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### Bruder Klaus Field Chapel: Towards a Secular Architecture

In the post-pantheistic and post-paganistic system of Western faith, the sacred has always been a main priority guiding the architecture of religion. From the Renaissance, to the Gothic era, cathedrals, churches, and chapels were designed, and built, striving for sacred presence. The tradition of religious architecture has been dominated by design adhering to the prioritization of the sacred over the secular, and the church over the exploration of the world. Thus, dating back to the 1400s and the Renaissance, religious architecture has effectively established a binary within its practice between the sacred and secular, the church and the world.

However, in the early 1900s, architectural modernism began to deviate from this path towards the sacred. Regarding his famous chapel, Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp, architect Le Corbusier asserted that his architecture had no ties to religion, and that religion did little to dictate his design. Instead, Le Corbusier's Ronchamp strived to stimulate "the psychophysiology of the feelings" (6). In today's age, architecture enthusiasts are making grand pilgrimages to see these important spaces, designed by architects such as Le Corbusier, Tadao Ando, and Peter Zumthor among others. Their motives, however, are not completely faith-driven, but rather are driven by architecture and space. And these motives are fundamentally secular. Consequently since modernism, the position of the sacred in religious architecture is being actively challenged.

The following essay explores the role of contemporary architecture in religion. Focusing on Peter Zumthor's Bruder Klaus Field Chapel, and using Martin Heidegger's concepts of dwelling and the fourfold I aim to reveal how this contemporary religious space is rejecting these architectural binaries of the sacred and secular. By blurring this binary, religious architecture moves towards a secular, more inclusive space for all.

### **Bruder Klaus Field Chapel Background**

Before I discuss Heidegger's theory in relation to Peter Zumthor's work, it is useful to first provide important background information on the chapel. Completed in 2007, the chapel

was commissioned by the old German farmer,

Hermann-Josef Scheidtweiler, looking for a private space to worship his mother's favorite saint, Niklaus von Flüe, or Bruder Klaus (Fig. 1).

In the 15th century, Bruder Klaus was the patron saint of Switzerland and had much popularity among the rural German community, as he himself was a farmer, turned Christian mystic. It is said that the cave dwelling hermit Bruder Klaus survived nineteen years on Eucharist, and nothing else.<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 1. Bruder Klaus Field Chapel.

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<sup>1</sup> James Pallister, *Sacred Spaces: Contemporary Religious Architecture* (London: Phaidon, 2015), 102.



Fig. 2. Bruder Klaus from afar in the Mechernich countryside.



Fig. 3. Wigwam structure, constructed by the community, and Zumthor.

The chapel itself sits alone, deep in an open farming field in Mechernich, Germany, just outside of Cologne (Fig. 2). The erection of the building was a unique process, as it began with the farmers friends, family, and Zumthor himself erecting a small teepee,

wigwam structure out of 112 local tree trunks (Fig. 3).<sup>2</sup> Next, concrete molds

were placed around the teepee structure, and the community workers rammed concrete against the trees in a pentagon form, twelve meters tall with fifty centimeter thick walls, the concrete mixed with local sand.<sup>3</sup> Twenty-four layers of concrete were poured, leaving horizontal rings around the chapel, each ring marking a days work (Fig. 4).<sup>4</sup> After the concrete hardened, the trees on the inside were set fire, and burned for three weeks. This process left unique black char marks on the inside, and top of the chapel, also

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Amy Fearson, "Peter Zumthor completes Devon countryside villa in the tradition of Andrea Palladio," *dezeen*, October 29, 2018. <https://www.dezeen.com/2018/10/29/peter-zumthor-secular-retreat-living-architecture-villa-devon/>



Fig. 4. Steel triangle door, ribbed texture interior, and layered concrete facade.

leaving an aroma of burnt wood. Consequently, the imprint of the wigwam structure remains stamped on the ribbed inner concrete walls, contrasting the smooth, planar outside, with a jagged, rough, unfinished texture. Furthermore, there are no right angles in the inside of the chapel, only organic, free forms. This directly contrasts the outside of the chapel, which conveys a rigid, sharp form.

