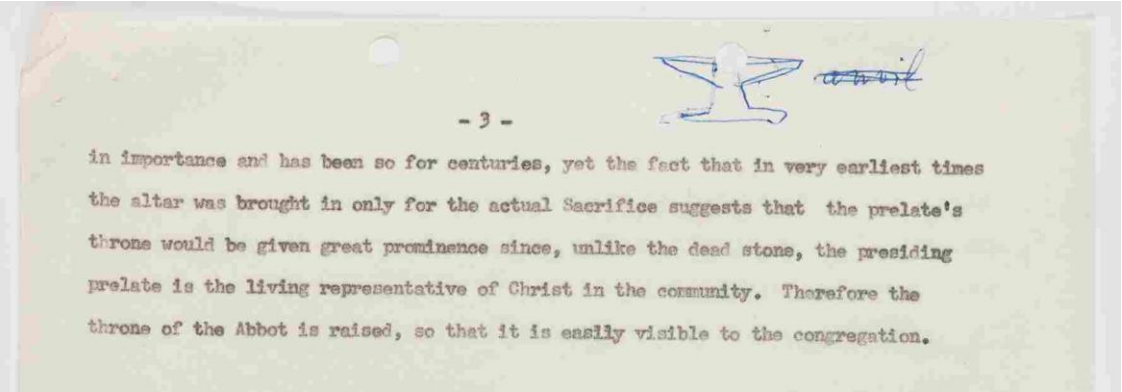
In Frank Kacmarcik's text, 'Living Forms for the House of God', a document Breuer drew on when conducting research for the project, he clearly indicates an intellectual distance from such a position by marking and annotating Kacmarcik's text. In one passage, Kacmarcik outlines the key aesthetic techniques for how 'the church building symbolises the worshipping community'.[107] The introduction concedes to the necessity of modernising church aesthetics: 'This called for a re-evaluation of traditional church forms, whether these forms would be valid for the living church today'.[108] Following Meinberg's methodology in 'The Monastic Church', Kacmarcik asks the following question: 'The contemporary church architect has gone back to the essentials, asking the question "What is a church?"'[109] And although Kacmarcik frames the question from the perspective of the architect, he ultimately answers the question in a similar manner to Meinberg: 'The building by its name indicates that it is a symbol of the living, the worshipping Church. The plans begin by establishing the relationship of the altar to the people. Here the theological problem comes before the aesthetical problem. The people, in the various proper places, around the altar, are the Church'.[110]

Following Kacmarick's outline of the importance of theology over aesthetics, he indicates several practical elements of architectural design which promote the liturgical processions and the communal aspect of religious worship important to the Benedictine community: 'Because Communion is the sacrament of unity, four small "tables" placed according to the natural flow of movement, were found to be the solution'.[111] In these passages, Breuer seems to follow the logic of the placement of various architectural elements, and even re-interprets the altar in a secularised guise, by drawing a symbol of modern industry - an anvil - in the top corner of the text. The altar, as the symbol of the unity of the Sacrifice, becomes transposed into a symbol of modern industry (fig. 6).

However, when Kacmarcik begins to explain the symbolic content of various architectural elements, Breuer expresses perplexity. This exposes the limits of the transposition of architectural knowledge from Benedictine to Breuer's diasporic Bauhaus framework. For instance, in outlining the nature of the Mass, Kacmarcik highlights the importance of two symbols as sources of sanctity: the Book and the Chalice. These elements must be clearly expressed:

[106] Meinberg, 'The Monastic Church'.
[107] Frank Kacmarcik, 'Living Forms for the House of God', in Folder 48. Research II. Principles of Sacred Art, Box 98, Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Libraries, NY.
[108] Kacmarcik, 'Living Forms for the House of God'.
[109] Kacmarcik, 'Living Forms for the House of God'.
[110] Kacmarcik, 'Living Forms for the House of God'.
[111] Kacmarcik, 'Living Forms for the House of God'.

> The sanctuary is kept very simple, with only two great elements given predominance: the Altar, the place of the Sacrificial Bread, and the Lectern, which already indicates the Book of Life. (…) The book will be visibly enshrined in the lectern structure, so that the community will be constantly aware of the importance of the Word of God.[112]



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in importance and has been so for centuries, yet the fact that in very earliest times the altar was brought in only for the actual Sacrifice suggests that the prelate's throne would be given great prominence since, unlike the dead stone, the presiding prelate is the living representative of Christ in the community. Therefore the throne of the Abbot is raised, so that it is easily visible to the congregation.

Figure 6 Frank Kacmarcik's text, 'Living Forms for a House of God' (undated). In the top corner, one can discern Breuer's tentative sketch of the anvil when he was annotating the text during the research phase of the Saint John's Abbey project. Photo courtesy of Marcel Breuer Papers, Special Collections Research Centre, Syracuse University Libraries.

Breuer's annotated version of the text shows multiple examples of scepticism toward the metaphysical meanings of the symbolic matrix offered by Kacmarcik. On another occasion, Breuer places question marks beside the claim that 'the entire baptistry is didactic', and after the explanation of the Benedictine understanding of *Parousia*, he marks the text with exclamation marks.[113]

In many ways this is unsurprising. Years after the Saint John's project, when asked in a 1979 interview whether he had 'an aesthetic for materials or a philosophy for their use'? Breuer replied categorically: 'If you mean a symbolic meaning, NO'.[114] In the interview, Breuer did, however, acknowledge that he had learnt many techniques, on a formal level as a result of his encounter with the Benedictine community at Collegeville. When discussing a later church commission, the St Francis de Sales Church in Michigan, Breuer claimed that he had developed the principle of 'hyperbolic paraboloid' structures based on his experiences at Saint

[112] Kacmarcik, 'Living Forms for the House of God'.

[113] The relevant passage which explains this reads as: 'The monumental apse icon will portray the Parousia; Christ in glory, flanked by the Blessed Virgin and Saint John the Baptist, together with saints and angels. Over the entrance to the church will be the ancient representation of the anastasis: (resurrection). This will be a statuary group. Christ, after His triumph on the cross, descends into Hades where, as the second Adam, He is seen as the Redeemer of the entire human race by lifting up the first Adam, representing mankind'. Kacmarcik, 'Living Forms for the House of God'.

[114] Shirley Reiff Howarth, 'Marcel Breuer: On Religious Architecture', *Art Journal*, 38: 4, Summer 1979, 257-260, 257-259.

John's.[115] This was precisely an evolution of the geometric thinking Breuer had engaged in during his time at Saint John's, wherein, lightweight, sculptural elements could be used as the very basis for the structure of the building itself.

At the heart of the encounter between Breuer and the Benedictines were two differing conceptions of symbolism. For Breuer, its meaning resided in deepening the structural possibilities of functionalism. While Benedictine theorists such as Kacmarcik and Meinberg situated their own history of church aesthetics within a functionalist paradigm, they had also insisted on the necessity of implementing a Catholic symbolic system. In Meinberg's words, 'the essence of church architecture (…) is always and everywhere a problem of effecting a marriage between the spiritual and the material'.[116] The asymmetry between these two competing conceptions of architectural symbolism discloses the limits of a transfer of architectural knowledge between the two parties. While on the one hand, there was a useful exchange in ideas on the level of aesthetics, this did not extend to an ontological synergy. This shows that in the diachronic extension of key Benedictine concepts, within the horizon of a modernist architectural discourse, the theological content of the Benedictine conception of symbolism was not directly transposable into Breuer's modernist framing.

However, since this was a church, and precisely connected to the wider social goals of the Benedictine community, that conceptual difference did not pose practical problems. In the end, while the Benedictine and Breuer's idiosyncratic variation of architectural symbolism differed in terms of fundamental ontology, Breuer's architectural design enabled the movement which was necessary for the promotion of the liturgy. As Peter Hammond points out 'the task of the modern architect if not to design a building that looks like a church. It is to create a building that *works* as a place for the liturgy'.[117] In other words, while they celebrated the architectural infrastructure which Breuer could offer (since it promoted the liturgical movement of the mass), they also insisted on the importance of pre-modern architectural elements such as the baptistery and the lectern. These elements contained a symbolic content which did not cross-over with Breuer's more

[115] Howarth, 'On Religious Architecture', 257. A hyperbolic paraboloid is a complex structure which derives its strength from shape rather than mass. As the definition appears on the Designing Buildings Wiki page: 'A hyperbolic paraboloid is a doubly-curved surface that resembles the shape of a saddle, that is, it has a convex form along one axis, and a concave form along the other. It is also a doubly-ruled surface, that is every point on its surface lies on two straight lines across the surface. Horizontal sections taken through the surface are hyperbolic in format and vertical sections are parabolic. (…) The use of hyperbolic paraboloids as a form of thin shell construction was pioneered in the post-war era, as a hybrid of modern architecture and structural engineering. By being both lightweight and efficient, the form was used as a means of minimising materials and increasing structural performance while also being capable of achieving impressive and seemingly complex designs'. Available here: https://www.designingbuildings.co.uk/wiki/Hyperbolic_paraboloid_in_construction Accessed 21/01/2019.

