

Common Ground: The Rothko Chapel and Architectural Activism

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The Rothko Chapel is described as “a stillness that moves, a quiet disruption, a sanctuary for the seeker” where “any and all are welcome.” In 1964, Dominique and John de Menil commissioned Mark Rothko to design a series of site-specific murals for a chapel to be built adjacent to the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas. This paper aims to establish a relationship between the architecture and the chapel’s social program through an analysis of Rothko’s use of form as a vehicle for the union of matter and spirit, ultimately opening the horizon between the self and the other.

CONCEPTION

Thomas Merton prayed, “O God who taught us that you dwell in us when we open to one another, help us to keep that openness and to fight for it with all our strength.”¹ It was in this spirit that John and Dominique de Menil sought to build the Rothko Chapel, a small ecumenical center near the University of St. Thomas in Houston. In the 1940’s the de Menils relocated from Paris to the United States, eventually settling in Houston where they amassed one of the most significant independent art collections in the country. They believed firmly in the ability of art and architecture to support social change. Emboldened by both the civil rights movement and changes in the Catholic Church following the opening of the Second Vatican Council, they envisioned the chapel as a space that should be open to anyone and everyone—a refuge for prayer, contemplation, communion, and action.

John and Dominique knew they wanted to commission a modern artist to aid in the design of the chapel, and when they witnessed the evocative power and stillness of the murals Mark Rothko had completed for the Seagram building, they knew immediately that he was the one who could pull their vision for the chapel into reality. He shared their conviction that “[a]rt is not only a form of action, it is a form of social action. For art is a type of communication...”² Following disagreements with the original architect, Philip Johnson, Rothko was granted full control over the design with assistance from

Houston-based architects Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry until the project’s completion in 1971.

At the chapel’s dedication ceremony, Dominique described the two experiences that had inspired its commission—hearing Father Yves Congar’s 1936 lectures on ecumenism in Paris and visiting the chapels by Léger, Matisse, and Le Corbusier commissioned by Father Marie-Alain Couturier in 1952.³ Congar and Couturier were integral figures in the French *renouveau catholique*, and both sought ways to apply Jacques Maritain’s integral humanism in the modern renewal of the Church. Congar’s work centered on social renewal through the ecumenical movement, which intended to unite the various Christian faiths under a common mission and core set of beliefs. Couturier’s efforts, on the other hand, looked toward spiritual renewal and the preservation of humanity’s physical and spiritual senses by commissioning works of sacred modern art and architecture. Through the teachings of Congar and Couturier, the de Menils understood that “the sacred is the domain of realities (things, words, persons) by means of which we experience the divine,” and they desired to construct a chapel that might provide a space for sensual engagement with these realities.⁴

The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty addresses the difficulty of perceiving truth outside of shared experience with other perceiving bodies. He argues that as one private world meets another an intersubjective ground is opened in which the sole true world, while still obscure, becomes visible.⁵ The joining of personal belief and universal truth advocated by Congar and Couturier is only possible through this sort of intersubjective human experience. Rothko, who spoke of art as a way of recovering the lost unity of the subjective and objective, achieved this in several ways at the Chapel. He addressed the personal through the use of scale to foster a sensuous, intimate experience of the work, and he addressed the universal through the use of light to recover an intersubjective experience of tactility. This paper will examine how Rothko’s use of scale and light at the Chapel reinforces and lays the groundwork for its social mission of love and brotherhood, and it will consider the implications of this for architectural practice.

CONTEXT

It is important that we first understand the position of the Rothko Chapel in relation to the larger architectural project of the French Sacred Art movement of the 1940's and 50's. In January 1940, Father Marie-Alain Couturier traveled to New York to deliver a series of sermons and lectures. The onset of World War II prevented his return to France, and so for the next five years he traveled between the United States and Canada preaching, writing, and forging friendships that would ultimately re-shape his understanding of sacred art in the modern world. His relationship with the Canadian architect Marcel Parizeau proved especially transformative, and it was through their discussions that Couturier arrived at the principle that a truly living architecture must protect the happiness of men while also instilling in them "the love of truth and sincerity of forms."⁶ In this, the revelation of divine truth is linked directly to the sensory experience of pure form in art and architecture.

