


# Taking Religion Outside: New Secular Identities between Autonomy, Contingency and Total Immersion

**Antonio Petrov**

College of Architecture, Construction and Planning,  
University of Texas at San Antonio, USA  
[antonio.petrov@utsa.edu](mailto:antonio.petrov@utsa.edu)

## ABSTRACT

 The secular has proven to be a condition all too intertwined with Christianity and Western narratives. However, the truth is that the religious and the secular are not opposites but they are inextricably linked within the geographic. This research is inspired by *geographia* [*geo*-earth and *grapho*-write], writing about earth. Observations, speculations, interpretations were made and stories recorded to illuminate how explicit intersections between religion and the environment expands the identity of the sacred. A study was made of critical cultural concepts that project objects into geographic objects, geographies, or both. It acknowledges architecture transcending beyond the traditional. The goal of this paper is to chart key characteristics, not as epistemological provocations, but as manifestations of material, spatial, and aesthetic transcendence. These characteristics may indicate how modified forms of religion not only saturate the prevailing presence of the secular, but completely transform the sacred.

**Keywords:** *Superordinary, geographic, formations of the secular, exteriorization, taking religion outside*

*To land in America is, even today, to land in  
that 'religion' of the way of life<sup>1</sup>*

*Alexis de Tocqueville's*

In 2009, an exploration of Evangelical architecture in the United States was made via a road trip. The journey included: 21 states, over 25,000 miles, 87 churches, hundreds of people, and thousands of photos. The goal was to gain a more intimate understanding of how religion and religious architecture traversed from "one mode of being into

another."<sup>2</sup> In the past 100 years, the presence of religious architecture was foreclosed in historical and theoretical discourses. Arguably, the impact of religion in the development of architecture has largely been lost to the eradication of religion or its marginalization within the public. For some, the twentieth century brought about the triumph of secularization over many aspects of material culture. For others, the secular, rational and politicized, contributed to a relegation of religion in its relationship to the built environment. The secular, however, has proven to be a condition all too

<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *America*. London ; New York: Verso, 1988. pp. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane; the Nature of Religion*. 1st American ed. New York,: Harcourt, 1959. Pp. 63.

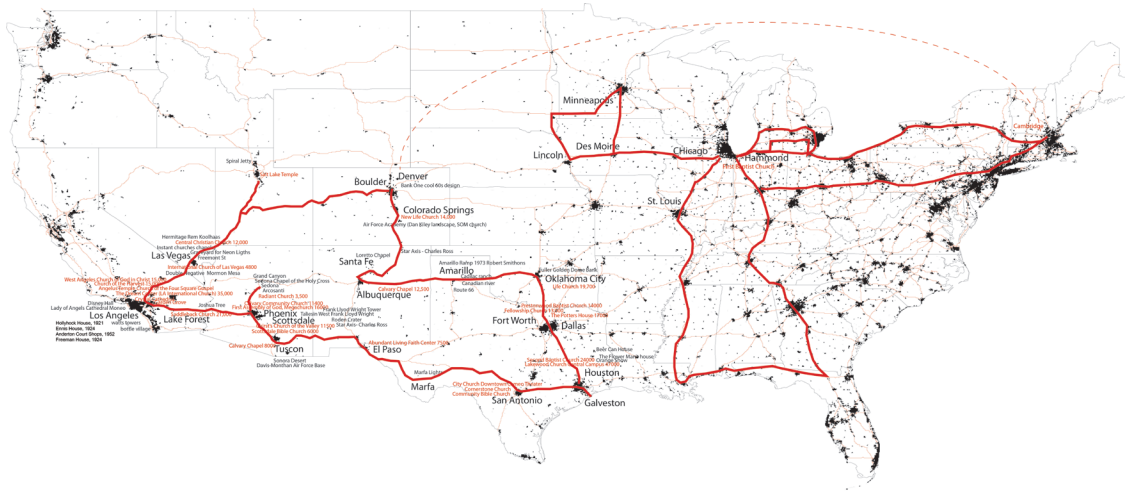


Figure 1:  
New Sacred Geographies road trip, 2009

intertwined with Christianity and Western narratives. “Formations of the Secular,”<sup>3</sup> as coined by Talal Asad, indicates the religious and the secular, are not opposites, but is, in fact, a religious phenomenon, made evident by Western secularism (Figure 2)

