

“Your sacred space is where you can  
find yourself over and over again.”

— *Joseph Campbell*

## SECULARISM OF SACRED SPACE

Interview with *Alsharif Khalid Nahas x Ali Reza Shahbazin*

**Architecture can be divided into secular and non-secular buildings, but the paradox for our era lies in preserving religious enrichment for non-religious buildings. Recent scholarship points out the lack of mystical and spiritual experiences in modern life. Friedrich Nietzsche insists that art, philosophy and music have the potential to bridge this gap; James Joyce discusses this epiphany in art as a phenomena of Modern spirituality.**

In contemporary architecture history, sacred spaces have been created by architects without a firm sense of religious belief. One ponders how they solve this paradox? How can we create something for believers without belief? How can we explain this dichotomy of creating a sacred space designed for a religious experience in a secular way?

Bearing these questions in mind, I had a tea-talk with Alsharif Khalid who worked on his capstone studio project with like-minded underpinnings.

**AS** Tell me about the project in detail?

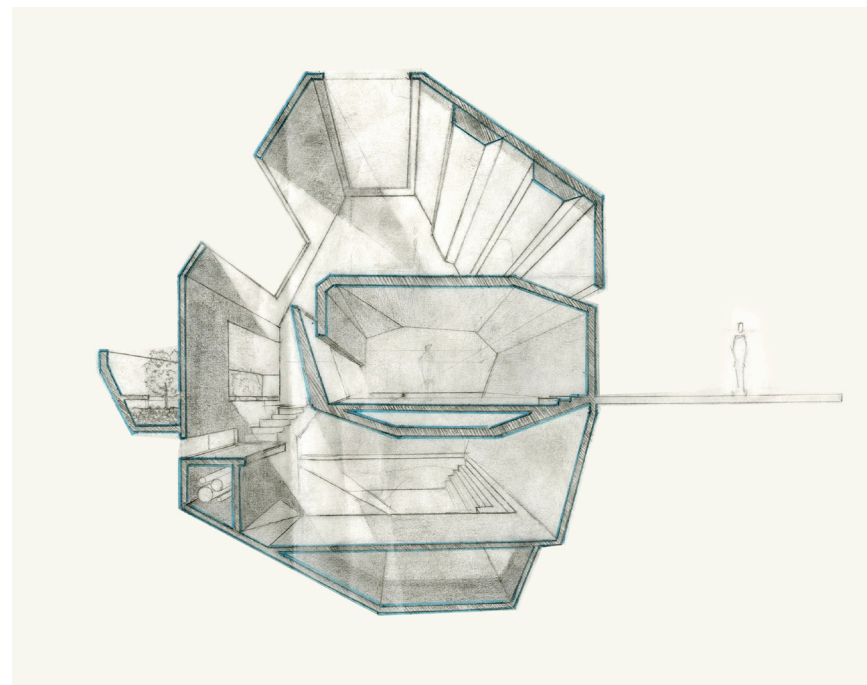
**AK** We were asked to create a sacred space; the first assignment was defining and understanding what a sacred space is. At the beginning, we think it's either a mosque or a synagogue or a church or whatever! That's the first thought you have into your head. I thought of it as controversial and initially it was difficult to define it. For instance, if you are a Muslim and you go to a church, you see people singing, you still feel the music reverberating, even if you might not

identify with the tenets of the faith. So I choose something that was more holistic and all encompassing; I was going to explore epigenetics, which is basically the study of DNA.

DNA as we understand, is just a blueprint. Whatever you inherit is given to you and you stick with it. However, couple of years ago, scientists started to understand that there is a catch. DNA is like an idea which changes through time, through the effects of our environment, food, drugs, natural causes and events. And the most influential time for a person to change their DNA is from day one of pregnancy, that is the day of fertilization to two and a half years after. This project makes a place for pregnant women to create a healthier habit of having a healthier baby and uncover that it is possible to alter genetics naturally through epigenetics. I tried to create an architecture that alters genetics. Its possibility of success, is something I couldn't see at this point, but this is what I was trying to achieve here.

**AS** Your idea emerged from that of a sacred space to a place for pregnant women. If we look at it from a mythological standpoint; in almost every religion, the pregnant woman is one of the most sacred elements. This tradition is also related to Middle Eastern ancient pagan religions and their goddesses. I can link this to the sacredness in your concept, theory and function. How did you apply these to architectural form?

