

A Transcultural Field Study in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania

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Design education is not value-free, and the explicit inclusion or explicit exclusion of certain topics, references and precedents reflect distinctions of the world.¹

Deconstructivists posit that there are no longer any shared symbols in our contemporary culture due to the melting pot of the global community. But we would argue that there are places in which a distinct metaphorical language is abundant, shared and widely understood. One of those places is Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania in the USA. It was in this community that we asked our fourth year architecture students to develop an architectural language that conveyed the belief system of the majority of its the borough's residents.

Bryn Athyn was founded in 1898 by a small group of Swedenborgians, believers in a Christian faith that is based on the Old and New Testament, but more importantly, the Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, an 18th Century scientist, philosopher and theologian. Bryn Athyn is a self sufficient and self contained community. It includes the Bryn Athyn Cathedral, Bryn Athyn College, the High School Academy, and Glencairn, an internationally recognized museum. But there now is enormous pressure for new development from both outside and within the borough to serve the needs of an expanding population. Consequently, the students' goal in this project was to help the residents of Bryn Athyn, as believers in the Swedenborgian faith, to recommit to an architectural and urban heritage that embodied their sacred writings and celebrated their Cultural Identity.

Over the course of a semester, alternative design proposals for a new chapel and then subsequent master plan proposals for the Swedenborgian Educational Academy were developed. The design process, that included numerous opportunities for input from the congregation and its leaders, demanded an authenticity to the students' growing knowledge of the Swedenborg faith. None of the students were familiar with Swedenborg or any of his writings prior to taking on the project so a quick study was required and the learning curve was steep.

The process of assimilating alternative cosmological ideas was approached heuristically by data collection through

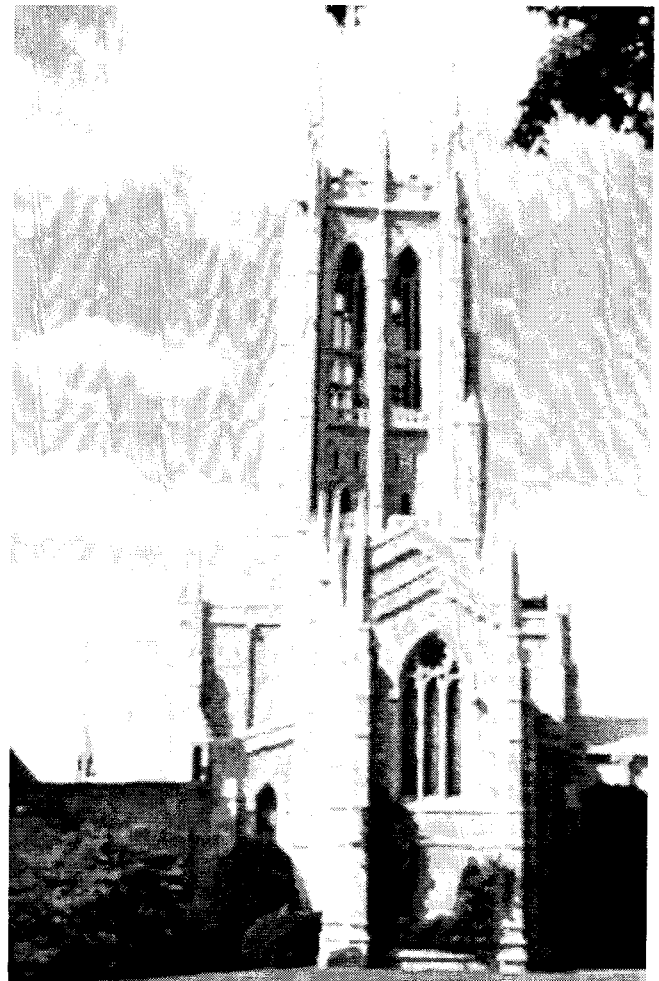


Fig. 1. Bryn Athyn Cathedral

doing. The students were given a computer copy of New Search— The Writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg on CD ROM, with the ability to access concepts and correspondences via a search engine. This data collection assisted in the formation of conceptual ideas as well as realizing questions concerning materiality, cosmology and the built envi-

ronment.

