

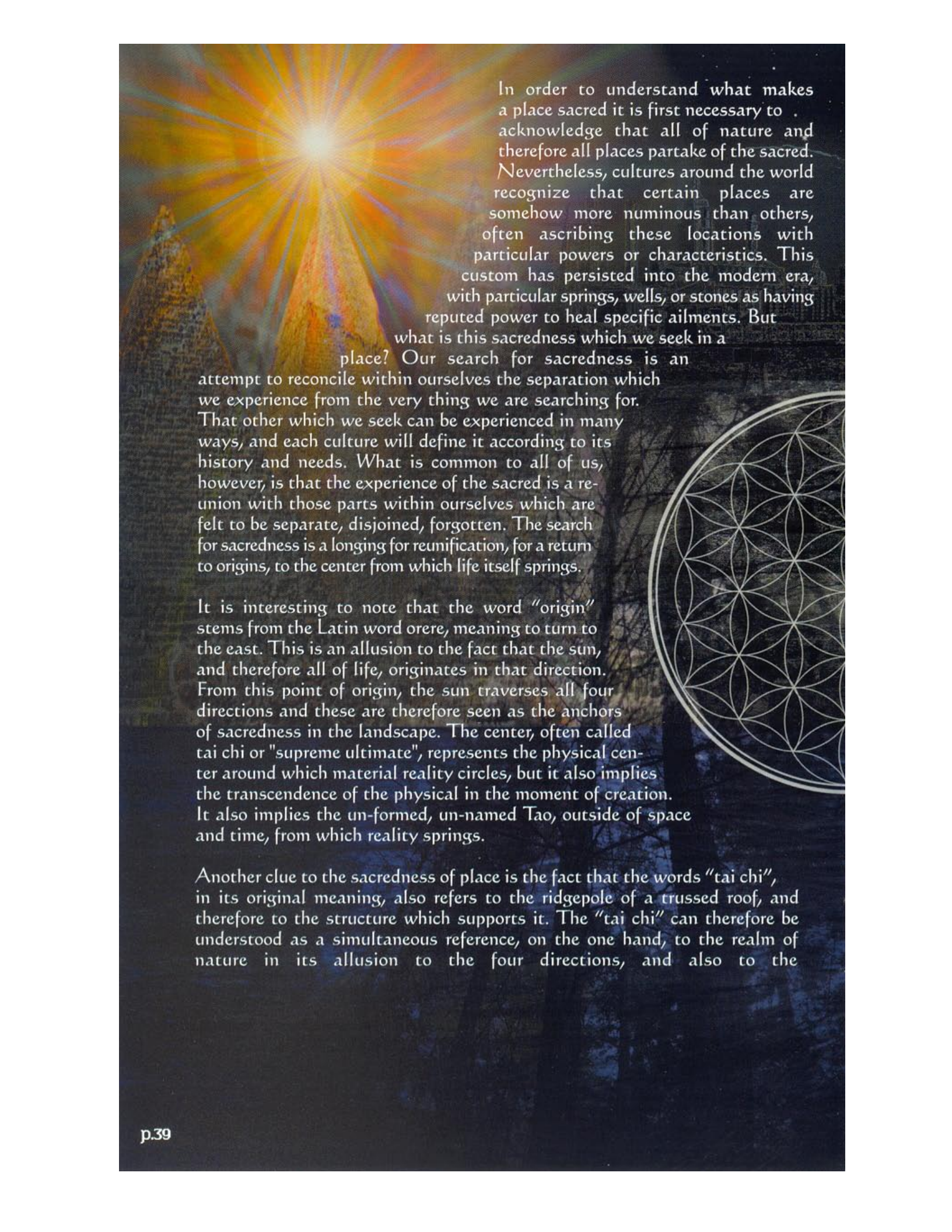
THE SACREDNESS OF PLACE

BY ALEX STARK

"The secret of
the...blessings to be found in
the holy places lies in this principle, that
the holy place is no longer a place; it has become a living being."
-Hazrat Inayat Khan

For those of us who live in urban areas it is a delight to be able to travel to the pristine areas of the earth still in existence. Often we return from these forays into the wild with bits and pieces of shells, rocks, or wood, which we then cherish by honoring them in special places in our homes and offices. It is as if the power of that place could be captured and stored for use later on. This, in fact, is exactly what is happening, and we, as instinctive creatures, are using our powers of intuition, identification, and intention to capture the sacredness of the land.

