

Marko Bilbija, University of Belgrade, m.bilbija.vezirov@gmail.com

Monika Bilbija, University of Novi Sad, monikaponjavic@gmail.com

ACTUALIZING SPACE: HIERARCHY AND EVENT IN ORTHODOX CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

Abstract:

This paper examines Orthodox church architecture through the concept of actualizing space, proposing that sacred architecture becomes fully intelligible only through the liturgical event that activates its spatial structure. Rather than focusing on stylistic continuity, the study interprets church architecture as a hierarchical and sequential spatial order structured by sanctuary, nave and narthex. Drawing on phenomenological approaches to architecture, the paper argues that hierarchy, thresholds and spatial sequence become meaningful through communal gathering and ritual practice, revealing tradition as a continuity of spatial principles rather than merely stylistic reproduction.

Keywords: space, event, hierarchy, church architecture, liturgy, dwelling

АКТУЕЛИЗАЦИЈА ПРОСТОРА: ХИЈЕРАРХИЈА И ДОГАЂАЈ У ПРАВОСЛАВНОЈ ЦРКВЕНОЈ АРХИТЕКТУРИ

Сажетак:

Овај рад разматра православну црквену архитектуру кроз концепт актуелизације простора, полазећи од тезе да сакрална архитектура постаје у потпуности разумљива тек у литургијском догађају који активира њену просторну структуру. Умјесто фокуса на стилски континуитет, црквена архитектура се тумачи као хијерархијски и секвенцијални просторни поредак заснован на односу олтара, наоса и припрате. Ослањајући се на феноменолошке приступе архитектури, рад показује како хијерархија, прагови и просторне секвенце добијају значење кроз заједничко сабрање и обредну праксу.

Кључне ријечи: простор, догађај, хијерархија, црквена архитектура, литургија, бивање

1. INTRODUCTION

Sacred architecture is often interpreted through typology and stylistic continuity, particularly in the case of Orthodox church architecture where historical models continue to shape contemporary design. While such approaches illuminate formal and historical lineages, they rarely address the dynamic dimension through which architectural space acquires meaning in lived practice. This paper proposes an alternative perspective by approaching the Orthodox church as a hierarchical and sequential spatial structure whose full significance emerges through the liturgical event of communal gathering. Rather than treating architecture as a static object, the study explores the concept of actualizing space – the process through which spatial hierarchy, thresholds, and orientation become operative within the temporal and relational conditions of liturgy. In this sense, the architectural form of the church is understood not simply as representation, but as a structured order that becomes fully intelligible in the event that activates it.

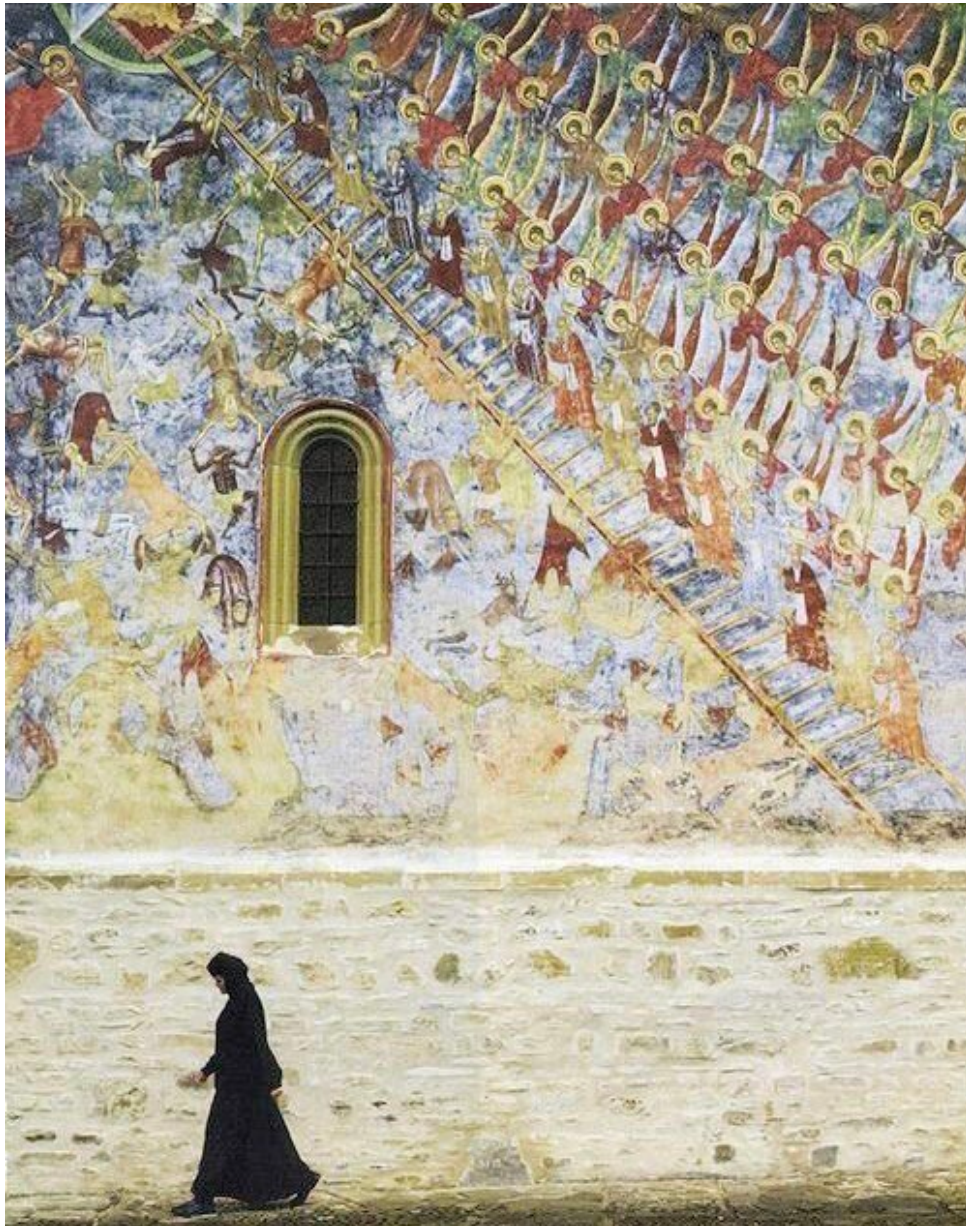


Figure 1. "Ladder of Paradise", Sucevița Monastery, Romania, late 16th century. Fresco illustrating vertical spiritual hierarchy and ascent, reinforcing the ordered spatial and symbolic structure of the church. Source: J. R. Martin, *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus*, Princeton University Press, 1954.

Rather than tracing a stylistic genealogy of church forms, the historical development of Christian worship spaces can be reconsidered through the way space becomes meaningful in the act of communal gathering. Early Christian assemblies in catacombs and domestic interiors did not yet constitute a fully developed ecclesiastical architecture, but they already revealed a rudimentary spatial order structured by gathering, proximity, and ritual focus. The Roman catacombs, including the Catacomb of San Callisto, were primarily burial spaces rather than regular churches in the later formal sense; yet early Christian funerary commemorations, devotional gatherings, and Eucharistic celebrations associated with burial made them important settings in which communal ritual gave spatial meaning to otherwise non-monumental environments [18], [23]. In this context, sacred space did not yet depend on an autonomous architectural type. It emerged through the ordered relation between assembly, memory, and liturgical action.