Through these readings students were introduced to the foundation of The General Church of the New Jerusalem (or the New Church, Swedenborgianism) and the belief that the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborgian constitute the second coming of the Lord. Within these Writings are several important philosophical and theological concepts that shape the natural as well as the spiritual world of Swedenborgians.

1. The Physical Quality of the Spiritual World

Heaven is out of time and out of space, yet the appearance is just like the natural world. The world of spirits was seen by Emanuel Swedenborgian to have nations, cities, streets, houses, gardens and all items necessary for the angels to perform uses through eternity.

2. The Science of Correspondences

This concept illuminates the relationship between the natural world and the spiritual world. All things in the spiritual world have a direct and symbolic relationship to all things in the natural world. Material objects and actions have a spiritual correspondence.

The articulation of these philosophical and theological concepts or culturally understood narratives found throughout Swedenborg's writings is present in many of the existing historic structures in Bryn Athyn. The town's Cathedral is

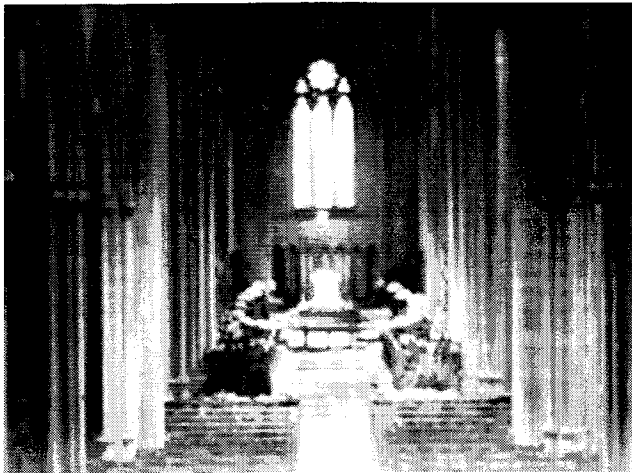


Fig. 2. Bryn Athyn Cathedral interior

rich in Swedenborgian symbolism as are the original Arts and Crafts homes surrounding it.

However, in recent years, this progressive, symbolically charged architectural language has begun to be diluted if not lost in Bryn Athyn. Economic as well as cultural changes within the Bryn Athyn Society have resulted in a non-cohesive, unrelated and symbolically void built environment. Consequently, the students' goal in this project was to help the residents of Bryn Athyn as believers in the Swedenborgian faith to recommit to an architectural and

urban heritage that embodied their sacred writings and celebrated their Cultural Identity.

In taking on this project, there were a variety of issues that needed to be addressed and were perhaps not present in other design studios we had taught in the past. These issues were primarily ethical, cultural, and formal.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Bringing religious writings into a state university was a risky venture. We were concerned that the students would reject the class as inappropriate to architectural education. But our stated premise was that we would ask the students merely to respect what they read with no obligation to believe it. Surprisingly, they showed little discomfort with the subject matter and a few seemed even to revel in the experience as it was the first time they were able to bring together a discussion about architecture and their life beyond the studio.

The studio often involved heated discussions of Swedenborgian scripture and what it meant. What did Heaven look like? What was the significance of the cube and what were the materials of in the third level of heaven? Were there shadows in Heaven? What about beds? And what is Conjugal Love? Do you really get to make love in heaven? For the uninitiated passerby, it was undoubtedly an odd conversation being had in a College of Architecture and a sometimes uncomfortable conversation for us to lead. Because we were reading the Writings along with the students, in many cases we questioned our own expertise. But when the questions got really tough, we had a Swedenborgian minister not only on call but at the other end our e-mail.

Yet regardless of their growing knowledge, we still had to overcome the students fear and conviction that they simply were not worthy of the task we proposed. How, they asked, could they possibly work with a new language that their clients had known in most cases, since birth? They worried about getting it wrong, or at worst, unintentionally insulting a member of the congregation with their naive attempts at using their sacred text for architectural expression. But the Director of Cathedral provided a reassuring voice, an understanding of the complexity of their task and a sense of humor that seemed to be shared by almost all the members of the community that the students encountered.

