

Water as Aesthetic & Narrative Device: Temple of Debod & Bosjes Chapel

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Abstract

Water and architecture have a mildly complicated relationship. To consider water in relation to architecture in the way one considers the plan, verticality, light, climate, and acoustics is difficult.¹ In that, water is typically the embodiment of the primary element to be excluded from architecture's most primitive consideration, shelter. Water can serve a powerful sensory device, affecting light, climate, and acoustics to influence the feel of an architectural space.² Beyond these elements of architectural design, water can be an imperative literary device, showing metaphor and facilitating interesting commentary on the architecture itself, culture, and narrative. The Temple of Debod (now in Madrid, Spain) offers an example of commentary on the architecture's history and what its current scenario says about society. The Bosjes Chapel in South Africa offers a powerful metaphorical reading using water, similar to its ambiguous form and the multiple readings of its meaning.



Figure 1. (left) Temple of Debod [img src:: Lonely Planet], (right) Bosjes Chapel (right) [img src: ArchDaily].

¹ Geva, Anat. 2011. *Frank Lloyd Wright's Sacred Architecture: Faith, Form, and Building Technology*. New York: Routledge.

² Toy, Maggie (Ed.). 1995 "Architecture & Water". *Architectural Design* 65(1).

Introduction

The Temple of Debod was one of four Egyptian Temples gifted to “western” countries for aiding in the relocation of cultural assets due to the construction of the Aswan Dam in the 1960s (Figure 2). Of those four, only the Temple of Debod was reconstructed in an exterior environment and with a water feature. Unlike most Christian works in proximity to water, the Bosjes Chapel in South Africa evokes the dynamic behavior of the water by which it is situated. This paper aims to extract interpretive meanings in the architecture with its relation to water, as well as indicate the detriment these water features have on their respective structures. This poses the question of whether the aesthetic and narrative effects are worth the material destruction.



Figure 2. (from left to right) (a) Temple of Debod [img src: Madrid Destino Cultura Turismo y Negocio S. A.], (b) Temple of Dendur, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York [img src: Metropolitan Museum of Art], (c) Temple of Taffeh, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, the Netherlands [img src: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden], (d) Temple of Ellesyia, Museo Egizio, Turin, Italy [img src: Inexhibit].

Background

The Temple of Debod was once located near Aswan, in southern Egypt. During the construction of the Aswan Dam in 1960, Spain helped Egypt move the Abu Simbel temples. In 1968, Egypt gave Spain the Temple of Debod for aiding in this effort. The temple was taken apart stone by stone and reassembled in its current location in

Madrid, Spain in 1972. Originally constructed ~250-200 BCE by Azekheramun, Ptolemy VI expanded the core shrine out and added three gates and built a walled enclosure around the temple in 186-145 BCE.³ Largely regarded as a temple to the god, Amun, Arnold (2003) indicates that the original temple was to the god, Amun, but that Ptolemy VI reassigned the temple to the goddess, Isis.⁴