With the adoption of the basilica in late antiquity, this relational structure began to stabilize architecturally [18]. Axial orientation, differentiated zones and articulated thresholds organized the space of assembly, establishing a hierarchy that guided movement and attention toward a shared center. The culmination of this development is Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, built between 532 and 537 under Emperor Justinian I. No analysis of Orthodox architecture can bypass Hagia Sophia, not only because of its architectural magnitude, but because it established a model in which imperial ceremony, cathedral liturgy, acoustics, spatial hierarchy, and visual order were brought into an unprecedented synthesis. As the cathedral of Constantinople and the principal church of the empire, Hagia Sophia accommodated not merely worship in an abstract sense, but highly articulated ceremonial practices in which ecclesiastical rite and imperial protocol were mutually intertwined. The building's vast central volume, axial approaches, galleries, sanctuary articulation, and dome were not neutral formal decisions: they supported processional movement, differentiated presence, collective visibility, and the ceremonial manifestation of both ecclesial and imperial order. In this sense, architecture did not simply house ritual; ritual and protocol exerted pressure on architectural form, while architecture in turn intensified the experience of liturgical and political hierarchy [18], [19], [23]. Hierarchy, center and threshold do not simply symbolize sacred meaning; they become operative within the communal event through which space itself is actualized.

As documented by Krautheimer and later expanded by Ousterhout, the ceremonial organization of Hagia Sophia depended upon carefully structured spatial differentiation between clergy, emperor, choir, and congregation [18], [19]. Processional routes, upper galleries, acoustical resonance, and controlled visual access toward the sanctuary were integrated into a unified liturgical environment in which architecture and ritual choreography operated together. Byzantine church architecture therefore cannot be understood independently of the ceremonial and liturgical practices that structured its spatial experience [19].

Within this framework, sacred architecture can be approached not simply as form, but as a spatial order whose hierarchy, thresholds and orientation become intelligible only when activated within the communal event that brings space into actuality.

1.1. RESEARCH CONTEXT AND CONTRIBUTION

Scholarship on Orthodox church architecture has generally developed along three main lines. First, architectural-historical studies have focused on typology, stylistic development, and regional schools, especially in relation to Byzantine and medieval Orthodox architecture. Second, theological and liturgical studies have interpreted the church building symbolically, emphasizing its sacramental, ecclesiological, and cosmological meanings [17], [21], [22], [20]. Third, phenomenological approaches to architecture have provided conceptual tools for understanding orientation, embodiment, threshold, and dwelling.

However, these approaches are rarely brought into a single analytical framework. Architectural history often remains focused on form and typology; theological interpretations frequently privilege symbolic meaning; and phenomenological discourse, when applied to sacred architecture, is often too general to address the specificity of Orthodox liturgical space. What remains insufficiently articulated is the relationship between the spatial structure of the Orthodox church and the liturgical event as the condition through which that structure becomes experientially intelligible.

This paper aims to address that gap by proposing the concept of actualizing space as an interpretive framework for reading Orthodox church architecture not only as form or symbol, but as a hierarchical and sequential spatial order that becomes operative through liturgical enactment.

1.2. HISTORICAL AND LITURGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ORTHODOX SPACE

The spatial organization of Orthodox worship emerged gradually through the transformation of early Christian gathering spaces into architecturally differentiated liturgical environments. Early domestic assemblies and funerary commemorations in catacomb settings already established rudimentary distinctions between the place of Eucharistic celebration and the gathered community, although these spaces had not yet developed into fully articulated ecclesiastical structures [18], [23].

With the legalization of Christianity and the adoption of the basilica form, liturgical space acquired clearer axial organization and hierarchical articulation. The longitudinal basilica established processional movement toward the sanctuary, while differentiated zones for clergy, catechumens, and congregation introduced a more explicit spatial hierarchy [18]. Byzantine church architecture later transformed this inherited basilical structure through centralized and domed compositions that intensified the relationship between vertical symbolism, liturgical focus, and communal gathering [19], [23].

The middle Byzantine cross-in-square church further synthesized these principles by integrating centralized spatial organization with hierarchical liturgical sequencing. Rather than representing merely stylistic evolution, these transformations reflected changing liturgical and ceremonial practices within the Orthodox world [19], [21]. Orthodox church architecture therefore developed not only as formal composition, but as a spatial response to the theological and liturgical structure of worship.

1.3. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a combined methodological approach that integrates phenomenological interpretation with architectural-historical analysis. While phenomenological theory provides the conceptual framework for understanding space as lived and relational, architectural-historical references are employed to ground this interpretation in concrete spatial configurations developed within the Orthodox tradition.

The analysis is structured through a threefold distinction between architectural form, spatial structure, and spatial event. This framework allows the study to move from the visible configuration of church architecture toward the relational order embedded within it, and finally toward the liturgical event through which this order becomes operative. Rather than offering a comprehensive historical survey, the paper uses selected historical examples as analytical references in order to demonstrate how spatial hierarchy, thresholds, and orientation become intelligible through liturgical practice.

The study combines phenomenological interpretation with comparative architectural reading of selected Orthodox monuments, focusing on spatial hierarchy, liturgical sequencing, ceremonial movement, and sensory articulation as observable architectural conditions. Rather than approaching liturgy as an abstract symbolic framework, the analysis examines the reciprocal relationship between ritual practice and architectural organization as historically developed within the Orthodox tradition.

2. ACTUALIZING SPACE: FROM ARCHITECTURAL FORM TO SPATIAL EVENT

This paper approaches sacred architecture not primarily as a formal object but as a spatial structure whose meaning emerges through the event that activates it. Architectural space is often interpreted primarily through its formal properties – geometry, composition, proportion and stylistic expression. Within such a perspective, architecture tends to be understood as a completed object whose meaning can be read directly from its visible form. While such an approach can reveal important formal and historical continuities, it frequently overlooks the dynamic conditions through which architectural space becomes meaningful in lived experience.

In order to address this dimension, this paper approaches sacred architecture from a slightly different standpoint by distinguishing between three interrelated levels of architectural understanding. They are: **architectural form**, **spatial structure** and **spatial event**.

Architectural form refers to the visible configuration of volumes, surfaces and compositional elements that define the physical appearance of a building. Spatial structure, by contrast, concerns the relational order embedded within this form – the hierarchy of spaces, their orientation, thresholds and sequences. While form can be perceived as an object, spatial structure operates as a latent system of relations that organizes perception, movement and spatial orientation.

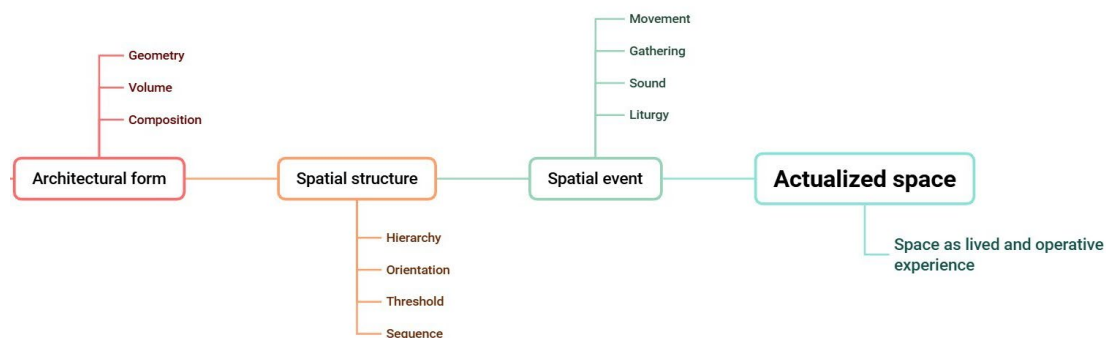


Figure 2. Diagram of actualizing space. Diagram illustrating the relationship between architectural form, spatial structure, and spatial event as a unified framework for interpreting sacred space. Author: Marko Bilbija and Monika Bilbija.

However, even spatial structure does not fully explain how architecture is experienced.