The students' sincerity in attempting to understand the Writings seemed to give them immunity for their missteps from the Swedenborgian community. Often the students initially misunderstood what they read and were gently corrected by church leaders. But is that not the role of the clergy? And therein lay the ethical dilemma. The line between religious teaching and architectural theory grew increasingly vague. The students did not seem to care or even notice. We faculty felt like we were skating on very thin ice. Thank God for tenure.

Our discomfort centered around a reoccurring question. Does the explicit exclusion of religious philosophy in archi-

tectural education reflect a real distinction in the world? We expose the students to a range of philosophical positions (modernism, Marxism, feminism, post modernism, classicism, deconstructivism to name a few) but rarely do we delve into areas based in religious philosophy. Is it just too personal? Or does architecture not have a soul? Is religion perceived by the academy to be anti-intellectual?

These questions challenged us throughout the semester. But they lessened in importance as the students work progressed seemingly unaffected by our pedagogical struggle. The inclusion of religious philosophy not only enhanced the students' work but their relationships with each other and with the community. We decided not to rock the boat since it was moving along so well.

CULTURAL ISSUES

The students had a mixed religious background. One was the son of a Methodist minister, one was an enthusiastic participant in a 12-step program, one was active in the Campus Crusade for Christ, another was raised a Mormon and another was a self declared agnostic. Initially, we thought the students would concentrate on the differences they discovered between themselves, their own experiences and those described by Swedenborg. Yet each student focused instead on commonalities.

Their acceptance of diversity (ie. live and let live, it's all the same God), while admirable, was not especially helpful in the design process at least not until the students were willing to delve further into the Writings, identify uniqueness and then celebrate it. Their "We are the World" attitude actually stood in the way of their learning. Acknowledgement of difference was not the root of prejudice, we taught, but rather a necessary beginning point.

FORMAL ISSUES

Coming through a curriculum with a pervasive modernist agenda, the students were very uncomfortable with the idea that form could communicate meaning. They had completed three years of their architectural education without considering the use of narrative as an acceptable design methodology. Architecture to them was about tectonics, composition, context, order and structure. We agreed that it was. But we hoped we could convince them that it might also be about something more.

For one semester, we asked the students to suspend their educated disbelief and consider the possibility and potential of narrative in their design process. Our ace in the hole were the readers in Bryn Athyn. If they could understand the students architectural language then we knew we would have a class full of converts. Not to Swedenborgianism but to an architectural theory richer than modernism.

THE DESIGN PROCESS

The students began with the design of a non site specific chapel as a means to explore Swedenborg's symbolic writings and their applicability to built form. Primary concepts embedded in Chapel proposals were based upon the following:

1. The Spiral Form

All natural forms have a spiritual correspondence. To Swedenborgians, the spiral represents the ultimate spiri-

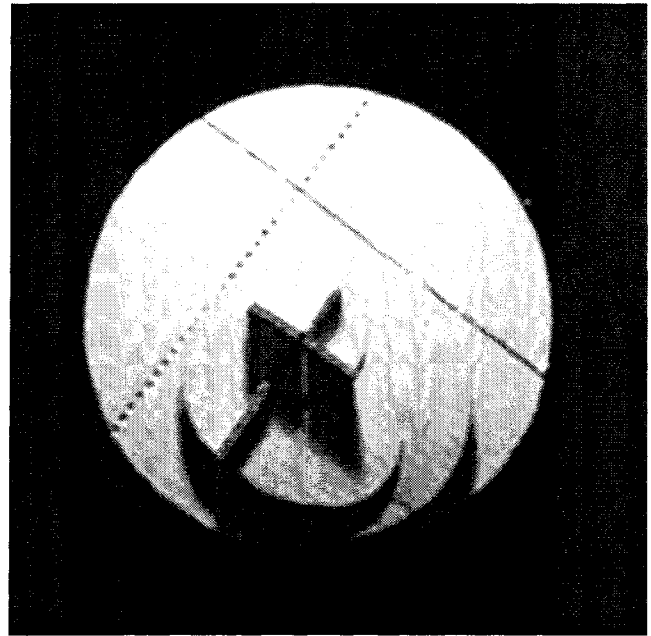


Fig. 3. Chapel Proposal

tual order. Therefore its use corresponds to a unique understanding of the cosmos.