After his return to France, Couturier's projects were increasingly architectural and provided a platform for the experimental application of the concepts he proposed in the review *L'Art Sacré*. He argued that works of sacred art and architecture should be recognizable within the context of their time and place, they should open up a reflexive connection between the user and the work, and they should accept responsibility for the preservation of humanity's physical and spiritual senses. The resulting projects arose from creative processes that shared a common love for humanity and belief in the restorative potential of an encounter with the work.

Couturier was directly involved in Maurice Novarina's church at Assy, Matisse's chapel in Vence, Léger and Bazaine's church at Audincourt, and Le Corbusier's works at Ronchamp and La Tourette. When the de Menils visited Couturier in the summer of 1952, they toured Vence, Audincourt, and the future site of the chapel at Ronchamp. The trip left a lasting impression on them. After over a decade of conversation around the renewal of the faith through art and architecture, they were finally able to experience firsthand the fruitful application of Couturier's theory to built works. Following Couturier's premature death in 1954, the building project of the Sacred Art movement slowly came to an end. However, the initiation of the Rothko Chapel project ten years later served as a natural extension of his vision into the American scene. According to her daughter Fariha, Dominique "quoted [Couturier] almost daily."⁷ His ideas about the relationship between creative acts, sensory experience, and the perceptibility of the divine provided a critical framework for the development of the chapel project.

The ecumenical theology of Father Yves Congar was also at the core of the project. The notion of a space that would be open to all was central to the de Menils from the beginning. However, when Dominique initially heard Congar's lectures in Paris his ideas were considered controversial and even blasphemous by Catholic leadership. His book based on these lectures, *True and False Reform in the Church*, was banned by the Vatican, and Congar was prevented from teaching and publishing for many years. However, when Pope John XXIII announced the Second Vatican Council in 1960, he invited

Congar to serve on the preparatory commission, signaling a crucial shift in the Church's attitude toward tolerance and openness. The principles of Congar's ecumenism provided the theological basis for the Rothko Chapel's social activities. If Couturier's ideas dealt primarily with the renewal of the senses in the individual, Congar's theology was a call to look outward and renew the bonds of our shared humanity. With this in mind, the de Menils set out to create a space where both were possible.

SCALE

Dominique, reflecting on the Rothko Chapel's popularity, once observed, "Maybe this constant stream of visitors is due to the fact that there is no other place in town where you can be by yourself in silence [...] one can be isolated and yet not alone."⁸ The personal experience of the chapel reorients visitors and connects them along the vertical axis between the corporeal world and divine truth. Marie-Alain Couturier insisted on a relationship between the physical and spiritual senses. He argued that through the bodied experience of art and architecture people could be drawn into a spiritual encounter with the divine. Congar reinforced this relationship between sensuality and truth, writing, "conversion to the deepest Reality is a movement of conversion from the outside to the inside, from sense experience to spiritual reality, from signs to the Truth itself."⁹ These views are closely aligned with Rothko's stance that sensuality remains the primary language of human experience.¹⁰

Rothko's work is about the fullness of seeing, and so it is notable that, as opposed to his earlier works, the distraction of color has been eliminated almost completely from the Chapel. Visitors are left with pure perception—a language of visual tactility unencumbered by the associative meanings of specific colors. Form and scale alone remain to convey the meaning of the work, and they must be experienced sensually. He relies on a totality of vision—both the mechanical operation of the eye as the body moves through space and the tactile sensation of seeing a form and understanding its physical weight. For Rothko, this link between the mechanical and the sensual in art is "an anecdote of the spirit, and the only means of making concrete the purpose of its varied quickness and stillness."¹¹

The work's capacity for sensuous communication with a visitor sits in the personal quality of the encounter. The key to Rothko's chapel murals in this regard is the careful tuning of their size. They are expansive enough to retain their otherness—uncontrollable bodies that we must enter into a direct relationship with—and yet they are not so expansive as to become incomprehensible. Rothko commented frequently on the need to "create a state of intimacy" in his work.¹² He asserted, "To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience [...] However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn't something you command."¹³ He uses scale as a tool to pull the viewer back into the reality of their own sense experience.

