



*Increasing evidence is pointing towards existence of a magnetic standing-wave life-force energy realm underlying our physical world. The imagery of artists like Helen Hill is giving us a sense of the nature of that world.*

# SACRED ART, SACRED SPACE

Tom Bender

© 27 March 06

Our culture has moved into a new realm.

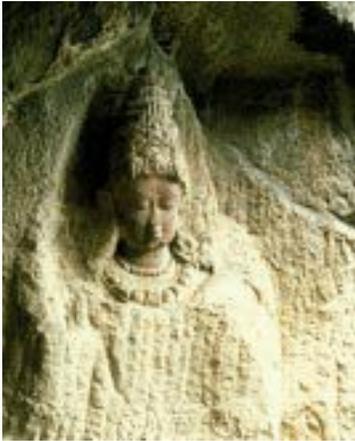
Direct experience of the sacred in myriad forms has broken through religious traditions that have outlawed it since the days of the Roman Empire. Our physics has been forced to acknowledge instantaneous communication, and thus consciousness, throughout all levels of Creation. The falseness that was the economic heart of our culture has exposed itself, and we are beginning to restructure our lives based on deeper and more rewarding goals.

Reconnecting with the oneness of Creation, we are finding new purpose, new meaning, and new richness in our lives. Through it, we are beginning to transform our culture into one able to sustain and support the well-being of all life. This is enabling us to reopen our hearts – long closed off from the pain an exploitive society caused us, others, and all life.

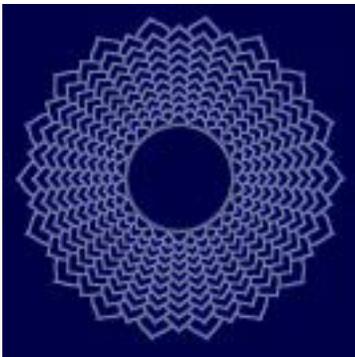
As we begin to connect in humility rather than arrogance with the deeper traditions of other cultures, we are finding with joy that art and architecture can fill a profoundly different role than in a culture of material growth and greed. What occurs as we shape our surroundings is vastly different in a sacred culture.

## ***The World of Sacred Art***

All art changes dramatically as we move into this deeper realm. The sacred, we are rediscovering, is a vital part of everyday life. It is not a once-a-week kind of thing. It underlies, but is distinct from, religious expressions of the sacred – which often tend to separate us from others with different traditions, and from personal experience of the sacred.



“Form is never valued for its own sake, but only so far as it serves to provide experience of religious or metaphysical truth. What is sought in form is an indwelling presence, the “soul” imprisoned in the material.” – Madhu Khanna, in YANTRA



The sacred emerges simply in our lives. Whenever we allow ourselves to know someplace, someone, or something intimately, we come to love them. We see among their inevitable warts and wrinkles the special and wonderful things that they are, and their existence becomes as precious to us as our own. Loving them, we come to hold their existence inviolate - or sacred - and any action which would harm them becomes inconceivable. Loving them, we open our hearts. And in that open heart we discover the oneness of all creation. Openness, intimacy, knowledge, and love are the essential foundations upon which any healthy existence and any true sustainability must be built.

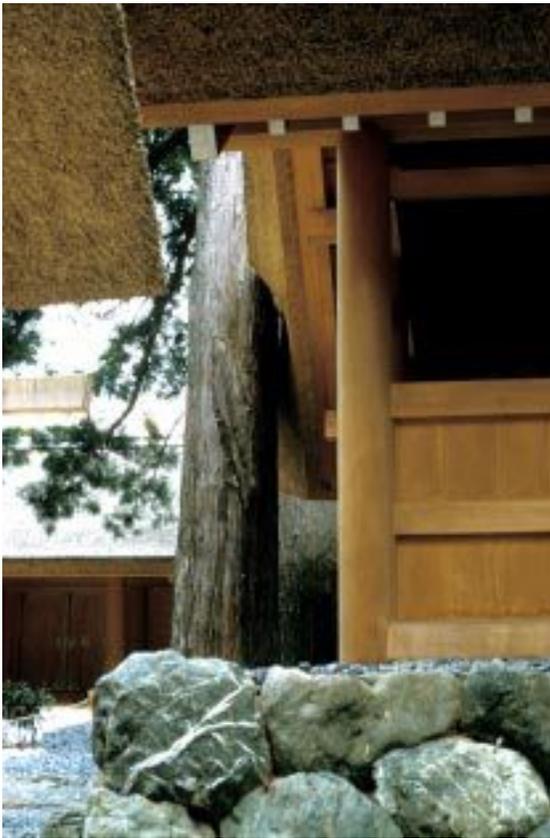


The purpose of sacred art is to bridge between our finite world and the infinite - to activate and carry us into that realm, and to help us understand the dance of creation in the realms of spirit. It is an avenue through which to connect with wondrous unknown things, and to transform our own souls. Its goal is revelation.