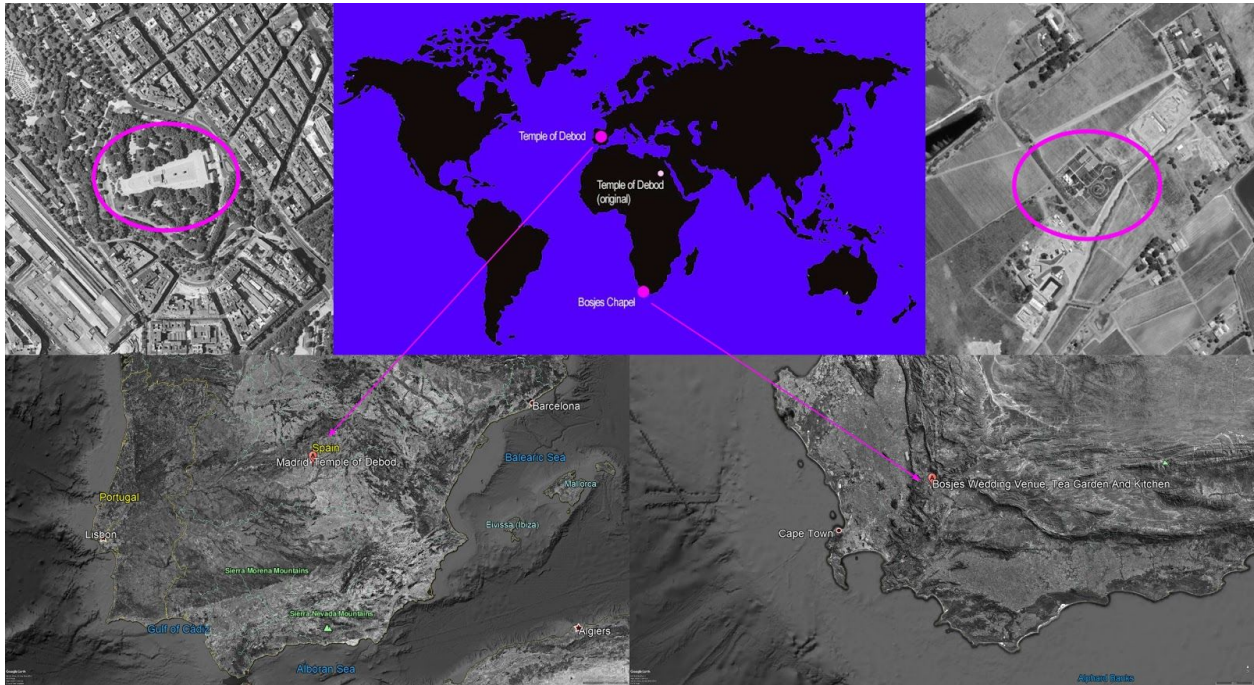


Figure 3. (left) Temple of Debod, (top) city-scale satellite image, (bottom) regional-scale satellite image; (right) Bosjes Chapel, (top) city-scale satellite image, (bottom) regional scale satellite image [img src: Google Earth Pro].

The Bosjes Chapel in South Africa is 110 km from Cape Town (a little over an hour), and is part of a larger wedding venue and vineyard. The chapel was built in the Breederiver Valley, Witzenberg, South Africa in 2016 by Steyn Studio, an architecture firm based out of London.⁵

³ Arnold, Dieter. 1999. *Temples of the Last Pharaohs*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Arnold, Dieter. 2003. *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Egyptian Architecture*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

⁵ "Bosjes Chapel / Steyn Studio" 20 Mar 2017. *ArchDaily*. Accessed 23 Apr 2019. <https://www.archdaily.com/867369/bosjes-chapel-steyn-studio/>



Figure 4. (left) Temple of Debod interior shrine [img src: Flickr] , (above right) Bosjes Chapel interior altar [img src: ArchDaily].

