

# Primal Symbols In Sacred Spaces

BY BARBARA HOWINGTON

**C**LEAR WATER SPILLS quietly from a fountain. Flickering candles softly illuminate the darkness. Early morning sunlight pours in through a window and illuminates the room. These primal symbols—water, fire, and light— are meaningful to most religions. In moments of prayer and worship, they lift us out of the normal and into the sacred. For architect Shelly Hyndman, primal symbols can mean the difference between a church that is just a building and one that conveys a sense of sacred mystery.

“Primal symbols are timeless representations of God the creator. They’ve been used for thousands of years in religious ceremonies of all kinds. Water, fire, and light speak to us within our core,” says Hyndman, a principal of Hyndman & Hyndman Architects in Cardiff by the Sea, California. In her more than 20 years as an architect, she has designed at least 40 churches. Rich in possibilities for spiritual expression, churches are her favorite projects. “People are giving their hard-earned money to build something because of their love of God and they really care about it.”

Hyndman has found that although water, fire, and light are used universally in religious rites, primal symbols are not always designed into a church. Hyndman embraces symbols in her approach, searching for opportunities to enrich a church’s sense of spirituality and mystery, inside and outside the sanctuary. She takes a holistic view of the entire church campus, designing beyond the four walls of the church and extending her design boundaries to the very edges of the property.

“Primal symbols can be used in so many ways to enhance the sense

of sacred mystery. For example, abundant water is rich in symbolism. It’s a life-giving symbol that can be used ceremonially inside the sanctuary and also outside within spaces for contemplation and private prayer,” says Hyndman.

## WATER: CLEANSING, PURIFICATION, AND RENEWAL

In many religions, water symbolizes purity. Hindus believe water has spiritually cleansing powers. Muslims cleanse in purifying fountains before approaching God in prayer. In Christian baptism, water represents entry into a life with God.

When the congregation of St. Gregory the Great entrusted Hyndman to design their Catholic church in Scripps Ranch, California, they came to her with the specific goal of creating a church that expressed the life-giving connection of water, earth, and baptism. Hyndman’s design used water to physically define the new church and campus.

Water traverses St. Gregory the Great’s church campus, unifying sanctuary, social ministry spaces, and grounds in harmony with devotional gardens and prayer paths. In the sanctuary under a sky-lit cupola, a large, bronze, bowl-shaped font sits on a decorative tree grate open to a pool below. Water sheets over the edges of the font into the pool, where it collects and spills out into the steps that frame the lower full-immersion baptismal font. These fonts are filled with water for the Easter season and are then drained, symbolizing Christ’s journey in the desert, and emphasizing the absence of water during the Lenten season.



*Overview of the St. Gregory the Great campus, across which water traverses.*

*Photo courtesy of Hyndman & Hyndman*





*St. Gregory the Great's baptismal is a series of fonts.*

*Photo: Pablo Mason*



*Light kisses the Blessed Sacrament Chapel in St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church.*

#### FIRE: UNITY, GATHERING, AND INITIATION

In primeval ages, fire was a symbol of respect. God manifested himself to man as fire in biblical times, and sometimes compared himself to an ardent fire. Fire is woven into religious celebrations with candles that symbolize unity, gathering in worship and initiation. The use of votive candles in private prayer can be dated back to polytheistic worship and beyond. Today, says Hyndman, candles can seem a token or an afterthought in a church setting, perhaps because of safety concerns.

Hyndman uses fire as a primal symbol to deepen the spiritual experience. Candles, placed safely in surrounds of fire-resistant materials such as precast concrete or sand, glow warmly in prayer spaces. In churches where fire is central to the Catholic Easter Vigil celebration, Hyndman folds it into the design of the church.

Hyndman found an ideal opportunity to bring fire to the forefront, when designing St. Gregory the Great. Where most churches rarely integrate Easter Vigil fire areas into the permanent site design, Hyndman instead located a fire ring outside the sanctuary, on axis with the altar and visible through a dramatic wall of windows beside the altar. The altar and fire create a liturgical connection, and the congregation can see the fire burning throughout the nighttime celebration. Candles flicker

*Photo courtesy of Hyndman & Hyndman*



Photo: Bob Forrest

*The Easter fire ring at St. Gregory the Great draws parishioners together.*

in a suspended arrangement high above the baptismal font, adding to the sense of spirituality and mystery.

**LIGHT: POWER, KNOWLEDGE, AND LOVE**

Light dispels darkness. This is a powerful image in many religions, usually symbolizing the truth, power, and love of God. As a halo or an aura seen around holy beings, light represents knowledge, wisdom, and purity. Hyndman feels that designing worship spaces to emphasize light is the greatest opportunity to use primal symbols in the creation of sacred space. The intangible nature of light and its power to transform and change a space are endless, she says. How daylight moves through the sanctuary and enriches the gardens is important to the spiritual experience.

Gothic cathedrals were designed with tracery, heavier at the base and letting in more light ascending toward heaven. The San Diego Latter-day Saints Temple, a Hyndman & Hyndman collaborative project, employs a similar concept, with art glass that is opaque at the base, increasing in transparency up towards the top of its 190-foot-tall towers. The magnificent towers symbolize the three tiers of the celestial

kingdom, with the remaining building between the towers stepping up with each level of spiritual significance and again introducing more light. The lowest level of the building is almost entirely subterranean.

Hyndman's designs often incorporate daylight filtered through hidden windows, conveying a sense of sacred mystery with the quality of reflected light that is felt but not seen. She designed the St. Mark Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, California, using this technique to bounce light around from hidden windows. Large expanses of daylight are invited into the sanctuary through windows not visible from the interior. Multiple openings in walls reflect the light onto a deep, sweeping space sculpted into the walls, creating a peaceful day-lit background for the chancel. By using the mystical quality of indirect daylight, the focus remains liturgical, undistracted by window views and glare.

Summing up her church design philosophy, Hyndman says that "a church must convey a sense of spirituality and sacred mystery. It's not like going to a shopping mall or a library. It should touch us and represent our faith and beliefs. Primal symbols make that connection for us. They enhance our spiritual experience." 

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