

Architecture and Theology: An Assessment through the Evolution of Churches in Kerala

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Abstract: Church is known as the abode of god. It is the most visible part of Christian theology. Since the introduction of Christianity, Christians started to build churches with its own distinct style and features. A clear evolution can be evidently seen through the churches built in different time phase based on architecture and sacred elements. New adaptations and changes are visible throughout. In the 20th century a drastic change in architecture took place in the Christian sacred buildings. Some of this rapid change took place even without any adaptation or alteration from the architecture styles that were prevailing till then. The design drift initiated the alienated church and its forms. As a part of evolution, many traditionally built churches are renovated and are replaced with modern ones. This paper aims to analyze the evolution of Kerala Christian churches and assesses the presence and importance of theology in creating sacred spaces. The research framework includes theoretical as well as analytical approach through a comparative analysis of selected case studies and the theological parameters identified.

Keywords: Architecture, Theology

1. Introduction

It is believed that Christianity in Kerala was introduced by the arrival of St. Thomas apostle. It is believed that St. Thomas established churches as a part of missionary activities. Vasco De Gama's expedition to Kerala in 1498 eventually lead to the introduction of the Portuguese and brought in their style of churches and liturgy rites. A series of conflicts and debates between the foreign missionaries and the locals led to the synod of Diamper. This led to a split within the Saint Thomas community and eventually new denominations were formed. The old party, who continued with the east Syriac traditions and stayed faithful with the Catholic Church, came to be known as the Syro Malabar Catholic Church.

2. Theology in Architecture

Christian theology is the study of Christian beliefs and practices dominantly based on the old and new testaments. Two biblical perceptions that stand as a base in theology are the incarnation and transfiguration of Jesus. Jesus is the son of invisible god who took on human flesh and blood and matters of earth to with the people on earth. Transfiguration is an event where the Christ's body became radiant with the light of heaven. This showed that the matter of his body could reveal that the heavenly realities could burst forth through a material substance like the body of Christ. Thus, these perceptions point out that a church building that is made of matter definitely reflects the glory of God and the mystery of faith. This sacramental reality of a church reveals the architectural theology in order to understand the eminence of the liturgy.

A. Meaning and symbolism of theology in churches

The three main laws of Catholic Church architecture are verticality, permanence and iconography. Verticality creates a sense of existence. A successful church sticks out

of other smaller buildings in the area. The ceiling creates a condition of transcendence towards the heaven through the mosaics murals and the natural light used. The second law of sacred architecture is permanence. Christians believe the indefinite presence of God everywhere in the earth. Similarly, church believes in the long-lasting presence of the building that will serve generation after generation. It should be enduring, durable and transcend space and time. The third law is iconography. It says that a church should be well distinguishable as a sacred space from other buildings around. Façade is one of the main examples of iconography. The symbolisms of each part of a church are as follows:

- i. The plaza or the porch of a church act as a transition between the profane and the sacred.
- ii. Façade radiates the prosperity of the church.
- iii. Narthex marks as a boundary between the outer world and the sacred space.
- iv. Nave known as the Galilee is symbolized as the procession path Jesus took from Galilee to Jerusalem for the crucifixion. This main body that leads to the sanctuary is also symbolized as the ark of redemption. The nave is also symbolized as a mother's womb where the devotee is nurtured to grow towards the kingdom of God. It is generally flanked by columns.
- v. The columns enhance its verticality and permanence.
- vi. The altar is the most sacred part and acts as a focal point for worship. Huge ornamentation is done to draw the attention pilgrims.
- vii. Another form of sacred imagery is the use of stained glass for windows. The light passing through creates an enchanting interior atmosphere that hints the beauty of heaven. A dome adds verticality and a sense of transcendence symbolizing the heaven kingdom.

3. Evolution of Kerala Church Architecture

It is believed that St Thomas founded seven and a half churches or the "Eazh-ara Palli". These churches that were

built back before the ninth century, does not exist in its original form at present. This is because of the lack of durability of materials used; such as palm leaves, straw thatches, less durable wood, bamboo etc. These churches were considered to be simple rectangular halls for the purpose of community gathering. The hall has a raised platform as a sanctum at one end. The altar is termed as madbaha and the assembly area is known as hykala. Less or no window openings were provided in the madbaha. The openings provided in the hykala were also minimal. Thus, the interior was very dark just like the shrine of a Hindu temple. These churches were purely indigenous in form until the arrival of the Portuguese.

The influence of the features of a typical Hindu temple is visible in these early churches. Apart from the madbaha and Hykala, there is a porch in front called Mukhamadapam. Traditional Kerala sloping roof, dwajasthambam (flag staff), dipasthambam (pillar of lights) is also evident.

