

# Sublime in Architecture: Promotion of Culture through Sublime Architecture

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## Abstract

Bhutan, with its rapid development and being consumed by technology, is slowly losing its cultures, and its significance. The present cultural centres are decentralized and disinclined to change of times. The features of spiritualism or divinity can only be seen in religious structures and is monotonous. Thus, this study comprises of ways to derive and inculcate the design features of 'Sublime in Architecture' or spiritualism in architecture in a cultural centre, which are mandatory for a structure which would showcase the nation's rich culture. There are no concrete design features suggesting sublime or spiritualism in architecture. Thus, phenomenological method is applied to derive the features of sublime from ideologies and philosophies, and through case studies. The overall design features derived also adheres to the traditional features, and thus, can be regarded as the 'first contemporary sublime in Bhutan.

**Keywords:** *Architecture, Sublime, Contemporary architectural style, Cultural centre*


## 1. INTRODUCTION

People, over the years, have achieved great significance in regards to arts, painting and poetry which can even immortalize human beings and monuments. These arts and poetry represent an elusive characteristic that the observer can connect and reciprocate the essence portrayed by the art. Similarly, in case of architecture, various designers have tried to convey their ideas and feelings through their design and some have achieved this great feat through their extensive ideologies. Such works are present to this date and is considered as a masterpiece. Such a piece of work is 'sublime' in nature. According to Kate Nesbitt, the meaning of sublime is found in its intellectual reach or spiritual dimension, and it alludes to enormous concepts such as space, time, death, and divinity. The study of nature, the character of man, and their artistic output in poetry, painting, and architecture were all influenced by Kant and Burke's ideas of the beautiful and sublime. The essence of sublime in architecture is an intangible phenomenon and should be perceived by an individual. Such feelings one gets from a structure cannot be described in concrete terms. Such an essence can evoke endless thoughts and emotions.

Vitruvius, in his Ten Books of Architecture outlines the three principles for a building to be successful. They are, firmitas implying to structural stability, utilitas for functionality and venustas meaning beauty that can evoke

emotions (Tshendup, 2016). The third principle mainly describes a capability of a building to be able to connect at intimate level.

**Table 1:** Basic definition of sublime in architecture

Sublime				
Values	Moral	Intellectual	Spiritual	Artistic
Output	Strongest emotion	Feeling capability	Perception	Aesthetics

## 2. LITERATURE STUDIES

### 2.1. The sublime and modern architecture

In our current times, the essence of the sublime is being acknowledged and developing. When it comes to the sublime, it's a bodily and spiritual experience. The immanent sublime is the path to philosophical importance in architecture. It also enables the recovery of the pair's second noun: beauty. In the framework of the sublime, beauty is returning in modern thinking. One may expect the sublime, given its important role in Enlightenment thought, to repress beauty. The beautiful, according to controversial thinker Peter Eisenman, has been a suppressor, ruling over the grotesque. Diana Agrest presents a model for reconsidering the aesthetic categories' relationship. In this paradigm, if the beautiful is the "normative" aesthetic discourse, the sublime may be considered a "analytical and exploratory discourse" which is the polar opposite of it. This may also be described as a "self-transforming

discourse," which is another term for sublime and this factor has had the greatest impact on the development of modern architecture. The only issue is that while contemporary constructions are capable of restricting physical existence, they fail to capture the essence of sublime and bring an individual into personal contact with the structure.

## **2.2. Man, and nature**

The relationship between man and nature has been a philosophical problem that phenomenologists have focused on. The concept of nature as "the other" in relation to civilization has long acted as a uniting factor. Systematic allusions to or ties with nature were utilized to generate meaning in architecture prior to industrialization. Architects' work continues to give shelter, both physically and metaphorically, by transcending the forces of nature. The human fight against a terrifying threat Nature typifies Enlightenment ideas of the terrifying sublime (Nesbitt, 1995). As a result, aesthetics offers a philosophical framework within which such questions might be discussed.