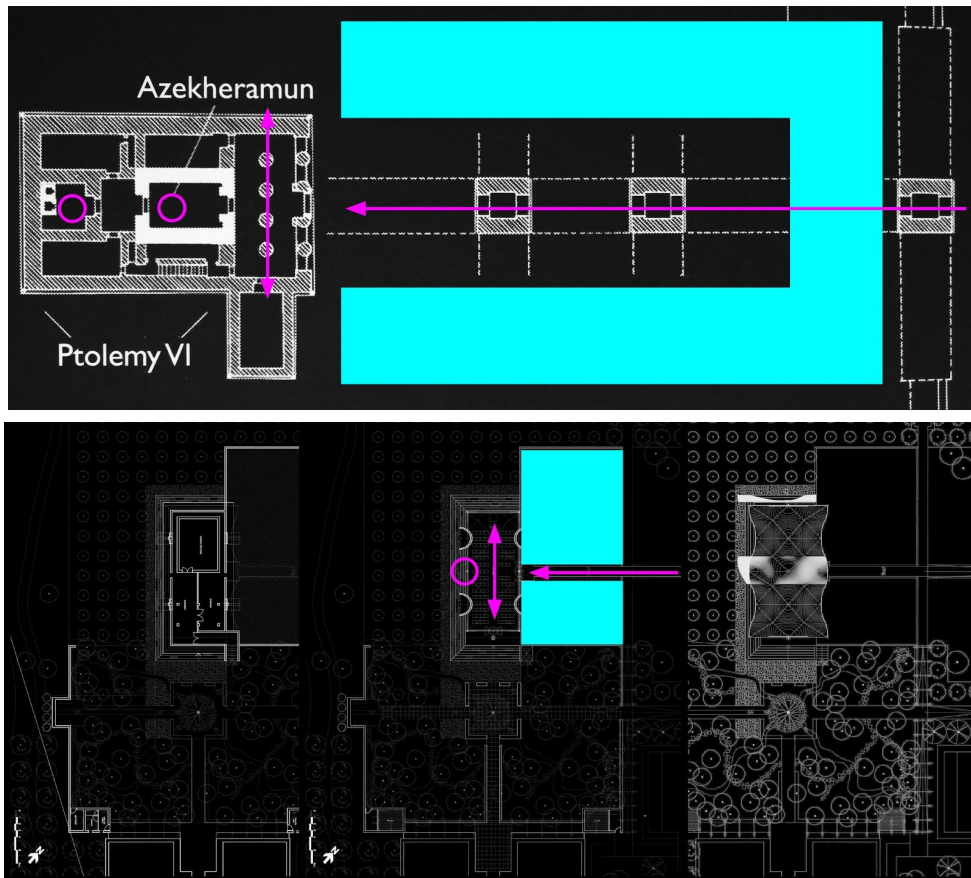


Figure 5. (top) Temple of Debod floor plan [img src: Arnold 2003], (above) Bosjes Chapel floor plans [img src: ArchDaily].
*Diagram elements by the author.

Focal Points & Procession

The Temple of Debod reaches its focal point with its shrine to Amun (later Isis), and the Bosjes Chapel's focal point lies behind the altar in a wooden crucifix mounted on the chapel's structural framing (Figure 4). While not unique to Egyptian temples or Christian chapels, indicating these strong processual forms is imperative to the use of water in each of these projects (Figure 5).

Water as Aesthetic & Narrative

Water plays a significant part in the narrative and metaphorical readings of both architectural works. The Temple of Debod was originally in an environment devoid of water, yet near the Nile River, and subsequently removed from this environment due the effect of water (Aswan Dam) to the severe detriment of Abu Simbel. Now, the temple is surrounded by a body of water. This can be read as considerate to the architecture, allowing it water after being deprived water, or "bringing the Nile to the temple" to, in a sense, reduce homesickness. Or, this could be read as insensitive to the architecture, placing the detrimental element to its brethren (Abu Simbel) immediately adjacent to the structure.



Figure 6. Temple of Debod processual entry [img src: Tomato].



Figure 7. Chapel of Bosjes processual entry [img src: ArchDaily].

The reading (or meaning) of water with the Bosjes Chapel is far more ambiguous and also pertains to the form of the architecture itself. One may be reminded of the scene from the bible of Peter walking out to Christ on the water, in the way the reflecting pools flank a path to the chapel and to the crucifix (Christ). Furthermore, the building's curvilinear form evokes the form of water itself, as if it is drawing its form from the pools before it (Figure 8). However, the client and architect discuss Psalm 36:7 as inspiration for the form of the chapel as wings.⁶ Other readings indicate that the architectural form draws from the surrounding mountainous landscape.⁷

⁶ "Chapel". *Steyn Studio*. Accessed 23 Apr 2019. <http://www.steynstudio.com/projects/chapel/>

⁷ "Architectural Masterpiece - Bosjes Chapel". 21 Apr 2017. *Expresso Show*. Accessed 23 Apr 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COwVD-XuYIk&list=PLD9XhwFgPuV0cyuMKhR5hFWk4sQa1mYSk&index=2&t=0s>