Its use of form arises from *inner* sources, and deals with revealing the inner nature of phenomena. In it, form or design is merely circumstantial and valued only as it provides experience of spiritual truth that can be confirmed in direct personal experience of others. It can provide that experience only if the artist has experienced it in the process of creating the work of art. What is sought in sacred art is a presence of the source of creation – the soul immanent within the experience.

The outer product, as in Navajo sand painting, Tibetan sand mandalas, or Inuit scrimshaw, is often only by-product – forgotten, discarded, or carefully erased after the process of creation in communion with the sacred. The true goal is the *inner* product – the transformative re-experiencing of the oneness of all creation, and the specific accessing of healing, understanding, and





*The Ise Shrine structures alternate sites every 20 years, while maintaining their role as connector to the spirit realms through the cycles of ritual and empowerment through consecration.*

*To an outside observer, the Bushman women's dance gives little evidence of trance activity or of what is occurring simultaneously in the spirit realm and in the dance in the village.*



personal growth that occurs in the process. The outer product is a record of, and sometimes a vehicle for that experience, and at times a means that can assist others with the same process.

This is true architecturally as well. Temples in certain Indian traditions were left untouched once built, to return to dust in their own time, allowing new opportunity for the creative process. The Ise Shrines in Japan are built with relatively impermanent techniques. For more than 1000 years, they have been built, consecrated, left untouched for 20 years, then rebuilt and reconsecrated again and again on alternate sites. The importance, in this case, lies in the cyclic ritual process of continual reinvigoration of the skills, patronage, and rituals of honoring the forests, trees, tools, and expertise through which the building arts continue to give to the sacred.

As a transformative process, sacred art acts as a vehicle for the individual to process what the universal consciousness has brought to the canvas with the guidance of spirit. When the product *is* kept or sought, it is as a benchmark for developing deeper expression of skills, as a reminder and celebration of what we can achieve, for use as an offering, or as an energetic-based element in creating a specifically functioning sacred portal.

Sacred art cannot be meaningfully evaluated from outside. It requires participatory experience to even be aware of the realms within which it is operating. This does not preclude objective evaluation of what is experienced, but gives an essential experiential basis from which to understand.

As Brad Keeney, who has trance-danced with the Bushman for the last ten years, has indicated, an unexperienced outside observer has *no* means of comprehending what is occurring in the process. Not knowing that American Indian "shuffle-dancing" or Sufi dancing can be trance-dancing with the ancestors, or that the Maya and Bushman community trance rituals actually *do* bring the spirits and the ancestors from the spirit world into their

village ceremonies leaves us tragically blind to the functions of their art, dance, architecture and music. We need to experience such ways of connecting with the spirit realms in order to have any concept what it is like to live *in spirit*.

### ***Sacred Art***

As we regain understanding of the interconnection of life-force energy and the sacred, and the role of arts in those realms, we are no longer dependent on artistic concepts limited to materialistic cultures. In sacred art, many of our familiar concepts are transformed. Beauty, for example, becomes an offering to spirit, a vehicle for opening our hearts, and a way of knowing truth – a special harmony and synchronicity within the oneness of spirit. Within beauty, recognition of truth on a deep level is possible.

But this beauty is not the predictable harmony tying to past conditions. It cannot, and does not, relate to artistic conventions, principles, fads, or historical styles. Those are all related to the familiar. Visual beauty is of outer appearances, whose imitation lacks the inner empowerment and manifesting energy which gives power to creation.

The deeper essence of beauty is perception of living truth as an ongoing process of unfathomable creation. This is the beauty of inner purpose, coherence, and joyful existence that emerges, to our amazement, as we get to know new and unfamiliar things. It is a beauty that deepens through unceasing rediscovery, and opens an intimacy among all that it touches.