## **2.3. Spirituality in architecture**

Humans are spiritual by nature and virtue, since we have an endless ability that allows us to connect with everything around us. Anything that motivates us and leads us to the finer sides of our nature is seen to be worthy of our attention. According to Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality, the spirit of a place necessitates that an individual's moral responsibility be extended to their community and its larger surroundings. Buddhists believe that we all possess divine beauty, and that valuing it will lead to a civilization that is more in tune with other species and our planet, which is precisely what we want. Religious structures are usually devoted to a god and constructed according to religious guidelines. Any religious structure can have spiritual architecture, but it does not have to be a religious structure. Spiritual architecture speaks to our spirits. It reaches out to a portion of our psyche. It becomes spiritual when architecture establishes a connection between the quantifiable and the ineffable. In architecture, light, shape, material, space, color, and structure are all employed to create a beautiful, sensual ambiance. The building serves as a backdrop for a more intimate and personal spiritual experience.

## **2.4. Relationship between culture and sublime**

Culture represents the ethnicity, people and their way of life. It also represents religion of a place. It can also narrate the identity and history of a place or a country. Since culture represents the rich aspects of society, a cultural centre should have the essence of sublime and should elucidate a natural aura.

Also, culture has been related to spiritualism from ancient history. There are scenarios where cultural aspects has impacted the design of a structures which would have an immense significance to the society. Sen no Rikyu, a Japanese poet, transformed webi tea into ethnics and aesthetics by incorporating it into every component of the tea ceremony, from the seating space to the technique of brewing and drinking tea (Tshendup, 2016).

In Bhutanese architecture, culture has impacted greatly to the design output. Religious structures such as the Dzongs have typical designs. A dzong usually incorporates a central courtyard which is mainly for ceremonial gatherings. The central area has an Uste of the highest significance. The walls are all covered with the paintings of God and saints. The dzong being a structure of sublime in nature is greatly impacted by the culture. Similarly, there are other structures that are affected by the culture.

## **2.5. Perceiver and the sublime**

The design of a sublime structure itself is an expression of the sublime. Although the design interprets the sublime or the spiritualism, the main intention of the sublime design is to make the inhabitants or the perceiver feel the essence of sublime. For this, the structure should be able to evoke strong emotions to the perceiver and should be able to connect to an intimate level. To achieve this the structure should emphasize to stimulate the senses; the visual, acoustic or the auditory, scent or smell, touch, detail, material and form, and light and shadow.

## **3. METHODOLOGY: DERIVATION OF SUBLIME DESIGN FEATURES**

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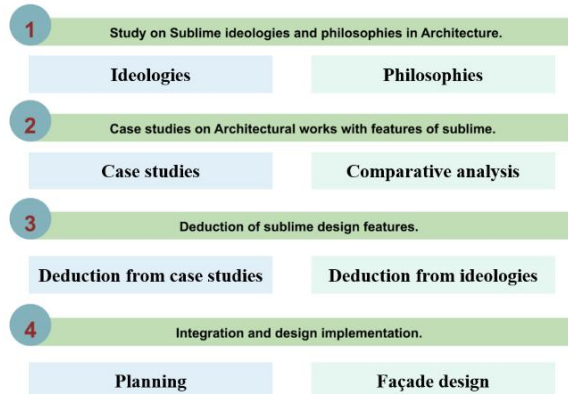


Fig. 1: Methodology for derivation of sublime design features

### 3.1. Study on Sublime Ideologies and Philosophies in Architecture

According to Edmund Thomas, there are 21 elements of the sublime with architectural meaning:

1. Height with Eminence
2. Ecstasy
3. Avoidance of Swelling
4. Reached by an arduous ascent
5. Attainability of the Sublime
6. Cosmic dimensions
7. Unity
8. Amplification
9. Monumentality
10. Response
11. The exhilaration of materials
12. The brightness of figures.
13. Rustification
14. Art and nature
15. Variety
16. Mass
17. Visualization: 'to make the hearer see'.
18. Rhythm
19. Perfection
20. Hyperbole
21. Arrangement

## 4. CASE STUDIES

### Case 1: Bruder Klaus Field Chapel

Location: Germany

Architect: Peter Zumthor

Sublime features:

*Form:* The rigid outside form reminds us of gravity and the ground, while the organic cave-like interior ties us to nature.

