

# The shifting borders between sacred place and secular space

Community and Sanctuary – Defining Sacred Space

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The chapel at Park Avenue Synagogue's Eli M. Black Lifelong Learning Center, designed by MBB.  
Photo: Frank Oudeman

Throwing open the doors of a house of worship lets the sacred spill out into the community, yet the opposite happens, too. As congregations engage their communities, their places of worship risk their own secularization. What, then, does sacred space mean in this context? The answer involves the delineation of sacred space from everything else, and the language of sacredness itself.

Setting aside the familiar spectrum of solutions – a sanctuary used for no purpose but worship, or the meetinghouse model where community is recognized as sacred unto itself – we should delve into the contested territories that characterize many houses of worship. How does a sanctuary feel like a sanctuary if it also serves support group meetings and youth group dodgeball, parenting classes, and performing arts? How does a sanctuary feel like a sanctuary to congregations of different faiths that share worship space?

One architectural element provides an adaptable solution: the threshold. Thresholds are designed to be crossed. Distinct from barriers, they are in fact always part of a passage. Importantly, they signal a change – the moment between there and here. From the sidewalk outside to the sanctuary within, focusing on meaningful thresholds can make a sacred space feel both permeable yet distinct.

Formal manifestations of sacred thresholds are familiar (the dais, the bimah, the altar) as are elements marking a space within a space (baldachins and mandaps), but there are subtler variants as well. Changes in proportion, lighting, materials, and acoustics can all signal a transition from the temporal to the sublime.

But how is a space identified as sacred? All faiths have visual cues to connote sacredness in architecture. Each has specific iconography or implements of worship; some are universal. Verticality, a point of focus, richness of material, an elevated plane – these architectural qualities communicate solemnity and dignity in ways that adapt across the faith spectrum, while remaining accessible to secular communities.

By communicating sacredness in universal terms and by allowing a permeable delineation of sacred space, congregations can preserve and strengthen their identities as sacred places while building a closer synergy between liturgical and pastoral mission.

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