This beauty is a measure of love.  
And love is the root force in the manifestation of life.

This beauty is not something intentionally creatable.  
It is a gift of spirit to an open heart.

### ***Manifesting Inner Realms***

The art of the Shipibo-Conibo and Tukano tribes in the upper Amazon Basin suggests that art in a culture based in the sacred fulfills a far different role from our culture's recent experience of art. Even though the Shipibo once covered everything – buildings, bodies, and bowls – with geometric designs, their art is not a decorative one. Their experience of the spirit world is daily, direct, and replicable.

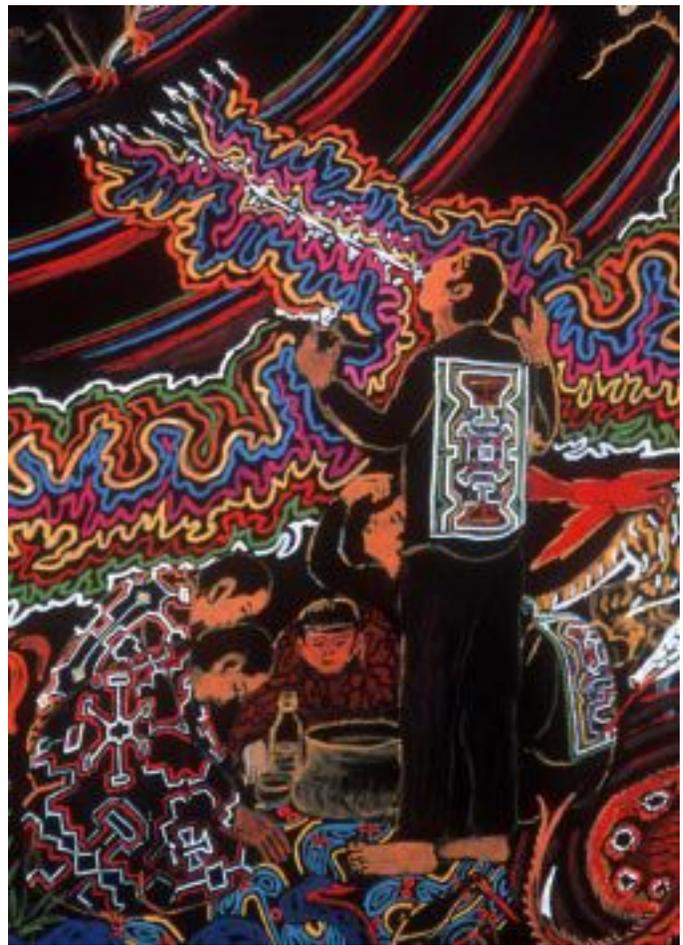
*The patterns on Shipibo men's ceremonial wear, and geometric face painting for healing ceremonies have been brought back from direct experience of the spirit world as active linkage to powerful forces active there.*



Their geometries come from their spiritual visions, and have specific and significant meaning and power.

Covering the outer surfaces of their bodies and their material surroundings with the geometries is not “decoration” but bringing them into congruence with actual experience of their deeper nature in the energetic realms. The paintings of contemporary ayahuasca shaman Pablo Amaringo is not fantasy creation, but detailed recording of shared community experiences in visions. Other villagers would stop by and comment on one thing or another in the paintings, and say, “Oh, yes, I remember seeing that!”

The Shipibo have staunchly held to the importance of their geometry through 400 years of cultural suppression, asserting it has a vital role in understanding the emergence of our material world from the realms of energy. Even their village circle-dances generate the same distinctive geometries as their feet trace a pattern in the



sand. Shipibo geometric face painting is also an active element in healing. And, as in virtually all traditional cultures, their ornamentation of physical spaces and objects is an active element in empowering them and allowing them to activate specific connections and access to the spirit realms.

Similarly, the “decorative motifs” of the beautifully painted clan dwellings of the Tukano Indians have been laboriously copied and intellectually debated by archeologists and art historians. To date, however, they seem to have missed the main point – that the motifs are not artistically created but are recording and affirmation of what they have experienced in the spirit realms. As always, we can only grasp a fragment of those realms, fragments shaped and colored by our particular personal and cultural perceptions. They are, however, a vital dimension of existence from which our culture had closed itself off.