There are only two apertures in the structure, the first, a heavy triangular steel door, which opens slow, and reveals a dark, almost sinister, narrow passage, which after a short, obtuse bend, leads to the prayer area. Passing into the prayer space, the pointed ceiling exponentially ascends upward to the second aperture, an unglazed oculus in the center of the prayer space, twelve meters high, open to all the elements - rain, sleet, snow, etc. The oculus is the only source of light, thus it is a very dark space. Light diffuses slowly into the prayer area, creeping down the angular ribbed concrete interior walls. As light descends into the space, it catches small, five centimeter diameter transparent glass caps, covering the hollow steel rebar imbedded in the concrete walls.<sup>5</sup> This creates a shimmering effect in the dark space. This contributes to the very intimate experience Bruder Klaus fosters, as the chapel is small, only allowing for three people inside at once. It is through this intimate experience one can contemplate, and dwell.

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<sup>5</sup> My sketchbook documenting my experience

## Heidegger, Dwelling, and the Fourfold

In his essay *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, Martin Heidegger begins by posing the question; “What is it to dwell?” According to Heidegger, the verb “to dwell” is something which has been somewhat lost in translation. Tracing its Old High German roots, the word *buan* means to dwell, but has a double meaning: building. This is because it is impossible to separate building, and dwelling, as Heidegger asserts “... building is not merely a means and a way toward dwelling - to build is in itself already to dwell.”<sup>6</sup> Building, *buan*, means to dwell, and to dwell, means “to remain, to stay in a place.”<sup>7</sup> To dwell is not simply to wait, but to contemplate; to ponder. But ponder what? This is where the fourfold enters. The point of dwelling, of *buan* is to become one with the fourfold. And what is important, is this concept is neither one exclusively of religion, nor worldly contemplation - but rather, is one of both contemplation, and existence. A fundamental key in *buan* is Heidegger’s fourfold.

To understand *buan*, one must first have an understanding of the fourfold. This is because experiencing the harmony of the fourfold is essential in *buan*. Heidegger breaks down the fourfold into four subconcepts: earth, sky, mortals, and divinities. Because earth and sky are both worldly phenomenon, they prioritize the secular. This is slightly different in the relationship between mortals and divinities, which carry into the realm of the sacred. Though broken into four categories, Heidegger is sure to assert that each fold is inseparable from one another. They are rather all united in one spirit, one being, one concept, “...a primal oneness the four - earth and

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” In *Basic writings from 'Being and time' (1927) to 'The task of thinking' (1964)*, ed. David Farrell (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 348.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

sky, divinities and mortals - belong together in one.”<sup>8</sup> Because Heidegger mixes these secular and sacred concepts together, and asserts that they are inseparable, dwelling is therefore an act which exists in the blurred binary of sacred, and secular. Like Heidegger does, this paper will also break the fourfold into four, and discuss how each fold relates to Bruder Klaus Field Chapel, and dwelling - for it is through the fourfold Bruder Klaus activates its spirit. Bruder Klaus Chapel finds the perfect harmony of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities, and is therefore a threshold of the fourfold.

## **Earth**

To Heidegger, earth is the “soil” which “cultivate[s] the vine,” it is the land which we stride.<sup>9</sup> Earth provides basic needs to sustain human life and prosperity. Bruder Klaus Chapel embodies this in several ways, first, its relationship with the site. From a grand distance away, the chapel itself is barely visible at first glance (Fig. 2). In its proportion, it stands slightly lower than the surrounding trees, and the trees in the background. It’s tan, sandy light color blends into the color palette of the German countryside, compositionally suiting the dark greens, dark browns, and earth tones. Up closer to the chapel, it is surrounded by no other structures on the field. Its simple geometric pentagon structure is not formally overstated, and does not try to overstep its presence on the land. However, this is not to say that the chapel does not have a presence. Up close, the chapel stands completely alone, next to an old rickety fence. There are no trees, buildings, or structures nearby, giving it autonomy, the complete attention, and presence at

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 351.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 349.





