

The Edge of Buddhism

By Alfredo Botello

The creation of sacred space demands difficult reconciliation — of the material and the immaterial, the timeless and the particular, the local and the universal. Whether rooted in naiveté or hubris, the ambition to embody the transcendent in stuff as coarse as mortar, wood, stone and glass seems somehow doomed from the outset. Yet we try, and sometimes we even succeed. Chartres, Todai-ji, the Pantheon — successful sacred spaces transform, inspire, calm. In rare moments, architecture crystallizes the non-architectural. But can we still do it? In an era that privileges reason, it is argued, the search for the sublime has been cast aside in favor of cute formal games, thin functionalist theory and a disdain for the realm of feeling, of mystery. One writer and architect, A. T. Mann, lamenting the death of sacred architecture at the hands of modern thought, calls this our “conspicuous absence of essence.”

Driving west along Sir Francis Drake, through the hypnotic rolling hills of rural Marin County, it is easy to miss the Spirit Rock Meditation Center. No buildings are visible from the road, and the only hint that you've arrived at the West Coast's most prominent Vipassana Buddhist community is a strange outcropping of granite, the “spirit rock,” in the middle of a flat meadow. Beyond the meadow, hidden in a gently sloped valley, are six new buildings that provide much needed housing for long-term retreats, ranging from three days to three months, and a meditation hall large enough to accommodate all retreatants at once. That was the obvious program, and it has been satisfied, despite the fact that rented trailers would have sufficed, and did for the past 10 years.

At stake here is the ambition to recapture Mann's lost essence. As founding teacher and author Jack Kornfield put it, a sense of the sacred matters “because sacred architecture has a kind of outer beauty that reminds people of the possibility of inner beauty.” Working with Spirit Rock's Design Committee, the architects, Helen Degenhardt Architect, in association with Jacobson Silverstein Winslow Architects, of Berkeley, spent four years struggling to create buildings that would reconcile a 2,500-year-old ascetic Asian tradition with the spiritual aspirations of a comfortable Western society at the cusp of the millennium.

The beginnings were less than auspicious. “One of the first things they told us,” says Helen Degenhardt, “was that Vipassana has no architecture.” Puzzling words, given Buddhism's rich tradition of forms — among them the hemispherical *stupas* of India, the ornate pagodas of Thailand and Burma, and the great bracketed halls of China and Japan. But the Vipassana tradition, which emerged from careful study of the life of the Buddha himself, is distinguished by its emphasis on simplicity and resourcefulness — Vipassana simply means “to see things as they really are” — and it matters little whether one realizes Nirvana in the shower, traffic jam, forest or beautiful building. If there is a latent tradition to Vipassana architecture, it is a loose mutability, a willingness to adapt whatever forms it encounters.

So the architects began with the rural Northern California vernacular of simple, minimally adorned forms, board-and-batten siding,

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broad, pitched roofs, and a site plan that preserved and sculpted outdoor spaces. The residence halls and Council House tumble along a line of oak trees, their long sides following a creek which, today, in the middle of summer, is dry and dusty, but which will gush again by early winter. Across the way the meditation hall sits proudly perched on a hillside, and in this sense, is traditionally sited as an important building. But to enter it, one must pass through a sheltered courtyard and glazed breezeway, not apparent from the distance, which lets out into a grove of mature oak trees. At that moment, the building dissolves and becomes a gateway to this untouched setting, a conscious evocation of the Buddha's life, much of which unfolded in the forests of India rather than in its ornate temples.

The Buddha never set out to found a religion, but upon his death, the man quickly became the idealized man, the demigod, and within several centuries, the large gilt idols, the familiar sitting Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of Asian temples, would begin to appear, and along with them, the elaborate rituals and texts that transformed one man's insight into a national religion. Architecture became the stage upon which this metamorphosis played out. To enter the traditional *stupa*, one passes through an ornamental gate, only to be confounded by a blank wall. One must circumambulate the building before entering it, and once inside, additional balustrades force a second ritual circuit around an enshrined relic or idol. The gateway, the indirect procession, the ornamentation, all reinforce the perception, from the feet up, that the *stupa* is no ordinary space.

At Spirit Rock there is no sign announcing the new meditation hall. None is needed. Nor is there an idol or relic in the center of the space. To enter the building, one simply takes off one's shoes and opens the front door. Inside, there is no fixed teacher's stage, or any fixed furniture at all. Throughout there is an obviousness and clarity that serves to place the emphasis not on the architecture, but on the practice housed within — meditation. Vipassana's break with its architectural past has the effect, paradoxically, of rekindling the past, of reminding one of the Buddha's own life and intentions. Nothing in the hall distracts from a mesmerizing sense of emptiness.

It almost wasn't so. When it became certain that trusses would be required to support the massive meditation hall roof, 64-feet across, the decision of whether to expose them or not became critical in defining the room's character. The architects wanted to expose the trusses, to use them to sculpt and enliven the space, but the design committee wasn't convinced. After mulling over photographs of a model both with and without trusses, they decided that the pure,

calm spaciousness of the room, so conducive to silent meditation, would be best. As a result, the trusses were hidden.