[116] Meinberg, 'The Monastic Church'.

[117] Peter Hammond, *Liturgy and Architecture*, 161.

elastic understanding of architectural symbolism. In the debate over the main window, the conceptual tensions at work would become even more discernible.

III. Form and symbolism: the language of religious experience

1959: A Divided Committee

Throughout the Saint John's project, Breuer became increasingly involved with other architectural decision making, including the acoustics and the art programme of the chapel. From 1958 on, the main window became the focus of attention. What was at stake was how symbolism was to be visually transposed. For the Benedictines, the window was so important because it became an orchestrating mechanism for the liturgical activity. Rather than aesthetic concepts based on texture, density, and materiality, debates about the nature of light and form became the focus of the main window. In sum, what were the best conditions to promote the collective experience so central to Benedictine spirituality?

The debate over the northern window was a long and contentious one which preceded the committee meetings and extended beyond the time when a decision was finally made on of November 25, 1959.[118] Throughout the committee meetings, Breuer was confident that his fellow *Bauhäusler*, Josef Albers, would be commissioned to design the northern window. This stemmed from the fact that Albers had already worked on a smaller project, the Abbot's chapel window in 1955.

The window was a meditative work, composed in four shades of grey, photo-sensitive glass, with the altar window depicting the spreading white arms of a cross uniting a series of staggered, rectangular glass fields, and located in a small monastic chapel window in the Benedictine community in Saint John's, Collegeville.[119] In 1956, a year after Albers designed the Abbot's chapel window, he reflected on its aesthetic significance.[120] As the text indicates, Albers was fascinated by the aesthetic potentialities of employing white in glass design, which he altered according to the symbolic axis of the cross in the centre of the window. Notably, Albers alluded to a historical precedent to illuminate his own window design – a cathedral window at Altenburg in Germany. In this way, Albers thought, his window could be seen in continuity with the Benedictine tradition of stained glass design stemming back to the church windows of the Cistercian order during the thirteenth-century.[121] One notable difference was in his use of photo-sensitive glass,

[118] Thimmesh, *A Monastic Memoir*, 103-114. Also, see Neil Benezra, *The Murals and Sculpture of Josef Albers*. PhD Dissertation, Stanford University, 1983, especially, chapter III, (51-81).
[119] Benezra, *The Murals and Sculpture of Josef Albers*, 51.
[120] Josef Albers, 'The White Cross Window (1956)', The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Josef Albers Papers, 57. 7. It has been published in its entirety in Irving L. Finkelstein, *The Life and Art of Josef Albers*, New York: New York University Press, 1984, (301-303).
[121] In his chapter on Albers's chapel window, Neil Benezra disputes whether Albers's was unaware of this since it was so close to his hometown: 'Significantly, Altenberg Cathedral is located less than forty miles from Albers' Westfalian hometown of Bottrop. The likelihood is that despite so resolute a denial, Albers most probably did know the grissaille windows at Altenberg. [...] [D]uring his youth Albers drew from several Westfalian cathedrals, most

which unlike older forms of stained glass design, had the advantage of 'producing varying densities within the glass and thus varying shades of colours'.[122] Yet, despite the technological innovations in photo-sensitive glass, Albers, whose justifications for various artistic decisions in this context were frequently technical in nature, offered a rare admission of internal meaning to his chapel window, on the basis of the interaction between the forms and colours employed.[123]

Following the successful reception of Albers's chapel window, Breuer was confident he could both convince Albers to design the northern wall, and that the committee would back him in choosing Albers.[124] Prior to the committee meeting discussions where the northern window was discussed, Breuer had contacted Albers about the possibility of designing the window. In a letter from January 14, 1957, Breuer sent four prints of drawings of the church, which was under construction at the time, along with an invitation to complete his contribution to the model by February 20, 1957.[125] On January 20, 1957, Albers replied, indicating he was 'intrigued', and suggested they meet to discuss the matter further at Breuer's New York City Office on January 23, 1957.[126] Later on, in the summer of 1958, when Breuer discussed the northern wall with the Benedictines, he suggested Josef Albers for the design of the northern window since the Benedictine community were already impressed with Albers's chapel window design. However, in Breuer's absence, while he was away in Paris working on the UNESCO project, the Benedictines had shortlisted several other artists. After consideration of these alternatives, the idea that Albers should design the main window was dropped. Among the alternatives which the committee considered was the Polish émigré artist, Bronislaw Bak (1922-1981).

Bak, who had survived five years in a German concentration camp, moved to Chicago after the 1939-45 war. In contrast to Albers, Bak was a fairly unknown

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prominently the cathedral in Münster. Given his early interest in stained glass - while a child Albers was taught the craft by his father – it seems likely he would have been familiar with this unique variation within the history of stained glass'. See Benezra, *The Murals and Sculpture of Josef Albers*, 68.

[122] Albers, 'The White Cross Window'.

[123] Albers ends the text with a five line description of the symbolic components of the window: 'Above a ground of indistinct distance; Light accumulates toward the middle; And culminates in the whitest light; Of the suspended cross, the centre; Extending wide arms to the furthest ends'. Josef Albers, 'The White Cross Window'.

[124] In a letter to Josef Albers from January 14, 1957, Breuer reassured Albers that he had the backing of the monks: 'The main question at the moment is whether you would like to do this work at all at your own risk, though the model costs are taken care of. I hate to suggest this "own risk" business, and I wouldn't do it if I didn't have confidence in the monks, and if I did not feel that, with the help of your suggestions and the model, there is a very good chance that they will commission you with the actual work'. Letter from Marcel Breuer to Josef Albers, January 14, 1957, in The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Josef Albers Papers, 57.6. Also, Abbot Dworschak spoke positively of the chapel window when he discussed it with Neil Benezra. See Benezra, *The Murals and Sculpture of Josef Albers*, 80.

[125] Benezra, *The Murals and Sculpture of Josef Albers*, 80.

[126] Letter from Josef Albers to Marcel Breuer, January 20, 1957 in The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Josef Albers Papers, 57.6.

artist who, prior his being commissioned to design the northern window, struggled for recognition as an artist in his newly adopted home in the United States. Following his flight from the ruins of post-war Poland in 1947, he joined a Polish work battalion of former prisoners of war under American leadership at the Kaefertal US army base, near Mannheim in West Germany. In the same year, following the encouragement of friends, Bak joined the Mannheim Freie Akademie, where he received his first formal training. Opting not to return to Poland after his artistic training in Mannheim, along with his wife Hedi, Bak applied for permission to immigrate to the United States as a 'Machine Operator', citing his experience in Kaefertal. Bak's first years in America were marked by job precarity and a series of artistic disappointments. However, by the Mid-1950s, he began working for the Michaudel stained-glass studio, in Chicago. It was here that he developed a method in stained glass window design and received his first commissions, including the window wall for the Sacred Heart Convent in Hubbard Woods near Chicago. In 1957, Bak moved to Fullerton Avenue, where he found a home on the campus of the McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago's Lincoln Park Community, where he further developed his experimental technique in abstract painting. It was at this moment that Bak had first contact with the Saint John's community. In 1958, and after having read an article for the *Catholic Today Magazine* written by Bak, a graduate of Saint John's, Matthew Ahmann, wrote to the school, recommending Bak for a teaching position at the Art Department of Saint John's. Ahmann was also familiar with Bak's previous work in stained glass design which placed him in a favourable position among the committee members as a candidate to design the northern wall for the abbey church.[127] Shortly after his appointment at the Art Department, the Benedictine committee invited Bak to start work on sketches for the window. Bak's ambitious window consisted of 430 hexagonal panels which conveyed the liturgical seasons in abstract form. The colour scale ranged from deep blue to red towards the middle of the window, and unified in the centre of the window by a white spherical section which Bak intended to symbolise the eye of God (fig. 7).