A. Churches from 16th to 19th century

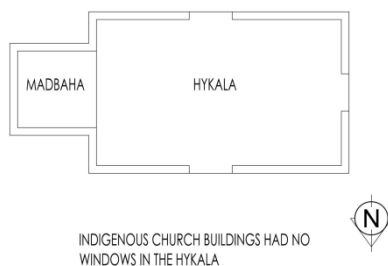


Figure 1: Indigenous church typology

Kerala had more than hundred churches at the time when the Portuguese arrived. They found that the churches were very indigenous in form and similar to Hindu temples of Kerala. The Portuguese missionaries started to impose their style of churches which exhibited an architectural character that was totally different from the indigenous form present till then. European architecture style was imposed in the churches by remodeling or rebuilding the existing ones. St Francis church in Fort Cochin is referred to be the first church built in Kerala that exhibits the distinctive European architecture style. This type of a religious building that was certainly new and alien to this region later prevailed throughout the sixteen and seventeenth centuries. These churches exhibited monumental character, impressive facade, larger scale proportion inner volume, ample lighting and used diverse materials.

B. Post colonial churches

Till the mid 20th century, Gothic architecture style was popular among the churches in Kerala. After independence, a unique architecture style was imposed to the churches in Kerala. Designers endorsed a new modern approach that was totally different from the colonial or the Gothic style that prevailed till then. One of the main reasons for such a change is the introduction of the present-day conventional materials like steel and concrete instead of laterite and wood. It gave shape to the façade which included symbols like star, ship, ark etc. The array

of columns flanked in the nave gradually disappeared. Large rectangular and circular halls were built in order to accommodate maximum people of the parish. The reinforced cement concrete structures were built with an elaborate unconventionally shaped front facade with striking colors and the rest is ordinary basic structure with plain interior.

4. Case Studies

A. St Mary's church, Kalllooppara



Figure 2 (a,b): St. Mary's church, Kalllooppara

Kalllooppara church in Pathanamthitta is one of the oldest indigenous church still existing. Historians believe that this church that was built in 1339 AD was established by St. Thomas. It is one of the Christian churches that reflect the indigenous character of Kerala traditional churches that existed in the early times. One of the main features of this church is the evidently visible hefty roof structure and the mukhamandapam. The altar seemed to be narrower in width and higher in height with respect to its proportion with the nave. Local materials like laterite is used for the walls, wood and tile for the roof etc. In its true indigenous form, less openings were provided that enabled a restricted amount of light to enter. Use of thick laterite blocks and wood maintains the thermal comfort within the place.

B. Immaculate conception church, Manjummel

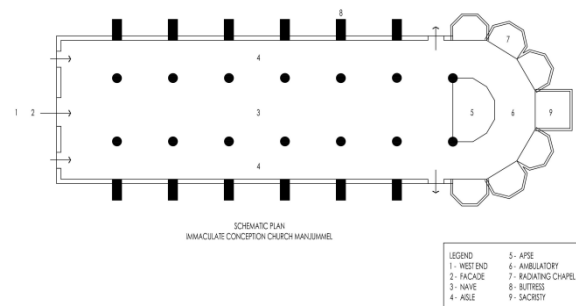


Figure 3 (a, b, c): IC church, Manjummel: front view, Gothic style windows, plan

Immaculate Conception church is situated near Eloor, Ernakulam. The style adopted is Gothic with some

indigenous characters. It is rectangular in plan with an open hall that extends end to end. The main entrance into the church building is through the three main doors in front on the west side. The altar is situated in the east with three smaller side altars on either side of the chancel. The sill height of the window opening is around 3m above the floor. The windows are adorned with stained glass. Laterite and stone are majoritively used for the construction. Traditional pitched roof constructed with wooden truss and tiles.

C. Loyola Chapel, Trivandrum

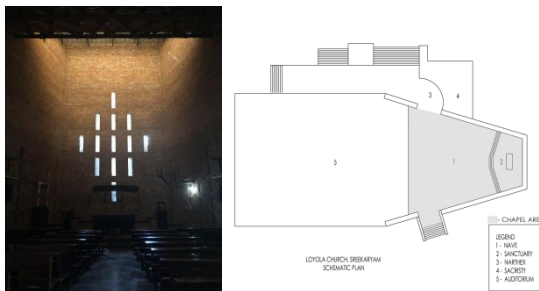


Figure 4(a, b): Loyola church, Altar, Plan

The Loyola chapel complex is situated in Thiruvananthapuram. The complex consists of a college, high school, the chapel and an auditorium. The chapel was designed by Laurie Baker in 1971. The chapel is fully constructed with bricks. Cavity walls using rat trap bonds have been used throughout the outer periphery walls. This method of construction of brick bonding is not only highly economical but also maintains thermal comfort inside the building. The lateral strength of the high brick wall is made strong using cross bracing brick patterns with the cavity wall. One of the main features of this chapel is the use of light and shadow to create defined spaces. This is altered using the different patterns of jaali on the exterior walls which made the interior adequately ventilated and mysteriously lit. The altar is lit with a beam of warm natural light coming from a clerestory opening on the roof thus making the nave and its surrounding area lit in a restricted manner. Baker's style of minimalism and character of space gives one a spiritual experience and peace of mind.

