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Different Forms of Power in Worship Spaces

by Patrick Russell

When people think about worship spaces they may not think about such spaces as having power, but each space communicates a sense of power on some level. This might be power as given by political structures, civil power through shared identity or nationalism, a sense of power based on the overall scale of the structure itself, or in a more indirect way through means of limits upon the structure.
All four of these means of power will be looked at through an engagement with two specific historical churches. The first structure is St. Paul’s Cathedral in London which is an Anglican structure to which all of these forms of power can be applied. Similarly, the second structure to be examined will be St. Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow, which as a Russian Orthodox space, will also utilize these forms of power in various ways. Historical details will be given for each structure first before being analyzed.

ST. PAUL’S CATHEDRAL

St. Paul’s Cathedral in London was built after the Great London Fire of 1666 destroyed some three-quarters of the city. Within that swath of devastation fifty-three churches were lost or badly damaged of which the original St Paul’s was one. This tragedy presented an opportunity for Christopher Wren, a promising young architect, to be of great service to London in the eventual redesign and construction of St. Paul’s as an originally Anglican church.¹ In contrast to St. Basil’s this is a church that sprang forth from loss.

Politically, St. Paul’s is a testament to the involvement of the British government because the final plan that was submitted had to be approved by the crown.² This got even more complicated when Parliament levied a coal tax to help raise funds for the reconstruction of this church, as well as others. It is also worth noting that King Charles II had been sending money toward repairs of the previous St. Paul’s before the fire and subsequently continued to do so for the new structure as well; reportedly one hundred thousand pounds per year.³ So, not only was St. Paul’s built with royal approval, and taxation, but also through the use of the personal funds of the king. In a very real sense, there was political involvement from every possible angle which speaks to a sense of political power within London as the heart of the British Empire. St. Paul’s then becomes a visual representation of the power, strength, and wealth of British governance in a time of great distress.

² Dupré, Churches, 68.
The presence of power as national/shared identity is present because it is a structure that came about from a shared trauma for the original survivors, who also took it upon themselves to raise funds through private and corporate donations as well as subscriptions. Moreover, St Paul’s Cathedral has continued as a symbol for London, and Britain as a whole ever since. Through means of conservation in the 19th century, critical repairs prior to World War I, and surviving damages sustained during the German Blitz of World War II, St. Paul’s still stands on Ludgate Hill as a distinctive structure of the London skyline.

I-enforces the importance and resilience of national religious identity. For example, when Christopher Wren was seeking to mark the spot for the new dome, he was reportedly handed a fragment of tombstone with the word Resurgam, “I will rise again” which was later etched into the pediment of the south portico. This resurrected structure, then is a conveyor of hope and the power of resilience for a nation as well as their shared faith in light of devastation.

Power is also communicated by the overall scale and grandeur of the space itself. This scale and attention to detail is made all the clearer by the fact that Christopher Wren was in control of much of the process from start to finish. St. Paul’s remains the only English cathedral to have been finished under the watchful eye of the original architect which adds to the prestige of the space as one of the finest examples of church architecture.

The expansive space of St. Paul’s is approximately 500 feet from east to west inside the walls, the breadth of the nave and aisles is 197 feet, space through the transepts is 285 feet, the length of the choir is 165 feet, and the circumference of the dome is 420 feet. This is a structure that was not built to human scale, but with a higher purpose in mind. To stand in such a space is to realize how small one is in comparison to the universe and to reflect on what it means to be human in light of Who one understands God to be.

5 Dupré, Churches, 68.
6 Dupré, Churches, 68.
7 Dupré, Churches, 68.
To talk about power in a space is to talk about what is there. It should also be acknowledged there are forms of power that are communicated by things/people who are not there. More specifically, a structure like St. Paul’s without being retrofitted for accessibility becomes a space that communicates the power of able-bodied persons only. Through re-landscaping the South Churchyard, St. Paul’s now has an entrance that does not require the use of stairs. There is also a newly expanded elevator that allows people access to the area even if they are in wheelchairs. Much of the main floor is level; there are even pathways through the crypt. Such improvements, while modern, undo a sense of power for the physically able, but also restore a sense of agency and belonging to those who would otherwise not have access to the worship space. The relinquishing of ableist constructions allows power to shift to those who previously had been functionally denied entrance to the space. Thus, a sharing of power for both groups and a building up of shared identity becomes possible in a way that was previously impossible.

ST. BASIL’S CATHEDRAL

St. Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow was commissioned by Tzar Ivan IV and was constructed between 1555-1560 by Barma and Postnik. The structure itself is made up of nine original chapels and a tenth that was added later in the same century. This complex of small worship spaces forms what is visually seen as one space, but is in fact many spaces for a similar purpose. The presence of the “onion domes” and their many colors make the church distinctive, but there is more to understanding the space than simply the external details.