Although Breuer was initially impressed with Bak's proposed design, when he saw these ideas put into practice, Breuer became increasingly sceptical about their viability within the broader architectural plan.[128] While Bak began to work on

[127] Information about Bronislaw Bak can be found in the online biography written by his son, Clemens Bak. It is available here: http://www.bakart-museum.org/gpage.html (accessed 21/09/2021).

[128] While Breuer was away from Saint John's, working on the UNESCO head quarters in Paris, in 1958, Breuer was encouraged by Bak's designs, believing that 'it would turn out very well'. See Young, *Saint John's Abbey Church*, 133. However, Breuer became increasingly critical of Bak's window. In a letter, written to the Benedictine community on December 9, 1959, Breuer outlined his emphatic rejection of Bak's design proposal: 'While I do not want to underestimate Mr Bak's merits; while I still feel that his first sketch was promising; while I give him credit for having convinced your Community that the glass wall can reflect the religious content without being necessarily a figurative presentation; while I value his intensity and interest in this work; while I note and appreciate the improvements he made since last August – I still feel that his work is not good enough for the most important element of the Church. [...] I am sure that you, the Community and the committee, will agree

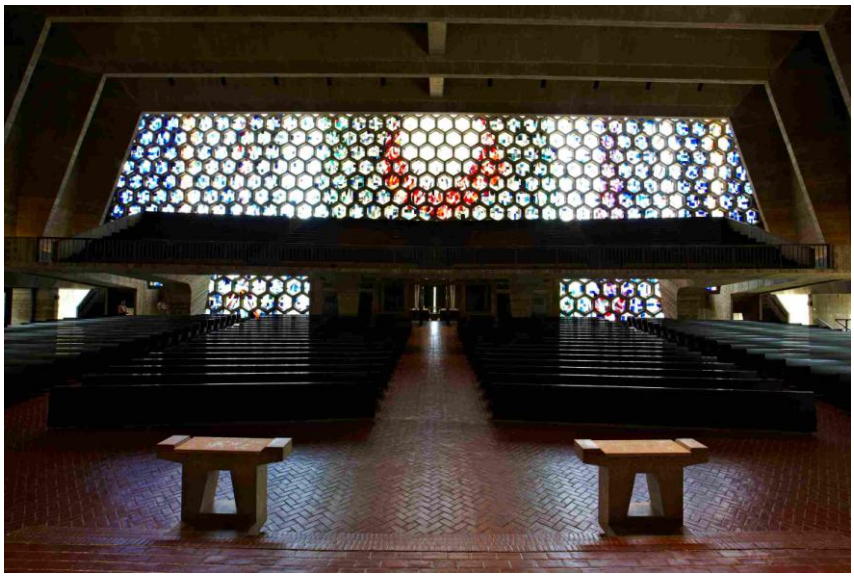

Figure 7 Photograph of Bronislaw Bak's design for the northern window. The white in the central portion of the window symbolises the eye of God. Olga Ivanova, photographer. Courtesy of Victoria Young.

the window of 430 hexagonal panels for the northern wall, Breuer's complaints were echoed by other members of the committee including Frank Kacmarcik, who, in one letter to Dworschak highlighted what was at stake in the choice:

> I question the colour of the eclectic medieval colour scheme (although it is safe) against the cold northern light. Do we from a liturgical point of view wish a deep mystical moody atmosphere for a community-centred space? I would think that we would prefer the more luminous golds and yellows, some greens and contrasting light blues, for expressing the banners reflective purpose, and also for giving better quality light for contemporary Christian worship.[129]

While Bak's proposed design had appealed to some committee members, including Godfrey Diekmann, the editor of the Benedictine journal *Orate Fratres*, who argued that it was not Bak's artistic dexterity but his religious integrity that mattered, others were more sceptical. For instance, the theologian Michael Marx thought that Bak's use of symbolism was dated and found the imagery to be clichéd and bucolic.[130] For Marx, what was central was for the window to illuminate 'the celebration and participation in the mysteries of the redemption, in particular the mystery of Christ's death leading to His glorious resurrection'. Moreover, this aesthetic effect was to be grounded in a theological concept of *doxa*: the effect of God's glorious presence, in radiant and bold forms, an ideal which Marx thought

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if I call this the obligation of all concerned: the integrity of the art work of the Church is a moral obligation'. See Benezra, *The Murals and Sculpture of Josef Albers*, 77.

[129] Frank Kacmarcik, 'Critical Observations and Recommendations for the Great Window of the New Abbey Church,' Box 98, Folder 48 (Research II. Principles of Sacred Art) Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Libraries, NY.

[130] Thimmesh, *A Monastic Memoir*, 72.

the modern artist could achieve, irrespective of their religious intentionality. While Marx's framing of *doxa* confounded a link between medieval churches and what he perceived necessary for Saint John's abbey church in the twentieth-century, he called on restraint, without the 'development of a major iconographical concept'.[131] Curiously, Breuer's critique of the Bak window was based on a similar logic. In a committee meeting, Breuer appealed to the Benedictine tradition of church building by claiming that Bak did not understand the restraint necessary for the architectural setting.[132] Breuer's remarks therefore appeared to be consonant with the aesthetics of the Cistercian church builders from the twelfth-century who emphasized expressive restraint since an elaborate colour scheme would distract people from liturgical action.[133] For many, Bak strayed too far from the austere forms and bright colours which were necessary for a community centred space based on action.

After debate among the committee, and pressure from Breuer, on August 4, 1959, the committee agreed to invite Albers to submit a sketch for the main window.[134] Three months later, on November 12, 1959, Albers presented his design and gave a lecture which justified his design decisions (fig. 8).[135] The presentation was structured in two parts: first, a yellow cross design he had made; and second, a white cross design. Within this framework, Albers discussed technical aspects of the designs, including a large scale of all subdivisions showing various 'tricks', glass samples and sketches. Additionally, Albers offered theoretical justifications which included the idea of the cross, an examination of the sensation of 'lifting', the relation of his design to the architectural setting, and the effectiveness of his composition regardless of the viewer's perspective.[136] In Thimmesh's memoir which recalled the lecture, he summarised the line of argument Albers presented at the committee meeting. First, Albers addressed his design in terms of structure, which was related to geometrical issues.[137] Drawing on this, Albers explained how his proposed structure could be incorporated into the 'theological and architectural

[131] Michael Marx O.S.B. 'The Resurrection Window' – an attachment to Josef Albers, 'The White Cross Window (1956)', in The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Josef Albers Papers, 57.7.

[132] Zalot, *Revisioning Liturgical Space*, 75-76.

[133] See Ernst Benjamin Koenker, *The Liturgical Renaissance in the Roman Catholic Church*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1954, esp. 165-180.

[134] Thimmesh, *A Monastic Memoir*, 82.

[135] In addition to the twelve Benedictine monks, those present at the meeting were Abbot Dworschak, Marcel Breuer, his architectural assistant, Hamilton Smith, Frank Kacmarcik, and Val Michelson, the onsite architecture supervisor. The lecture was recorded by Breuer, however, after 20 minutes, there were technical difficulties, and other than Albers's notes which delineate the sections of the talk, the only other surviving source for the lecture exists in Thimmesh's memoirs, who reconstructed his main arguments. What is left of the surviving tape reel is kept in the Collegeville archives in Minnesota. See Thimmesh, *A Monastic Memoir*, 97. For Albers's notes, see Josef Albers 'Two Presentations' – an attachment to Josef Albers, 'The White Cross Window', (1956) in The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Josef Albers Papers, 57.7.

[136] Josef Albers 'Two Presentations'.

[137] Thimmesh, *A Monastic Memoir*, 97.

desiderata'.[138] Here, he explained how the lines which tied the hexagons together were not anchored to the perimeter of the window. Rather, the periphery spaces of the window were to be of clear glass. This enabled the primary form at the centre of the window to radiate, giving the optical impression that the central symbol of the window configured the aesthetic order of the entire window. The intention was 'to give the design a weightless effect and to allow everything to relate to one basic centre' which, Albers explained when addressing the committee, was 'a parallel to your philosophy'. As Thimmesh recalled, this was the closest that Albers had arrived at discussing religious symbolism.[139]

Figure 8 Photograph of Josef Albers's proposed design for the Northern Window. Image courtesy of the Saint John's Abbey Archives, Collegeville, Minnesota.