In, *America*, Jean Baudrillard positioned the secular within the framework of his cultural critique in his chapter, “Utopia Achieved.” He indicates the relationship between religion and the environment are not opposites but, “what in Europe had remained a critical and religious esotericism became transformed on the New Continent into a pragmatic exotericism.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, his observations not only render religion as a sphere of reality, but a reality in which the distance between the secular and the sacred or its ontological trajectory is measured. It becomes less about the space itself, but how visible and invisible systems eliminate the divisions between the two. Consequently, this research does not explore traditional religious architecture manifested in a physical church. But rather, explores the realization of how geographic evangelical architecture is amorphous and placeless (Figure 3 & 4)

Evangelist Reverend Robert H. Schuller confronted existing Protestant models by ushering in new religious typologies and challenged perceptions of where religion might be located. In his manifesto, *Your Church Has Real Possibilities*, he argued that religion could be “everything and everywhere.”<sup>5</sup> His churches not only reflected this transformation, but they radically transcended the sacred into geographies beyond a church. The way he embraced the quotidian, or the means through which he redefined broader cultural issues of daily existence, further supported his ambition of an omnipresence religious experience, or in other words, how ‘religion left the inside’. (Figure 5)

Religion has expanded its identity as a critical cultural concept and finds itself between autonomy, contingency, and total immersion. This is a twofold argument. The first looks at how traditional objects shifted into the geographic transcending the spatiality, materiality and aesthetics of a church. In contention are reductive ideologies, identities, myth of authenticity, and the sacred space. Within this framework, the primary focus is on public presence; the critical forms through which buildings hold

<sup>3</sup> Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular : Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Cultural Memory in the Present. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *America*. London ; New York: Verso, 1988. pp. 81.

<sup>5</sup> Schuller, Robert Harold. *Your Church Has Real Possibilities*. Glendale, Calif.: G/L Regal Books, 1974.

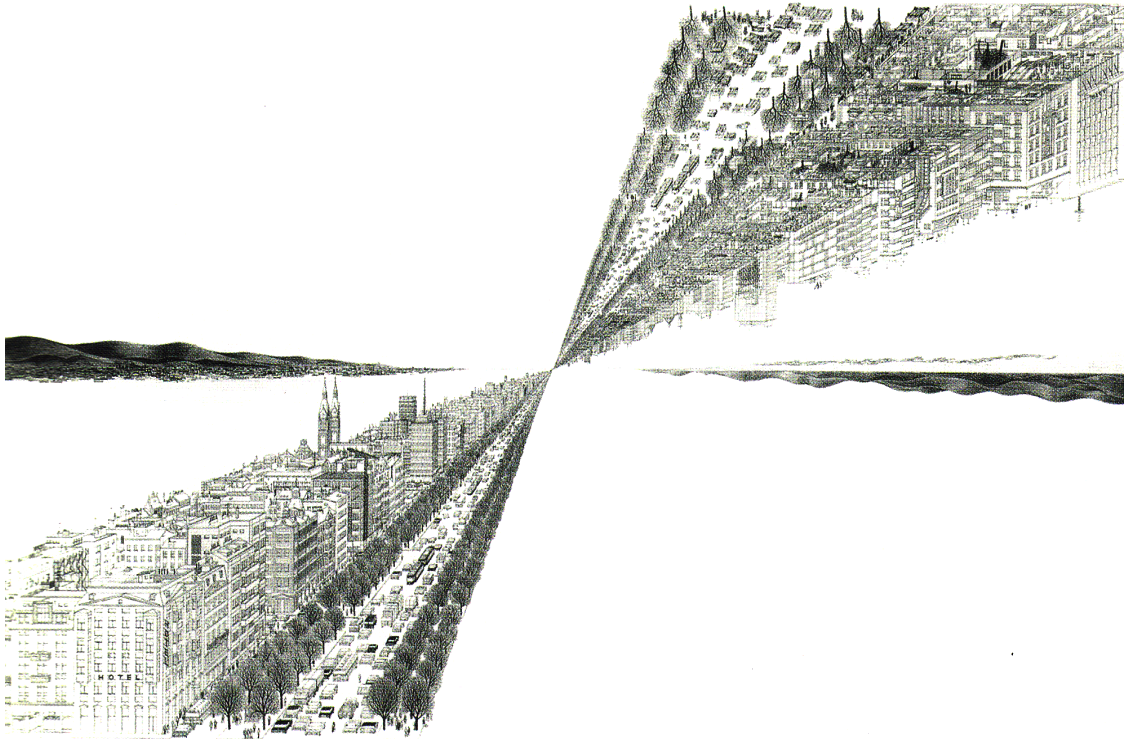


Figure 2:  
Max Peintner, *Vorschlag Fuers Jenseits*, 1971



Figure 3:  
Richard Neutra, *Exterior Garden Grove Community Drive-in Church*, 1961





