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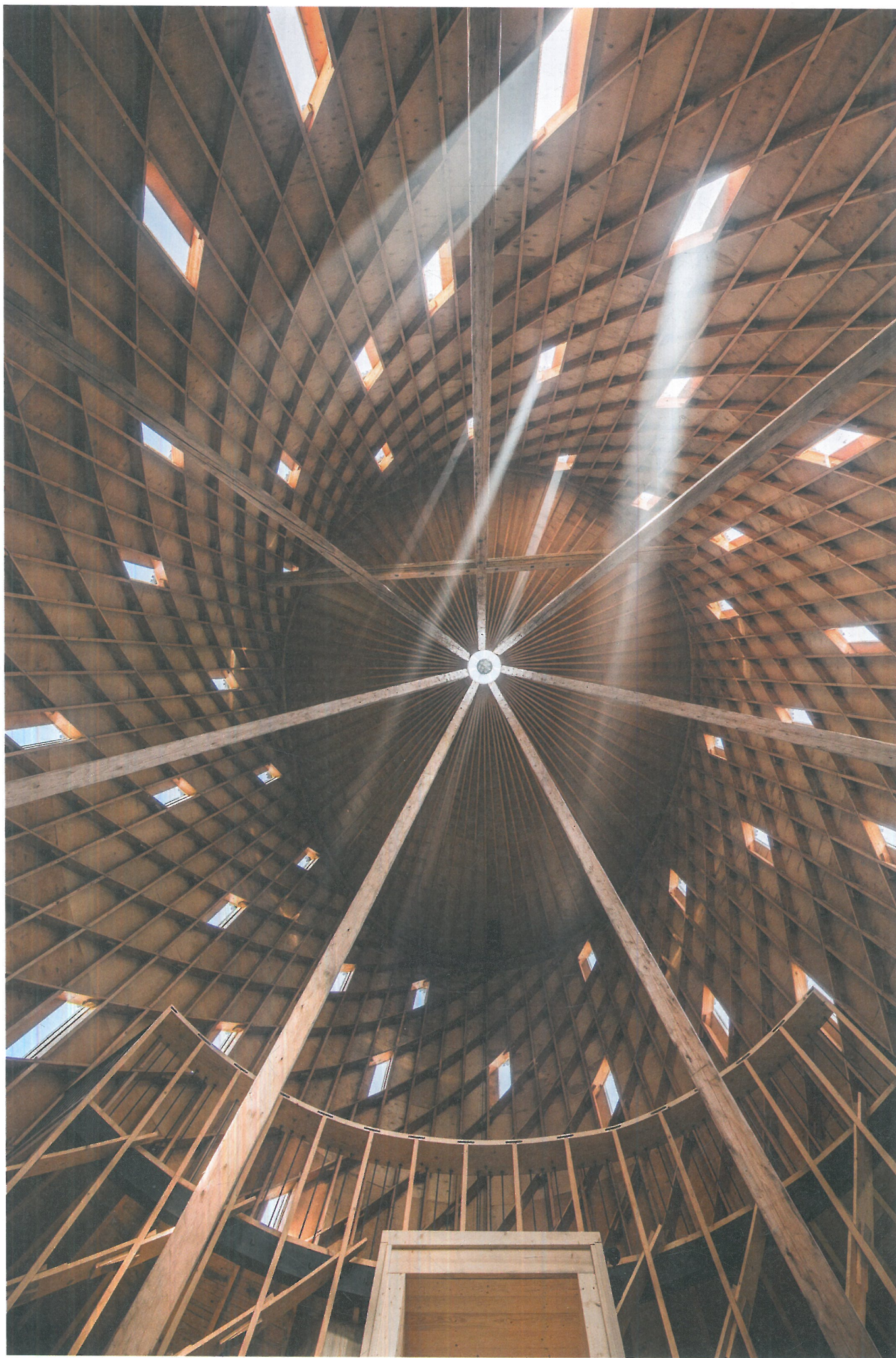
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● Our Lady of Sorrows Chapel. Located in Nesvačilka, Czechia by RCNKS (2024)

It begins with light - natural or shaped - that falls from above, evoking mystery rather than clarity.



In an era marked by rapid transformation and profound challenges, architecture finds itself at a pivotal crossroads. Beyond its traditional roles of shelter and utility, there lies an emerging imperative: to craft spaces that evoke awe, foster connection, and nourish the human spirit.

# ARCHI- TECTURE OF AWE

Designing for Transcendence  
in Times of Change

● Natalia Olszewska (1989)

Polish neuroscientist and the co-founder of Impronta. Her work focuses on the intersection of neuroscience, cognition, and innovation. She is particularly interested in how scientific understanding of the brain can inform creative processes and human-centered design. She has collaborated on international research and innovation projects bridging science and the arts.