Albers's indication to the Benedictine committee that his design was a 'parallel' to their philosophy highlights the nuanced difference between his conception of spirituality and the Benedictine conception of symbolism. This distinction highlights what is conceptually at stake in this lecture at Saint John's. As many scholars have recently highlighted, Albers had in fact been raised as a Catholic. As a twelve-year-old he was offered the task of painting grave makers in the cemetery, and one of his first artistic commissions was to make the *Rosa Mystica* stained-glass window for a church in his hometown, Bottrop in the Ruhr area of Germany.[140] Albers was therefore familiar with Catholic symbolism, and its ability to communicate certain themes. However, after going on to become one of the most renowned art teachers of the twentieth-century at the Bauhaus, the Black Mountain College and Yale, it became increasingly difficult to discern any traces of this religious background, at least in terms of notable conventional Catholic symbolism. Nevertheless, Albers did hold on to a conception of the spiritual in art during his career, which he conveyed in two lectures during his time teaching at Black Mountain College. In what follows, I will therefore focus on the specific way in

[138] Thimmesh, *A Monastic Memoir*, 97.
[139] Thimmesh, *A Monastic Memoir*, 97.
[140] On Albers's Catholic upbringing, see Nicholas Fox Weber, 'Josef Albers as a Catholic Artist', in Nicholas Fox Weber, *Sacred Modernist. Josef Albers as Sacred Modernist*, Cork: Glucksmann, 2012, (13-28).

which Albers's conception of the spirituality of art changed from the Catholicism of his youth.

Albers on Form and Tradition

In a text written in 1934 for the *Black Mountain College Bulletin*, 'Concerning Art Instruction', Albers revised his earlier view that tradition had no place in modernity. As art historian Eva Diaz explained, Albers 'came to view tradition and history as residual formations that, though demanding vigilant testing, also must be frequently resuscitated and never dispensed with entirely.'[141] Accordingly, Albers sought to think historically in the present, a thought which was grounded in the conviction that tradition and experiment were not opposing forces, but 'dialectically related'.[142]

In 'Concerning Art Instruction', Albers claimed that 'art is the province in which one finds all the problems of life reflected – not only problems of form (e.g. proportion and balance) but also spiritual problems (e.g. of philosophy, of religion, of sociology, of economy)'.[143] 'Life', for Albers, here signifies not only physical aspects, but also spiritual components. The reason why art had this dimension, for Albers, was because mankind is not only 'endowed with all the physiological senses', but also 'has all the senses of the soul (e.g. sensitivity to tone, color, space)'.[144] An understanding and appreciation of art was therefore based on a communication between the physical and spiritual aspects of existence.

Moreover, such an interaction between the spirit and embodied experience effectuated creativity within history and gave tradition its dynamic component. The motor of this change was generated in the clash between the intellect and intuition. For Albers, an artist's work consists in 'on the one hand the intuitive search for and discovery of form; on the other hand[,] the knowledge and application of the fundamental laws of form'.[145] Additionally, this dynamic had a social dimension, which Albers sought to apply in his drawing, basic design (*Werklehre*), colour, and painting courses. As Albers explained, the teacher can apply this method: 'appreciation and understanding of art can grow both through learning (the development of intuitive perception and discrimination) and through teaching (the handing on of authoritative knowledge)'.[146] It was in Albers's basic-design courses that an element of handicraft and working with industrial products came to the fore by focussing on studies of materials, based on a 'general constructive thinking, especially a building thinking, which must be the basis of every work with any material'.[147] The basis of the design courses resided in *matière* studies and material

[141] Eva Díaz, 'The Ethics of Perception: Josef Albers in the United States', *The Art Bulletin*, 90: 2, 2008, 260-285, 280.
[142] Díaz, 'The Ethics of Perception', 280.
[143] Josef Albers, 'Concerning Art Instruction', *Black Mountain College Bulletin*, 2, 1934, 2-7, 2.
[144] Albers, 'Concerning Art Instruction', 2.
[145] Albers, 'Concerning Art Instruction', 2.
[146] Albers, 'Concerning Art Instruction', 2.
[147] Albers, 'Concerning Art Instruction', 5.

studies. The former was concerned with the *appearance* and surface of materials, whereas the latter was concerned with the *capacity* of materials.[148]

By expanding the meaning of art beyond the purely formalist conception, Albers thought that form was loaded with cultural meaning. Albers's conception of form meant that there were continuities throughout history: 'We need not be afraid of losing the connection with tradition if we make the elements of form the basis of our study. And this thorough foundation saves us from imitation and mannerisms, it develops independence, critical ability, and discipline'.[149] The artist's search for a refinement of form therefore entailed a normative elevation of humanity. Albers put it in these terms: 'To understand the meaning of form is the indispensable preliminary condition for culture. Culture is the ability to select or distinguish the better, that is[,] the more meaningful form, the better appearance, the better behaviour'.[150] Form had its correlate in society, the aesthetic component of which we call 'culture' and the refinement and distillation of form had positive social effects.

On the face of it, this has one notable cross-over with Cistercian aesthetics. This refinement of visual form, as a kind of *distillation* process, towards the attainment of austerity was also how the Cistercians intended to reform Christianity.[151] This was how they perceived a return to an authentic and living tradition in the Church. Curiously, in the Benedictine history of church building, metaphors of regeneration were coupled with architectural structures and design interiors which aimed at reducing everything to the essential.[152] Abstraction, bare walls, and the lack of colour advocated by the church builders of the twelfth-century, were considered mechanisms to rejuvenate the life force of the Church through liturgical action.[153] Frank Kacmarcik expressed this idea by claiming that

[148] Albers, 'Concerning Art Instruction', 5; also see Rainer Wick, *Teaching at the Bauhaus*, Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2000, 176-181.
[149] Albers, 'Concerning Art Instruction', 2.
[150] Josef Albers, 'Every perceivable thing has form', draft of a poem, n.d. 1, in Yale Papers quoted in Díaz, 'The Ethics of Perception', 265.
[151] The process of distillation in the painterly process, was how writer Nicholas Fox Weber ascribed Albers's work as Catholic: 'Distillation was fundamental to Josef's method. But, [...] meticulous in his measuring of quantities and his choice of elements, masterful as he was in his handling of tools and the technique with which he executed his craft, he used that simplification and refinement to evoke splendors beyond his comprehension'. See Weber, 'Josef Albers as a Catholic Artist', 13.
[152] As many historians of Cistercian architecture have highlighted, due to the lack of a centralised religious authority which generated funding and standardised building practices of the Benedictine Abbeys in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, the success or failure of their monastery largely relied on the benevolence of patrons from the secular domain. As a counter measure, Benedictine purists such as Saint Bernard, advocated measures to ensure that their spiritual spaces cut their ties from such patrons and advocated extreme self-sufficiency. In practical terms, the Cistercians inaugurated a new socio-economic system based on a land-economy. This gave them more freedom to develop their own building practices which were separate from the secular sphere of influence. See Peter Fergusson, *Architecture of Solitude: Cistercian Abbeys in Twelfth-Century England*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, 5.
[153] Constable, 'Renewal and Reform in Religious Life', 59.

blank, single-coloured walls provide the least amount of distraction for God to be communicated with. In his own words: 'It is the people that are the ornaments. I prefer light coloured walls because the jewels in space are the peoples' faces. Having designs on the wall, stencils or fancy brickwork […] camouflages, to a degree, the presence of the people'.[154] The process of aesthetic refinement was therefore not only a means of achieving a more effective communication with God, but also a way of transposing culture and tradition through time.