**AK** I applied architectural roles through diagrams. I was trying to make a



*Section Sketch*  
*Coloured Pencil*  
*8" x 10"*  
*2016*

relationship between the womb, the mother and the environment. That's the reason I created a house, which is a circle inside the womb within the mother and within the environment. That's the whole idea!

**AS** When we think of sacred space, traditionally; mosques, churches and synagogues are at the forefront with their time staking yet timeless architectural schemes. However, the space you create is devoid of this ornate celebration of form. Secularism is seen as the quality of behavior outside the realm of religious belief.

What was your thought procedure like? How did you face, design and solve this paradox of what I would term as "secularizing sacredness"?

**AK** If I ask people about what a sacred space is, most of them will respond by saying that it is a place to pray in. I understand what you are saying here; that a pregnant woman is the symbolism of the sacredness, but normally we don't view it that way. Architecturally, that is what I am trying to explore. I might understand it as an idea and as a symbol, but how does one relate this concept to architecture? That was the challenge for the project, where there was a gap!

**AS** Do you think you filled the gap in your project? Were you successful in doing so?

**AK** For part of it! My theory was that, I can make a sacred space for anyone, no matter what. I cannot define a sacred space for them; my definition of sacred space is very different from your definition of a sacred space, everyone's definitions are unique.

**AS** This is secular!

**AK** Yes, I tried to create a different perspective. Some people believe in God, some of them don't. They might believe in science, facts or not even that! Some people believe in creationism, some they don't; so, I tried to capture different perspectives and I didn't want to capture only one.

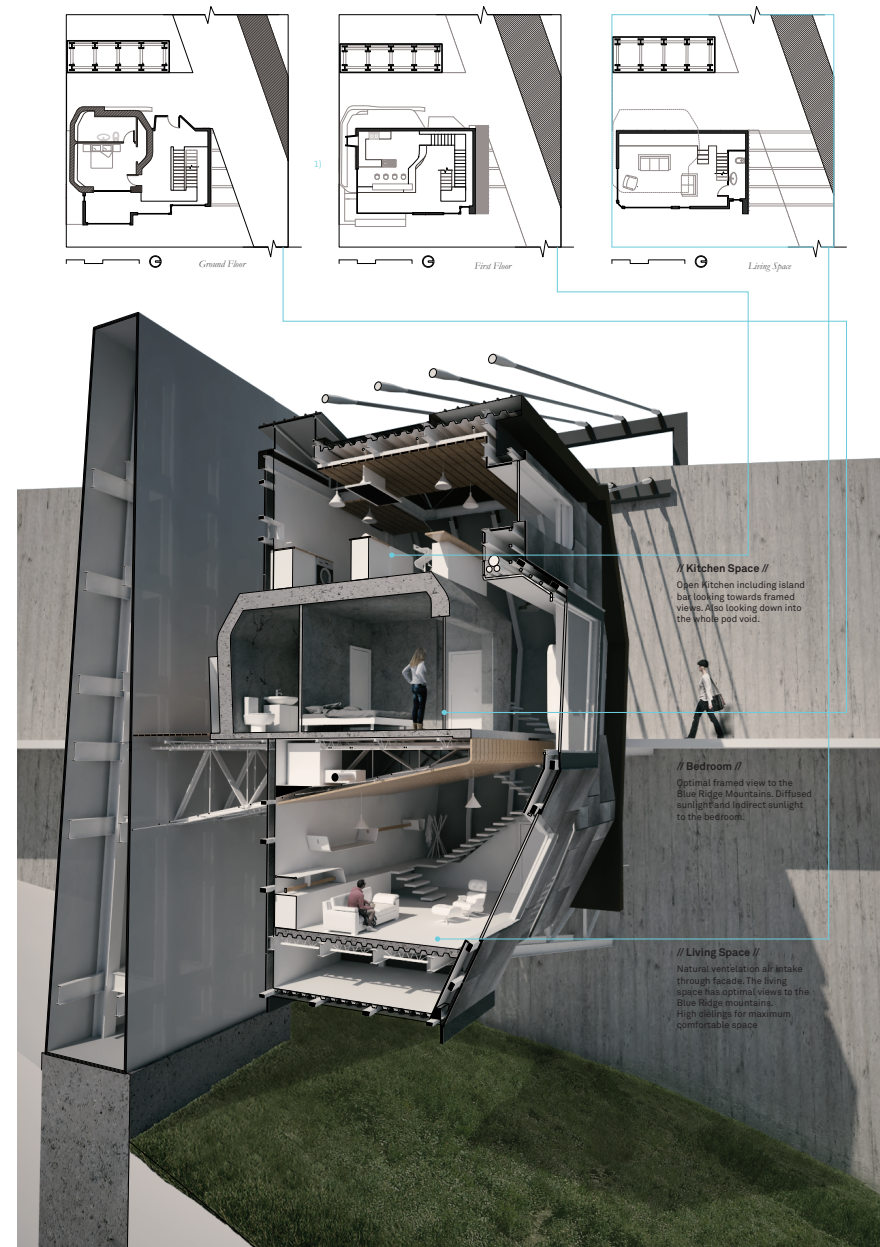
**AS** At first, I did not know this project was a sacred space, I thought it was a house...