*Light:* The light in the room is both tranquil and provocative.

*Colours:* Contrasts of light and darkness.

*Touch:* The rough texture forces one to be fully present in the moment.

*Smell:* Makes every space breathe the weather.



Fig. 2: Bruder Klaus Field Chapel (Source: Archdaily)

### Case 2: Therme Vals

Location: Switzerland

Architect: Peter Zumthor

Sublime features:

*Color:* The blue bold colour adds some cold and mysterious tone to the sunlight.

*Material and light:* The water adores the stone more than any other material. Because the stone retains the water, light enters in specific areas, causing the stone to light up, the water to sparkle, and an indecent environment to develop.

*Acoustic:* In the shadow of the lateral rooms, sound of water rings differently with the echo of the room. Thus, a serene and peaceful atmosphere is created.



Figure 3: Therme Vals (Source: Arch daily)

### Case 3: Jewish Museum

Location: Berlin

Architect: Daniel Libeskind

Sublime features:

*Materials:* RCC is used in the interior to emphasize instances of empty spaces and dead ends when just a sliver of light enters the room.

*Light:* A sliver of light gives hope at the darkest periods when you feel like you'll never escape.

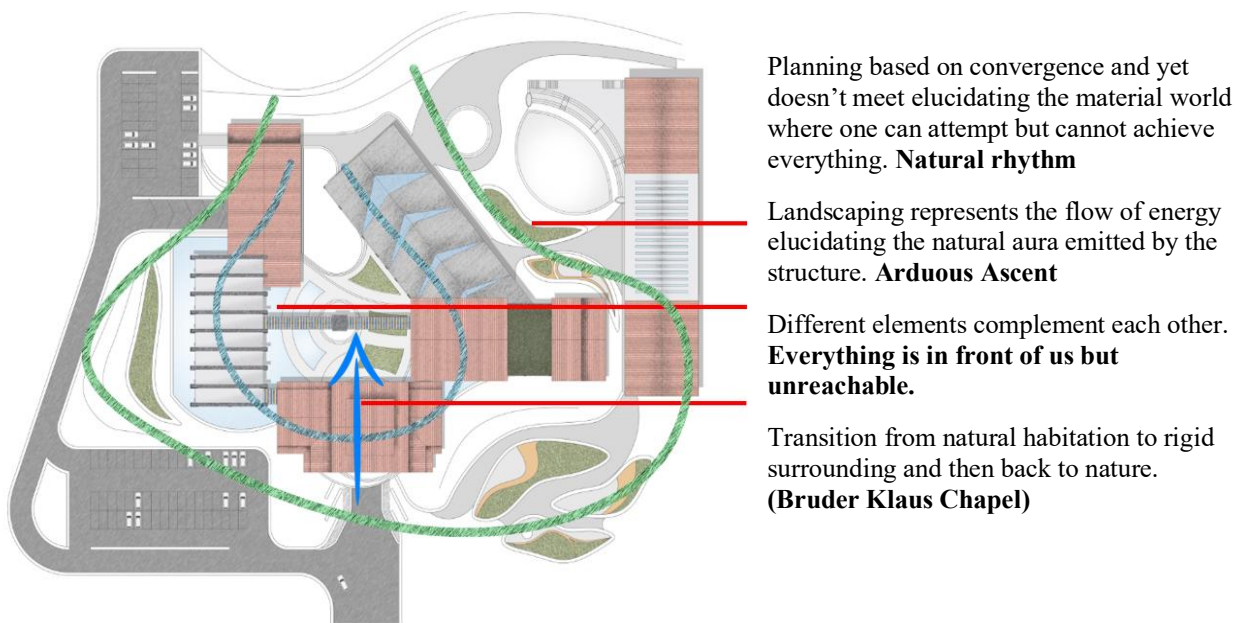


Figure 4: Planning



Figure 5: Jewish Museum (Source: Archdaily)