2. Orientation relative to the Cardinal Points

All natural directions (North, South, East and West) correspond to spiritual affections and levels of truth.(2)

3. The Cube Form

The form of the cube is in reference to John's vision in the Bible of the heavenly city of the New Jerusalem coming down out of the sky. The city is said to have equal cubic dimensions and this concept represents spiritual principles of goods, truths, and honesty.

4. The Three Levels of Heaven

In Swedenborg's memorable relations he describes heaven as having an outward order of three levels: The Natural, The Spiritual, and The Celestial. These levels correspond to various degrees of wisdom in reference to the angels who occupy, work and live in these areas. Each of the three realms has a its own series of characteristics based on its forms, functions, and members in perspective of the overall panorama of heaven. The Natural Kingdom is the first level of heaven and is based on intense sensual feeling perceived through the five senses we humans have on

earth but of which are only partially aware. The second realm, the Spiritual Kingdom, is characterized by its overwhelming sense of community and neighborliness.

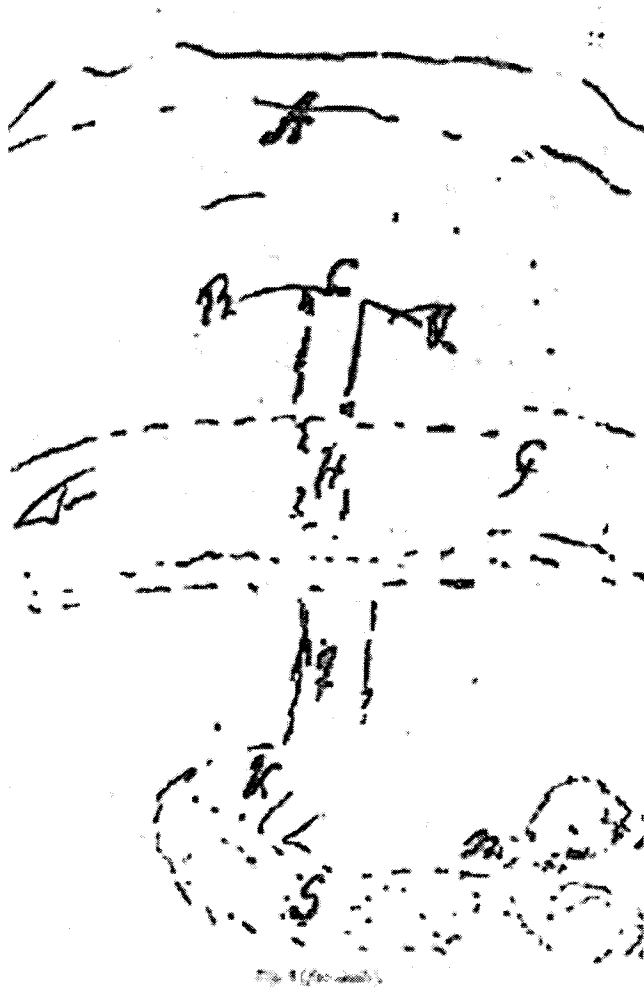


Fig. 4. Emanuel Swedenborg's drawing of the Three Levels of Heaven.

The Celestial Kingdom is the closest realm to the knowledge, understanding, and truth of what the higher being known as God really is. The Celestial Kingdom is the highest degree of the three heavens and therefore is characterized as the place in heaven for all members of heaven to aspire to be.

5. Conjugal Love

Swedenborgians believe in "Marriage Love" or "Conjugal Love" through eternity. The correspondence of a relationship between a man and a woman is that of Divine Love and Divine Wisdom as expressed in the Lord. Therefore this concept of Love is integral with a life of worship in the community.