Figure 4:  
*Philip Johnson, Interior Crystal Cathedral, 1981*

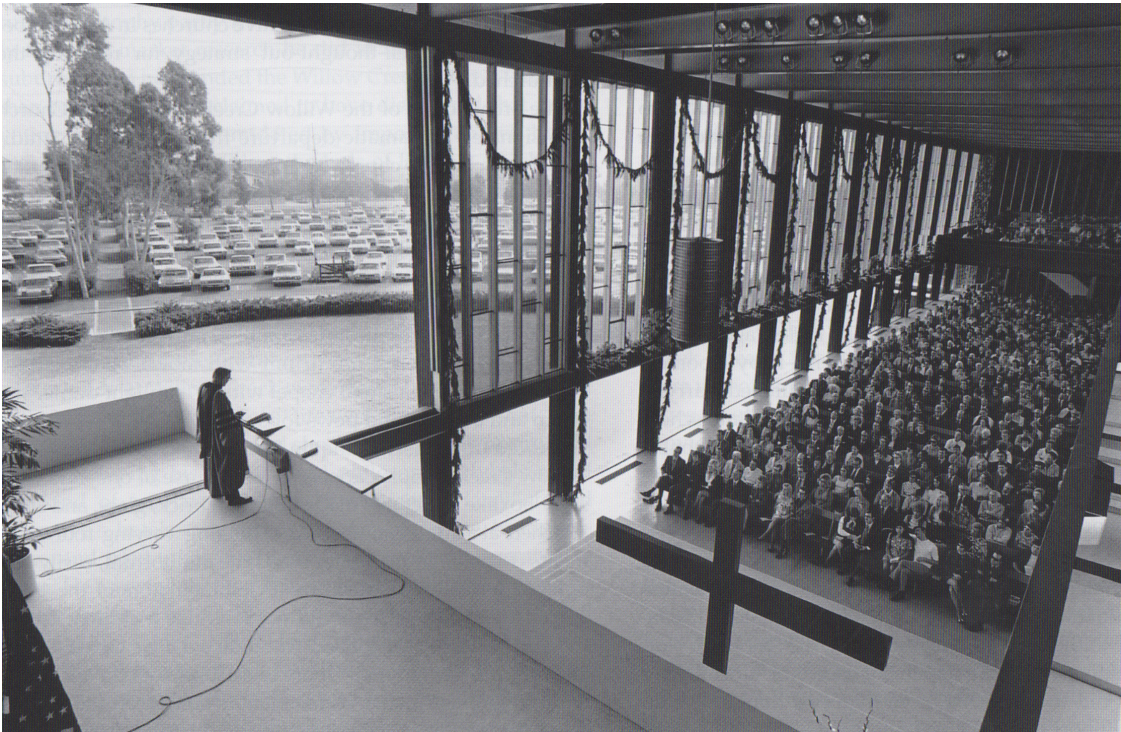


Figure 5:  
*Richard Neutra, Interior-Parking Lot, Garden Grove Community Drive-in Church, 1961*



meaning or are iconic. Also addressed is the sense that information concerning the whole is contained in each of the elements that hold them together, or keep them apart. The second argument unearths the mechanics behind the operations.

The examples discussed not only expanded religious archetypes anchored by the epistemology of the church, but they also transcended the meta-geographical divide between the sacred and the secular. These forms of secular don't divide, but straddle the intersection of constructed oppositions; religious and architectural, traditional and modern, inside and outside. At this trajectory, they are fundamentally an architectural issue. (Figure 6-9)

Inspired by geographia the goal is to illustrate how the link between religion and the environment produced some of the most intriguing new religious morphologies. Examples of this are as follows: the Westward expansion of the seventeenth century lead to new sects and utopian communities; the link

between revivalism and the wilderness contributed to movable-tent churches; the awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth century questioned the role of nature; industrialization and mass evangelism inspired a new engagement with the urban; the emergence of the automobile culture in the 1950s resulted in drive-in churches; TV and cinema stimulated televangelism; consumerism interiorized religion.