The operative dimension of space emerges only when this relational order becomes activated via human presence and action. Movement through space, the gathering of bodies, the unfolding of sound and the shifting perception of light transform architectural relations into a temporal field of experience. In this sense, architecture becomes intelligible not only as a configuration of elements but as a condition that unfolds in time.

Within this framework, the notion of *spatial event* becomes crucial.

A spatial event designates the moment in which architectural relations become perceptible through lived practice. Rather than existing as a static container, space emerges through the interaction between architectural structure and human activity.

In this paper, the term actualizing space refers to the process through which a latent spatial order embedded in architectural form becomes operative through human presence, movement and ritual practice. In this sense, architectural space may be seen as a structured potential that becomes fully intelligible through the event that activates it. The notion of *actualizing space* thus describes the moment in which architectural form, spatial structure and human practice converge to produce a lived spatial situation. Architecture can therefore be understood not only as a formal object but also as a structured potential whose full spatial meaning emerges only when it is inhabited and enacted.

Phenomenological approaches to architecture have long emphasized this experiential dimension of space. Christian Norberg-Schulz describes architectural space as *existential space* [1, p.11], a structured field that enables human orientation and dwelling in the world [1, pp. 24-27], referring to Merleau-Ponty's famous words *that if space is existential then existence might as well be spatial* [1, p. 16] but also to Martin Heidegger, noting that "existential space, therefore, symbolizes man's *being in the world*, or in Heidegger's words: 'Das Dasein ist raumlich'" [1, p.27]. Similarly, Juhani Pallasmaa argues that architecture is fundamentally a *multisensory experience* in which space is perceived through the body, movement and atmosphere rather than through visual form alone. In his words, "architecture is the art of reconciliation between ourselves and the world" [2, p. 72]. Steven Holl further develops this understanding by emphasizing the role of light, material and spatial sequence in shaping the temporal unfolding of architectural perception and experience [3].

This experiential understanding of architecture can be traced back to the key philosophical work of aforementioned Heidegger, particularly his essay *Building Dwelling Thinking*, in which dwelling is described as the fundamental mode of human *being-in-the-world* [4, pp. 145-161]. From this perspective, architecture provides the conditions in which human dwelling and orientation can occur, instead of just simply enclosing space. Space thus emerges through the relationship between built structure and human presence and it can never be simply neutral.

A complementary perspective can be found in the work of Henri Lefebvre, particularly in his book *The Production of space*. Lefebvre distinguishes between spatial practice (the ways space is used and experienced), representations of space (conceptualized space such as architectural plans and designs) and representational space (space as a lived and symbolically experienced), emphasizing that space is not merely designed but continually produced through social and experiential practices, i.e. through human activity [5]. In the light of this view, architectural form can be understood as a conceptual and material framework within which spatial relations become actualized through lived practices. Sacred architecture provides a particularly clear example of this process, since the spatial

order of the church becomes fully meaningful only through the ritual practices that inhabit it [17], [21].

From a different theoretical standpoint, Bernard Tschumi has argued that architecture cannot be reduced to form alone but must be understood through the relationship between space, movement and event (*architecture = space + event + movement*). As Tschumi famously states in *Architecture and Disjunction*, “there is no architecture without event” [6, p.146]. While phenomenological approaches emphasize the lived experience of space, Tschumi’s perspective highlights the role of action and occurrence in activating architectural structures. In both cases, architecture is not a static object but a condition that becomes meaningful through use and experience.

Sacred architecture provides a particularly clear context in which this dynamic character of space becomes visible. In the Orthodox church, architectural space is not simply observed but enacted through the communal and ritual practices of liturgy [21]. Movement through thresholds, the gathering of the congregation, the resonance of chant and the orientation toward the altar all contribute to a situation in which architectural form becomes operative as a structured field of relations.

From this perspective, architecture can be viewed and understood as **a spatial order that awaits activation** [17]. The hierarchical and sequential organization of the church interior does not merely represent theological meanings; rather, it establishes the conditions through which space becomes accessible and understandable within the event that actualizes it.

The Orthodox church can thus be approached as a spatial structure whose hierarchy and sequence become fully intelligible only when activated through the event, in this case, the liturgy.

The argument developed in this paper therefore moves from *architectural form*, through *spatial structure*, toward the *liturgical event* in which space becomes actualized as lived spatial experience.

3. HIERARCHY AS SPATIAL ORDER

Hierarchy is one of the fundamental principles through which architectural spaces acquire order and intelligibility. Rather than referring merely to symbolic or institutional ranking, spatial hierarchy describes the differentiation of spaces according to intensity, orientation and centrality. Through variations in scale, light, height and spatial articulation, architecture establishes relations that guide perception and movement within a built environment.

If architectural space becomes meaningful only when it is actualized through lived experience, then hierarchy can be understood as the spatial structure that organizes this process of actualization.

If architectural space is understood as a relational structure that becomes meaningful through lived experience, hierarchy emerges as one of its fundamental organizing principles.

Hierarchy thus functions as a spatial mechanism through which architecture produces orientation and coherence. Certain spaces acquire greater prominence, while others assume transitional or peripheral roles. This differentiation generates a gradient of spatial significance that allows the user to perceive the built environment not as a homogeneous container but as an ordered structure.

Phenomenological interpretations of architecture have frequently emphasized the importance of such ordering. A key element in the phenomenological understanding of spatial hierarchy is the notion of the center. According to Christian Norberg-Schulz, architectural space becomes coherent when it establishes clear structures of orientation that allow individuals to situate themselves within their environment. Human dwelling depends on the capacity to orient oneself and to identify with particular places within a spatial structure [7, pp. 19-21]. Within such structures, certain locations acquire the role of spatial centers that organize the surrounding environment and serve as existential points of reference [1, pp. 18-27]; [7, p. 32]. The center is not just a geometric point within the composition. The center operates as an experiential focus that gathers spatial relations and organizes the surrounding environment [1; 8]. Through lived experience, such spatial structures become part of what Lefebvre describes as *lived space* [5]. By the establishment of such a center, architecture produces coherence and allows spatial hierarchy to become perceptible.

As noted by Rudolf Arnheim, spatial organization becomes perceptually stable when it establishes a dominant center capable of structuring the surrounding field of relations [8].

A similar emphasis on spatial orientation can be found in the work of Kevin Lynch, who argued that spatial environments become coherent when they provide recognizable points of reference that structure perception and movement. Although developed in the context of urban space, this insight also applies to architectural interiors, where hierarchy helps establish a field of orientation through identifiable spatial anchors [9].

In sacred architecture this ordering often manifests through the articulation of a spatial center toward which the architectural composition and order is oriented. Such a center is not only geometrical but experiential: it gathers spatial relations around itself and concentrates perception within the interior. The organization of spaces around a focal point establishes a directional field that guides attention and movement toward areas of greater significance.

Architectural hierarchy thus operates through a combination of spatial differentiation and directional orientation. Variations in height, enclosure, light intensity and spatial volume produce gradients of importance within the interior. A comparable understanding of spatial hierarchy appears in the work of Louis Kahn, who described architecture as an ordered system of “served” and “servant” spaces [10, pp. 33-37], where primary spaces of collective significance are supported and articulated by secondary spatial elements. These spatial distinctions guide attention and movement, producing an experiential progression toward zones of greater intensity. Through such architectural means, space becomes structured as a field in which certain areas acquire a stronger presence than others.

Within the Orthodox church this hierarchical structure is clearly articulated through the spatial relation between the sanctuary, the nave and the narthex. Rather than operating only as functional or liturgical divisions, these zones establish a progressive spatial order in which orientation and attention gradually intensify toward the altar. The sanctuary forms the primary spatial focus, the nave operates as the central field of communal gathering, and the narthex mediates the transition between exterior and interior.