Fig. 5. Detail of layered local concrete facade.

this close scale. Instead of exploiting nature, Bruder Klaus become one *with* nature, creating a structure in harmony with earth, yet still “needed to mark out its territory,” as Zumthor states in an interview with *Domus* magazine.<sup>10</sup>

Earth is also engaged through materiality. In his discussion of Earth, Heidegger brings up a synonym to *buan*: *bauen*, which means “man is insofar as he dwells,” but also has a connection to

building, like *buan*. “*bauen*, however, also means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine.”<sup>11</sup> In the soil, and the vine, there are two connections to Bruder Klaus. In his book *Sacred Spaces*, author James Pallister explains “The concrete was set... using local sand and gravel” (Fig. 5).<sup>12</sup> In this case, the concrete of Bruder Klaus acts the very “soil” Heidegger discusses in *bauen*. The soil of Bruder Klaus also “cultivate[s] the vine,” or the building’s walls and structure itself, and the dwelling experience provided in the chapel.

Furthermore, because tree branches serves as the inner mold for the concrete, the very structure of the chapel is a product of earth (Fig. 3). Moreover, the chapel is not only made out of earth, but was constructed using earth. And it conveys this earth through texture, from the small

<sup>10</sup> Stefano Casciani, “A Saint and an Architect,” *Domus*, September 19, 2007, <https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2007/09/19/a-saint-and-an-architect.html>

<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” In *Basic writings from 'Being and time' (1927) to 'The task of thinking' (1964)*, ed. David Farrell (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 349.

<sup>12</sup> James Pallister, *Sacred Spaces: Contemporary Religious Architecture* (London: Phaidon, 2015), 126.

rocks imbedded in the grainy rammed concrete facade, to the ribbed interior, reflecting the tree ghosts of the branches which were vital in the construction of the structure. The chapel therefore stands made of earth, and because of earth. As discussed earlier, after the concrete hardened, the inner trees were then burned, and released into the sky.

## Sky

In Heidegger's fourfold, sky represents the spiritual. Hinting at human's presence below the sky, Heidegger states: "...on the earth" already means "under the sky."<sup>13</sup> Heidegger also establishes human's fascination with the sky, saying: "Mortals dwell in that they receive the sky as sky. They leave to the sun and the moon their journey, to the stars their courses..."<sup>14</sup> This fascination catalyzes profound thinking on spiritual eternity - and forges a direct connection between earth, where humans reside, and sky, or eternity.

This connection between earth and sky is highlighted in Zumthor's architecture. The burning of the trees to finish the project is the literal transformation of earthly material into eternity, as the smoke from the fire ascends into the realm of the sky. This instance of the connection between earth and sky was not a one time occurrence. The physical product of the fires, the black char marks on the chapel, and the aroma of burnt wood, remain presence in the space, as reminders of the connection with eternity.

Furthermore, the architectural focal point of the chapel's experience is the oculus (Fig.6). This unglazed aperture permits the entry of the elements coming down from the sky: rain, snow,

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" In *Basic writings from 'Being and time' (1927) to 'The task of thinking' (1964)*, ed. David Farrell (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 351.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.





Fig. 6. Unglazed oculus of Bruder Klaus.

light, air. The oculus then becomes a passageway for the sky to enter the earthly space. As seen in the architectural section of the structure, a shallow dent in the paving of the prayer space allows for these elements penetrating the space to gather, in the exact teardrop shape of the oculus (Fig. 7). After time, these gathered elements from the sky, resting on the earth's surface naturally evaporate, and recycle.

Because the oculus is the focal point, the attention of the experience brings the gaze upward, towards the sky. The upward gaze is encouraged by motif of verticality, as every element vertically points toward the sky, from the triangular door to the ceiling structure. As Heidegger indicates, humans gaze up to the sky to ponder eternity, and Zumthor provides architectural motifs to emphasize the sky in the space. Humans are therefore invited to gaze up at the sky and contemplate, and dwell.

Earth and sky are in perfect dialogue, they are not separated, but rather they work in harmony towards *bauen*.