The aim is to chart key characteristics, as manifestations of material, spatial, and aesthetic transcendence. This will be done in order to identify how modified forms of religion not only saturated the prevailing presence of the secular but also completely transform the sacred. History reveals that the determining characteristics of these structures emerged from a combination of geography, history, aesthetics, atmospheres, economics, detail, and agency. The focus is to explore these explicit intersections and how these expanded territories allow opportunities for new forms of the secular.

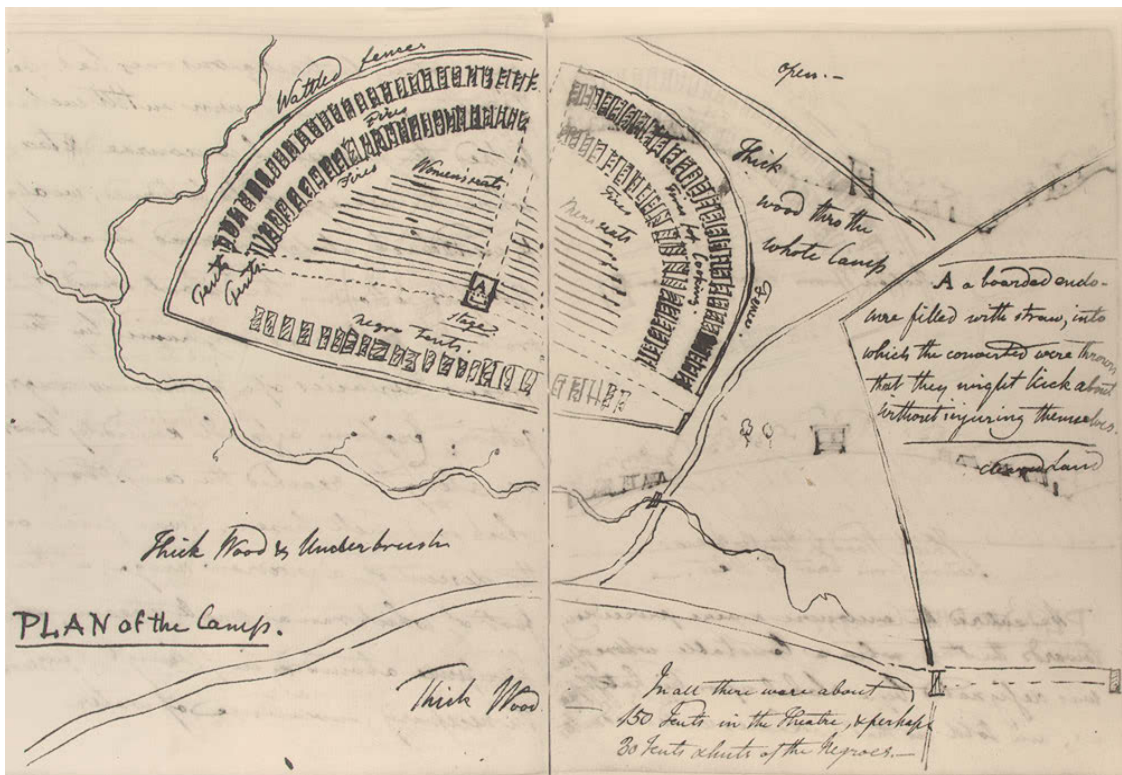


Figure 6:  
Plan of Camp-Meeting, Henry Benjamin Latrobe



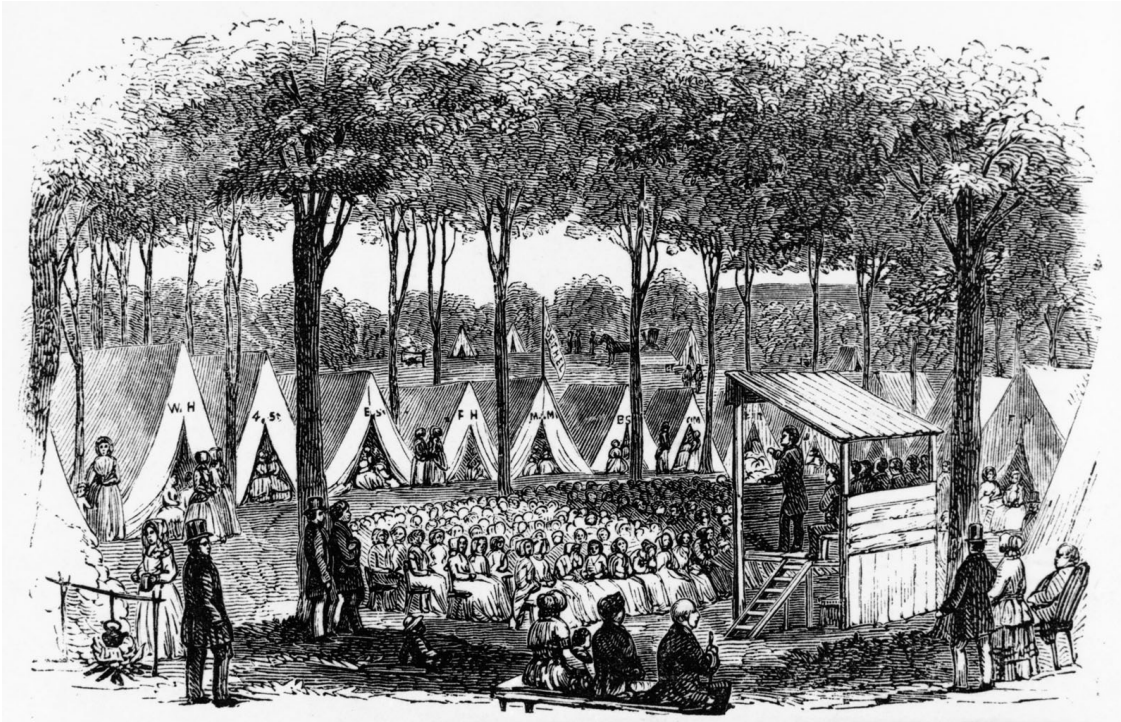


Figure 7:  
Camp Meeting, ca. 1801

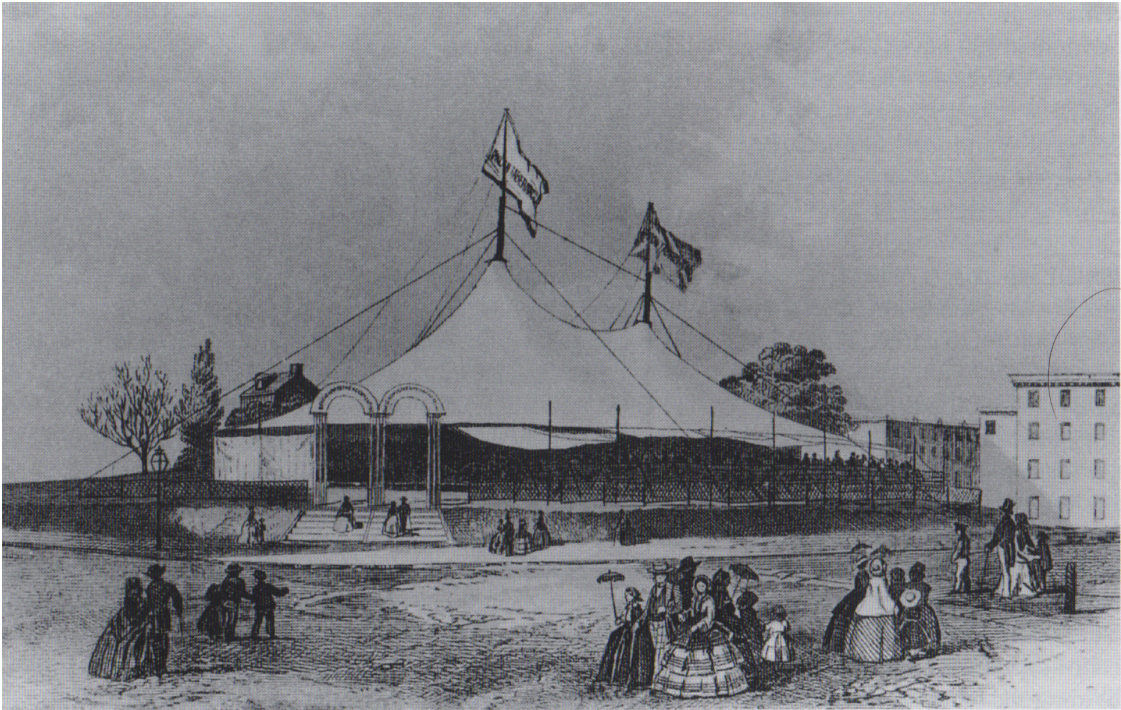


Figure 8:  
Union Tabernacle, Movable Tent-Church, Philadelphia, 1858





Figure 9:  
*Wannamaker, Pennsylvania Railroad Yard Church meeting, 1876*

## GEOGRAPHIC

The geographic as a methodological framework is proposed because it externalizes the isolationism of being inside traditional religious architecture. It separated production and consumer culture into two distinct spheres. It not only questions the relationship between the sacred and the secular, but it allows new understanding of abstraction and reality on one hand, and legibility and cognizance on the other. For instance, the geographies that were produced by the political and ideological dimensions of the seventeenth and