

Meet The Architect Building Spiritual Spaces In People's Homes Amidst The Global Pandemic



Rachael H. Grochowski, Founder + Principal Architect at RHG Architecture + Design © EMILY GILBERT

In 2018, for the first time in history, the Vatican entered the secular cultural scene by taking part in the Venice Architecture Biennale. Curator and Architecture Historian, Francesco Dal Co invited 10 architects from around the globe, faithful and non, to construct chapels and spiritual spaces in the wooded garden behind the 400-year-old Benedictine church on the storied island of the Venetian lagoon, San Giorgio Maggiore.

The entire concept was inspired by the Woodland Chapel, designed by Erik Gunnar Asplund in 1920 for a Stockholm cemetery. A design that blends both natural and architectural elements that take advantage of the organic landscape.

“With this small masterpiece, Asplund defined the chapel as a place of orientation, encounter, and meditation, seemingly formed by chance or natural forces inside a vast forest, seen as the physical suggestion of the labyrinthine progress of life, the wandering of humankind as a prelude to the encounter,” Dal Co expressed in a statement.

With this in mind, and attracted by how spiritual forces can be enhanced by architecture and design, I spoke with Rachael Grochowski, an award winning Architect, Architectural Historian, Founder and Principal Architect of [RHG Architecture+Design](#) based in Montclair, New Jersey. Grochowski also has a profound focus on the spiritual space and has been building such places right inside people’s homes and businesses.

“In my contemplation in creating spiritual spaces, I started going back to the foundation of architecture which is really through the cathedral. It was really through religion to be closer to God. It’s why I see architecture design and spaces no matter their purpose, as spiritual, Design is spiritual. It just depends on how you see it,” says Grochowski.

Even as a child, Grochowski explains how her understanding of spirituality, having a grounding experience, or the creation of any particular experience was heavily influenced by nature and her surroundings. “As a child, I had an awareness that spaces were creating experiences and held energy. Often it was about the space, the texture, the energy or the stillness. It may have been through walking through the woods in Northern Wisconsin where there were mounds that were Native American burials or in elementary school in Colorado where kids would go to an area called the pit which was a sunken area where a more intimate conversation would happen. Even at that young age - there was an understanding that the physicality of going down those steps and coming into these spaces created a different kind of experience.”



Soaking bath tub in a sustainable home LISA RUSSMAN

The experiences from her childhood informed her passion for designing homes, wellness studios, and now spiritual spaces for people. Grochowski says that her approach to creating a spiritual space for a client is to "invite people to bring in what resonates with them and their culture. We create the platform but what is it that harkens back to your lineage or to the time you felt safe, is personal. For me, my grandparent's cottage was that place and I am recreating experiences through that design all of the time."

In the Covid era, where more and more people have been forced to be at home, a visceral need has arisen for many to find calm and serenity. Grochowski's design solution to this problem has been by working with clients to help create spiritual spaces in their homes to help people find the serenity that was missing. The goal of these rooms is to help people cope with the complicated times we are living in, by finding peace, calm, and have a sense of being grounded.



Reading nook © 2021 LISA RUSSMAN

“The way I design is very much about asking my clients questions; How do you want to feel? How do you want your family to feel? I think in most cases it's forming community, having a connection to nature, finding calm, and peace, they want a place to rest. When we specifically start talking about spiritual spaces, it can be a range of what that could mean. For one person it may mean a meditation area with an icon or a statue. For someone else, they want to be surrounded by their books in a reading nook. Another might be a bathtub where they can submerge themselves and be surrounded by candles. So I think it has different meanings for people when asking the question of what spirituality means for you and your family,” says Grochowski.

“During covid, there was a lot of anxiety that came with the pandemic, but we also realized we must find ways to come into the present moment. And we have, because of the forced stillness. To some extent when we were first forced to be home, opportunities to create and get creative arose. In many ways, covid created the luxury of time that we didn't afford ourselves before.”

The resilience of human beings has shown to be immeasurable throughout these unprecedented times. From a design point of view, Grochowski explains the value of having a space dedicated to cope with the hard times. “The benefit of these spaces is that it creates an opportunity for peacefulness and calm. Which allows us to connect to our gratitude, our lineage, to our present moment. And I think that when those things happen, you can open up to joy and beauty that you don't otherwise often even contemplate.”

What defines a spiritual space is broad, because everything has the possibility of being spiritual; “it could be anything that anybody wants. It's based on how the individual approaches it, through their culture, their religion, what makes them feel at peace. It could be the materials you use in a kitchen because someone is passionate about cooking and it could be their sanctuary because every time they look at the stone you chose for their counter, they are reminded of the connection to the earth. So even something as functional as the countertop has this possibility of creating a sense of sanctuary which is very different from a meditation room.”



Spiritual yoga studio RHG ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN

Grochowski has worked with clients to design salt-walled yoga studios, prayer rooms, reading nooks that all have served the purpose of centering people in their homes. “Of course, not every moment is joyful, but when you do get into those hard moments, you can stay more grounded and in your present body and take a moment to cope. These spaces help us to come back to ourselves so we can manage as life gets busy again, we can have these spaces to go back to. It's like a tool to cope with our modern lives.”