This hierarchy is reinforced through concrete architectural means. Slight changes in floor elevation, the articulation of the solea, differentiated lighting conditions, and the increasing visual concentration toward the sanctuary intensify the perception of spatial progression. In many Orthodox churches, the dome further strengthens this hierarchy by establishing a vertical axis above the liturgical assembly, transforming the central space of the nave into a field structured simultaneously by horizontal gathering and vertical orientation [19], [23].

However, this hierarchical order does not operate solely as a static compositional arrangement. Its spatial logic becomes fully perceptible through movement, perception and collective presence. As the congregation gathers and the liturgical action unfolds, architectural relations between center and periphery, elevation and enclosure, are experienced dynamically in time.

Hierarchy therefore functions not simply as a formal characteristic of sacred architecture but as a relational spatial order that becomes fully intelligible through lived experience. Within the context of Orthodox worship, this activation occurs through the liturgical event that brings the architectural order of the church into lived reality.

4. THRESHOLD AND SEQUENCE

If hierarchy establishes the structural order of architectural space, thresholds and spatial sequences articulate the way this order is experienced through movement.

Architectural space is rarely encountered all at once; rather, it unfolds gradually through a succession of spatial transitions that organize perception and orientation. Through thresholds, architecture interrupts the apparent continuity of space and introduces moments of transformation that signal a change in spatial condition.

A threshold therefore cannot be reduced to a physical boundary separating two zones. Instead, it functions as a transitional spatial condition marking the passage between different spatial regimes. In crossing a threshold, the user experiences not only a change of location but also a shift in scale, atmosphere, enclosure, light and spatial volume. Through such transitions architecture produces an experiential rhythm that structures the perception of space over time.

A comparable understanding of threshold appears in the work of Aldo van Eyck, who describes the threshold as part of an *in-between realm* where different spatial conditions meet and interact. Similar ideas appear in the work of Riken Yamamoto, who describes the threshold as an intermediate spatial domain that mediates the relationship between different environments [11]. Rather than functioning as a line of separation, the threshold operates as a zone of interaction where interior and exterior conditions overlap and spatial relations are negotiated.

Phenomenological interpretations of architecture have frequently emphasized the importance of these transitional moments. According to Pallasmaa, architectural experience is deeply shaped by multisensory encounters with material, light and spatial boundaries perceived through the body [2]. Thresholds play a crucial role in this process because they mediate between different spatial atmospheres and intensify the awareness of entering or leaving a particular place.

A related understanding of architectural experience appears in the reflections of Jean Nouvel, who compares architecture with cinema and describes buildings as spatial narratives unfolding through

movement and time, “architecture exists, like cinema, in the dimension of time and movement. One conceives and reads a building in terms of sequences. To erect a building is to predict and seek effects of contrast and linkage through which one passes... In the continuous sequence that a building is, the architect works with cuts and edits, framings and openings...” [12, p. 17]

Within this framework, architectural space can be approached as a temporal sequence rather than a static composition. Instead of being perceived instantly as a complete form, space gradually reveals its structure through movement from one spatial condition to another. Each threshold marks a moment within this unfolding sequence, allowing shifts in orientation, enclosure and spatial hierarchy to become perceptible.

In sacred architecture this sequential articulation (of space) acquires particular significance. The experience of entering a church is rarely immediate; rather, it unfolds through a series of spatial transitions that mediate the passage from the exterior world into the interior field of communal worship. These transitions structure not only physical movement but also the gradual intensification of spatial perception and awareness.

In the Orthodox church this sequence is articulated through a progression of spatial thresholds. The entrance threshold marks the passage from exterior space into the interior domain of the church. The narthex functions as an intermediate zone that mediates between outside and inside, preparing the movement toward the nave. A second transition introduces the central field of communal gathering, where the spatial hierarchical organization of the church interior becomes fully perceptible.

The relationship between the nave and the sanctuary introduces yet another form of threshold. Here the boundary is not a solid wall but a permeable architectural element articulated through the iconostasis. Rather than simply separating spaces, the iconostasis functions as a spatial membrane that simultaneously divides and connects the sanctuary and the nave. In this sense, it represents a complex threshold condition in which visual, symbolic and spatial relations intersect.

This interpretation resonates with the work of Pavel Florensky, who described the iconostasis not merely as a barrier but as a boundary of revelation that mediates between different dimensions of sacred presence [13, pp. 33-40]. From an architectural perspective, the iconostasis can therefore be understood as a threshold that intensifies spatial hierarchy while maintaining relational continuity between zones.

Through this sequence of thresholds – entrance, narthex, nave and sanctuary – the interior of the Orthodox church unfolds as a spatial progression. Each transition subtly alters the spatial atmosphere and guides perception toward the central focus of the liturgical space.

Within the broader argument of this study, hierarchy establishes the structural order of sacred space, while thresholds and spatial sequences articulate the experiential process through which this order becomes perceptible.

Thresholds and sequences therefore transform architectural hierarchy into lived spatial experience. While hierarchy establishes the structural order of sacred space, sequential movement allows this order to unfold in time. In this way, sacred architecture is experienced not simply as a composition of forms but as a processual spatial field that gradually reveals its structure through movement, perception and participation.

5. CASE READINGS: HOSIOS LOUKAS AND VISOKI DEČANI

The spatial principles discussed in this paper become especially legible when tested against concrete historical examples. In the katholikon of Hosios Loukas Monastery, the progression from entrance to narthex and from narthex to naos establishes a carefully graded sequence of thresholds, while the dome above the naos intensifies the vertical and symbolic focus of the gathered liturgical field. The sanctuary, articulated through the iconostasis, remains hierarchically distinct yet relationally connected to the nave, allowing the interior to function as a structured but permeable order of presence.

The spatial experience of Hosios Loukas is further intensified through the relationship between lower and upper zones of illumination. Comparatively darker lower surfaces contrast with the elevated dome structure, producing a gradual perception of vertical ascent toward the illuminated center above the naos. Acoustically, the compact domed volume amplifies Byzantine chant and contributes to the formation of a unified sonic field in which architecture and liturgical performance become inseparable [19].

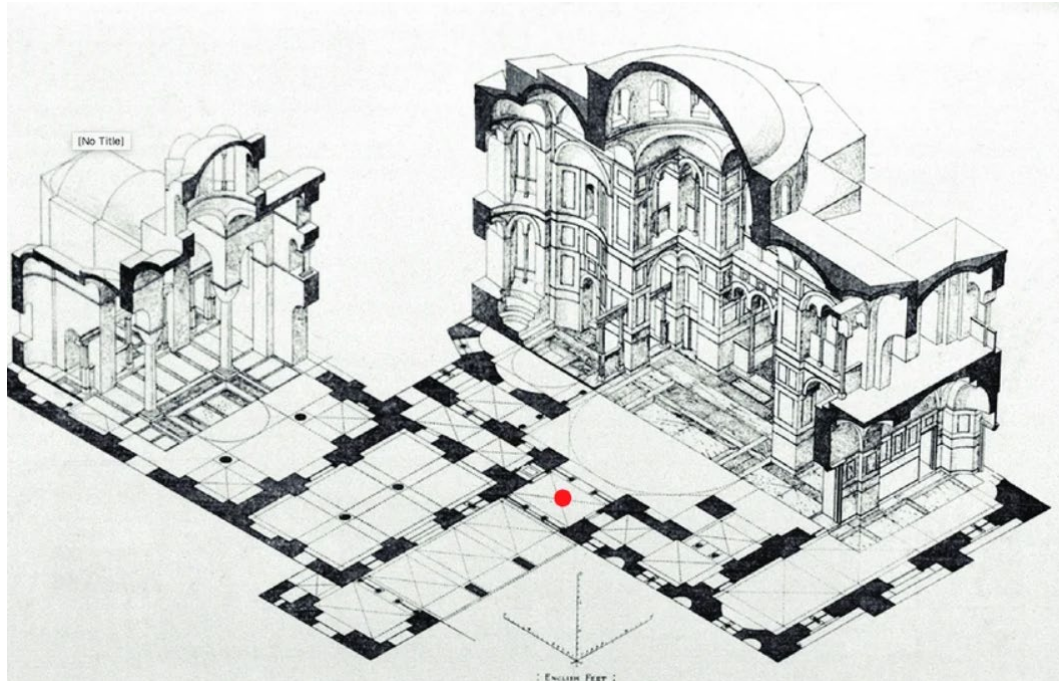


Figure 3. *Hosios Loukas Monastery, Greece, 10th century. Axonometric diagram showing the hierarchical sequence of narthex, naos, and sanctuary, and the dome-centered spatial focus activated in the liturgical event. Source: UNESCO World Heritage / Hosios Loukas Monastery.*