D. St. Ann’s Church, Eloor



Figure 5(a, b): St. Ann's church, Eloor: Front view, Plan

The St. Ann's church is situated in Eloor, Ernakulam. The church laid its foundation stone on November 1963. The church has a simple rectangle open plan with altar on the west side. The main entrance is through the east side. The interior is devoid of colonnades. A proper distinction between space cannot be seen i.e., a proper defined space for nave, narthex, transept, choir area etc. is not recognized. The number of windows provided does not justify its role in church theology. Sill height of 90 cm is given for the windows. The façade is more like an abstract form that seems to be less evangelical. A conventional material like cement concrete and steel is used for the construction of the church. The sloping pitched roof is constructed using asbestos sheets. St. Ann’s Syro Malabar church definitely represents the majority of churches we see in our daily life.

5. Findings

A. Comparative analysis

A general comparison between churches based on the literature and live studies conducted. The following tables compare between three types of churches and the presence of theological elements. Church Type A are churches that were built before the introduction of foreign architecture i.e. the indigenous churches. Church Type B consists of churches from the 16th to 19th century. Church Type C are churches built after independence or in other words, the post-colonial churches.

Table 1: Comparison between Churches Based on Architecture Parameters

Variables	Church Type A	Church Type B	Church Type C
Orientation of the church building	Always present Oriented with altar on the east side and the main entrance on the west.	Need not be present	Not present
Presence of a compound wall	Mostly present	Mostly not present	Mostly not present
Presence of padippura	Mostly present	Absent	Absent

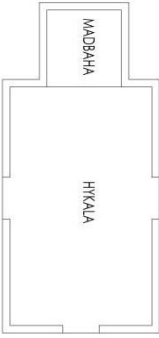
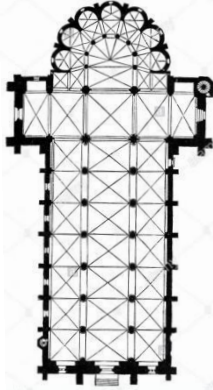
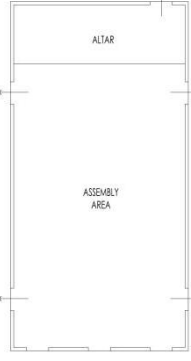
Plan			
Smaller width for the sanctum w.r.t nave	Yes	No	No
Use of vaults and arches	Yes	Yes	No
Presence of arch or vault segregating the altar area	Yes	Yes	No
Higher roof for sanctum than the rest of the building	Yes	Sometimes present	No
Presence of windows	No / Less number of windows provided	Yes -Use of stained glass -Sill height around 3m	Yes - Tinted glass is not used-use clear or -sill height around 0.9m
Decorative façade	No	Yes	Yes Abstract forms are common
Porch in front	Yes	No	No
Presence of flag staff	Yes	Yes	Yes
Decorated interior spaces	Sometimes present, especially the altar area	Yes	Sometimes present
Material	Wood, leaf thatch, granite stone, tiled roof, laterite stone	Laterite, wood	Cement concrete, steel, asbestos corrugated sheet
Landmark	Yes	Yes	No
Roof	sloping roof - thatched	Sloping roof – wooden truss with tiles	Concrete roof, asbestos truss etc.
Altar as a focal point	Yes	Yes	Absent, Multiple focal points
Presence of columns in the assembly space	No	Yes	No
Light	Mostly dark interior space	Partially lit interior space	Well-lit interior space
Belfry	Absent	Present	Present

Table 2: Relation of Churches with Theology

Variables	Church Type A	Church Type B	Church Type C
Verticality	–	✓ colonnades helps to achieve this character	–
Column as an architectural element	–	✓	–
Permanence	✓	✓	–
Durability	–	✓	✓
Focal point	✓	✓	multiple focal points present sometimes
Distinction between spaces	✓	✓	–

6. Inference

Table 1 concludes that most of the architectural elements seen in type A churches are not visible in type C. Elements like arches, vault over the altar, padippura etc. gradually diminished. Whereas the use of flag staff, belfry etc. continued to be used from the early times to the present day. The main reason for the differences or similarities seen is due to the alteration or the continuation in the liturgy creed.

Table 2 concludes that Type B churches definitely has a theological underpinning and is more evangelical. Churches of type C seems to be too simple and minimal and therefore is comparatively less evangelical.

We are now in a midst of the reviving classical architecture. One of the reasons that people prefer the latter knowingly or unknowingly is that classical architecture is fundamentally respectful of tradition, order of nature revealing the mind of God. It unveils that certain proportions are harmonic, certain ways of bringing things

together are ordered. So, in theological aspects classicism is a way of imitating the mind of God. It shows all the logic of structure and also creates a natural sympathy to the catholic understanding of liturgy.

7. Conclusion

From the above study and analysis, it is evident that there exists a strong relation between church architecture and theology to make a church evangelical. A church that does not go with the laws of theology and catholic architecture does not declare the catholic faith and its beliefs. It is therefore necessary to hold on to the fundamental guide lines to fulfill the same.

This dissertation concludes that, proper measures are to be considered to create and conserve sacred spaces with theological fundamentals. An architect should have a thorough understanding between the theology and architecture bond. He should understand and thereby create a space that proclaims the faith of God and thus secure the trust between the worshipper and God.

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