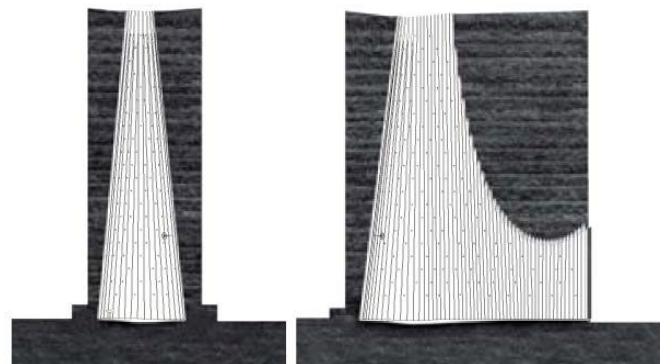


Fig. 7. Two cross section drawings, drawn after the projects realization.

## Mortals

According to Heidegger, mortals are humans, and “dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth.”<sup>15</sup> Since “dwelling” is synonymous with “building,” it is then also fair to say the act of constructing architecture is also “the manner in which mortals are on the earth.” Humans are important in Bruder Klaus, as it was constructed by the commissioner’s friends, and family, and Peter Zumthor himself; “The concrete was set by the clients’ friends and family using local sand and gravel in twenty-four pours, which can be read in a horizontal banding around the chapel.”<sup>16</sup> The



Fig. 8. Peter Zumthor building wigwam structure on site.

wigwam structure was also constructed by the same local humans (Fig. 8). The construction of the chapel by mortals shows in the facade language, as each of the twenty four horizontal ring around the chapel represents one day’s work.

Another instance of Heidegger’s mortals is seen through Zumthor’s technical drawings which dictated the project and its design. Unlike the precision of normal, traditional technical drawings for architectural projects, Zumthor drew sketches of a section, and plan, with pencil

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>16</sup> James Pallister, *Sacred Spaces: Contemporary Religious Architecture* (London: Phaidon, 2015), 126.

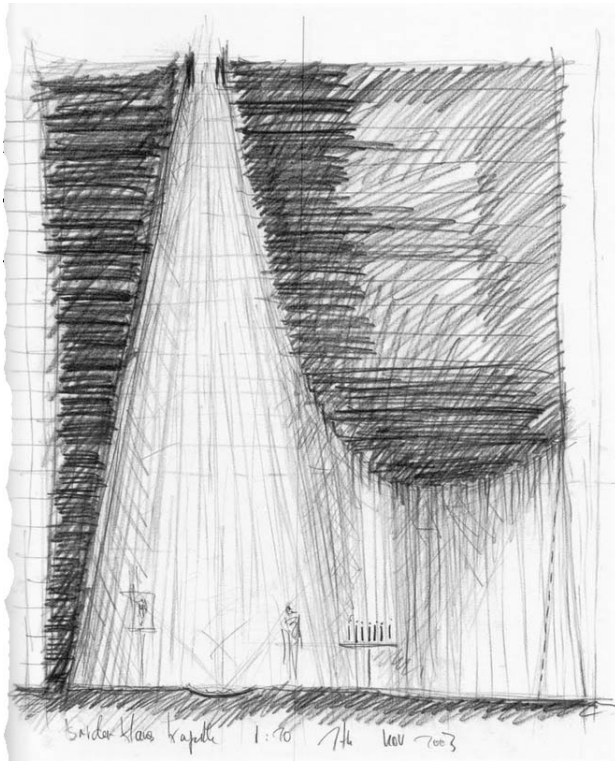


Fig. 9. Section sketch by Peter Zumthor.



Fig. 10. Plan sketch by Peter Zumthor.

and paper (Fig. 9/10). His sketches are rough, texturized, dark, and convey the essence of the intended experience of the space. This is important because Zumthor recognizes he is mortal, not divine, and does not strive for perfection.

The burning of the inner tree wigwam structure is also a symbolic instance of mortality. Fire, a destructive phenomenon destroyed the wood structure. However, the structure leaves behind a concrete shell, with the imprint of the trees throughout the interior. In the conversation between the structure that existed, and the structure left behind after the fire, this conversely also symbols the immortality of the wooden structure - as it was set in stone.

### **Divinities**

Heidegger asserts that the divinities provide a standard for human society, saying: “Mortals dwell in that they receive the divinities as



divinities. In hope they hold up to the divinities what is un hoped for.”<sup>17</sup> The chapel itself was built for religious purposes, for Saint Niklaus. Therefore, the chapel is an active religious space where people come to perform religious rituals, such as praying and lighting candles (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Local lighting candle inside chapel.