A different but equally illuminating example is the church of Visoki Dečani, one of the most complex monuments of medieval Serbian architecture. Its exterior massing conveys unusual solidity and monumentality, yet the interior unfolds as a markedly more luminous, vertically animated, and spatially permeable environment. The contrast between the weight of the outer form and the relative immateriality of the interior experience is especially significant. Built in the fourteenth century and distinguished by a synthesis of Eastern Orthodox and Western Romanesque features, Dečani demonstrates that Orthodox spatial logic is not reducible to a single formal language. Its marble architecture, vertical interior articulation, and exceptionally rich fresco program create a spatial field in which enclosure is continuously transformed into depth, elevation, and visual extension. During the liturgy, this tension between mass and lightness becomes operative: the architecture no longer appears merely as a monumental shell, but as a dynamically stratified interior ordered by orientation, hierarchy, image, and chant. In this sense, Dečani provides strong evidence for the argument that the continuity of Orthodox architecture lies less in stylistic uniformity than in the capacity of architecture to sustain the actualization of sacred space through liturgical event [19], [21].

The elongated nave of Dečani additionally reinforces ceremonial movement and axial orientation toward the sanctuary. During liturgical processions, the contrast between the heavy marble exterior and the luminous fresco-saturated interior becomes especially perceptible, revealing how material, light, image, and movement together contribute to the actualization of sacred space. The extensive fresco program further dissolves the apparent solidity of the architectural envelope, transforming the interior into a continuous iconographic environment structured around liturgical presence [19], [22].

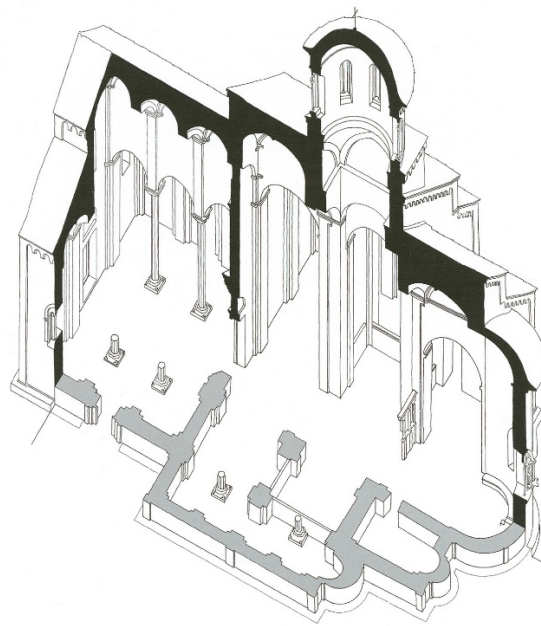


Figure 4. *Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia, 14th century. Axonometric diagram showing the transformation from exterior mass to a vertically articulated, light-structured interior oriented toward the sanctuary in the liturgical event. Visoki Dečani Monastery official site.*

6. THE LITURGICAL EVENT AND THE ACTUALIZATION OF SPACE

Within the framework proposed in this paper, the liturgical event may be understood as the moment in which the architectural structure of the church becomes fully operative as spatial order. The church building does not simply contain the liturgy as a neutral container; rather, the liturgy activates and reveals the hierarchical relations already inscribed within the spatial structure [21]. What may appear in architectural analysis as a formal composition of volumes, thresholds and axes becomes, within the liturgical gathering, a dynamic configuration of movement, orientation, sound and communal presence. In this sense, the architectural form of the church functions less as representation than as a structured spatial field capable of being actualized through collective action. Yet the liturgy should not be understood simply as the performance of a ritual within an architectural setting.

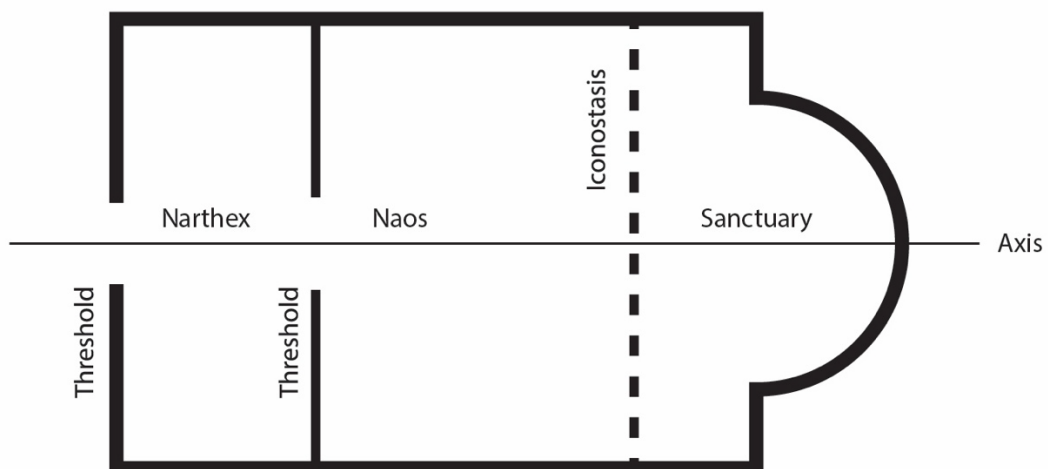


Figure 5. *Diagram of church spatial structure. Diagram illustrating the hierarchical organization of sanctuary, nave, and narthex as the fundamental*

relational order of Orthodox liturgical space. Author: Marko Bilbija and Monika Bilbija.

In the Orthodox tradition, liturgy is not a representation of sacred meaning but its manifestation in lived form [21], [22]. The ritual does not symbolically “stand for” a theological reality external to it; rather, the liturgical act embodies and brings into presence the order it expresses [17], [22]. The church gathering thus forms what may be described as a ritual microcosm: a structured field in which relationships between heaven and earth, visible and invisible, center and periphery, are not merely described but enacted. In this sense the liturgy operates as an ontological event [17] in which the symbolic order of the Church becomes perceptible through embodied practice. The architecture of the church provides the spatial conditions for this enactment, while the liturgy activates them.

The spatial hierarchy of the church – its differentiation of center and periphery, sanctuary and nave, threshold and approach – may therefore be understood not simply as a symbolic arrangement but as a structure that becomes intelligible through the liturgical event. Within the celebration of the liturgy, architectural elements that might otherwise appear as static features begin to function as operative relations. Paths become processional routes, spatial boundaries become thresholds of transition, and visual alignments become axes of communal orientation.

Through the liturgy, the architectural structure of the church is therefore transformed from a formal configuration into a lived spatial order.