NARRATIVE READABILITY

These chapel proposals were juried in the College and

then taken to Bryn Athyn and juried by the congregation. The reaction to the work from our colleagues was mixed and very vague. Students felt as if the professors at the University did not understand their work. The symbolic language the students attempted to incorporate was lost on the uninformed jurors who chose to disregard the readings the students cited and relied instead upon an architectural language born out of modernist theory. The faculty questioned if form could contain meaning and they were fairly sure that the ideas the students employed were unreadable.

In comparison, the Swedenborgian reviewers, some of whom were also architects, not only understood the proposals but were intrigued with their creativity and ingenuity. They understood the symbolic language employed by the students and encouraged them to further it. In many cases, the age difference between the student and the congregant exceeded 50 years, and yet, they shared a language articulated through architectural form. Interestingly, there was no rejection of the modernity of the proposals from the congregation. Instead, they celebrated yet another way in which their faith could be articulated.

URBANDESIGN

After the chapel presentation, the students began a site analysis of Bryn Athyn and began the master planning process. They toured the borough, some of the Arts and Crafts homes and the Cathedral to witness the architectural articulation of Swedenborg's Writings. The students' charge was to consider the same concepts that directed the design of their chapel proposals but at an urban design scale. While at the same time, we also asked them to delve even farther into some of the more challenging ideas that structure the Swedenborgian faith. These spiritual concepts included:

1. The Metaphor of the Grand Man.(3)

All of heaven and natural creation exists in a relationship similar to the body of man housing all of its various organs, parts and uses. All matter is related in both a physical and a symbolic way.

2. The Concept of Charity and Neighborliness.(4)

Swedenborgian writes that charity toward the neighbor extends beyond ones immediate environment. All aspects of life and use in the natural world are discussed with spiritual correspondences associated with actions.

3. The Doctrine of Good from Use.(5)

All humans achieve the process of regeneration through performing uses for society. It is the belief of Swedenborgians that through performing uses one is defining one's spiritual lives.

4. The Concept of Free Will.(6)

In order for what is good to be chosen, one must have available falsity as an type opposite. Swedenborgians believe that through Divine providence the Lord has allowed free will and choice to define their path of regeneration. The act of choosing codifies ones spiritual life.



Fig. 5. Bryn Athyn

These spiritual concepts led the students to strive towards:

1. A master plan that was a balance between the parts and the whole, the organs within the grand man, the interdependency of discreet parts.
2. The designation of distinct but interdependent organs of multiple but linked centers.
3. To accept a doctrine of mixed use.
4. To establish an order or fabric to the town. At present Bryn Athyn a collection of randomly sited buildings.
5. To yield to the Cathedral and relate to it as the most important element on the site.
6. To develop visual, pedestrian and vehicular linkages throughout the Burrough.
7. To cluster new development together to increase opportunities for the further formation of community and to preserve the open space that helps to give Bryn Athyn its unique character.

The master plan included the individual design of at least fifteen buildings and outdoor spaces.

The Cathedral and Grounds

The Cathedral and Grounds served as the physical and spiritual focal point of Bryn Athyn and of the students'

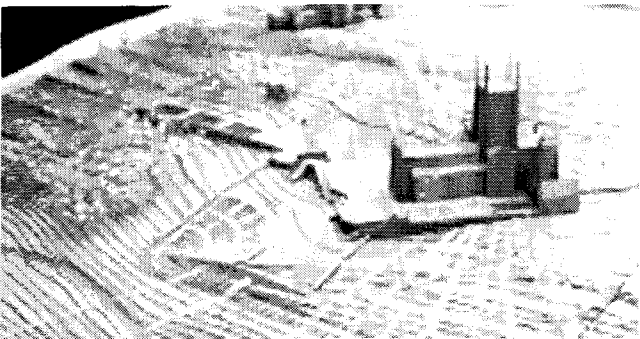


Fig. 6. Bryn Athyn Cathedral and Grounds

master plan. The master plan incorporated four primary view sheds that radiated on the cardinal points from the tower of the Cathedral. Since the second essential of the church is the holiness of the Word, and because the Cathedral is the holding vessel of the Word of the Lord, these channels symbolically carried the holiness of the Word into the community.