## 5. RESULT: INTEGRATION OF SUBLIME IN DESIGN

The whole planning is done in order to show an essence of convergence, yet the structures doesn't seem to meet and close the gap which elucidates the reality of material world where one can attempt but cannot achieve everything, a natural rhythm of the world. To subsidise the shortcoming of the structure to converge at a point, the landscapes also try to converge at the same point but again fails to do so. The landscaping represents the natural flow of energy emitted by the structure and are shaped in a fluid like manner to represent the aura. Complimentary elements are used in the design. The surface of water below the structure compliments each other. It also represents another truth of this materialistic world where everything is in front of us yet unreachable as the

structure cannot submerge in the water even though it is just below it. A sublime feature from the Bruder Klaus Field Chapel is also integrated; transition from the natural habitation to rigid surrounding and back to the nature. The area has abundance of greenery and when one enters the structure, there is rigidity of the public zone but then the courtyard gives the feeling of connecting back to the nature.



Figure 6: Aura landscaping



**Skyline**

Entry point shows **Height with Eminence**. And gradual deterioration of everything.

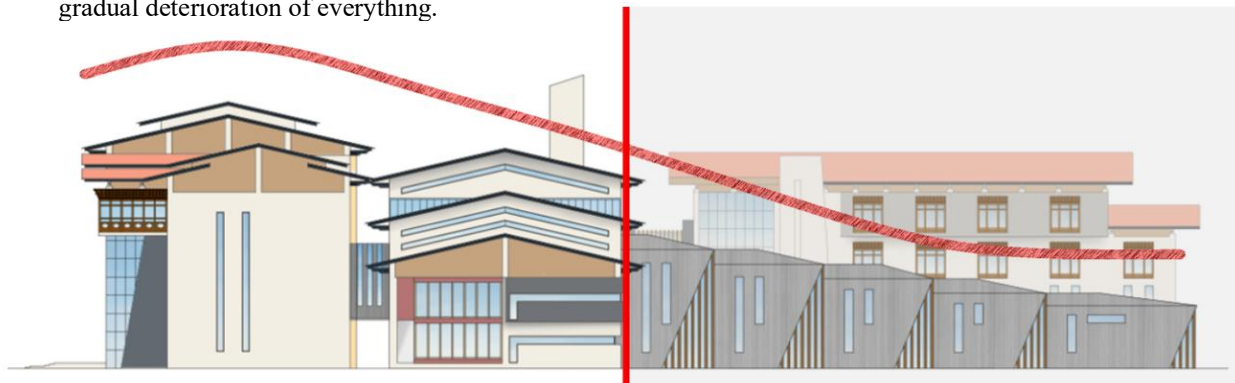
**Difference of time and cosmic dimension**