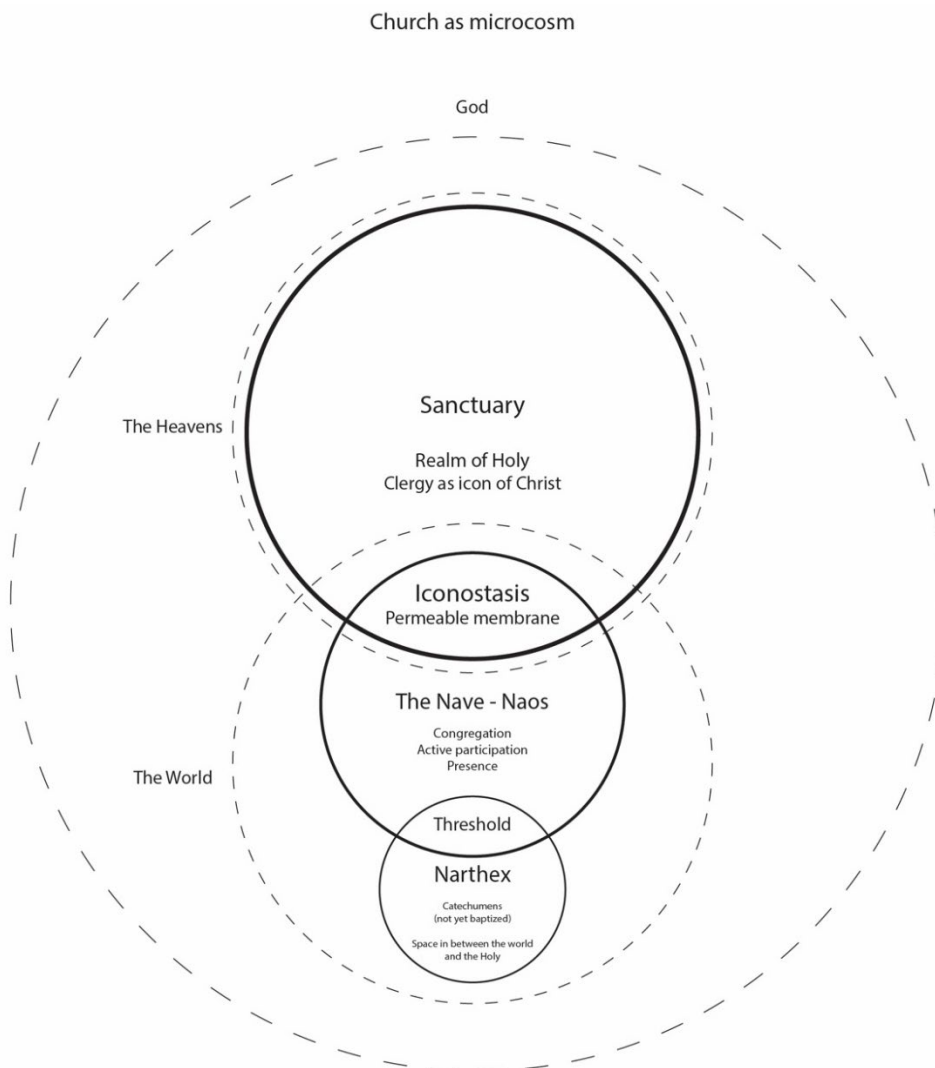


Figure 6. Church as microcosmos diagram. Diagram illustrating the relational structure of the liturgical field, integrating visible and invisible orders within the spatial organization of the church. Author: Marko Bilbija and Monika Bilbija.

6.1. MODES OF PRESENCE

The spatial organization of the Orthodox church can be further interpreted through the differentiation of distinct modes of presence. The goal of the interior is not to merely divide physical zones but to articulate different ways in which presence becomes manifest within the liturgical event.

These modalities coexist within the same architectural environment while remaining hierarchically structured.

The first modality may be described as **gathered presence**. The nave forms the spatial field in which the community assembles as a liturgical body. The congregation does not occupy the space as a collection of isolated individuals but forms a collective orientation toward the liturgical center. The architecture of the nave – its openness, orientation and relation to the sanctuary – allows the gathered community to appear as a visible and spatially articulated body.

A second modality is **liturgical presence**, concentrated in the sanctuary where the sacramental actions of the Eucharist take place. The sanctuary represents the focal point of the spatial hierarchy, not simply as a separate room but as the locus in which the liturgical transformation unfolds. The architectural differentiation of the sanctuary intensifies the spatial center of the church, establishing a field of orientation toward which the gathered community is directed.

A third modality may be described as **iconic presence**. As Pavel Florensky famously wrote, “the iconostasis is the boundary between the visible and the invisible world” [13, p. 62] Yet iconic presence is not limited to the iconostasis itself. In Orthodox architecture the entire interior surface of the church participates in the iconographic field. Frescoes and icons covering the walls, vaults, and domes transform the architectural envelope into a visual environment in which the communion of saints and the biblical narrative are made present within the space of worship. The image of Christ Pantocrator in the dome establishes a vertical axis that extends the spatial order beyond the horizontal plane of the congregation, while the iconographic cycles along the walls articulate a cosmic and historical order that surrounds the liturgical assembly. Architecture and iconography therefore operate together as a unified spatial system in which visibility and presence intersect [22].

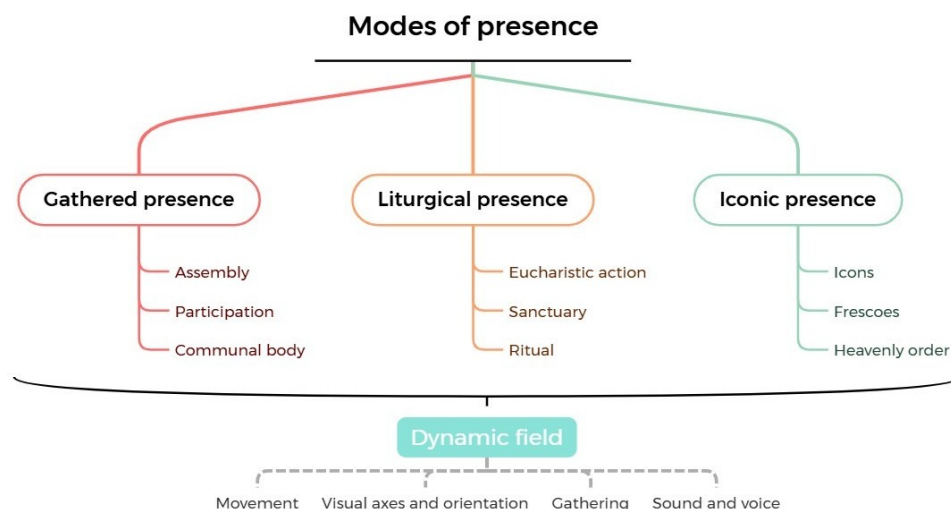


Figure 7. *Modes of presence. Diagram illustrating the differentiation and interaction of communal, liturgical, and iconic presence within the spatial and ritual framework of the Orthodox church. Author: Marko Bilbija and Monika Bilbija.*

These differentiated presences – communal, liturgical, and iconic – coexist within the same spatial framework while remaining distinct. The liturgical event activates their relationships, allowing the hierarchical order of the church to emerge as a dynamic field rather than a static architectural composition.

1.1.1. Movement

Movement plays a crucial role in the activation of this spatial order. Liturgical processions and ceremonial entrances traverse the hierarchical structure of the church, transforming static spatial divisions into a sequence of lived transitions. The movement of clergy through the nave, the ceremonial entrances, and the circulation around the sanctuary articulate paths that reveal the latent organization of the building. Through movement, the architecture becomes perceptible as a spatial sequence rather than a fixed composition. Such ceremonial movement was historically embedded

within the architectural organization of Byzantine and medieval Orthodox churches, where circulation paths were closely related to liturgical roles, processional sequence, and visibility toward the sanctuary [18], [19], [24].