Albers's conception of form as a distillation process formed the intellectual backdrop for his *Homage to the Square* series of paintings. Begun in 1950, Albers's *Homage to the Square* series was perhaps his most ambitious project, which contained over two thousand works, and preoccupied him for over twenty-five years. The series was characterised by a relentless adherence to a singular pictorial form, namely, the square. Based upon optical effects, the aims of the paintings were to challenge the faculty of perception of a given viewer. As the writer and critic Leyland de la Durantaye has highlighted, while such a fascination for a pictorial form based on geometric purity could suggest a philosophical Cartesianism, aiming to arrive at the essence of an object, such an endeavour in fact had the opposite philosophical implications– he was intrigued by their artificiality.[155] By effacing his personal signature from the paintings and focussing on sharp irreducible forms, we can discern similarities with the Benedictine emphasis on an aesthetics of simplicity. Such *visual* connections have led some commentators, such as de la Durantaye, to designate Albers's square series as 'sacred': 'Of all the things that Albers said on art the simplest is the most resonant – that "art is neither imitation nor repetition, it is revelation." If the thing […] which the artist reveals […] is the inexpressible fact that we are born with minds able to conceive a cosmos and to seek order in it – then that thing is the sacred subject of any work of art'.[156]

Albers: Spirituality contra Science

If form offered a viable means for transposing spirituality throughout history, it was the human agent who offered a meaning to that process. One of the moments where Albers clearly articulated a spiritual conception of form on an affective level can be located in a lecture entitled 'The Meaning of Art', delivered at the Black Mountain College on May 6, 1940. To explain how art could be a spiritual activity, Albers placed art in opposition to science.

[154] Zalot, *Revisioning Liturgical Space*, 291.
[155] Leyland De la Durantaye writes: 'Squares appealed to Albers because they were artificial, because they were abstract. He said as much, declaring that he chose them because they "did not occur in nature", because they were "man-made", because they were a "human invention". Rather than honouring some Pythagorean purity of number or some Euclidean harmony of form, they were made to do something specific. They were made to serve'. Leland De la Durantaye, 'I went Out In The Extreme Cold, or On the Squares', in Nicholas Fox Weber, *Sacred Modernist. Josef Albers as Sacred Modernist*, Cork: Glucksmann, 2012, (34-42), 38.
[156] De la Durantaye, 'On the Squares', 40.

To explain the difference between subjective experience of nature on the one hand and art on the other, Albers highlighted the distinction between birdsong and music. For Albers, birdsong is not music because it is merely combination of tones. By contrast, music is an activity which 'comes from the human soul and speaks to human souls'.[157] For Albers, this was because music engaged with an activity which *transformed* nature beyond a mere random accumulation of sounds. The distinction Albers employed served to exemplify the principle that in art, it is the *how* that matters, and not the what.[158] If art were merely constituted by physiology, then indeed potentially any accumulation of sense data could count as music. However, for Albers, this was clearly not the case.

As Albers goes on to explain, by giving form to the raw experience of nature (sound), the composer transforms nature by giving the sounds a *relational* value. Like in Albers's colour theory, the claim here is that sounds only have a value in terms of the context in which they are placed.[159] Yet that relationality is imbued with meaning by the composer and transposed to the listener, and thereby elevates art above nature. It was therefore in our capacity as active interpreters of nature that art had any meaning whatsoever: 'As long as we hear single tones or only many tones, we don't hear music at all. Music is in between the tones; we hear music if we feel the relationship of the tones'.[160] And it was on account of art being able to appeal to human emotions that gave it a spiritual value: 'art is revelation instead of information'.[161]

To clarify the spiritual nature of art, Albers placed it in contrast with science, since both are forms of human activity that transform nature and our understanding of it. Science, for Albers is 'deductive', as the activity is directed towards objectivity and the final aim is to explain the world. By contrast, art is characterised in terms of subjectivity, belief, and its truths are 'permanent'. Based on these contrasts, Albers reasoned in the lecture, 'art is essentially religion'.[162]

Yet, despite the religious semantics contained in some Albers's texts from these years, its lack of denominational specificity, or its stress on the importance of the individual as the locus of religious experience were at odds with the Benedictine conception of religion as a public and collective phenomenon. Albers conception of the spiritual in art is a striking example of what the architectural theorist Peter Carl has referred to as the 'secular-sacred' phenomenon.[163] In this post-Romantic context, whereby the broader, non-denominational idea of 'sacred space', replaces older religious articulations, the public component of religion evaporates. 'One must

[157] Albers, 'The Meaning of Art', in Box No. 16 (Professional Papers, Albers, Josef & Anni, Pamphlets/Writings), Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Libraries, NY, 3.
[158] Albers, 'The Meaning of Art', 4.
[159] On the Gestalt components of Albers's colour theory, see Karen Koehler, 'More than Parallel lines: Thoughts on Gestalt, Albers, and the Bauhaus', in Vanja Malloy, *Intersecting Colors: Josef Albers and His Contemporaries*, Amherst: Amherst College Press, 2015, (45-64).
[160] Albers, 'The Meaning of Art', 4.
[161] Albers, 'The Meaning of Art', 3.
[162] Albers, 'The Meaning of Art', 5.
[163] Peter Carl, 'The Godless Temple, "Organon of the Infinite"', *The Journal of Architecture*, 10:1, 2005, 63-90.

acknowledge', Carl writes, 'that the emphasis on individual freedom has inverted the primacy of collective solidarity (…). The result is (an) aggregate of individuals – mass culture – whose collective identity is very obscure'.[164] At the historical moment when art becomes equated with the religious, as Albers appears to gesture toward, 'the absolute can only be manifest by analogy (…)' and becomes, in Carl's parlance, an 'organon of the infinite'. This concept of the infinite is different from a Catholic concept of the eternal, by precisely not postulating a conceptualisation of eschatology. In this context, religious ideas become separate from experience, which Carl notes, the latter only became a category in the nineteenth-century, when religion passes, via 'religious experience, (…) to aesthetic experience'.[165]

Moreover, Albers's conception of the spirituality of art falls within the domain of what philosopher Charles Taylor refers to as the 'eclipse of God' in modern Western societies. In his essay 'A Place for Transcendence?', Taylor examines how in a world where God's presence is less obvious, different forms of spirituality remain active.[166] These forms of spirituality are an effect of the splintering of spirituality, causing further atomisation among believers. According to Taylor, this contributed to the 'eviction of transcendence from the public sphere'. One of the main effects of the distancing of God is that there was a development of an 'immanent-humanist' option, which Albers appears to be adopting.[167] As Taylor explains, one of the dimensions which emerged in this 'eclipse of God' of modernity is, in quoting Shelley, the 'search for subtler languages'.[168] As the traditional languages of art are rendered void in God's distancing, artists sought languages which were unique to their constitution (medium specific), and simultaneously gestured toward a deeper spiritual meaning. In this way, the search for a more specific language of religious experience, became contemporaneous with the increasingly individualised nature of that experience. Moreover, Albers's ideas on the spiritual in art emphasised developing creativity at the expense of more archaic symbolic matrices. As he phrased it in one lecture: 'Tradition in art is to create, not to revive'.[169] This was completely at odds with the Benedictine stress on the importance of reviving older elements of tradition, based on the public dimension of the liturgy.

The Public Dimension of Symbols

As the Benedictine theologian Frédéric Debuyst highlighted in his 1968 work, *Modern Architecture and Christian Celebration*, the 'sacred', in a truly Christian sense, is not strictly attached to the appearance of an altar or a window design, but to the

[164] Carl, 'The Godless Temple', 64.
[165] Carl, 'The Godless Temple', 67-68.
[166] Charles Taylor, 'A Place for Transcendence?', in Regina Schwartz, *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology Approach the Beyond*, transl. Damian Treffs, New York and London: Routledge, 2004, (1-11).
[167] Taylor, 'A Place for Transcendence?', 9.
[168] Taylor, 'A Place for Transcendence?', 10.
[169] Josef Albers, 'General Education and Art Education: Possessive or Productive', in *Search Versus Research*, Hartford: Trinity College Press, 1969, 13.

living dialogue conveyed in words and gestures, i.e. that which celebrates the incarnation and provides an atmosphere to facilitate that.[170] Accordingly, in the Benedictine tradition, there is no rule which favours representational or abstract art. The true image of Christian worship is in the gathering of the *ecclesia* and the promotion of liturgical participation, which is *itself* the living symbol of the celebration of Christ.[171] Therefore it was important that the imagery either incorporated the redemptive activities of Christ through imagery or provided an atmosphere where such activity could be re-enacted through the liturgy. As the theologian and philosopher Ernest Benjamin Koenker explains:

> Liturgical art prefers to choose its subject matter from the redemptive activities of Christ and from the sacramental life of the Church. It presents these […] by means of the symbol – true life hidden beneath significant signs. The divine can be made discernible only through the symbol. The symbol points beyond itself to a higher, spiritual reality, the objective sign lays claim to what it expresses. It presents the invisible, incomprehensible, supernatural reality in the real, visible, tangible this-worldly reality.[172]

