



By Beth Broome

Against the backdrop of Rome's magnificent and enduring architecture, a collection of miniature portable prayer spaces has sprouted.

American architect Michael Herrman designed the Nomadic Prayer Spaces, which can be transported in a compact car and erected in less than an hour, to serve as an amalgamating force for the city's burgeoning and fractured migrant communities.

A Rome Prize fellowship in architecture at the American Academy brought Herrman to Rome to continue his research on the relationship between migration and architecture and the nontraditional ways transient populations use city spaces. Observing the impromptu Sunday gatherings of Romanians in parking lots, public squares, and the like underscored for the architect the powerful unifying force of religious activities for scattered communities and served as the genesis for this project.

With a goal of preserving the gatherings' simplicity, visibility, and accessibility, Herrman set about creating a form

Finding religion in a shoe-box sanctuary

Prayer Space #2 at Parco Appia Antica (previous page). Illuminated Prayer Space #1 set in front of Sant'Anastasia basilica (right). A close-up of Prayer Space #2's resin and fiberglass panels (below).



that could be deployed as needed in various meeting places across the city, adapting to the particular requirements of site and population, and then removed. Lightweight and inexpensive, these sacred spaces would help the “congregation” demarcate a gathering area and protect them from the elements while remaining connected to the city around them. “There was something beautiful about the fact that the gatherings were outside,” says Herrman. “I wanted to intervene as little as possible.”

Nomadic Space #1 was constructed specifically for the Romanian community. In the tradition of Christian places of worship, the church is cruciform in shape, though as a twist, the form sits vertically. Made of interchangeable aluminum angle and T extrusions covered with a translucent stretchable-polyurethane high-strength fabric, the space, which can be illuminated with video projections by night, can adapt in size and form according to the community's needs. Longer or shorter angles can be substituted according to the number of congregants, and the arms of the cross can also open and

close as needed. “I didn't want to make a space that imposed itself on the audience,” says Herrman, “Instead, I wanted a space that responded to them.”

Nomadic Space #2 evolved as other communities became interested in the project. Herrman responded with a space that was not linked to any specific religion. The size of the aluminum frame for Nomadic Space #2 is variable, and the flexibility of the flat aluminum extrusions suspended within the frame allows the users to create a form with the most meaning for them: the semicircular dome of a church, the flat dome of a mosque, an apse, or the rectilinear shape of a Buddhist temple. Handmade polyester resin and fiberglass panels (which can be illuminated) are bolted together in a chain formation and manipulated to fit the selected configuration.

There are currently three Nomadic Prayer Spaces scattered about Rome (with two more now in Paris). In parking lots or beside iconic buildings and ruins, newcomers to the city can be found assembling in these small shelters that have reduced the place of worship to its most basic elements, connecting the congregants to their origins while firmly rooting them in their new environment. ■