"What happened," explains Murray Silverstein, "was a collision of architectural thinking and spiritual thinking, and serving the spiritual purpose first was the right decision."

"What we're doing," says teacher Guy Armstrong, "is a Theravadin practice with a

retreatant's room has its own thermostat and sink, there are few formal rituals, and snakes are relegated to the outdoors.

It was the architects' charge to express Vipassana's hybrid heritage convincingly. Two recurring motifs in Buddhist iconography are the square and the circle, and in the classic *mandala*, or cosmic diagram, a square is inscribed within a circle, evoking both the dome of the heavens

spiritual shorthand of sanctioned Buddhist building types like the circular *stupa*, tiered pagoda, or bracketed hall, patterns left formal solutions wide open, a mode of exploration well suited to a community in search of a symbolic bridge between past and future, east and west.

Out of this pattern investigation emerged the octagon sitting on a square base and surmounted by a square, pyramidal roof, a shape both directional and centered, expansive yet enclosing, and historically evocative without being overtly historicist.

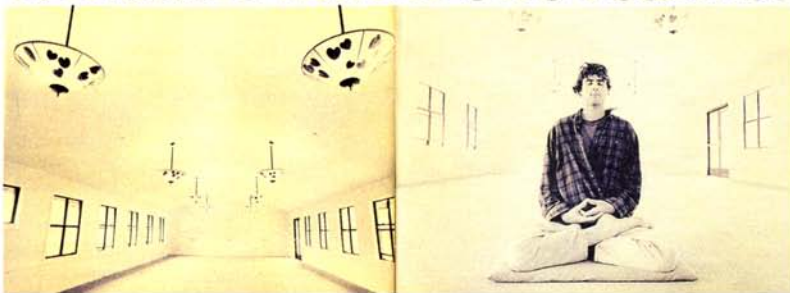
But a sense of the particular, of the idiosyncratic, was missing. The octagon felt perhaps too universal, too general. Vipassana may make no claim to a formal architectural heritage, but in its migration from India to China, Japan, and into Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka, a clearly Asian architecture evolved, and at one meeting, the Design Committee approached the architects and told them that the buildings were simply not "Thai" enough. The architects were taken aback. "We worried that it would turn out goofy, that it would look like a Thai restaurant," says Max Jacobson. "Our hearts kind of dropped into our stomachs. We just didn't know how to approach it." So he, Degenhardt, and Silverstein started to cram, poring over books on traditional Thai architecture, eventually distilling a vocabulary of recurring motifs for the project: long, slender brackets to support the ample roof overhangs, gently upturned roof edges, stair guard rails fashioned from bamboo stalks, roofs tucked one under the other. The "Thai" additions work. They evoke the history of Vipassana in such a subtle and integral way that one senses the Asian presence, but doesn't really see it.

On one level, it could be argued, the new buildings, and the question of whether they successfully marry East and West, old and new, is irrelevant. The larger question is, what makes architecture sacred? Perhaps it is the rare confluence of inherent beauty and beautiful human intention. After all, before funding for the new buildings was in place, the meditation hall had been a cheap plywood trailer, still in use today, which in its way has become as sacred a space as the elegant new buildings.

The meditation hall, retreat residences and Council House are now a little more than a year old. Can this architecture fairly be called sacred? One veteran Vipassana practitioner may have inadvertently answered the question. After visiting Spirit Rock and spending some time sitting in the new hall, he approached Armstrong and said, "I have meditated in many different spaces, but some spaces meditate you. This is one of them." ☉

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Nirvana in the shower, traffic



jam, forest or a building.

Mahayana spirit." The Theravadin tradition traces its lineage to austere monastic practice — Armstrong and Kornfield both spent years ordaining as monks in one room huts in Thailand, sharing those huts with scorpions, snakes and torrential rains, and eating only one meal a day. The tradition of Mahayana, or "the great vehicle," by contrast, was consciously developed to make Buddhism more appealing to the masses. Hindu deities were adopted, Taoist beliefs incorporated, rules relaxed. Call it Buddhism-lite. At Spirit Rock this mix translates into intensive days of 13 sitting and walking meditation periods beginning at 5 a.m. and continuing until 10 p.m. However, each

and the four cardinal points of the earth — the immeasurable "captured" within the measurable. With this in mind, the architects began writing "patterns," short written descriptions of crucial qualities the buildings should possess.

The use of patterns was a natural choice for Silverstein and Jacobson, who were among the principal authors of *A Pattern Language*, an odd mix of how-to manual and utopian manifesto, first published in the mid-'70s, which described hundreds of common-sense design elements, ranging in scale from window mullions to plans for cities. Using written patterns early on, rather than sketches or models, made sense as a Vipassana methodology. Rather than relying on the