For rural dwellers, this process works in reverse, as they often pilgrimage to the larger cities to seek the benefit of temples and the sacred rituals that a collective can provide. They return to their farms and villages with idols and images which they then place in special places in their homes. Yet both urban adventurers and rural pilgrims are seeking the same thing: an identification with that other which heightens our awareness of the Mystery. And this is at the heart of sacredness as a human experience. Its poles are the wilderness and the city temple, and they come together in that most human of all institutions: the home.

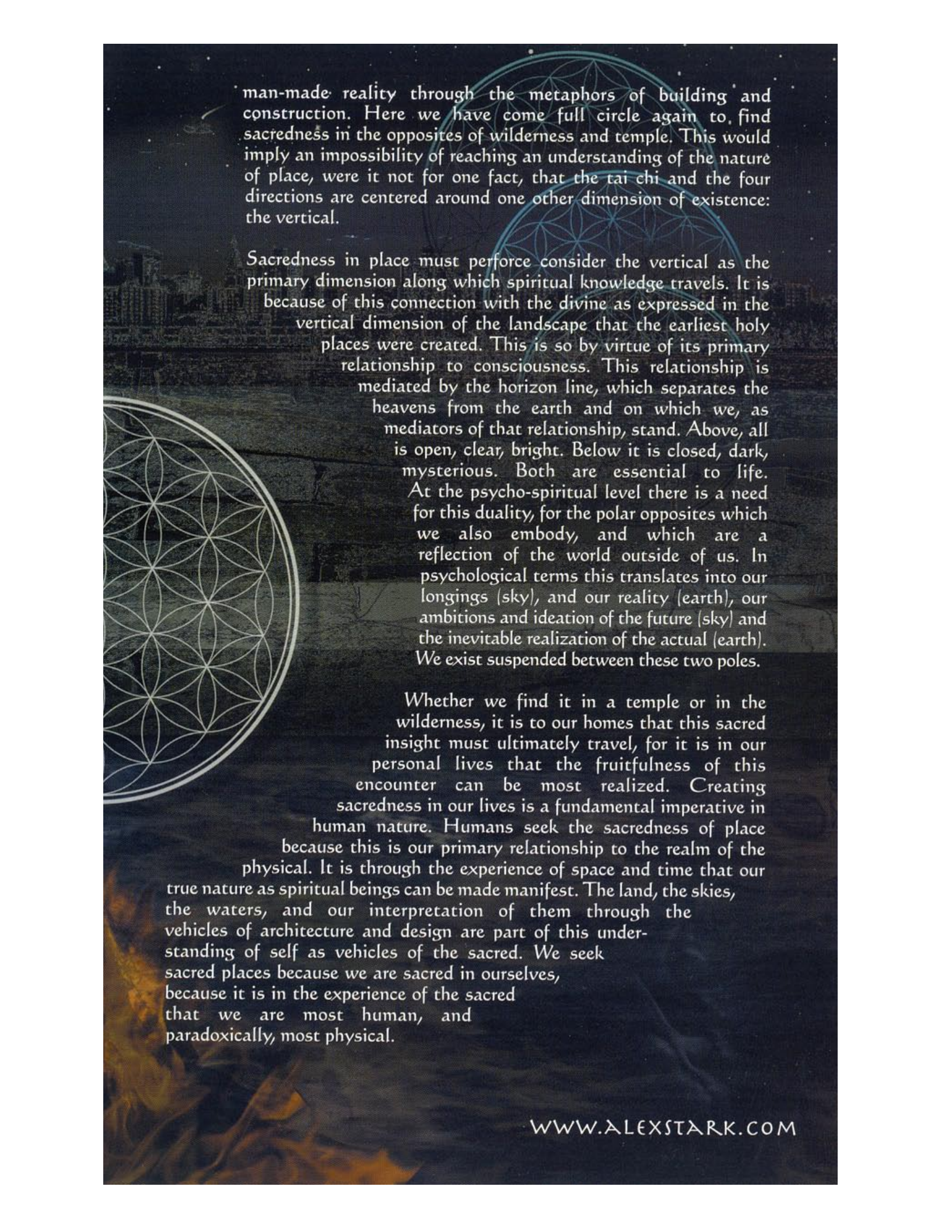


In order to understand what makes a place sacred it is first necessary to acknowledge that all of nature and therefore all places partake of the sacred. Nevertheless, cultures around the world recognize that certain places are somehow more numinous than others, often ascribing these locations with particular powers or characteristics. This custom has persisted into the modern era, with particular springs, wells, or stones as having reputed power to heal specific ailments. But what is this sacredness which we seek in a

place? Our search for sacredness is an attempt to reconcile within ourselves the separation which we experience from the very thing we are searching for. That other which we seek can be experienced in many ways, and each culture will define it according to its history and needs. What is common to all of us, however, is that the experience of the sacred is a reunion with those parts within ourselves which are felt to be separate, disjointed, forgotten. The search for sacredness is a longing for reunification, for a return to origins, to the center from which life itself springs.

It is interesting to note that the word "origin" stems from the Latin word *orere*, meaning to turn to the east. This is an allusion to the fact that the sun, and therefore all of life, originates in that direction. From this point of origin, the sun traverses all four directions and these are therefore seen as the anchors of sacredness in the landscape. The center, often called *tai chi* or "supreme ultimate", represents the physical center around which material reality circles, but it also implies the transcendence of the physical in the moment of creation. It also implies the un-formed, un-named *Tao*, outside of space and time, from which reality springs.