Politically, power is communicated as it is a church commissioned by the Tzar, but more specifically because it was for the purpose of commemorating military victories over the Tartar Horde. Most of the chapels in the structure are a memorial to military victories during his reign. The central chapel, around which the other eight original were built, is dedicated to the Intercession of the Mother of God because the

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10 Dupré, Churches, 67.
Tartar capital of Kazan was taken on October 5, 1552, which is the feast of the Intercession.\textsuperscript{11} Even in the religious choices, political, or in this case, military power undergirds the purpose of the space.

It is important to note that St. Basil’s as it is today, is different from how it was when it was originally constructed. There have been drastic changes over the last almost 500 years starting with the reconstruction after the chapel burned down in 1583. Debates persist as to when the current domes were added to the church, but the consensus is that the “onions” are not original. Typically, either at the end of the 16\textsuperscript{th} century or sometime in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century the helmet-shaped copulas were replaced with the flared copulas: lukovitsi.\textsuperscript{12} There have been other changes to the structure over time such as the addition of floral designs throughout the lower level, a bell tower, a covered colonnaded gallery with four vestibules in the late 17\textsuperscript{th} century, as well as various restorations since 1923.\textsuperscript{13}

In the context of political power, the history of St. Basil’s is complicated. Yes, in a religious context the space does have the civil responsibility of being a place of worship, but the size of the various chapels limits the effectiveness of that function. For example, the central chapel is approximately 753ft\textsuperscript{2} while one of the side chapels has only 248ft\textsuperscript{2}.\textsuperscript{14} These small spaces limit the size of a gathering and speak more to the power of the cathedral as a military monument rather than a space for religious encounter.

St. Basil’s Cathedral has further complications regarding political power because it was seized by the Bolsheviks and subsequently turned into a museum. To this day it is still a part of the State History Museum though worship has resumed since the fall of the USSR.\textsuperscript{15} St. Basil’s remains a property of the state and with it being situated in Red Square, within view of the Kremlin, this connection between political control and the cathedral itself is hard to miss.

\textsuperscript{11} Dupré, \textit{Churches}, 66-7.
\textsuperscript{12} Dupré, \textit{Churches}, 67.
\textsuperscript{13} Dupré, \textit{Churches}, 67.
\textsuperscript{15} Dupré, \textit{Churches}, 67.
From the perspective of nationalism, St. Basil’s Cathedral has become synonymous with Russian culture for many people. The fact that there are over 400,000 tourists to St. Basil’s every year reinforces the idea that it communicates something uniquely Russian. The fact that the building has also survived multiple attempts at demolition, another fire in 1737, a failed attempt by Napoleon Boneparte to blow it up in 1812, and the whims of Joseph Stalin adds to a sense of substance and significance for St. Basil’s Cathedral. 16 “It is a living organism. It has grown; it has changed; it has been modified, [b]ut the core has always been distinctive. It’s remained there as a symbol of Muscovy and Russia’s endurance.” 17 Much like the Russian people, St. Basil’s stands as a reminder of past events amid ongoing struggles for a future that is not guaranteed.

The structure of St. Basil’s Cathedral does communicate a sense of power, but one which is not as grand as St. Paul’s in London. From the outside, St. Basil’s, when perceived as a single church, certainly looks impressive, and to some extent it is, but when one realizes that there are multiple chapels inside the structure the space changes to something far more intimate or even confining. The bright colors on the outside and the domes make the building look massive, but the individual chapels are anything but huge. The interior makes for a maze in which it is easy to get lost or even feel claustrophobic, but it does not match the expectations from the outside.

In the case of limits of power, there does not appear to be a means of access for those with mobility constraints. Every direction one looks there are stairs leading up into the building. Add to that the fact that the church looks like it is built on a platform and there is very little chance for the inclusion of those with physical limitations. Though there may yet be opportunities for such inclusion as restorations and changes continue to happen to the cathedral itself, or in Moscow in general, this does not look to be a current project for St. Basil’s Cathedral.

CONCLUSION

The presence of power in a worship space is multifaceted, especially in places like St. Paul’s in London or St. Basil’s in Moscow, where there are centuries of history and development surrounding and informing how people perceive and engage with those locations. To say that churches do not have power is to underestimate their function, but to try to articulate the full range of that power would also be futile. In the examples explored, the presence of political power, civil/religious power, power of scale, and the power of limits are a few ways in which power operates in these spaces. It is likely, that there are other ways and means of power also at work in these locations, but hopefully, those which were given are enough to demonstrate the importance of power within any given worship space. Thus, one may come to a new space with an understanding that power is operative there as well and that it is not a neutral space to such an extent that nothing is at work in terms of power.
Bibliography