While for Albers, the refinement of form arguably had social implications, and was considered as an antidote to what he perceived as a vapid expressionism among some of his contemporaries, Albers's pedagogical aims at Black Mountain College and Yale were to develop the critical and creative capacity of each *individual* student. The refinement of form in his classes was therefore aiming at the expansion of multiplicity and diversity. By contrast, as Koenker explains, 'For the Benedictine congregations, liturgical art is always community art; the individual artist blends his personality into the community of like-minded men, all living the liturgical art. He must enjoy full contact with the communal cult'.[173] In this sense, it could have also been precisely Albers's refusal to fully assimilate with their communal project which swayed the vote in favour of Bak's.[174]

Later, in 1981, when Kacmarcik was reflecting on his contribution to the liturgical arts movement in the US for the Berakah Award, he described his role as a 'deacon of visual theology'. In this speech, Kacmarcik highlights where he would have agreed with Albers: 'humans are creatures of sense as well as spirit, and [the]

[170] Debuyst, *Modern Architecture and Christian Celebration*, 71.
[171] This idea was proposed on one occasion in the committee meeting in support of Albers's window, when the stained-glass consultant Emil Frei Jr. claimed that the lack of religious content of Albers's window was unproblematic since that would emerge from the liturgical procession directed from the altar. See Thimmesh, *A Monastic Memoir*, 101.
[172] Koenker, *The Liturgical Renaissance in the Roman Catholic Church*, 167.
[173] Koenker, *The Liturgical Renaissance in the Roman Catholic Church*, 168.
[174] In contrast to Albers, who only stayed for a couple of days, Bak had moved from Chicago to teach in the Art History Department at Saint John's and made the effort to understand the Benedictine way of life and design his window on that basis. For a short biography of Bak written by his son, see: http://content.yudu.com/Library/A2x2z0/BronislawBakBiograph/resources/index.htm?referrerUrl=http%3A%2F%2Ffree.yudu.com%2Fitem%2Fdetails%2F1997805%2FBronislaw-Bak-Biography accessed: 13/03/2019.

senses and spirit are not two separate compartments, but aspects of one and the same human being, intertwined and interrelated'.[175] Indeed, this was the reason for why visual forms were so important for Kacmarcik, since they operate as a vector for transcendent experience. And it is precisely in this sense where the Bauhaus diaspora and the Benedictine conception of visual form departs. In contrast to Albers, whose educational imperative to enable his students to continually see new elements of reality through the experimentation with form, Kacmarcik's conception of visual form was primarily concerned finding a transparent language open to the transcendent:

> If art and environment is such an influence, we who are baptized and confirmed in the following of Christ and in keeping his influence primary have to be alert to all the influences that help or hinder. This means being sensitive to the elements, to the earth and the world, to materials as signs […] The furnishings, the vessels, the utensils that we use in worship must have a profundity, a *gravitas*, an inner content…

IV. Coda. Why not Eliade? On the semantics of the 'sacred' in modern architecture

When examining the dynamics between pre-modern symbols and modernist aesthetics, one name who frequently appears is Mircea Eliade.[176] Parallel to the committee meetings began in Minnesota in 1956, Mircea Eliade was delivering lectures at the University of Chicago on the history of religions, at the behest of the religious scholar Joachim Wach.[177] From the 1960s on, Eliade would go on to be a defining voice in the study of religions in America, founding the *Journal of the History of Religions* in 1961 and becoming the Sewell Avery Distinguished Professor of the History of Religions at Chicago University in 1964.[178]

There is, however, an important reason why I have decided not to include an Eliadian exegesis of symbolism in this article; namely, there is a fundamental difference between the way in which Eliade understands myth on the one hand, and

[175] Frank Kacmarcik, 'The Berakah Award 1981', *Worship* 55, 1981, 359-374.
[176] For instance, in one of the central anthologies which explores the interconnections between religious imagination and modern architecture, *The Religious Imagination in Modern and Contemporary Architecture: A Reader*, edited by Renata Hejduk and Jim Williamson (New York: Routledge, 2011), an essay written by Eliade ('The Sacred and Modern Artists'), appears in there (122-125).
[177] William McGuire, *Bollingen: An Adventure in Collecting the Past*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982, 151.
[178] David Carrasco, 'Mircea Eliade and the "Duration of Life": An Abundance of Souvenirs', in David Carrasco and Jane Maria Law, *Waiting for the Dawn: Mircea Eliade in Perspective*, Niwot: University of Colorado Press, 1991, (139-146), 142. The Harvard theologian once claimed that 'Mircea Eliade is by nearly unanimous consent the most influential student of religion today'. See Kenan Heise's obituary of Mircea Eliade in *The Chicago Tribune*, April 23, 1986. Available here: https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1986-04-23-8601290634-story.html accessed 02/07/2020.

the socially transformative aims of the Benedictines in the twentieth-century on the other. Much of Eliade's analysis of the operativity of pre-modern symbolism in modernity draws upon the concept of the axis.[179] As Bert Daelemans has pointed out, Eliade's work has received a renewed attention in the context of discussions on 'sacred architecture'. In particular, Daelemans points to a symposium which took place in October 2007 titled 'Constructing the Ineffable: Contemporary Sacred Architecture' at the Yale School of Architecture in collaboration with the Yale Institute of Sacred Music.[180] Departing from the conviction that 'many studies of modern architecture have overlooked the significant role of religious buildings as sites of exploration and experimentation,' the symposium sought to bring together an eclectic set of agendas stemming from different religious traditions and disciplinary backgrounds.[181]

Although the contributions were diverse, as Daelemans points out, the conception of 'sacred space' was largely based on Eliade's demarcation between the profane and the holy.[182] It is this form of analysis which places the concept of the 'symbol' as an inflection of the 'sacred' in antagonism to the profane and the modern.[183] In the Baptist ethicist, Emilie M. Townes's contribution, 'Constructing the Immaterial in Spaces Large and Small' (2010), she mobilizes Eliade's philosophy of the sacred as a means of providing a spiritual centre of gravity.[184] Numerous other publications which examine the recalibration of older forms of religious expression in modernity also lean of this idea of the sacred, among them, Renata Hejduk and Jim Williamson's edited volume, *The Religious Imagination in Modern and Contemporary Architecture* (2010), where extracts from Eliade's 'The Sacred and the Modern Artist' text appears.[185]

[179] For three works where the concept of the axis is central, see Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, transl. Willard R. Trask, New York: Pantheon Books, 1954; Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, transl. Philip Mairet, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969; Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, New York: Crossroads, 1990.

[180] The contributions were later collected in a book edited by Karla Cavarra Britton: *Constructing the Ineffable: Contemporary Sacred Architecture*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010.

[181] Daelemans, *Spiritus Loci*, 100.

[182] Daelemans, *Spiritus Loci*, 53, 101.

[183] In Daelemans's PhD thesis, he writes: 'The main discussions in the most recent conferences and publications on sacred space evolve around the issue of the sacred. Traditionally, the sacred is expressed by separating a specific space from the ordinary, which thus becomes "profane", facing the holy (*pro-fanum*)'. Daelemans, *Spiritus Loci*, 53. Daelemans derives this definition of the 'sacred' from Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, transl. Williard R. Trask, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961.

[184] Emilie M. Townes, 'Constructing the Immaterial in Spaces Large and Small', in Karla Cavarra Britton: *Constructing the Ineffable: Contemporary Sacred Architecture,* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010, 72-79.

[185] Renata Hejduk and Jim Williamson, *The Religious Imagination in Modern and Contemporary Architecture: A Reader*, New York and London: Routledge, 2011.

Eliade's conception of myth operates on a supra-historical register, thereby aiming to provide insights into eternal and universal truths. One of Eliade's most renowned works, *Images and Symbols* (1969), elaborates on the 'symbolism of the centre', by explaining how 'the cosmic mountain' has been a universal symbol which facilitated a meeting between the earthly and the divine. As such, he draws on how such symbolism was operative in Mesopotamian, Indian, Syrian, Judaic, and Christian traditions among numerous others.[186] In the context of aesthetics, Eliade examined how the symbolism of the centre transpired in temples, sculptures and monuments. For instance, his analysis of Constantin Brâncuşi's work *The Endless Column*, which is a series of repeated rhomboids, extending vertically from the base towards the sky, he described this sculpture as an inscription of the symbolism of the 'axis mundi'.[187] Like the 'cosmic mountain', the basic aim of the axis mundi is to convey a symbolism of ascension, from the earth below toward heaven above.