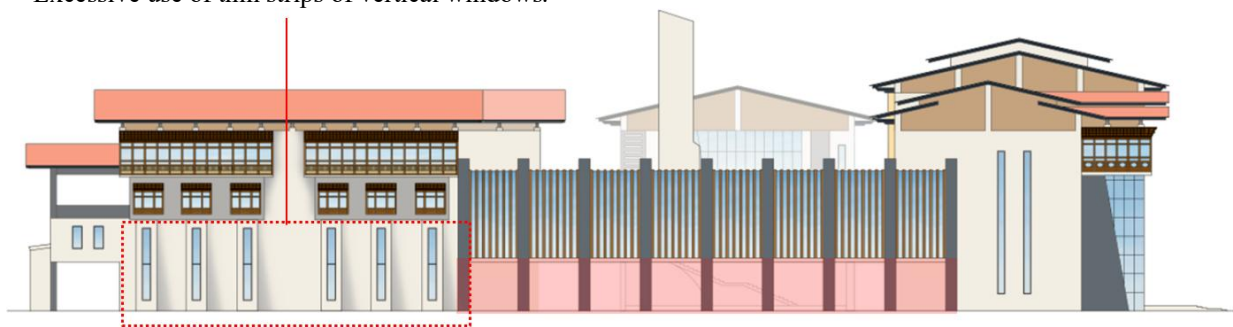
Figure 8: Right Elevation

**Ray of Hope**

Excessive use of thin strips of vertical windows.

**Every space breathe air**

Spaces open to air and can feel every weather.



Essence of lightweight, levitation and water below for self-reflection and realization.

Figure 7: Left Elevation

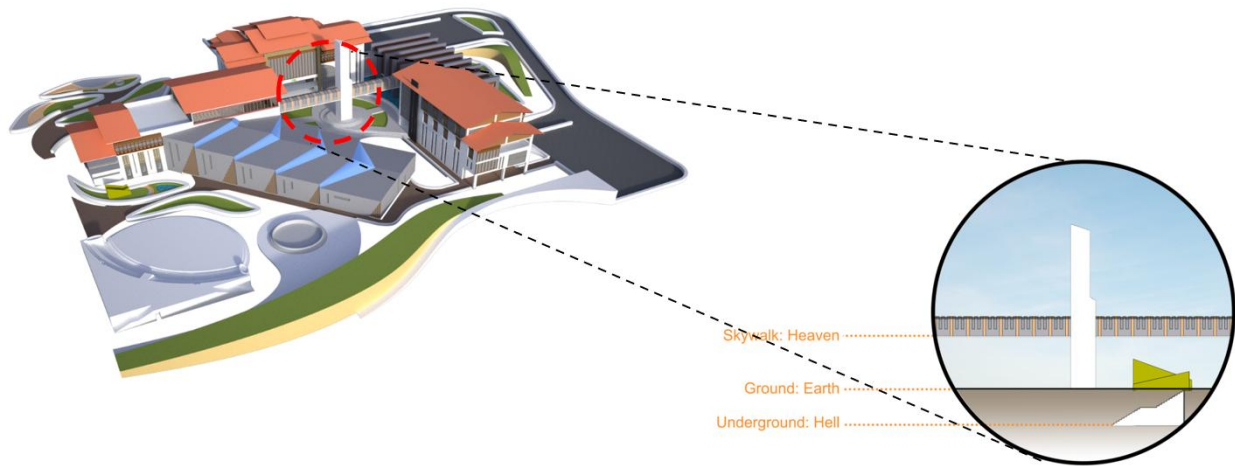
*From one's perception, as can be seen...* From the entrance, it has the view with the greatest height and shows the essence of Height with Eminence. After that, there is gradual deterioration of height which shows that everything has its own time and doesn't last forever and diminishes over time. The production zone, even though integrated together with the rest of the structures, has a different style, which shows the difference in time and cosmic dimensions. This separation shows the difference in the material world and the cosmic dimension.

The design also features excessive use of thin vertical windows which depicts a 'ray of hope', an intricate feature of sublime which was also incorporated by Daniel Libeskind in the design of Jewish Museum.

The circulation has three levels; the main circulation level on the surface of the ground which represents the realm of earth. The skywalk incorporated in the design signifies an essence of heaven and tries to connect the two realms. The underground passageway which connects the outdoor landscape and the basement of public exhibition hall, represents the realm of hell. These three realms being represented by the three-tier circulation elucidates the attempt to achieve divinity by the structure.