6.1.1. Visual Axes and Orientation

The Orthodox church also organizes perception through a series of visual orientations that converge toward the sanctuary. Architectural framing, iconographic placement, and spatial alignment guide the gaze of the congregation toward the liturgical center. These visual axes structure collective attention and reinforce the hierarchical organization of the interior. The spatial order therefore operates not only through physical movement but also through the orientation of vision.

6.1.2. Gathering

The liturgy is fundamentally an event of assembly [17], [21]. The nave functions as the spatial field in which the community gathers and becomes perceptible as a unified body. Architecture does not merely contain this assembly but structures the conditions under which communal presence emerges. The spatial configuration of the church allows the congregation to experience itself as part of a larger relational order oriented toward the liturgical center.

6.1.3. Sound and Voice

The acoustic dimension of the church interior further contributes to the actualization of space. Orthodox liturgy is characterized by the prominence of the living human voice expressed through chant and responsive prayer. The architectural volume of the church amplifies and distributes sound, transforming it into a shared sonic environment. Chant fills the interior and binds the congregation within a common acoustic field, revealing the architecture not only as a visual structure but as an environment shaped by resonance and reverberation.

Taken together, these dimensions – movement, visual orientation, communal gathering and the resonance of voice – demonstrate how the liturgical event activates the architectural structure of the church. Elements that might otherwise appear as formal properties of the building – hierarchy, threshold and center – become operative relations within the lived spatial field of worship. Through movement the hierarchy of spaces becomes perceptible as a sequence of approach; through visual orientation the architectural order focuses collective attention toward the liturgical center; through gathering the congregation becomes spatially manifest as a communal body; and through voice and resonance the architectural interior is transformed into a shared acoustic environment.

In this way the liturgical event reveals the church not merely as an architectural object but as a structured spatial order that becomes intelligible only in use. The building provides the potential framework of hierarchy, orientation and sequence, while the liturgy actualizes these relationships through embodied action. The concept of actualizing space therefore describes the convergence of architecture and ritual in which the hierarchical order of the church emerges as a lived and communal event rather than a static architectural form. Recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of acoustics within Byzantine worship, particularly in relation to Hagia Sophia, where reverberation and chant contributed directly to the perception of sacred presence and spatial transcendence [25]. Sound therefore operates not merely as an addition to architectural space, but as one of the primary means through which liturgical space becomes experientially unified.

6.1.4. Detail

The actualization of sacred space can also be observed at the scale of architectural detail. Floor patterning and paving joints may subtly organize movement by reinforcing axial direction and marking zones of transition. Steps, soleas, and slight changes in level intensify hierarchy not only visually but bodily, as the worshipper experiences elevation and approach through the movement of the body. Openings in the iconostasis, especially the Royal Doors, do not merely puncture a screen but regulate visibility, procession, and the intermittent disclosure of the sanctuary. Light entering from the dome or upper windows does not simply illuminate the interior evenly; it establishes gradients of emphasis, often strengthening the perception of vertical ascent and concentrating attention toward the liturgical center. Fresco placement contributes to this same structure: the Pantocrator in the dome extends the vertical axis above the assembly, while saints and narrative cycles along the walls transform enclosure into a surrounding field of presence. Acoustic detail is equally significant. Reverberation, chant response, and the diffusion of the human voice through vaulted volume convert architecture into a shared sonic environment in which spatial boundaries are heard as much as they are seen. These elements show that actualizing space is not produced only by the general plan of sanctuary, nave, and narthex, but also by the fine-grained sensory articulation through which architectural order becomes experientially legible [19], [21].

7. TRADITION BEYOND HISTORICISM

7.1. TRADITION AS SPATIAL STRUCTURE

Throughout this paper the analysis has relied on a deliberately simplified diagram of Orthodox liturgical space structured around three primary zones: sanctuary, nave and narthex.

At first glance such a reduction may appear overly schematic when compared with the immense diversity of historical church forms. Yet this simplification reflects a fundamental characteristic of the Orthodox architectural tradition itself.

Unlike many Western traditions of ecclesiastical architecture, the Orthodox Church has never established a strict canonical model of architectural style or typology. What has remained essential instead is the spatial condition in which the liturgy can be celebrated.

The example of Visoki Dečani further confirms that Orthodox continuity cannot be reduced to a single stylistic code, since a highly hybrid and formally complex monument may still preserve the relational spatial order required by the liturgical event.

For this reason, the continuity of Orthodox church architecture lies less in formal replication than in the preservation of a relational spatial order [17], [21]. The differentiation of sanctuary, nave and narthex establishes the minimal framework through which the liturgical event unfolds.

These zones articulate the fundamental hierarchy of the church interior: the sanctuary as the locus of Eucharistic action, the nave as the field of the gathered community, and lastly, the narthex as the threshold mediating between the liturgical assembly and the exterior world.

From an architectural perspective this observation resonates with phenomenological interpretations of place. As Christian Norberg-Schulz writes, “a place is a space which has a distinct character” [7, p. 5]. Architectural meaning therefore arises not merely from formal composition but from the structured relationships that allow space to become intelligible through human dwelling and orientation. Within the Orthodox church these relationships are intensified through hierarchy, threshold and orientation toward a shared center. The simplified diagram employed in this study should therefore not be understood as a reductive abstraction but as an attempt to identify the fundamental spatial structure through which the liturgical event becomes possible.

7.2. HISTORICAL CONTINUITY BEYOND TYPOLOGY

Seen in this light, the historical evolution of Christian worship spaces may be interpreted less as a succession of architectural types and more as a series of architectural articulations of the same underlying spatial order. Early Christian communities gathered in catacombs and domestic interiors that possessed little formal architectural elaboration. Yet even within these modest environments the essential relational structure of worship – an assembly oriented toward a liturgical center – was already present.

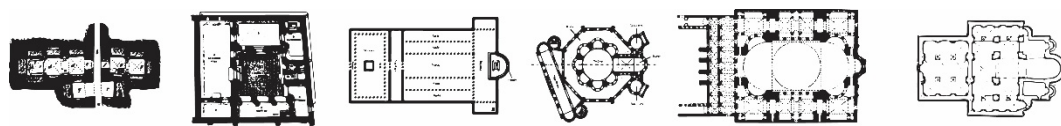


Figure 8. *Historical evolution of church plan. Diagram showing the transformation from early Christian gathering spaces to basilical and domed forms as progressive articulations of a consistent spatial order. Author: Marko Bilbija and Monika Bilbija.*

With the adoption of the basilica in late antiquity, this relational structure acquired clearer architectural articulation through axial orientation, differentiated zones and the progressive articulation of thresholds. Later developments, including domed churches and centrally planned forms, transformed the architectural expression of the church interior while preserving its fundamental spatial hierarchy.



Figure 9. Hosios Loukas Monastery, Greece, 10th century. Interior view illustrating dome-centered spatial organization and hierarchical articulation of liturgical space. Source: UNESCO World Heritage / Hosios Loukas Monastery.

The diversity of historical church forms therefore does not represent the replacement of one architectural type by another. Rather, it demonstrates the capacity of Orthodox architectural tradition to accommodate formal transformation while maintaining the spatial conditions through which the liturgical event unfolds.

The sanctuary, nave and narthex remain legible across these transformations not as rigid typological prescriptions but as relational zones organizing the liturgical microcosm of the church.

7.3. HISTORICISM AND THE LOSS OF SPATIAL MEANING

In contemporary Orthodox architecture this phenomenological dimension of tradition is sometimes overshadowed by an emphasis on stylistic continuity. Efforts to preserve tradition often focus on the replication of recognizable historical forms derived from Byzantine or medieval precedents. Domes, arches and decorative patterns are reproduced with considerable fidelity, yet the spatial logic that originally generated these forms may receive far less attention.