Eliade's analysis of Brâncuşi's *The Endless Column* is conceptually grounded in archetypes which permeate culture from antiquity to modernity. This philosophical commitment becomes clear in his essay 'Brancusi and Mythology', where Eliade praises Brâncuşi's use of symbolism as a return to an authentic conception of the sacred: 'Brancusi's attitude toward his materials', Eliade writes, 'and especially toward stone, may possibly help us one day to understand something about the mentality of prehistoric man. For Brâncuşi addressed himself to certain stones with the awed and ecstatic reverence of someone for whom such an object was the manifestation of a sacred power and was thus, in itself, a sacred mystery.'[188] Such reverence for the 'mystery of stone', Eliade maintains, brings about an intensive form of 'interiorization', a form of religious consciousness disclosed in different forms of archetypes, equally applicable to pre-history, as they are to modern man. These experiences, so Eliade claims, can be examined through the lens of Carl Jung's notion of a 'collective unconscious'.[189]

Given the prominence Eliade acquired in the study of religions, and his interest in aesthetics, the mobilisation of his ideas also gained traction in the only monograph published on Saint John's abbey written by Victoria Young. In her book, *Saint John's Abbey Church. Marcel Breuer and the Creation of a Modern Sacred Space* (2014), the concept of the 'axis' takes a centre stage. In the book, she argues that the 'spiritual axis', was central to Breuer's architectural planning. As Young maintains, the 'spiritual axis' is a term she coined 'for worshippers' processional way based on monasticism, liturgical reform, and modern design.' For Young, the building itself is a testimony to the unity between these parts, through 'its form, its emphasis on the holy sacraments and their accessories, and the use of vernacular language and customs'.[190] However, what such an approach omits in valorising the cohesion between mythic ritual and architectural design are the very concrete disagreements

[186] Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, 43.
[187] Mircea Eliade, 'Brancusi and Mythology', in *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadone, New York: Cross Road, 1990, 93-101.
[188] Eliade, 'Brancusi and Mythology', 97.
[189] Eliade, 'Brancusi and Mythology', 97.
[190] Young, *Saint John's Abbey Church*, 67.

which emerged throughout both the research phases (by Breuer) and the committee meetings among the parties involved. Moreover, as Bert Daelemans has convincingly argued, Eliade's conceptual demarcation is too binary, wherein we are left with the choice between the dehumanising, chaotic 'junkspace' of a profane modernity, and a harmonious and meaningful ordered space of the sacred.[191] As the committee meetings and Breuer's binder showed, there were subtle negotiations at play between the sacred and the modern.

Moreover, in contrast to Eliade's concept of *hierophanies*, which indicates greater or lesser degree of legitimacy in so far as an artefact coheres with its original, pre-modern archetype, the Benedictine order frequently insisted on their futurism. 'Nothing could be more uncharacteristic of our Order', Meinberg wrote, 'than to fall back upon imitations of the past, no matter how successful'.[192] This principle of futurism in Benedictine thought has always been based on an ability to adapt to the concrete circumstances in which they found themselves within. As Marcel Gauchet explains, this theoretical framework was not merely the result of external circumstances but inscribed in its intellectual origins. In *The Disenchantment of the World*, Gauchet places the Benedictine ability to accept the 'thickness of an unavoidable reality' in contrast to prior forms of hermeticism, including those which Eliade celebrates as authentic versions of the sacred, which radically rejected the world. Accordingly, by accepting the world in its imperfection, yet with an aim of transforming the world, monasticism brought about new forms of collective action which aimed to improve the conditions of existence.[193]

As the historian Thomas Wallnig has pointed out in *Critical Monks: The German Benedictines, 1680 – 1740* (2019), pre-modern Benedictine concepts frequently overlapped with 'the political, ecclesiastical, and intellectual geographies of Early Modern Europe'.[194] The way in which Benedictine concepts interlaced with early modern public institutions, particularly in the Habsburg Empire, entailed a 'layering' of pre-modern Catholic concepts within a burgeoning modern political framework.[195] In terms of attitudes to history, the concept of tradition remained

[191] Daelemans, *Spiritus Loci*, 101.
[192] Meinberg, 'The Monastic Church', in Box 97, Folder 41. Office Records: Office File, Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Libraries, NY.
[193] Marcel Gauchet, *Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, transl. Oscar Burge, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, 84. The relevant passage where Gauchet elaborates on the ontological structure which informs this sphere of collective activity is the following: 'Behind the formulation of the ascetic ideal lay an implicit commitment to an ontological structure. The entire scope of religion was redefined, beginning with its boundary as represented by the monastic calling. […] In other words, there could be no internal setting aside of appearances, no abolishing the world's apparent stability, even for those supposedly dead to it; there was, rather an obligation to accept the thickness of an unavoidable reality. For the man of God living only for salvation, work provided a minimum level of consent to this world and the discipline of the collective undertaking was proof he shares the human condition. The quest for the other life thus had to take place within the framework of this life'. Gauchet, *Disenchantment of the World*, 85.
[194] Wallnig, *Critical Monks,* 8.
[195] See Chapter 1: Layers of Time – between Trent and the Enlightenment; Layers of Space: 'Benedictine Europe'; Layers of Knowledge: Religious Communities in Early Modern

central. As Wallnig explains: 'the German Benedictine approach to monastic knowledge mostly centred around concepts of "tradition," its evolution referred to as "*reforma(tio)*" and its positive reassessment termed "*renovation*".'[196]

In 'A Project to Assist in Understanding the Basic Ideas and Artistic Forms of the Christian Tradition in Western Civilization', a key document in Breuer's binder for the Saint John's project, the Benedictine community presented their order as one which integrated its pragmatic and contemporaneous attitude within the context of the broader development of Western art and ideas.[197] '"[C]ommunication" and "understanding",' the document states, 'will be most rapid and most effective if it is achieved, not from books alone, but in an environment that reflects the spirit and values of the men and times which produced the books'.[198] This yielded an attitude which stressed how the daily way of life of a given society harmonised with the Christian origins which inspired the intellectual and cultural products of Western modernity. In short, Benedictine thinkers have always stressed their dynamic ability to connect with the current ways of thinking and artistic practice which does not indicate a return to a more authentic experience, which Eliade's analysis of the sacred in modernity suggests.

The Benedictine concept of futurity did not, however, entail that the monks of Minnesota were in complete agreement with Breuer and Hamilton, as the heated exchanges throughout the committee meetings showed. At the heart of these discussions was a negotiation on the specific direction of their ideas on symbolism. For Breuer, the realisation of new engineering techniques enabled architects to incorporate poetic elements from a broader history of modes of expression. It was therefore the technical means that enabled poetic expression which Breuer thought was the basis for going beyond a limited conception of architectural modernism he was seeking to reconfigure.

In this sense, Breuer's intellectual approach to Saint John's might best be described in terms of the 'sacred-secular', as Peter Carl has outlined it, which we encountered earlier in this article. Like many non-Catholic modernist architects working in the aftermath of the 1939-1945 war, Breuer aimed to replace a concept of the religious eternal with a secularised concept of the infinite. In this regard, Breuer's invention of a 'heavy-lightness' was innovative. Contemporaneous architects tended to favour either an abstract rationalist approach, exemplified in Mies van der Rohe's I.I.T. Chapel in Chicago on the one hand, or, the organic expressionism manifest in Le Corbusier's Ronchamp building.[199] Breuer, by opting for neither an organic pastoral idiom (Le Corbusier) suggesting an idealised past,

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Central Europe; Layers of Demography: Being a Benedictine Monk. In Wallnig, *Critical Monks*, 1-31.

[196] Wallnig, *Critical Monks,* 166.

[197] The document is signed by members of the 'Library Subcommittee', which includes the following names: John, Alfred, Martin, Alexius, Benjamin, Ronald. Appears in: Folder 10, Office Records. Project File, Box 89 Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Libraries, NY.

[198] [N/A], 'A Project to Assist in Understanding the Basic Ideas and Artistic Forms of the Christian Tradition in Western Civilization', in: Folder 10, Office Records. Project File, Box 89 Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Libraries, NY.