# TO LIVE IN SPIRIT

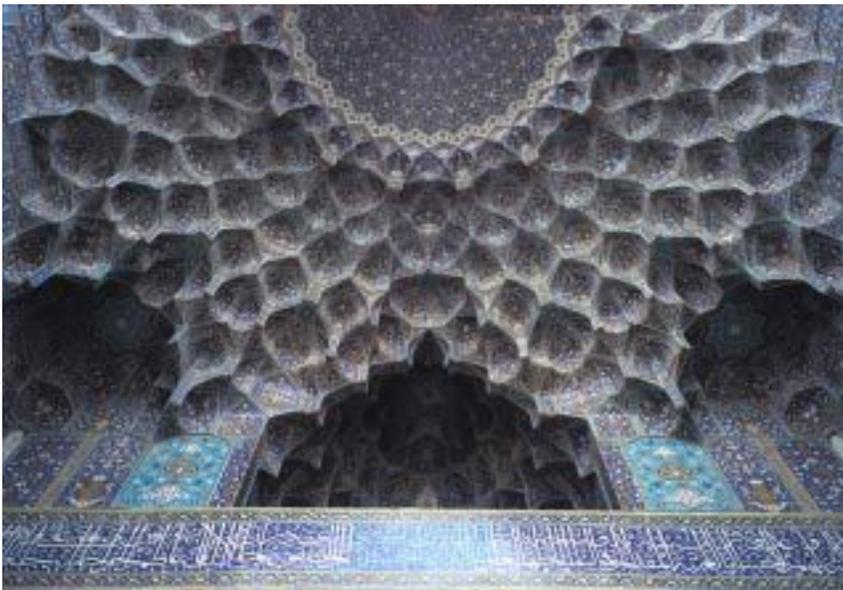
## *The Music of Creation*

Beginning to live in these new realms gives new perspectives on our older patterns. For me, it has included losing interest in European classical music. Part is hearing the same music repeated for the thousandth time. But it now feels odd to me that musicians prefer to repeat the music of composers from another time rather than to create anew from the wonder of the present moment. I'm now surprised that they are unable to tune in to each other and the flow of the music psychically, and have to pay a conductor to keep themselves in lockstep. I'm saddened that this world is divided into performers and audience, and that they are unable together to weave the dance of energy that is the heart of *making* music. With fixed compositions, there are "right" ways to play the music. And failure to "do it right", or as well as someone else, is a characteristic experience of most musicians. This is a sad contrast with the wonderful creative feeling of being entrained by music and experience of the creative dance as it evolves amongst those taking part. There are profound depths to all of our arts that have been sacrificed by the orientation of our culture.

## *The Creating of Openness*

In discussing pottery-making in the Dagara tribe, Malidoma Somé talks about more rewarding alternatives to our working to get money to satisfy our wants. Most work in the Dagara village is done collectively. The purpose is not so much the desire to get the job done but *to raise enough energy* for people to *feel nourished by what they do*. The nourishment does not come *after* the job. It comes *before* the job and *during* the job. "We are nourished first," he says, "and then the work flows out of our fullness."

The indigenous notion of abundance that underlies such work practices is very different from that in the West. Villagers are interested not in accumulation but in a sense of *fullness*. Abundance, in that sense of fullness, has a power that takes us away from the worry characteristic of lives in our culture. So even the process associated with the making of art is profoundly different.



*"Whereas in the West, architecture seemed to be primarily a business phenomenon, or at times a means of solving social needs, here was a view of architecture and the arts as a transformative, personal, transcendent act."*

– Nader Ardalan

## *Sacred Space, Sacred Place*

Sacred space is an energetic, not material, phenomenon. It is a place of linkage between our material world and the world of spirit. It may have material attributes which we see as sacred places, or it may exist almost entirely on an energetic level. Conditions of physical space, and energetic dimensions attached to physical space or symbols may influence and call into being sacred space, but the material is not the primary operational level. The *energetic* or spirit realm is the operational level of our universe, where things manifest into material existence, where our eternal energy selves exist, and where we connect directly with other life and other existence.



*Japanese temple guardians are fierce as protectors of those who enter the temple precincts.*

Sacred space is where we feel physically safe from disruption during deep process, and psychically safe for the vulnerable process of opening our chakras and psychic portals to connect intimately to others or to the realms of spirit. It is a place constituted to enable connection with the realms of spirit.