Text Natalia Olszewska

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WHAT IS AWE, AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

THE HUMAN NEED FOR TRANSCENDENCE

In times of rupture, we don't just rebuild - we rethink. We restart. The PULSE 2025 Festival arrives at a moment when architecture is called not only to adapt, but to re-imagine its purpose. Our task is no longer simply to build efficiently or sustainably, though those remain vital. It is to create spaces that address a deeper, often unnamed need. A need for meaning, for connection, for something that helps us feel alive again, when much of life has been flattened by acceleration, anxiety and abstraction. That something may well be awe. And in this moment of cultural and ecological complexity, I believe awe is not only a spiritual emotion or poetic luxury - it is a neurobiological key to individual and collective renewal.

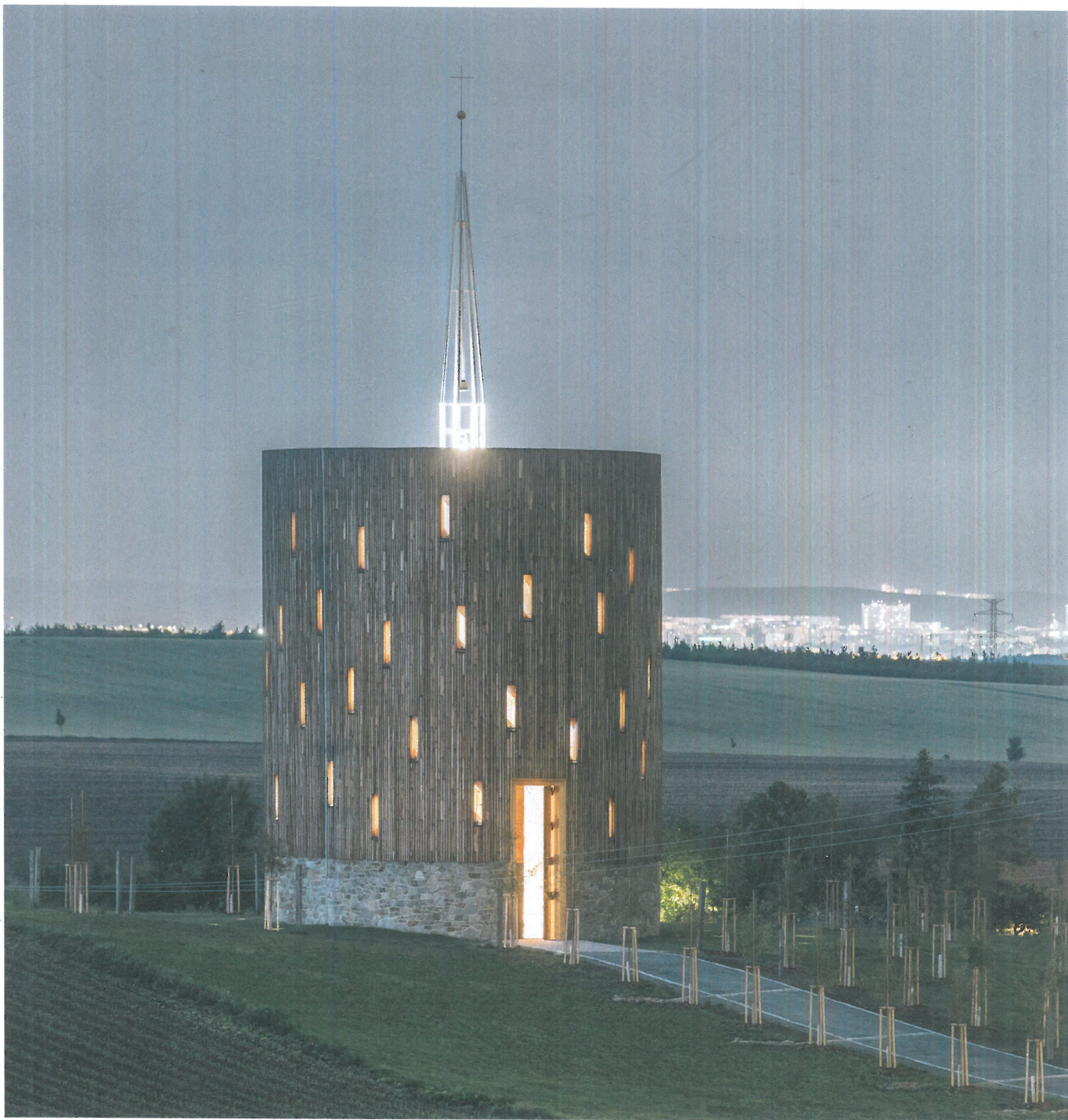
Awe is one of the most profound emotional states we can experience. It arises when we encounter something vast, complex, or beautiful that transcends our existing mental models. In these moments, the brain temporarily suspends its usual patterns: self-focused thinking dissolves, time seems to stretch, and a sense of unity or deep presence emerges.