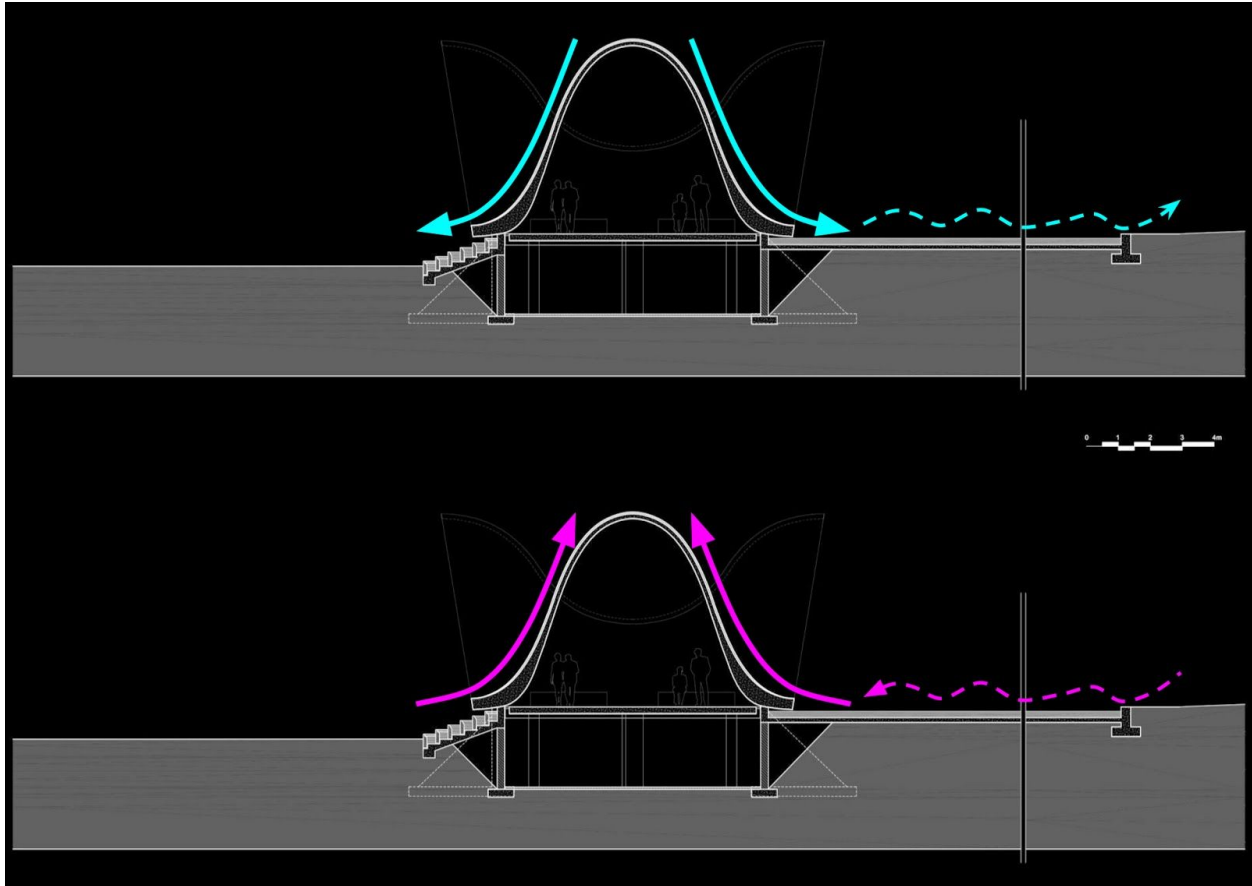


Figure 8. Chapel of Bosjes building section [img src: ArchDaily], (top) rain water movement, (above) architectural form drawing its identity from the movement of water. *Diagram elements by the author.

Water as Detriment

. The Temple of Debod being a sandstone structure, and a structure that was moved to a radically different climate, makes the temple susceptible to considerable degradation (Figure 9). At least one source indicates proposals for a glass dome to encase the temple. This is due to the degree of degradation of the sandstone from moisture.⁸ This dome would allow for regulation of entry (to reduce vandalism) and environment (to control humidity exposure).

⁸ O'Sullivan, Feargus. 18 Jul 2016. "Why Madrid's Ancient Egyptian Temple Needs to Be Encased in a Glass Bubble". Accessed 23 Apr 2019. <https://www.citylab.com/design/2016/07/madrid-ancient-egyptian-temple-glass-bubble-debod/491723/>



Figure 9. (left) Temple of Debod in the late 90s [img src: Arnold 1999], (right) Bosjes Chapel formwork and reinforcement during application of shotcrete [img src: PERI Group].

The chapel is primarily a concrete shell structure (Figure 9).⁹ Two portions of the shell almost touch the reflecting pools, seemingly dispersing rain water into the pools (Figure 7). However, their proximity to the pools could cause considerable mildew and mold build-up on the concrete shell structure. The central dip in the curvilinear shell could also pool rain water, where it would need to be regularly siphoned out.



Figure 10. (left) Temple of Debod, lotus blossom capital, [img src: Pinterest], (right) Bosjes Chapel, interior finishes [img src: ArchDaily].

⁹ "Bosjes Chapel, South Africa" *PERI Group*. Accessed 04 May 2019. <https://www.peri.com/en/projects/cultural-buildings/bosjes-chapel.html>

Conclusion

The Temple of Debod and Bosjes Chapel present unique examples of water and architecture in complex relationships of narrative, metaphor, and physical detriment.

The Temple of Debod exhibits a more historical and contextual metaphorical narrative of meaning closely tied to its origins in Egypt and with the Nile River, as well as its current water feature. Furthermore, the temple stands to be in considerable danger of degradation due to water. The Bosjes Chapel shows a more interpretive and metaphorical narrative of meaning behind an abstract form, and how that form and its direct proximity to water can become detriment to its own existence.

Notes

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Image Credits

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