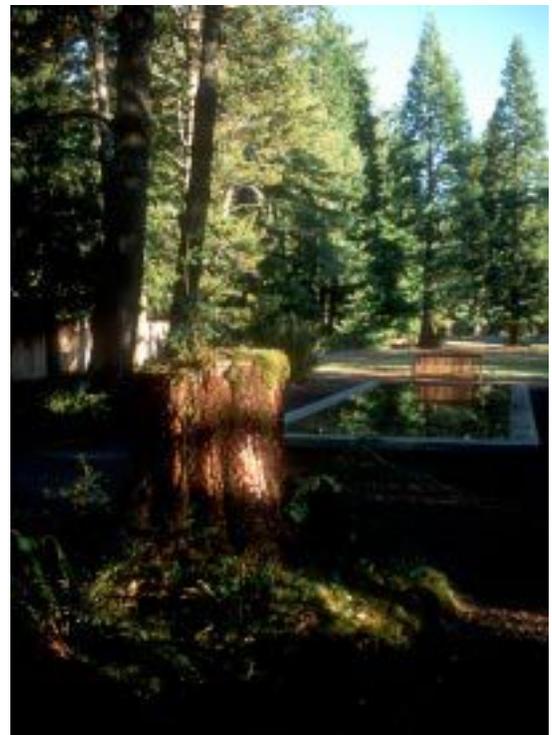
The presence of protective and enabling forces from the spirit world – either already present in special places in the natural world or consciously called into residence in created spaces – can offer both security and assistance in making desired contacts. It is no accident that Medieval cathedrals in Europe were built on ancient sacred sites, or that the Spanish repeatedly built churches and monasteries atop the massive walls of Incan temples.

Over the last 25 years, we have rediscovered that we *can* create sacred places – places with souls – and how to do so. We can again create places that move our hearts when we enter them, which give us peace and nurture, and which continue to unfold and enrich our lives the more we are part of them. When all the pieces are right, everyone who goes into such places breathes a sigh of relief. Their legs get rubbery and they want to sit and soak in the energy.

Such places are filled with a deeply powerful stillness. They act as energized portals to connect us to the rest of Creation. They nurture us, and our institutions with the breath of life, with the strength of truth. They inform our sciences, and help us transform knowledge to wisdom.

Architectural design in a culture aware of the role of life-force energy fulfills a different role, and holds a different focus than one in a materialistic culture. It focuses on place, not space – as it extends far beyond a space-time realm. It focuses on relationships, rather than structure, as interconnectedness, not rigidity is paramount. It focuses on meaning instead of esthetics, as inner rather than surface characteristics are of central value. The “design principles” architecture has recently focused on are unique to a material-centered culture, and are subsumed by higher priority needs in an energetically-based society.

*The theme of this church memorial garden is that death is the compost out of which richer life emerges. Its image is a nurselog, out of which a new sapling has taken root. The names of the deceased are seen in the bottom of the reflecting pool – visible within the reflections of sky and trees.*





*In an energy-based culture, co-creation with other consciousness becomes a powerful process of design, bringing energy and rightness into a place beyond what we can consciously conceive. Here, the design was shifted into an “inner” focus rather than looking out into a garden – more powerful for meditation.*

*A font formed from a 4000 pound single crystal of columnar basalt energetically creates a gateway into sacred space leading both into the sanctuary and to a sacred garden.*



Learning to set aside our rational compulsions and tap into our shared universal consciousness brings new tools to help discriminate what material possessions help to attain our goals and what distracts from and inhibits our highest goals. It helps us design with respect for the needs and aspirations of *all* Creation. And it helps us deal with the silences and absences in the places we create – death, illness, age, equity, fairness, the sacred, sustainability – the things our culture hasn’t wanted to acknowledge or deal with, but which contribute vital elements to the (w)holiness of the places we make.

### ***Intention***

I’ve discussed details of creating sacred places elsewhere, so will just touch on a few of the important concepts here. One of the most important aspects of sacred design or sacred art is *intention*. All that we touch is like a mirror, reflecting back to us the intention that has gone into its making and use. If made from greed, if made to deceive, it conveys that. If created from a meanness of soul or smallness of spirit, it surrounds us with that essence. If made with love, with generosity, with honoring of all life, it supports and evokes the same intentions in our own lives and communities.