eighteenth century pastoral landscape; the role of wilderness and how it set the stage for religious revivals; industrialization, consumerism, and globalization completely transformed the cultural landscape generating new forms of the secular. As a result, new rituals, practices, and worship spaces expanded the traditional figuration of churches into geographies, geographic objects, or both.

## LINGERING GOD

God is not only present in church design, but also in the typological and stylistic developments vis-à-vis new doctrines. Despite the presence of geography in religion, much of the current analysis, especially in Western discourses, fails to understand, or even recognize this interrelationship. While research in the field is emerging, it primarily confronts the role of religion to understand the designs of churches. This approach invariably draws from liturgical studies, theology and phenomenology. Architects and planners have used their theories, designs, and pedagogical approaches often disguised as spiritualism and mysticism. But, this approach overlooked crucial aspects in which the built environment has historically contributed to the development of new aesthetics and secular orders in religion. The externalization of religion gave it a larger public presence wrapped in urban and suburban processes as environmental and economic externalities, and set the foundation

for designs with what were readily available. It also allowed for 'new sacred geographies' beyond traditional frameworks in which not only the profoundly moral is acknowledged as beautiful, or only the heroic distinction between nature and culture is exciting (Figure 10)

## SUPERORDINARY

One might argue that sacred architecture has not only lost its ability to critically mediate between ethical positions, value systems, and the environment, but also aesthetic expressions. This paper will not attempt to clarify the contested relationships between history (and theory) of (sacred) architecture, but explores the aesthetic between extraordinary and ordinary, or what is termed as superordinary.<sup>6</sup>

One theory idealizes the design of environment and places that house representations and another celebrates the absence of it. Absence unfolds in scale and complexity to the effect it displaces previously established hierarchical orders. The interventions dismantle what lends it beauty and then constructs new geographies of access, control, place and relations. Geography mediating traditional aesthetics, synonymously linked to churches and institutionalized spaces, linked to Evangelical architecture, is the latent influence that both produces and is produced by urban, suburban, and exurban development. This set the foundations for new ontologies of worship. This not only results in designs that address larger cultural issues, but is a shift from deterministic objects to geographic objects, or geographies that expanded the understanding of what is considered traditional religious architecture.<sup>7</sup> (Figure 11 & 12)