The feelings of intimate scale and being within the paintings are reinforced by Rothko's expansive treatment of the forms on the canvases and of the canvases on the walls. Seven of the pieces

consist of hazy maroon backgrounds with opaque, hard-edged black rectangles painted over them. A close examination of the built-up layers within these rectangles reveals that they were modified over and over, becoming slightly larger each time until they filled nearly the entire canvas.¹⁴ The use of hard, taped edges and opaque layers was new for Rothko. The forms take on a dense impenetrability, but their expansiveness creates a sense of interiority. They are solid, and yet they are windows into another space. Through the encounter of their mass, the black forms draw visitors into the silent spiritual reality of the chapel. The remaining seven canvases are washes of deep plum. Absent of any compositional form, these canvases become forms themselves as they stretch toward the edges of the unfinished plaster walls. Unlike the black rectangles, they vibrate with translucency, their innermost depths laid bare before the viewer's eyes. The two sets of canvases point toward the nature of human intimacy, in which the other is at once unknowable and yet the only way of coming to know reality.

LIGHT

This reflection of intersubjective human relationship is given new dimension through the use of light as a connective agent within the chapel. Throughout his career, the lighting of his work was one of Rothko's primary concerns. He instructed that "the pictures have their own inner light and if there is too much light a distortion of their [meaning] occurs [...] Above all, the entire picture should be evenly lit and not strongly."¹⁵ When Philip Johnson presented him with the completed chapel design for approval, Rothko strongly objected to the scale of the proposed central skylight for fear that it would not provide adequate illumination.¹⁶ Having worked in Houston on other projects for the de Menils, Johnson was familiar with the harsh quality of Texas' southern light. He had proposed a tall, tapered skylight that would diffuse sunlight evenly into the space. Rothko, however, insisted that something lower and with a larger aperture was necessary. The two could not come to an agreement on this point, and under Barnstone and Aubry the final design mirrored the large lantern skylight in Rothko's Manhattan studio with the intention that a thin veil of parachute silk would be installed below it to diffuse the incoming light. When the chapel was completed, it was clear that the space was grossly overlit. Because Rothko died before the paintings were installed, he was not able to adjust their lighting on-site as planned, and we are left with an imperfect approximation of his vision. In spite of this, his intentions for the lighting were clear, and subsequent renovations in 1974 and 1976 made efforts to correct it through the installation of a baffle system.

In *The Artist's Reality*, Rothko argued for the primacy of the tactile sense: "Our eyes, our ears—all of our senses—are simply the indications of the existence of a veritable reality that will ultimately resolve itself to our sense of touch."¹⁷ He described how, in the Renaissance, the totality of vision as a sensual experience had been sacrificed, and the focus of painting had shifted to the reproduction of visible appearances. However, the painters of the Venetian school developed a method of depicting ambient light within their works

that "made it possible to unify the picture tactilely through having all the objects partake of a common enveloping atmosphere, as well as to provide a tactile means for the representation of sensuality."¹⁸ Rothko employs this technique within the space of his paintings, imbuing them with an inner glow, but he extends the atmosphere further through the careful illumination of the work itself so that the viewers have an awareness of participating with the canvases in a single thick reality. One has a definite sense that the luminosity within the canvas and the luminous atmosphere wrapping their own body are of one substance. It is in this moment that the work can finally communicate and actualize its social function. "This attitude of receptivity [between the work and the viewer], indispensable in art, is also the attitude necessary for ecumenism—TO LISTEN."¹⁹

Rothko described "the recipe for a work of art" as a preoccupation with death, sensuality, tension, irony, wit, chance, and hope – "10% to make the tragic concept more endurable."²⁰ The presence of light as an enveloping body provides the 10 percent of hope at the chapel. The light says that we are all here, together. It establishes a horizontal unity, calling us into communion with others in the chapel simply through our mutual being there, and it intimates the universal brotherhood and freedom the de Menils were so ardently seeking.