Clarity, strength, and rightness of intention also bring life force energy, or qi, into a place, a painting, or an object, with its ability to nurture our lives. The nature of our intention – whether in making or using a place – reflects that same energy back into our own lives, enhancing or weakening our own energy.

### *Qi Energy*

气

*Qi*, or life force energy, is a central part of the soul of place and art that we are rediscovering today. The Maya say that there is life force in everything, but that *we* have to imbue the things *we* create with that energy. Combined with intention, life force energy forms the template upon which our material world takes shape in its wonderful complexity. It is vital to supporting our physical as well as emotional and spiritual health. It is blocked by artificial building materials, intensive use of electromagnetic devices, and cultural practices based on taking from others.

We can locate our buildings on good natural concentrations of qi. Qi energy can also be called directly into a place, enhanced, and worked with by individual intention and group ritual. It forms the glue which keeps a community healthy. We're discovering the connections with the spirit world inherent in an energy-based world, and how places can be made specifically to work with individual and community chi and to act as access points to the spirit world.



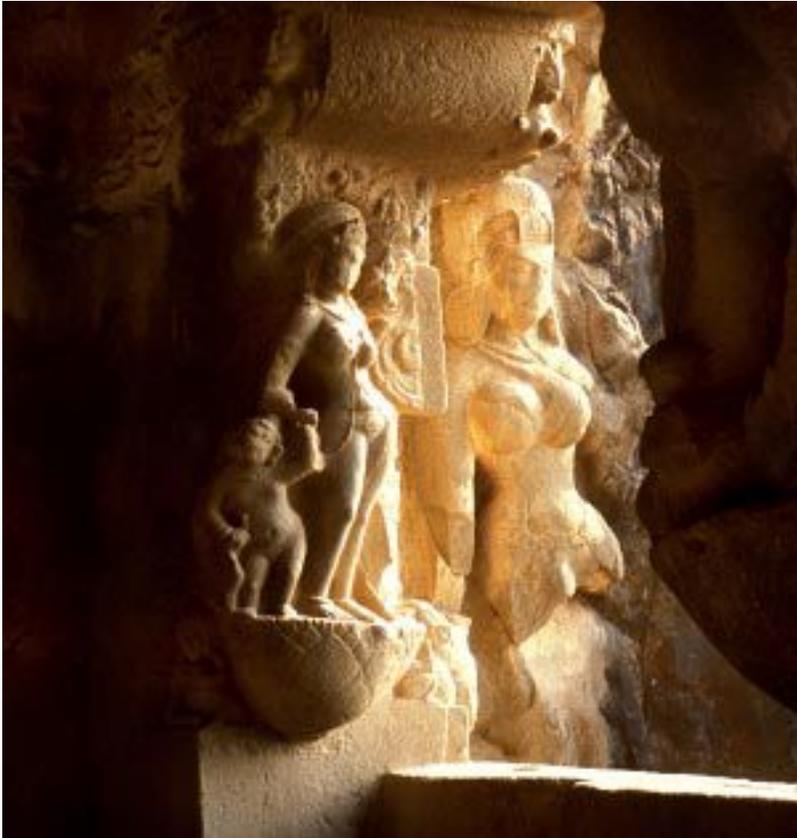
*Intention does not always require “doing” something in order to manifest. The invisible “non-action” of allowing other life to continue undisturbed is a particularly powerful response to our recent human-centeredness.*



*Even institutional structures such as banks can be energized when we touch into the original heart of the institution – in that case as a means for a community to prioritize the manifesting of dreams.*

## *Diseases of the Spirit*

The truly rampant diseases in our materialistic culture were not of the body, but *diseases of the spirit*. They arose from lack of self-esteem and mutual respect, being of value to our community, or finding meaning in our lives. They found expression in rape, substance abuse, addictions, violence, crime, obesity, isolation, depression and despair – things possible in any culture, overpowering in ours. They arose from the root violence of our deepest cultural values – our separation from the love of others caused by denying existence of the spirit world.



*Communities based in the sacred give nourishment, meaning, and fullness to our lives that has been absent in a world shut off from the innate connectedness that exists among all life.*

surroundings - to celebrate the rain, the winter, the night, the heat - and find ways to live comfortably in joyful harmony with them.