**AK** It is a house!

**AS** Then, I felt that this is not a typical house because of your concept of placing a bedroom at the center of the house and its relationship with the womb. The womb is natural. Consciously or subconsciously, derivatives of nature, for humans, become sacred. We consider nature to be our mother. In light of this, this project is successful, but largely paradoxical because of the way your program secularizes it. This house is non-religious; it is not a sacred space for a mother with a particular religious background. It is for everyone. How did this idea come about?

**AK** The studio program was about finding your own definition of a sacred space, but I remember when I presented my first idea, it was confusing. Part of it was also my point of view, that I didn't want to follow any religion. I tried to find a universal code, a universal language which could be applied to anyone

I looked at the Sancaklar Mosque in Turkey, which has a simple wall; where the play



3d Section Rendering

3ds Max / Adobe Photoshop

24" x 36"

2016



*Inspirational image / Emre Arolat Architects  
Daniel Brown 2016*

of sunlight defines a strong feeling inside. This is what I tried to capture inside the womb. It is not a matter of belief. To be in that space, which gives you the chills; that is what I tried to accomplish.

**AS** Geometrically, the center is always important in space even if we choose to decentralize it. There has always been a dialogue with the center; in Middle Eastern architecture, water courtyards find their presence; Frank Lloyd Wright underlines the importance of a fireplace in the house based on collective unconsciousness; in her book *Sexuality and Space*, Beatriz Colomina speaks of the bedroom as the center of universe as contemporary society stays indoors due to technology.

Why did you choose the bedroom as the center?

**AK** What is the most comfortable place for you?

**AS** Bedroom!

**AK** That is the reason I chose the bedroom: it is a retreat space. I thought that the bedroom in this project should be a place that you want to be in it, where want to wake up, and enjoy the site view all the time! Even the kitchen on the top and living room at the bottom has the view of the sunrise.

**AS** The culture one born in, defines sacredness, architecture and design. How does your Middle Eastern background impact this project?

**AK** Most of the time design is affected by experience, which we understand as intuition. What is intuition? Intuition is whatever you like; whatever you read, whatever you experience and my background is part of this intuition!

**AS** In Middle Eastern architecture, one is always found inside a space and design happens from inside to outside. Whilst in western culture, design happens from outside to inside. I see that in your bedroom, your idea starts from inside not outside, which is an Oriental

mindset; a Space inside space, like one thousand and one night (*Arabian nights*), a story inside a story.

**AK** I think what you say is interesting. From the beginning I tried to make something like a courtyard space, but didn't see it as successful. Perhaps this concept was always at back of my head!

**AS** I think your project works well without the theoretical DNA part. The idea of a mother, child, womb and environment is brilliantly simple; why did you choose to complicate it with epigenetics?

**AK** Yes, it works. But you see, that simplicity, where did it come from?

**AS** A lot of research..?

**AK** That's the thing. It takes a lot of time to do something simple. Without complexity, simplicity will not emerge.

**AS** Simplicity and complexity, great we reached another layer of paradox, Thank you, Khalid, for your time!