Peter Zumthor achieved sublime in his architectural works through the use of a concept of altering openings and closure while designing which gave a uniform pattern of shadow.

Similarly, the National Centre for Culture also incorporates this concept. The commercial zone has thin strips of window followed by strips of



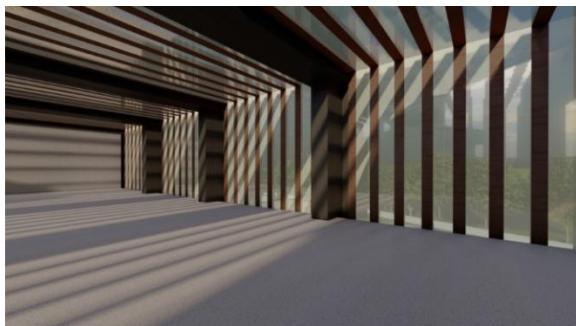
*Figure 9: Three Tier Circulation*

closure which casts shadow and at the same time gives ray of light as shown in the Fig. 10.

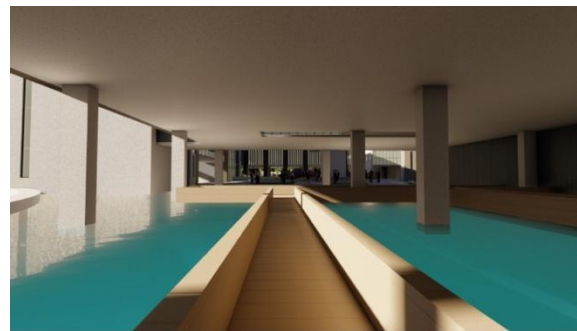
The pathway on the ground floor of Exhibition and Learning zone floats on water. The colour and texture of the water with the solid surface of the walls and the pathway gives an elusive yet welcoming creates a serene and pure environment. Also, the echo created by the water with the solid surface rings a serene and a blissful sound. Thus, this area is visually as well as acoustically enhanced. The commercial zone appears to levitate on the surface of water which gives a sense of weightlessness and absence of gravity.



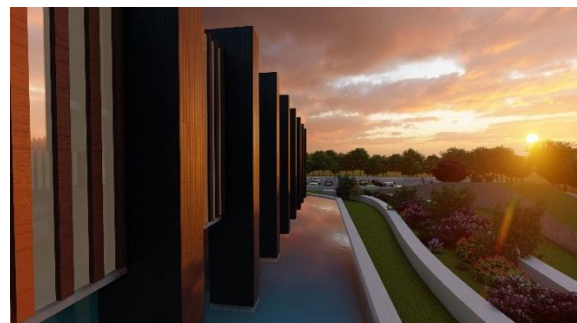
*Figure 10: Underground passageway*



*Figure 11: Concept of alteration of light and shadow*



*Figure 12: Visual and auditory serenity*



*Figure 13: Essence of weightlessness*

The total site area is 8.87 acres (35914 sqm). Of the total area, 1.59 acres or 17.9% is covered by the structure. The total built up area by the structure is 4.03 acres (16294 sqm). The site also incorporates efficient number of parking for both the visitors and the staffs. For the higher officials, basement parking is also available for use. For outdoor events and ceremonies, open air theatre or Tendrel Thang is also incorporated efficiently between the Production zone and the Public Exhibition Hall. The outdoor landscaping is divided into three sectors, Leisure Valley Sector 1,2, and 3 with different landscaping