Architectural discourse has long warned against this danger.

Kenneth Frampton notes that historicism can reduce living traditions to superficial stylistic quotation, transforming architecture into a catalogue of references rather than a coherent spatial language [14, p. 314]. When applied to church architecture, such an approach risks producing buildings that appear historically familiar while lacking the spatial depth through which the liturgical event becomes intelligible.

At the same time, the critique of historicism should not be mistaken for a rejection of historical architecture itself. Within the Orthodox tradition, historical church forms command profound respect. They represent the accumulated architectural wisdom through which generations of builders articulated the spatial conditions of the liturgy. The domed basilica, the cross-in-square church and numerous regional variations embody a rich architectural heritage that continues to inform contemporary practice.

The challenge therefore does not lie in abandoning historical forms but in engaging them more deeply. Historical architecture should not be treated as a repository of formal motifs but as a manifestation of spatial principles developed in response to the liturgical event. As Dalibor Vesely observes, architecture can disclose a deeper order of reality that extends beyond purely formal considerations [15, p. 4]. When historical forms are understood in this way, they reveal the spatial logic that allowed them to sustain the liturgical microcosm of the church.

7.4. TRADITION AND THE ACTUALIZATION OF SPACE

The analysis developed throughout this paper suggests that the continuity of Orthodox architectural tradition lies precisely in the spatial structures that allow the liturgical event to actualize space. Orthodox church architecture should therefore be understood not merely as a stylistic inheritance, but as the spatial articulation of liturgical relations developed historically through ritual practice, ceremonial movement, and communal worship. The simplified diagram of sanctuary, nave, and narthex therefore functions not as a rigid typological template but as an analytical lens through which the relational order of Orthodox liturgical space becomes visible. If the meaning of church architecture emerges most clearly within the liturgical event, then tradition must be understood in relation to this dynamic process.

The architecture of the church establishes the potential order of hierarchy, orientation and threshold. The liturgy activates this order, transforming architectural structure into lived spatial experience. Tradition therefore resides not simply in the preservation of forms but in the continuity of the spatial conditions through which this activation becomes possible.

Seen from this perspective, contemporary Orthodox architecture faces not the task of replicating historical models but the challenge of articulating the spatial principles that sustain the liturgical event. The diversity of historical church forms – from catacombs and house churches to basilicas and domed interiors [18], [23] – already demonstrates that Orthodox tradition has long accommodated architectural transformation while preserving its essential relational structure.

The future development of Orthodox church architecture may therefore depend less on stylistic fidelity than on the capacity of architecture to sustain the spatial order through which the liturgy actualizes space. When hierarchy, threshold, orientation and communal gathering are articulated with clarity, the church interior becomes capable of supporting the liturgical microcosm in which sacred space emerges as lived experience.

In this sense, tradition may be understood not as the repetition of historical images but as the continuing ability of architecture to sustain the event through which space becomes present.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has approached Orthodox church architecture through the concept of actualizing space, proposing that sacred architecture cannot be fully understood through formal or typological analysis alone.

While architectural form establishes the visible configuration of the church and spatial structure organizes its hierarchical relations, the intelligibility of these relations emerges most clearly in the liturgical event through which space becomes operative. Movement, gathering, orientation, sound and ritual participation transform architectural form into a lived spatial field in which hierarchy, threshold and center become experiential relations rather than abstract compositional devices.

From this perspective, the Orthodox church may be approached not simply as a building but as a spatial structure awaiting activation. The differentiation of sanctuary, nave and narthex establishes a relational order embedded within architectural form, yet this order becomes perceptible only when the liturgy unfolds within it. As Alexander Schmemmann writes, “the liturgy is the epiphany of the Church” [16, p.27], emphasizing that the liturgical event manifests the Church as a gathered reality rather than merely representing it. Within this event, architecture functions as the spatial framework through which the relational order of the Church becomes perceptible. This understanding of liturgy as manifestation rather than representation is further developed within contemporary Orthodox theology [17], [21].

Phenomenological interpretations of architecture help clarify this dynamic. Norberg-Schulz reminds us that “a place is a space which has a distinct character” [7, p. 5]. While Juhani Pallasmaa argues that “architecture is not about visual images but about existential experience” [2, p. 41] Within the Orthodox church these experiential dimensions are intensified through liturgical action, which activates the hierarchical and sequential structure of the interior. The resulting spatial order becomes intelligible not as a static composition but as a dynamic field revealed in time.

This perspective also clarifies the role of tradition in contemporary Orthodox architecture. Historical church forms – from catacombs and house churches to basilicas and domed interiors – demonstrate that Orthodox architecture has long accommodated formal transformation while preserving its essential spatial structure. Tradition therefore lies not primarily in stylistic repetition but in the continuity of the spatial conditions through which the liturgical event actualizes space. When hierarchy, threshold, orientation and communal gathering are articulated with clarity, architecture becomes capable of sustaining the liturgical microcosm in which sacred space emerges as lived experience.

The historical development of Orthodox church architecture demonstrates that continuity within the tradition has never depended exclusively upon stylistic uniformity. From early Christian gathering spaces and basilicas to domed Byzantine and medieval Orthodox churches, architectural transformation consistently remained tied to the spatial requirements of liturgical worship, ceremonial movement, and communal orientation [18], [19], [24].

In this sense, the Orthodox church is not merely an architectural object but a structured spatial order whose meaning emerges fully only in the liturgical event through which space itself is continually brought into actuality. Sacred architecture may therefore be approached not merely through its formal completion, but through the way its latent spatial order becomes operative in liturgical enactment [17], [19], [21].

LITERATURE:

- [1] C. Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space and Architecture*. New York, NY, USA: Praeger, 1971.
- [2] J. Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. Chichester, UK: Wiley, 2005.
- [3] S. Holl, J. Pallasmaa, A. Perez-Gomez, *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture*. San Francisco, CA, USA: William Stout Publishers, 2006.
- [4] M. Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
- [5] H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 1991.
- [6] B. Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.
- [7] C. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. New York, NY, USA: Rizzoli, 1980.
- [8] R. Arnheim, *The Dynamics of Architectural Form*. Berkeley: University of California, 1977.

- [9] K. Lynch, *The Image of the City*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960.
- [10] L.I. Kahn, *Between Silence and Light: Spirit in the Architecture of Louis I. Kahn*. Boston, MA, USA: Shambhala, 1979.
- [11] R. Yamamoto, from private conversation with the architect, October 2024. Novi Sad.
- [12] J. Nouvel, "Architecture and Cinema," in *Architecture of the Image*, J. Pallasmaa, Ed. Helsinki, Finland: Rakennustieto, 2001.
- [13] P. Florensky, *Iconostasis*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996.
- [14] K. Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2017.
- [15] D. Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 2004.
- [16] A. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997.
- [17] J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Crestwood, NY, USA: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985.
- [18] R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 4th ed. New Haven, CT, USA: Yale University Press, 1986.
- [19] R. G. Ousterhout, *Eastern Medieval Architecture: The Building Traditions of Byzantium and Neighboring Lands*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- [20] C. Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*. Crestwood, NY, USA: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984.
- [21] A. Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*. Crestwood, NY, USA: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986.
- [22] V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. Crestwood, NY, USA: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997.
- [23] J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*. New York, NY, USA: Fordham University Press, 1974.
- [24] R. Taft, *The Byzantine Rite: A Short History*. Collegeville, MN, USA: Liturgical Press, 1992.
- [25] B. V. Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia: Sound, Space, and Spirit in Byzantium*. University Park, PA, USA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017.