SPIRITUAL BUILDINGS WITH AMAZING ARCHITECTURE

Throughout history religion has sparked the creation of some of the world’s most beautiful architectural achievements. See how that tradition continues in AD’s survey of breathtaking contemporary houses of worship.
Architects often aim to infuse their creations with meaning, but one type of structure demands something particularly moving—a spiritual building. The most successful churches, chapels, temples, synagogues, and mosques have at least one thing in common: architecture that transforms raw, earthly materials into compositions so powerful they evoke something beyond our world. No wonder sanctuaries from across the ages remain among the most popular sights for global travelers. From the Pantheon in Rome to the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul to Le Corbusier’s Notre Dame du Haut chapel in Ronchamp, France, they are not just places of spiritual pilgrimage, but architectural pilgrimage. That tradition continues as contemporary architects boldly reimagine designs as old as religion itself.
All Saints Chapel Martinho Campos, Brazil

Designed by Brazilian architect Gustavo Penna, this quaint, 1,700-square-foot chapel is a meditation on simple materiality that modernizes a number of traditional Christian motifs. A heavy, cross-shaped concrete structure, wider than it is tall, appears to be supported by impossibly delicate glass walls. Outside, a slender rectangular reflecting pool inspired by a baptismal font bisects the paved ground.
Step through the entrance, however, and the building’s strong exterior suddenly fades away—warm wood slats sheathe the interior surfaces, creating a cozy, inviting place of respite. During the day, a long, linear skylight illuminates the chapel; at night, the whole structure glows like a beacon atop the hill.
Cathedral of Brasilia. Brazil

Oscar Niemeyer, the legendary Brazilian modernist who died at the age of 104 in December, was famed for designing buildings with strong silhouettes. Among his most iconic projects are the institutional buildings for the capital city of Brasília, of which his cathedral is arguably the standout. Formed from a circle of 16 curved concrete columns connected by wide swaths of glazing, the building appears to gather strength at the ground, rising from a moatlike pool before bursting toward the heavens with open arms.
Inside, ribbons of translucent blue, green, and off-white fiberglass snake overhead, contrasting with three suspended statues of angels and the visible expanse of sky. Moving from the cathedral’s entrance—a dark tunnel that passes beneath the water—into the open, sun-drenched space feels a bit like arriving in another world.

This epic, opulent mosque, opened in 2007, is one of Abu Dhabi’s most iconic buildings, clearly visible from the three main bridges connecting the island city to the mainland. Large enough to hold 40,000 worshippers, the complex has 82 domes of various sizes and a hand-knotted carpet in the main prayer hall that measures more than 61,000 square feet—reportedly the world’s biggest.
While the exterior is mostly clad in brilliant Sivec white marble from Greece, the courtyard and interior offer an array of vibrant colors with intricate floral patterns inlaid in the stone. With other decorative details realized in exquisite natural materials, including semiprecious stones like lapis lazuli and amethyst, mother of pearl, and 24-karat gold, the mosque is a lavish place of worship to behold.
Jubilee Church. Rome.

Designed by Richard Meier, this church is one of the Pritzker Prize–winning architect’s most celebrated works. One of its breathtaking features is a set of three large curved walls that artfully allude to the Christian notion of the Trinity: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The gaps between the precast concrete waves, which are connected with glass, offer separate entrances to the chapel and baptistery, while the nave is created by the space where the last curved wall meets the rest of the rectilinear building.
Inside, a cool, modern austerity prevails, with simple wood pews and a stone floor, altar, and priest’s chairs. The building, which was completed in 2003, also has a number of cleverly concealed green features—a titanium dioxide coating makes the exterior self-cleaning and capable of scrubbing pollution, and the large thermal mass of the concrete walls balances temperature throughout the day.
Munich’s Herz Jesu Kirche, or Sacred Heart Church, designed by Allmann Sattler Wappner Architekten, is most famous for its striking sense of openness. The building consists of an interior box made from vertical maple slats and a larger, exterior glass box that completely contains it. The dramatically oversize blue glass–and-steel doors let one entire side of the structure swing open to welcome churchgoers on special holidays.
The maple slats inside are spaced to maximize the flow of daylight into the area near the altar, and the glass panels outside shift from transparent to opaque for privacy. A walkway between the two boxes also depicts the Stations of the Cross.
Cathedral of Christ the Light. Oakland, California.

Designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, this church was built on the site of the Cathedral of St. Frances de Sales, which was damaged in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake and later torn down. Opened in 2008, the 226,000-square-foot structure couldn’t be more different than the Gothic Revival building it replaced, with a boldly contemporary design realized in layers of curving concrete, glass, and wood.
With a footprint based on the vesica piscis—the shape created by the intersection of two equal circles—the cathedral reaches out diagonally toward Oakland’s Lake Merritt. And with an exterior skin that’s open at both ends, it’s designed to appear welcoming to the surrounding community. One of the church’s most intriguing features is a 58-foot-tall image of Christ made from perforated-aluminum panels. During the day, the architectural graphic is illuminated by sunlight; at night, it projects a haunting glow toward the street.
Martin Luther Church. Hainburg, Austria.

The fact that this church looks like it has been buffeted by winds shouldn’t be a surprise—it was designed by Coop Himmelb(l)au, an Austrian architecture firm that frequently creates buildings inspired by clouds. In this case, however, the design of the roof for the 3,200-square-foot structure was actually informed by the curved roof of a nearby Romanesque ossuary; its geometry was digitally twisted and prodded into a contemporary swirl of steel with three circular skylights.
Because of the resulting form’s complexity, the roof was manufactured at a shipyard, along with a 66-foot-tall bell tower resembling a geyser of steel. Deferring to the exterior architecture, the interior is kept deliberately spare, aside for a sculptural altar backed by a perforated-wood screen cut with the shape of a cross.
Chapel of Reconciliation. Berlin.

One of the architectural victims of the Berlin Wall was the Reconciliation Church, a neo-Gothic structure completed in 1894. Located just steps from the church's main entrance, the wall cut off access to its congregation and left the building abandoned in no-man’s-land, until it was almost completely demolished by the East German government in 1985. After the wall came down, Berlin architects Peter Sassenroth and Rudolf Reitermann set about designing this chapel on the same site as a remembrance.
Completed in 2000, the chapel consists of a rammed-earth structure wrapped by an exterior screen, made with vertical wood slats, that creates a partially enclosed promenade in between. Deliberately modest, the small, oval-shaped building is plainly detailed and quietly contemplative. History feels incredibly close here—the church’s altar remains in its original location, as do the cellar stairs, which had been boarded up for decades. Even the original bells were rescued, and ring out with familiar-sounding peals on Sundays.
Baps Shri Swaminarayan Mandir. London.

A triumph of Indian stone carving, this building became Europe’s first traditional Hindu temple when it was completed in 1995—and it remains a dramatic sight for people more accustomed to sober English architecture. Embellished with incredibly intricate hand-carved details, the structure was built from 26,300 pieces of stone, including more than 3,000 tons of Bulgarian limestone and 1,200 tons of Italian marble.
The temple was painstakingly sculpted, piece by piece, by more than 1,500 craftsmen in India before being shipped to the building site for assembly. The interior is just as impressive as the exterior, with a great hall topped by a dome measuring 28 feet in diameter, which is capped by a 2.5-ton keystone and ornamented with elaborate floral patterns.

Designed by the New York–based French architect Thierry W Despont, this Beaux Arts–style building on Manhattan’s Upper East Side is distinguished by thoughtful grand gestures. The exterior and interior surfaces are clad in golden Jerusalem limestone; the street entrance is set off by hefty 18-foot-tall bronze doors featuring a tree of life design by artist Mark Beard; and the sanctuary is topped by a 45-foot-high oval oak dome.
With classical details outside and a luxurious minimalism inside, the building, which is designed to seat about 300 people, appears ready to inspire worshippers regardless of aesthetic trends. Founded by Edmond J. Safra, the synagogue was completed in 2003, four years after the banker’s mysterious death.
Harajuku Church. Tokyo.

Designed by Ciel Rouge Création, an architecture firm with offices in Tokyo and Paris, this Protestant church is as much about negative space as it is the monumental concrete building itself. Constructed using six enormous undulating arches that are tied together by ribbons of glazing, the porous building is designed to pull in beams of natural light.
The wildly curvaceous ceiling is intended not only to improve the interior’s acoustics, but also to create the impression of an enormous hand reaching down from above. A neighboring bell tower is a tall, slender triangular column of concrete with openings in the shape of a cross—at certain times of day, the tower casts a shadow of the cross on the church.

Designed by Walter Netsch of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and completed just over 50 years ago, in 1962, this groundbreaking chapel still appears as if it were pulled from the frames of a futuristic science-fiction film. Its 17 aluminum, steel, and glass spires—each composed of 100 tetrahedrons—evoke the feeling of fighter jets pointed skyward.
Inside the 150-foot-tall building, there are separate worship areas for Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Buddhist cadets. The largest space is the Protestant chapel, located on the top floor, where thin strips of stained glass, transitioning from dark to light colors as they rise along the edges of the spires, blanket the interior in a multicolored glow. In recognition of the building’s timeless, influential design, the American Institute of Architects awarded the chapel its annual Twenty-Five Year Award in 1996.