Though these are mortals performing these acts, they do so in search of a connection with the divine.

Zumthor’s architecture even searches for this divine connection in several ways. One way is the use of mass to symbolize a cave, which Saint Niklaus was said to have lived during his nineteen year fast. In this experience, the thick concrete walls compress, then release the chapel-goer into the prayer area. The fifty centimeter thick concrete walls, and the very large concrete mass over head on the walk through mirror the subtractive essence of a cave. Furthermore, the bulk of the concrete being above the chapel-goer at all times

symbolizes the weight of the divine above us, and again, affirms our presence as mortals on earth.

The careful consideration of lighting in the space is said to represent a dream Bruder Klaus of witnessing a gigantic starburst, while in his mother’s womb.<sup>18</sup> Because of Zumthor’s conservative use of lighting, the light penetrating the oculus indeed does appear to be a burst.

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<sup>17</sup> 328

<sup>18</sup> James Pallister, *Sacred Spaces: Contemporary Religious Architecture* (London: Phaidon, 2015), 126.

The manner which light creeps into the dark space resembles the diffusion of light in all directions after an explosion. Furthermore, the small, dark, concrete form can also be seen as the womb. In designing Bruder Klaus Chapel, Zumthor was keen to consider these Heideggarian connections with the divine.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on dwelling and the fourfold, Heidegger ends the first part of *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* with the question “if dwelling preserves the fourfold, where does it keep the fourfold’s essence? How do mortals make their dwelling such a preserving?”<sup>19</sup> After a close consideration of each fold of Heidegger’s fourfold, Zumthor does exactly this: preserve the fourfold through building and dwelling. It is through Zumthor’s architecture that the essence of the fourfold is maintained. With earth, Zumthor uses the rawest form of earthly materials, tree branches, and sand. With the oculus, Zumthor highlights, and prioritizes the experience of the sky in the chapel. Mortals designed, constructed, and continue to use the chapel, which was designed with close attention to acknowledge divinities, which serve as our template for human, mortal life.

Bruder Klaus Chapel without a doubt has sacred principles. Religious ceremonies occur in the space, as people come to pray, light candles, etc. However, I would like to echo a thought from København University professor of theology, Ettore Rocca, who studying the relationship between the “space of the moment,” and the “space inside the church,” thinks that through Bruder Klaus Chapel, Zumthor did not create a sacred space. Rather Zumthor created a shell, a

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<sup>19</sup> 329

“form” which has the ability of hosting a sacred act through the subtractive mass.<sup>20</sup> I agree with Rocca. Through principles of architecture, Zumthor has made a space that can exist almost in its own right, in harmony with the fourfold. The fourfold is neither sacred, nor secular, but *both*. Thus, it would not be correct to label Bruder Klaus on one side of the binary, or the other. People visiting Bruder Klaus may go for a sacred, religious purpose, however, to reduce Bruder Klaus Chapel to sacred negates its worldly power - and its ability to reach the greater masses of people. Heidegger ends *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* by asking “what is the state of dwelling in our precarious age?”<sup>21</sup> In Bruder Klaus Chapel, the state of dwelling is strong. In our contemporary age, religious architecture is a catalyst for challenging the binary between sacred, and secular.

This architecture has a transcending power. In the introduction, I use the word “inclusive space” when describing Bruder Klaus Chapel. This is because dwelling is something which any human can partake. Heidegger’s fourfold offers a simple existential connection, reducing being to four folds - earth, sky, mortals and divinities. I also title the paper “Towards a Secular Architecture” because, contrary to what Pallister asserts in his introduction, religion is on the downfall. According to a 2018 Pew Research Center study, “Adults under 40 are less likely to be religiously affiliated” around the world.<sup>22</sup> Now, more than ever, we are in need of spaces which can be enjoyed by all, spaces which do not require a knowledge or background in religion, but rather solely require yourself, and your willingness to contemplate, and dwell. Bruder Klaus Chapel invites this powerful experience in its space.

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<sup>20</sup>

<sup>21</sup> page 339

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