Another clue to the sacredness of place is the fact that the words "*tai chi*", in its original meaning, also refers to the ridgepole of a trussed roof, and therefore to the structure which supports it. The "*tai chi*" can therefore be understood as a simultaneous reference, on the one hand, to the realm of nature in its allusion to the four directions, and also to the



man-made reality through the metaphors of building and construction. Here we have come full circle again to find sacredness in the opposites of wilderness and temple. This would imply an impossibility of reaching an understanding of the nature of place, were it not for one fact, that the tai chi and the four directions are centered around one other dimension of existence: the vertical.

Sacredness in place must perforce consider the vertical as the primary dimension along which spiritual knowledge travels. It is because of this connection with the divine as expressed in the vertical dimension of the landscape that the earliest holy places were created. This is so by virtue of its primary relationship to consciousness. This relationship is mediated by the horizon line, which separates the heavens from the earth and on which we, as mediators of that relationship, stand. Above, all is open, clear, bright. Below it is closed, dark, mysterious. Both are essential to life. At the psycho-spiritual level there is a need for this duality, for the polar opposites which we also embody, and which are a reflection of the world outside of us. In psychological terms this translates into our longings (sky), and our reality (earth), our ambitions and ideation of the future (sky) and the inevitable realization of the actual (earth). We exist suspended between these two poles.

Whether we find it in a temple or in the wilderness, it is to our homes that this sacred insight must ultimately travel, for it is in our personal lives that the fruitfulness of this encounter can be most realized. Creating sacredness in our lives is a fundamental imperative in human nature. Humans seek the sacredness of place because this is our primary relationship to the realm of the physical. It is through the experience of space and time that our true nature as spiritual beings can be made manifest. The land, the skies, the waters, and our interpretation of them through the vehicles of architecture and design are part of this understanding of self as vehicles of the sacred. We seek sacred places because we are sacred in ourselves, because it is in the experience of the sacred that we are most human, and paradoxically, most physical.