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HYPERALLERGIC

Holy Architecture for Earthly Devotion

Created by Virginia Dwan in the 1990s in collaboration with land artist Charles Ross and architect Laban Wingert, the Dwan Light Sanctuary is a secular space for contemplation.

[Angie Rizzo January 28, 2020](#)



An apse in the Dwan Light Sanctuary in Montezuma, New Mexico (all photos by Angie Rizzo)

In the 1990s, Virginia Dwan conceived of the Dwan Light Sanctuary, a secular space for contemplation that would be free and open to the public. Well-known for her career as an art dealer, her longstanding financial support of major earthworks such as Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, and her promotion of conceptual art in the 1960s and '70s, Dwan is also a longtime resident of northern New Mexico. She collaborated with artist Charles Ross, known for his work with prisms and light, and architect Laban Wingert to create the Dwan Light Sanctuary in Montezuma, New Mexico on the grounds of the Montezuma Castle and the United World College.

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A visitor to the sanctuary

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Artist Charles Ross is well-known for his work with prisms

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Rainbows are refracted across the sanctuary by prisms

The sanctuary is just over an hour's drive east of Santa Fe and is best seen on bright, sunny days for optimum light refractions. Upon approaching Montezuma Castle, one might think they have arrived at the Hogwarts School of Wizardry with the backdrop of mountains, turrets reaching toward the sky, and smiling students playing soccer on the front lawn. The light sanctuary is situated in a grove of ponderosa pines just adjacent to the castle and offers a complimentary if not contrasting experience.

The stand-alone building is accessed via a magnetic key card supplied by a helpful security guard and once entered is a world onto itself. All sound ceases except the echo of footsteps. The circular interior is lit by soft, diffused light and stray prismatic rainbows move slowly across the curved, white surfaces of the walls. White benches hug the walls creating seating in the round. An inlaid metal pattern on the floor alludes to an astrological chart complete with planet-like circles in shades of gray. The circular central space opens up on three sides, two of which house prisms which are designed to refract light at certain times of the year, depending on the Earth's orientation.

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The exterior of the Dwan Light Sanctuary

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While the colorful light refractions are what I had hoped to see, I was far more struck by the structure itself and the marriage of art, architecture, and contemplation in a secular setting. The Dwan Light Sanctuary feels like a church, but one that might have existed in a post-apocalyptic sci-fi movie like *Blade Runner*, where nature is a relic of the past. Like a Catholic cathedral, there is an apse, but where an altar would be is a large square plate-glass window through which the gentle swaying of ponderosa branches can be seen. The window functions more like a religious painting, elevating its contents to holy levels. To what or whom do Dwan and Ross suggest holiness? The tree itself? The idea of “nature” in our time of climate catastrophe? The intention at its opening in 1996 most likely differed from a contemporary reading of the space, in which the changing climate is an ever-present influence. The window in the apse acts as an icon with the help of the architectural language of cathedrals. And where there is an icon, there is devotion.