The Bryn Athyn Burrow Greenscape

The Bryn Athyn Burrow Greenscape sited adjacent to the Cathedral incorporated a design based on Swedenborg's vision of heaven from the Natural Kingdom to the Celestial Kingdom along the bank of a small, existing drainage channel. (6)

The Natural Kingdom was based on the concept of heightened sensual capability featuring an orange grove for smell, a drinking fountain for taste, an echo chamber for hearing, a landscaped funnel for sight and a children's playground featuring geometric volumes for touch. The area representing the Spiritual Kingdom was divided into three parts by pathways and retaining walls based on Swedenborg's hierarchy of member understanding. Between these retaining walls were open green spaces with well-groomed lawns. The area representing the Celestial Kingdom was designed as an outdoor chapel in the shape of a foursquare sited in the naturally rolling topography per Swedenborg's description of the highest heaven.(6)

Visitor Housing

Visitor Housing was located adjacent to the Greenscape and designed as representative of the World of Spirits, the point from which the prepared spirit departs into the various realms of heaven (or hell), or in this case, from which visitors disperse into the community. The Inn is a series of twelve towers or pillars upon an articulated foundation. This foundation signifies the truth on which heaven, the Church, and Doctrine are founded. The pillars are inhabitable sculpture recognizing the importance the community places upon the intellectual and artistic endeavors as well as reflections of Swedenborg's description of heavenly structures.(7)

The pillars, being the truths that support the Church, are single dwelling units based on the three states of man after death. As individual domiciles, they convey the doctrine of free will - that each person decides his own spiritual destination. Programmatically, the spaces within each pillar rise from entry and kitchen, to bath, to sitting room, through sleeping chambers, and terminating in a study. This vertical ascension transpires through man's exteriors (the means by which he adapts to fellowship with others), to his interiors (the state at which he is let into the interiors of his mind, will and thought, and exteriors are laid to sleep), and ends in preparation (the state of instruction, where truth learned from the Word and the Doctrine of the Church exists). On the exterior of the pillars, the cladding treatment transforms vertically from opaque, rough stonework with only a few punched openings, to transparent glass that exposes the interior structure of steel ribbing.

The natural topography of the site further lent itself to the description and articulation of the World of Spirits. Created to represent the idea of the paradisaical labyrinth that exists as the entrance to heaven, the landscape is shaped into multiple tiers and levels traversed by stairways and ramps. The stairs represent the extremity of the reach from earth to heaven and the communication of the lowest truths to that of the highest. (8)

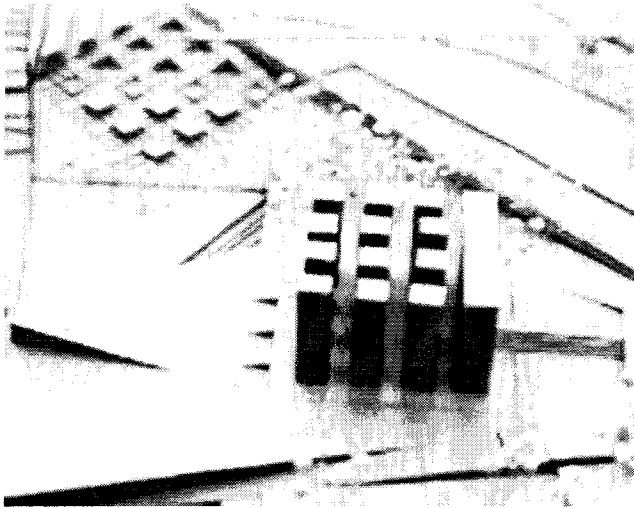


Fig. 7. Bryn Athyn Visitor Housing

The Town Center

The Town Center was designed with the metaphor of the Grand Man guiding the development of the buildings both individually and contextually. The doctrine of charity, i.e. usefulness, led to a tenet of multi functionality. Swedenborg referred to the town center as the breast of the body of man. Therefore it was sited as a functionally centralized organ, integrally connected to many, if not all of, the other organs. The Town Center included a much needed retail corridor lined with street trees and street lamps sited in groups of seven.(9)