## 6. DESIGN TRANSLATION

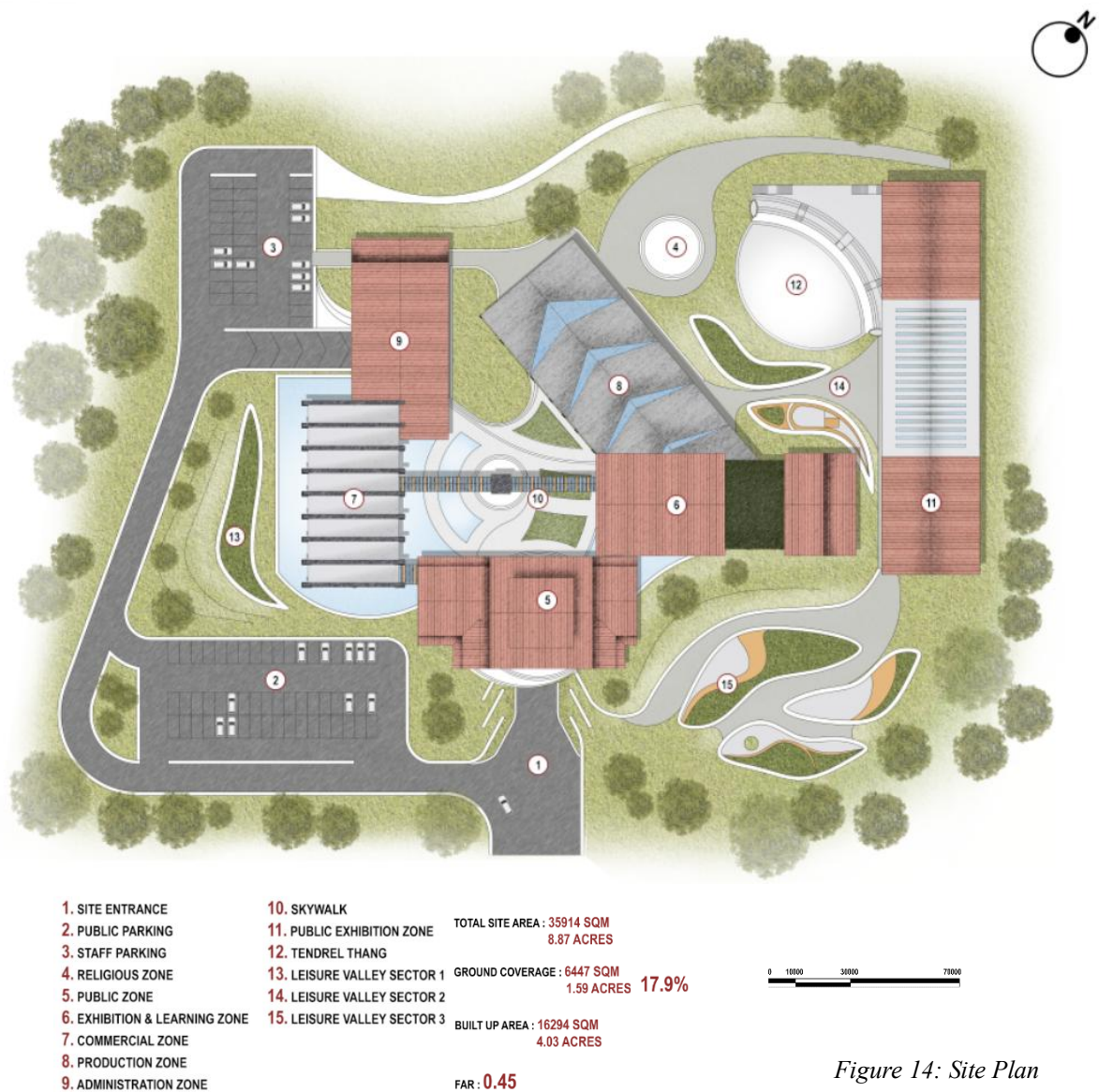


Figure 14: Site Plan

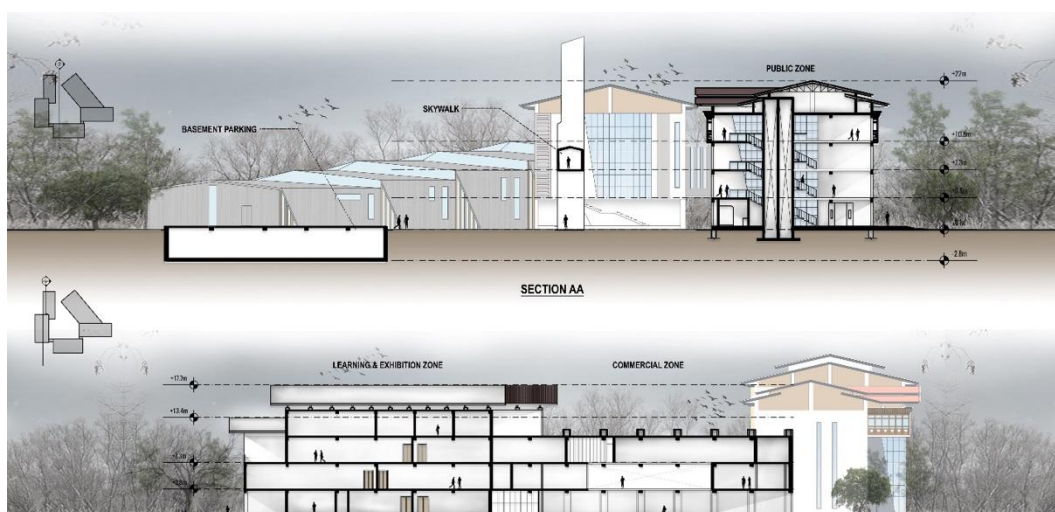


Figure 16: Sections





Figure 18: Overall view 1



Figure 17: Overall View 2

features. These sectors are mainly incorporated to exhibit cultural aspects in open area. It also has recreational facilities like water bodies and benches to be used by the visitors.

Section AA shows the vertical circulation of the public zone. It also shows the height of the skywalk with respect to the other structures. Section BB shows the interior of the commercial zone and the administration zone. It also shows the light shaft of the commercial zone. The Section CC shows the interior of the exhibition

and learning and zone, mainly the interior of the library. It also shows the height of the skywalk which connects the two zones. Section DD shows the interior of the production zone mainly the auditorium. It shows the two-tier seating area of the auditorium and the ceiling design. It shows the placement of the skylights of the auditorium and the backstage area. The section also shows the interior of the exhibition zone with the indoor reading area.



The features of sublime are enhanced during the setting and the rising of the sun. The commercial zone reflects and casts the warm shadow from the sun during dusk. Also, the water below gives the perfect reflection of the structure. The view from the light shaft of the commercial zone can be considered as a view with the strongest emotion.