We now know from neuroscience that awe deactivates the Default Mode Network - a system in the brain associated with internal dialogue, self-referential thought, and often anxiety and rumination. In its place, new networks light up, associated with sensory processing, attention, and social connection. At the physiological level, awe increases vagal tone, reduces sympathetic arousal, and triggers the release of oxytocin - the so-called "bonding hormone".

Awe is not just a feeling - it is a reset. A temporary, powerful shift in how we relate to ourselves, others, and the world. In psychological terms, awe has been linked to reductions in depression, anxiety, and trauma symptoms. It enhances generosity, cooperation, and openness to new perspectives. In other words: awe heals. Not in a metaphorical sense, but in measurable, embodied ways. At a time when we are collectively navigating climate grief, social polarization, and existential fatigue, awe may be one of the most underutilized design tools available to us.

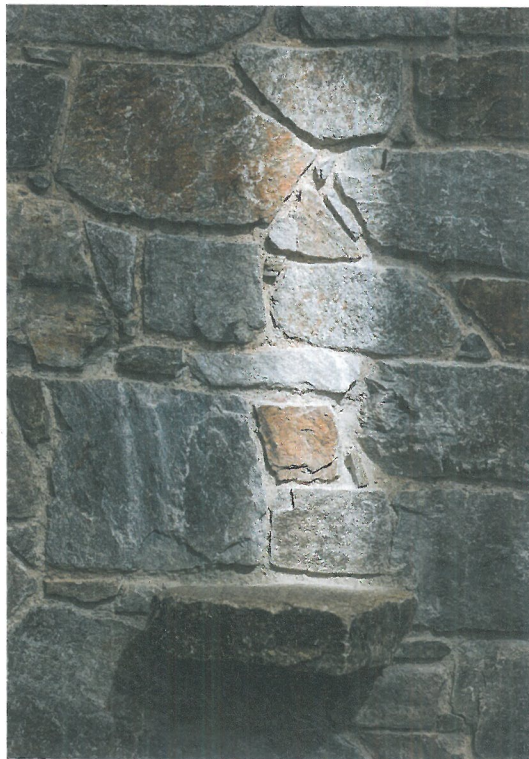
From the Eleusinian Mysteries to Gothic cathedrals, from Sufi poetry to the spaces of Japanese teahouses, humans have always created architectures of transcendence. Spaces that remind us we are part of something larger than ourselves. This need for contact with something beyond the material is not a cultural artifact. It is a biological one. We are hardwired to seek states that soften the ego and expand awareness. Whether we call them spiritual, mystical, aesthetic, or sublime, these states serve an essential function: they connect us to life in its wholeness. Architecture, then, becomes not just the shaping of space, but the shaping of consciousness.





● Our Lady of Sorrows Chapel. Located in Nesvačilka, Czechia by RCNKSJ.

Designing for awe is not about size or extravagance. It is about creating the conditions for an emotional shift.



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● Interior of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw by Thomas Phifer Studio.

Silence allows inner stillness to emerge.

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● Interior of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw by Thomas Phifer Studio.

Silence and vertical magnitude invite the emotion of awe.

Designing for awe is not about size or extravagance. It is about creating the conditions for an emotional shift.

1920

It begins with light - natural or shaped - that falls from above, evoking mystery rather than clarity. We see this in Tadao Ando's Church of the Light, where a narrow cross-shaped opening allows daylight to cut through the concrete wall, creating a quiet, simple, and powerful atmosphere.

1930

It continues with silence that allows inner stillness to emerge.

It includes vertical magnitude, cognitive and emotional stretch that evokes humility and longing at once.

1940

It embraces rhythm and repetition - architectural means that mimic the patterns of breath.

1950

None of these elements work in isolation. Awe arises from the interplay of perception, memory, space, and feeling.

## ARCHITECTURE AS MEDICINE

What if we thought of buildings not just as places, but as nervous system experiences? What if we treated spatial design as an intervention in cognition, mood, and meaning-making?

1960

At IMPRONTA, we explore these questions with a range of clients. We analyze how the brain and body respond to layout, forms, materials or light. But more importantly, we help design teams use this science not as limitation, but as inspiration - a creative lens through which architecture can truly support the human experience. Because design that regulates emotion, invites reflection, or fosters a sense of belonging is not merely functional - it carries transformative potential. This is especially urgent in cities. As urban life becomes more dense, digital, and distracted, we must ask: What anchors us? What heals us? What reminds us that we are alive, and part of something larger?

1970

1980

## TOWARD A NEW PARADIGM IN DESIGN

I offer no ten commandments for awe-inspiring buildings. Instead, I offer a few provocations asking:

1990

How might we measure "success" in architecture not by efficiency, but by how often it moves us?

2000

And what would our cities look like if we designed not just for sustainability, but for transcendence?

Can space be designed to induce reverence without religion?

2010

Perhaps this is the real restart - not only new materials or technologies, but a new relationship between space, psyche, and society.

2020