HOPE

So we see how the Rothko Chapel functions architecturally to restore in its visitors the vertical connection between their bodies and the world through an intimate, sensuous experience of the work and the horizontal connection between their inner world and the worlds of other visitors through a common participation in the light-filled space. It is a place equally devoted to both contemplation and action. Beginning in 1973 it has served as the site of colloquia, ceremonies, and demonstrations with the intent of raising awareness for humanitarian crises and envisioning a unified response. The sympathetic relationship between the viewer and the architecture points toward the receptivity visitors should have toward one another as they engage in the tasks before them. According to Dominique, "The mere fact of assembling in the Chapel gives a spiritual orientation to the debates. It means that man's reality implies transcendence."²¹ The need to meet together in the chapel reflects the critical importance of both the physical and spiritual senses in envisioning a better world. The shared experience of the chapel's reality provides a framework for the subjective realities of love, compassion, and understanding within the space, and through the Rothko Chapel Foundation's social programs this love has been extended to those in the world who need it most, who are otherwise alone. It has provided a space to forge ties of communion and shared vision. Dominique wrote, "As one learns walking by walking, we are learning togetherness by meeting others. Lovingly."²²

The attitude with which Rothko and the de Menils approached the Chapel holds important lessons for architectural practice. Rothko argued that art is about intention—the artist's soul.²³ This ties to the connection between art's communicability and social action. He noted that artists in the 20th century were subject to the authority

of the Market in the same way that artists of earlier eras had been subject to the rule of the Church. He insisted that it was the artist's responsibility to choose hunger over compliance to the demands of the Market and the sacrifice of truth.²⁴ It is a sentiment he lived by, as evidenced by his rejection of the Seagram commission on wholly moral grounds.

The dilemma we face as artists and architects in the 21st Century is no different. It is always easier to operate complacently within the structures of practice given to us. However, the Chapel stands as Rothko's challenge to us to make work that is true—to express hope in the face of a broken world. This charge is especially critical given the troubling issues we face today. We occupy environments that dull our senses, both physically and spiritually, and we are increasingly removed from the tactile world. Our public spaces have been co-opted as convenient marketing opportunities, lined in floor-to-ceiling digital screens. We are unwell, and our vision is cluttered to the point of blindness. Furthermore, there are calls for housing and infrastructure that will serve only to reinforce growing divisions in economic status, race, religion, and nationality.

And so we must ask—what can we do, as architects, to address the persistent crisis of truth in our age? How can we operate within our broken world in the hopes of changing it? Like art, architecture is a form of communication. As such, the practice of architecture is inherently a social action. We are only one set of participants in a transdisciplinary dialogue, but it is crucial that we acknowledge the role architecture plays in either reinforcing or reshaping societal norms. Because we construct realities, the projects we accept and our intentions for accepting them matter. We must learn to approach our practice as both a moral obligation to the human community and as an opportunity to provide spaces that communicate love, unity, and the hope of a better future, accessible to all.

ENDNOTES

1. Dominique de Menil, *The Rothko Chapel: Writings on Art and the Threshold of the Divine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 40.
2. Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 10.
3. De Menil, *The Rothko Chapel*, 20.
4. Yves Congar, *At the Heart of Christian Worship: Liturgical Essays by Yves Congar*, trans. and ed. Paul Philibert (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010), 109.
5. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 13-14.
6. Marie-Alain Couturier, *Marcel Parizeau: Architecte* (Montreal, Editions de L'Arbre, 1945) 27-28.
7. De Menil, *The Rothko Chapel*, 6.
8. De Menil, *The Rothko Chapel*, 28.
9. Congar, *At the Heart of Christian Worship*, 4.
10. Rothko, *The Artist's Reality*, 25.
11. Mark Rothko, *Writings on Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) 45.
12. *Ibid*, 128.
13. *Ibid*, 74.
14. Susan J. Barnes, *The Rothko Chapel: An Act of Faith* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

15. Rothko, *Writings on Art*, 145.
16. Barnes, *The Rothko Chapel*, 81. 7.
17. Rothko, *The Artist's Reality*, 25.
18. Rothko, *The Artist's Reality*, 32.
19. De Menil, *The Rothko Chapel*, 17.
20. Rothko, *Writings on Art*, 125-126.
21. De Menil, *The Rothko Chapel*, 34-35.
22. Dominique de Menil in Barnes, *The Rothko Chapel*, 9.
23. Rothko, *The Artist's Reality*, 19-20.
24. *Ibid*, 3.

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