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The importance of sublime features in a structure such as cultural centre ascertains the architectural value it has and the significance it grants to a structure. This study has elucidated the importance of sublime in architecture for significant structures and how such design features can be derived. Furthermore, these features have been efficiently inculcated for the design of National Centre for Culture. To deduce the sublime design features, a designer should not solely depend on the ideology and the philosophies since they tend to contradict with one another. Even though sublime design features can be derived and incorporated, the structures do not become sublime. The true essence of sublime should be felt by an individual as one inhabits the space.

### Recommendations

*From the perspective of the designer:*

To design a sublime structure, one should not get restricted by the contradiction of different ideologies and philosophies.

*From the perspective of the observer/ perceiver:*

To feel the essence of sublime or divinity, one should not judge the structure at a glance but should let emotions to flow naturally and be the judge.

*Further research*

Basis for the design of cultural centres has been outlined in this study along with the design features of sublime in architecture. From this comprehensive study, further studies and research can be carried out which can bring insight or new ideas to comprehend this study. The following are some of the proposed areas:

- The principle of aesthetics and the sublime.
- Design of outdoor cultural centre.
- Acoustic design for cultural centre.
- Sublime landscaping: the design for sublime recreational parks.
- Sublime Architecture as a concept for urban design and development.
- Lighting design to comprehend sublime architecture.

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