The High School Athletic Stadium

The High School Athletic Stadium was sited as the centerpiece in the secondary view shed radiating out from the cathedral and designed to promote charity and neighborliness. To promote community "home and away" seating was eliminated, combining both to one side. (10)

The layout of the stadium building was derived from the dimensions and regulating lines that govern the playing field. The smallest increment of measurement on the field was one yard, which is roughly the amount of space required to comfortably accommodate one spectator. Each spectator was then perceived to be an organ in the Grand Man. As each spectator took their respective seats, the Grand Man would become complete.(11)

Academy Row Housing

Academy Row Housing was designed as an interpretation of the meaning Swedenborg attached to the cardinal points. The north facade of the units was less open and represented ignorance and darkness. The east facade had a patio that faced a private yard and represented love and the infinite extension of good. The south facade had many windows to allow light inside and represented the light of intelligence and wisdom. (12)

Mixed Use Neighborhood

The Row Housing terminated in a Mixed Use Neighborhood of faculty and student housing, a home for the College Chaplin, classrooms, and college offices all located around a grassy circle. The form of the circle is repeatedly referred to in the Writings as the shape of a notable place or as a means to communication.(13)

Fig. 8. Bryn Athyn Row Housing

CONCLUSION

The master plan for Bryn Athyn was presented to the College in December of 1998 in the form of a multi-media presentation that centered upon a 30 scale model of the borough that measured 8feet x 10feet. However, this time we attempted to better prepare the jury in the college. We gave our colleagues a small packet of Swedenborgian reading material several weeks in advance of the jury and strongly urged them to familiarize themselves with it. We also brought in faculty members from the Swedenborgian Academy and two Swedenborgian architects to sit along side the three architects from the College's faculty. At best, the jury was anti-climatic. The discussion was no longer about the specific narratives employed, but whether or not they were readable by a community. The in house faculty implied that they were not. Our visitors felt otherwise.

We presented the master plan to the Bryn Athyn congregation the following February in the same manner. The response was enthusiastic and supportive. The reaction from the community was two-fold. First, members of the church reflected upon how we outsiders had given them an appreciation of the depth and breadth to which their faith could be practiced. Secondly, we were told that the students' work reawakened in the Burroughs residents a desire to celebrate their faith in the design of their homes and neighborhoods, especially now that they had seen by example how it could be done.

The juxtaposition of the two juries highlighted for us the difficulty of teaching transcultural design in a college environment. In our program, faculty are expected to participate in each other's studios. But most do so off the cuff, responding to students work from their own personal perspectives. In a transcultural design process where all personal interests and agendas must be questioned, it makes for an uncomfortable situation. Students have cultural knowledge that faculty from outside the studio lack and they are not always skilled in communicating it. Consequently, the generic criticism the students receive from those faculty members is often ill conceived and inappropriate to the task at hand.

Still, the value of a Transcultural Field Study was of great value to the students. In this experimental environment the architectural education of the students evolved into a fuller understanding of methods to introduce new ideas into form, tolerance of cross-cultural and religious beliefs systems, and more integrally, how one works within the system of design to incorporate various personal beliefs.