We need places we can love, and enjoy, and about which we can be fervent. We are rediscovering how our communities can raise our passions, move our hearts, and open our love. That is the sustaining force of life. When our communities nurture our souls, we will want them to endure. With that love, we will seek and assure the changes in institutions, infrastructure, land use, building practices and patterns of living essential to that survival.

Healing those diseases of the spirit requires that we give primacy to the emotional and spiritual well-being of all. In our surroundings this requires the honoring of the materials, the elements and forces of nature, the rhythms and cycles of life. It requires limiting our wants to ensure the fulfillment of other forms of life. These are all possibilities inherent in building, done with reverence, which comes from love, which comes from intimacy.

## *Love*

Our places need to convey a spirit of greatness and generosity in our hearts – of celebration of the universe we inhabit and co-create, and of our connections throughout it. We need homes for our spirits as well as our bodies. We need to express the special spirit of place and time in our



## *Giving*

The act of *giving* is a powerfully transformative deed. Expressed in our surroundings and our art, it becomes the embodiment of soul needed for sustainability as individuals and as a culture. Building that lasts beyond our lives can become gifts to succeeding generations. Providing habitat for birds, spiders, bats, and butterflies; restoring creeks and watersheds, providing wildlife migration routes, are all forms of giving.

## *Ecstasy*

Emotion, ecstasy, and primal presence are elements of, and also doorways into, the sacred. Energy rides emotion. Art arising from, and conveying, deep emotion moves life-force energy, and opens connection with the sacred. Connection with the sacred in turn *creates* ecstatic experience, moves energy, and opens our hearts even further. This is the core and importance of direct personal experience of the sacred, and the empowering role of truly sacred forms of art.

This is, indeed, a new realm  
we are entering!



*Sculpture in the cave temples of Ellora, India, give powerful connection to the sacred. Special geometries, coherence of the rock, tantric trance-work, ritual empowerment with life-force energy and other techniques work together to give them this capability.*

## ***Further Reading on Creating Sacred Places:***

- SILENCE, SONG & SHADOWS, Fire River Press, 2000. Our need for the sacred in our surroundings.  
BUILDING WITH THE BREATH OF LIFE, Fire River Press, 2000. Details of working with chi energy in design.  
THE CAVE TEMPLES OF INDIA, DVD and video, Fire River Press, 2004.  
THE PHYSICS OF QI, DVD and video, Fire River Press, 2006.  
“Cities of Passion, Cities of Life,” 1993. “Ending the Silences: Changing Community Chi,” 1998. “In Beauty We Walk,” 1992.  
“It Gets Even Stranger From Here On,” Building With Nature #19, 1998. “Our Need for the Sacred in Our Surroundings,” 1999.  
“Shedding A Skin That No Longer Fits,” In Context #44, 1996. “The Sacred Roots of Sustainable Design,” 1995.  
“The Spiritual Heart of Sustainable Communities,” In Context #44, 1996. “Towards a Sacred Society,” Urban Ecologist, 1993.

## ***Further Reading on Related Topics:***

- AYAHUASCA VISIONS, Pablo Amaringo and Luis Eduardo Luna. North Atlantic Books, 1990.  
BUILDING ARCHITECTURE OF STHAPATA VEDA, Dr. V. Ganapati Sthapati. Dakshinaa Publishing House, 2001.  
“The Geometric Designs of the Shipibo-Conibo in Ritual Context,” Angelika Gebhart-Sayer. J. of Latin American Lore, 1985.  
OF WATER AND SPIRIT, Malidoma Somé. Tarcher/Putnam, 1994.  
PRINCIPLES OF COMPOSITION IN HINDU SCULPTURE, Alice Boner. E. J. Brill, 1962.  
ROPES TO GOD, Brad Keeney. Ringing Rocks Foundation, 2003.  
SCIENCE AND HUMAN TRANSFORMATION, and CONSCIOUS ACTS OF CREATION, Wm. Tiller et al. Pavior, 1997 and 2001.  
SPIRITWALKER, 1995; MEDICINEMAKER, 1998; VISIONSEEKER, 2001. Hank Wesselman.  
TANTRA: THE CULT OF THE FEMININE, Andre Van Lysebeth. Weiser, 1995.  
THE SPONTANEOUS FULFILLMENT OF DESIRE, Deepak Chopra, 2003.  
YANTRA, Madhu Khanna. Inner Traditions, 1979, 2003.