[199] Debuyst, *Modern Architecture and Christian Celebration*, 47-48.

nor a rationalised systematicity implying a belief in technological progress (Mies), operated along the lines of a paradoxical temporality, drawing on both pre-modern and modern design concepts by placing structural contrasts against one another (fig. 9).

Figure 9 Photograph of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Robert F. Carr Memorial Chapel of St. Saviour, service in progress, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, Illinois, United States (1952). Photo courtesy of University Archives and Special Collections, Paul V. Galvin Library, Illinois Institute of Technology.

As we observed earlier in this article, Breuer aimed to achieve 'long range improvement', and 'long range progress'. Later, in 1966, Breuer would attribute such an extended diachronic architectural imaginary with the attempt to grasp 'infinite space'. As he claimed in the context of discussing his design for the Church of Saint Francis de Sales in Muskegon, Michigan (1966) (fig. 10):

> How much this building affects those who see and enter it, how much it signifies its reverent purpose, will depend on the courage its designers manifest in facing the age-old task: to defeat gravity and to lift the material to great heights, over great spans – to render the enclosed space a part of infinite space. There the structure stands – defined by the eternal laws of geometry, gravity and space.[200]

Breuer's reference to 'eternal laws' are not those of the sacraments, but of science, and mankind's ability to master the laws of physics. He wanted to introduce poetry into the scientific components of engineering science. As we observed, this enabled

[200] Quoted in Jeremy Robinson and Patricia Markert, eds, *Religious Buildings*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1979, 116.

both the Benedictines and Breuer to celebrate movement. However, Breuer's stress on the scientific aspect of mastering space and its lack of a destination brings his ideas into a tension with the Benedictines. This is based on the precise destination of 'movement', whereby 'infinity' has fundamentally different philosophical implications from the Benedictine stress on the eternal, guided by the specific phases of the liturgical procession.

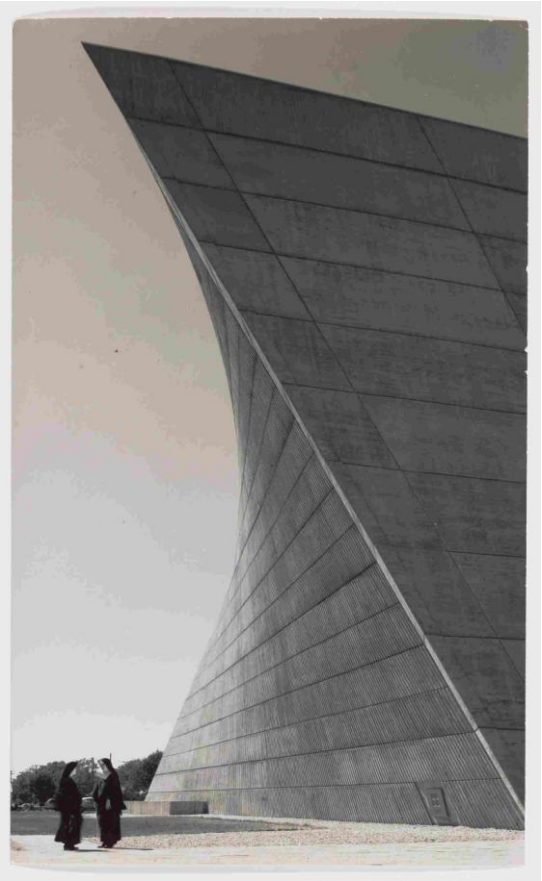

Figure 10 Photograph of the south-east corner of Marcel Breuer's Church of Saint Francis de Sales in Muskegon, Michigan, United States (1966). Photo courtesy of Marcel Breuer Papers, Special Collections Research Centre, Syracuse University Libraries

In many ways, Breuer remained a staunch modernist in his valorisation of acceleration and movement for its own sake. Modernity, for Breuer, was to be celebrated, due to the continuous fluctuating experiences it engendered. In *Sun and Shadow* he made this clear: 'At the rate at which we move our impressions are quicker, our impressions come in greater units than they ever did before: the scale has changed, we see in larger scale[sic.]. And this is not true of architecture alone: it is true of our interpretation of history it is true of our interpretation of the whole universe.'[201] Breuer's declaration is based on a vantage point of contemporaneity looking back at the past. As the historian Reinhart Koselleck consistently reminds his readers, it was only after around 1780, that a modern concept of movement emerged as a 'collective singular,' wherein '[t]ime is no longer simply the medium in which all histories take place; it gains a historical quality. Consequently, history

[201] Breuer, *Sun and Shadow*, 61.

no longer occurs in, but through time'. In this way, time 'becomes a dynamic and historical force in its own right'.[202]

One of the many consequences of this new conceptual-historical dynamic was that 'one's own time was experienced not only as a beginning or an end, but also as a period of transition'.[203] For Koselleck, two important characteristics were associated with this experience of transition: first, the alterity of the future, and the acceleration in the rhythm of temporal experience; second, the experience that one's own time is distinguished and an improvement of what went before.[204] This engendered a mode of looking at the world, which partitioned history into epochs, and viewed events in terms of a world historical process. In Breuer's application of the 'law of acceleration', to architectural history, Breuer remains committed to a modernist idea of movement ('*neuzeit*').[205] 'Infinity' becomes an umbrella signifier for an unknown future, and an experience of continual forms of transition inform his view of architectural history.

By contrast, the Benedictines at Saint John's did not perceive history on the same register. For them, the technical aspects of the design were there to organise space and time in accordance with a form of life which put them in touch with the divine, an experience unaffected by the acceleration of temporality in modernity. In the architectural historian Thomas Coomans' analysis of Monastic architecture, he places the importance of framing time and space as central to their architectural designs:

> Living in a closed community, monks and nuns gave a symbolic or spiritual dimension to all the material components of the monastery, as well as to all the rituals that punctuated their daily lives. The organisation of the monastic space and the organisation of monastic time were sanctified and formed a whole in the service of a project for life that, in its essence and choices, aspired to divine perfection.[206]

In other words, while liturgical sacraments were adaptable to different contexts (enabling a collaboration with functionalist modernism), there was nothing singular about modernity in its ability to elevate such an experience like we have with Breuer's celebration of the cantilevered slab for opening up a new paradigm in architectural composition and understanding of history.

Reflecting on the heterogenous nature of this exchange across the Benedictine – Bauhaus divide propels us toward a semantics grounded in 'connectivity', rather than as a synthesis, as many of the reflections of contemporary 'sacred architecture' have suggested. In the introduction to *Aesthetics of Religion: A*

[202] Reinhart Koselleck, '"Neuzeit": Remarks on the Semantics of Modern Concepts of Movement', in *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, transl. Keith Tribe, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, (222-254), 236.
[203] Koselleck, 'Neuzeit', 241.
[204] Koselleck, 'Neuzeit', 241.
[205] Koselleck attributes this phrase to Henry Adams, in particular, his posthumously published memoir, *The Education of Henry Adams*, first published in 1918.
[206] Coomans, *Life Inside the Cloister*, 17.

Connective Concept (2017), Alexandra Grieser and Jay Johnston present the metaphor of 'connectivity' as a useful tool to examine cross-over concepts between art and religion. Crucially, for Grieser and Johnston, 'connectivity' does not 'claim to subsume everything under one umbrella, as the word "integrative" might suggest; it does not link two sides, as a "bridging concept" would; and it does not evoke the notion of a closed and unified whole as some "holistic theories" might'. In contrast to this, what the metaphor of connectivity does suggest 'is a way of modelling complex processes that are not confined to a one way causality, but are rather based on mutual responses and feedback loops, which result in learning systems'.[207]

Throughout the course of both Breuer's research for the Saint John's project, and the committee meetings, a process of intellectual exchange occurred between Breuer and the Benedictine monks which revolved around 'mutual responses and feedback loops', generating new spatial conceptions. Rather than being placed in opposition to modernity by emphasising a return to the archaic structures of consciousness (Eliade), the Saint John's project shows how ideas from both the medieval and the modern could be negotiated with one another to confront the complex material circumstances of the twentieth-century. This negotiation was at the heart of the discussions over the main window. Ultimately, the Benedictines rejected the idea that their building was representative of an individualist spirituality disconnected from the core social aims of the Benedictine community.

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[207] Alexandra K. Grieser and Jay Johnston, 'What is an Aesthetics of Religion? From the Senses to Meaning – and Back Again', in *Aesthetics of Religion: A Connective Concept*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017, (1 – 50) 31.