NOTES

1. ACSA Call For Papers, October 1999.
 2. "In the Word, the "north," "south," "east," and "west," has each its own signification. The "north" signifies those who are out of the church, namely, those who are in darkness as regards the truths of faith; and it also signifies the darkness in man. But the "south" signifies those who are within the church, that is, who are in the light as regards knowledge; and it likewise signifies the light itself. The "east" signifies those who lived previously; and it also signifies celestial love, as before shown. But the "west" signifies those who are to come, and in like manner those who are not in love." Academy of The New Church Theological School. *New Search-Compiled Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, The Stairs Project (CD-Rom)1998.*
 3. "...although man, as we know, consists of an innumerable variety of parts, not only as a whole but also in each part-as a whole, of members, organs, and viscera; and in each part, of series of fibers, nerves, and blood-vessels, thus of members within members, and of parts within parts-nevertheless, when he acts he acts as a single man." Academy of The New Church Theological School. *New Search-Compiled Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, The Stairs Project (CD-Rom)1998.*
- "A community on earth appears before the angels in heaven in like manner as one human being." Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Charity, the Practice of Neighborliness.* Westchester: Swedenborg Foundation, Inc.,1995.
4. "All are neighbor in a restricted or a wide sense." Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Charity, the Practice of Neighborliness.* Westchester: Swedenborg Foundation, Inc.,1995.
 5. "From these arises the general good; and yet it does not come of these themselves, but from the individuals there, and through the goods of use which the individual performs." Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Charity, the Practice of Neighborliness.* Westchester: Swedenborg Foundation, Inc.,1995.
 6. "Since everyone in the spiritual world enters and walks in ways that lead to those who are in a like ruling love, and everyone is free to go anyway he wishes, thus into and by anyway that his love leads him, and these ways to the right or to the left tend to one love or another, thus to the love that has become ingrafted, so "right and left" signifies pleasantly, freely, and of choice." Swedenborg, Emanuel. *The Apocalypse Explained.* Westchester: Swedenborg Foundation, Inc.,1995.
 8. "I was led by the Lord to a perception of forms the notion of which far surpassed the notions received by geometrical things". Academy of The New Church Theological School. *New Search-Compiled Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, The Stairs Project (CD-Rom)1998.*
 7. "The dwellings of the blessed in the other life are of many kinds, and are constructed with such art as to be as it were embodiments of the very art of architecture or to come straight from the art itself." Academy of The New Church Theological School. *New Search-Compiled Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, The Stairs Project (CD-Rom)1998.*
 7. "a long blue interstitial thread and a procession from truth in the ultimate to interior truth and good." Academy of The New Church Theological School. *New Search-Compiled Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, The Stairs Project (CD-Rom)1998.*
 8. "The World of Spirits appears like a valley between mountains and rocks, with windings and elevations here and there. The gates and doors of the heavenly societies are visible only to those who are prepared for heaven; others cannot find them. There is one entrance from the world of spirits to each heavenly society, opening through a single path which branches out in its ascent into several." Academy of The New Church Theological School. *New Search-Compiled Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, The Stairs Project (CD-Rom)1998.*
 9. "Money and trade themselves are but vehicles for the common good," and "In the midst of the street of it and of the river, on this side and on that, was the tree of life, bearing twelve fruits." Rev. xxii, 2 and "And the seven lamp stands which thou sawest are the seven churches, signifies the New Church upon earth, which is the New Jerusalem descending from the Lord out of the New Heaven." Academy of The New Church Theological School. *New Search-Compiled Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, The Stairs Project (CD-Rom)1998.*
 10. "In a community in heaven, all know one another and are associated because they are in similar good." Academy of The New Church Theological School. *New Search-Compiled Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, The Stairs Project (CD-Rom)1998.*
 11. "But when a whole exists from various parts, and the various parts are in a perfect form, in which each attaches itself like a congenial friend to another in series, then the quality is perfect. So heaven is a whole from various parts arranged in a most perfect form, for the heavenly form is the most perfect of all forms." Academy of The New Church Theological School. *New Search-Compiled Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, The Stairs Project (CD-Rom)1998.*
 12. "A quadrangle," or "a square," signifies what is just because it has four sides, and the four sides look towards the four quarters, and to look equally towards the four quarters, is to respect all things from justice." Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Conjugal Love.* New York: Swedenborg Foundation, Inc.,1954.
 13. "In the middle of the garden was a grassy circle on which husbands and wives and young men and maidens were sitting in pairs; and on a raised ground in the centre of the circle was a small fountain leaping high by reason of the force of its stream." Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Conjugal Love.* New York: Swedenborg Foundation, Inc.,1954.
- "From all this it is evident by what a circle communications are effected—from will into thought, and so into speech; and from speech through the ear into another's thought and will." Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia, The Heavenly Arcana.* New York: Swedenborg Foundation, Inc.,1984.