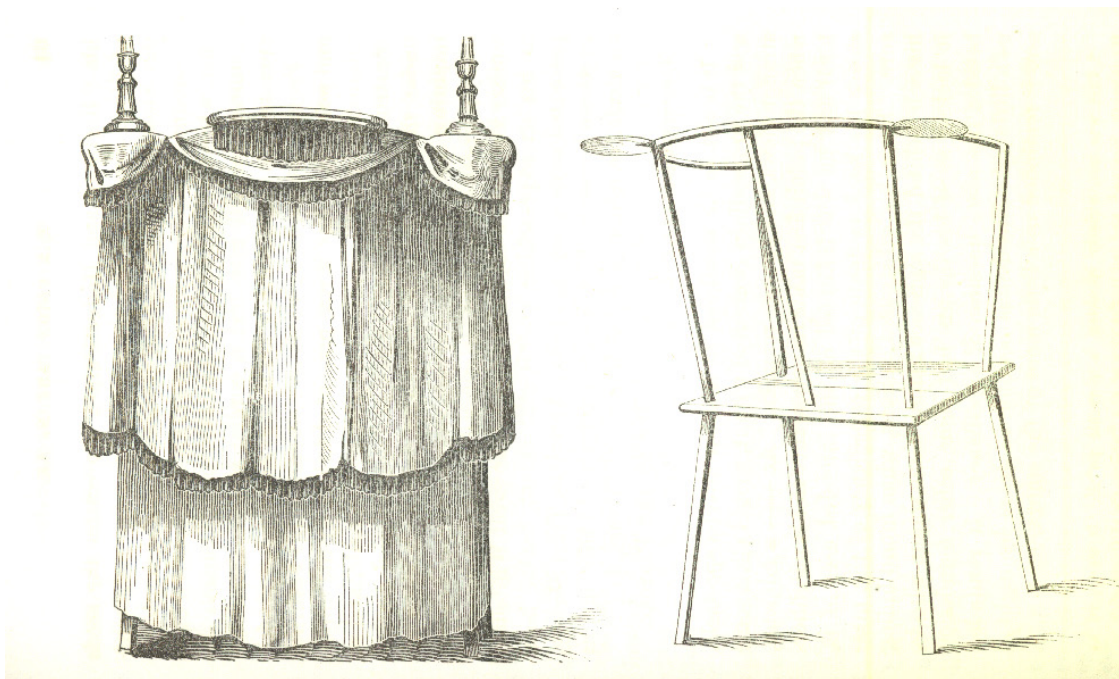


Figure 10:  
*Highway and Hedge Pulpit, 1854*

<sup>6</sup> Petrov, Antonio. *Superordinary! Aesthetic and Material Transformations of Megachurch Architecture in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: My Doctoral Dissertation at Harvard University, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Petrov, Antonio. "Transitioning Natures: Robert Schuller's Garden Grove Experiment." In *Urbanism, Spirituality, and Well Being*, edited by Luigi Bartolomei: University of Bologna, 2016.



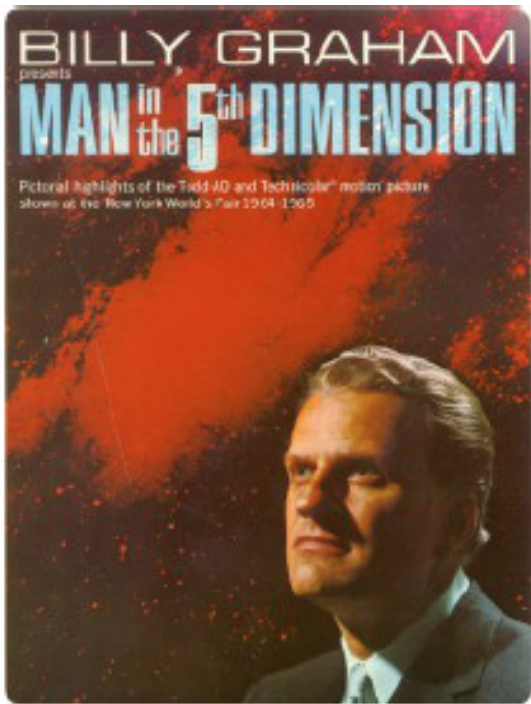


Figure 11:  
Billy Graham, *Man in the 5<sup>th</sup> Dimension*, New York World's Fair, 1964



Figure 12:  
Billy Graham, *Tent-meeting*

## ATMOSPHERES

Atmospheres have always played a crucial role at the intersection of geography, architecture, and worship. Whether it was embedded in design traditions or it was a concerned climate ascribed to cultural and ideological values and performative aspects of worship. The revivalist tents exposed to the rough climate, Billy Graham's *The Man in the 5<sup>th</sup> Dimension* pavilion at the NYC World's fair in 1964, or radio waves transmitting the religious service held on the inside to the outside in Richard Neutra's Garden Grove Church all ascribe to atmospheres as another form of materiality to not only render religion legible, knowable, and actionable but also offer new experiences.<sup>8</sup> (Figure 13 & 14)

## ECONOMICS

The economics of religion also play a crucial role in setting the foundation for new metrics of religious spatiality. This is best understood through the characteristic adaptability. It radically redefined the roles of place, structure, spectator, interior, and exterior to created new forms of reality-architecture, or super reality. A space in which the exteriorization of the inside, as well as the interiorization of the outside, extending its borders "gobbling up everything and everywhere in order to increase (surplus) value and accumulate capital."<sup>9</sup> For example, the emphasis of physical characteristics such as accessibility and location was largely recognized. Churches, like businesses, needed

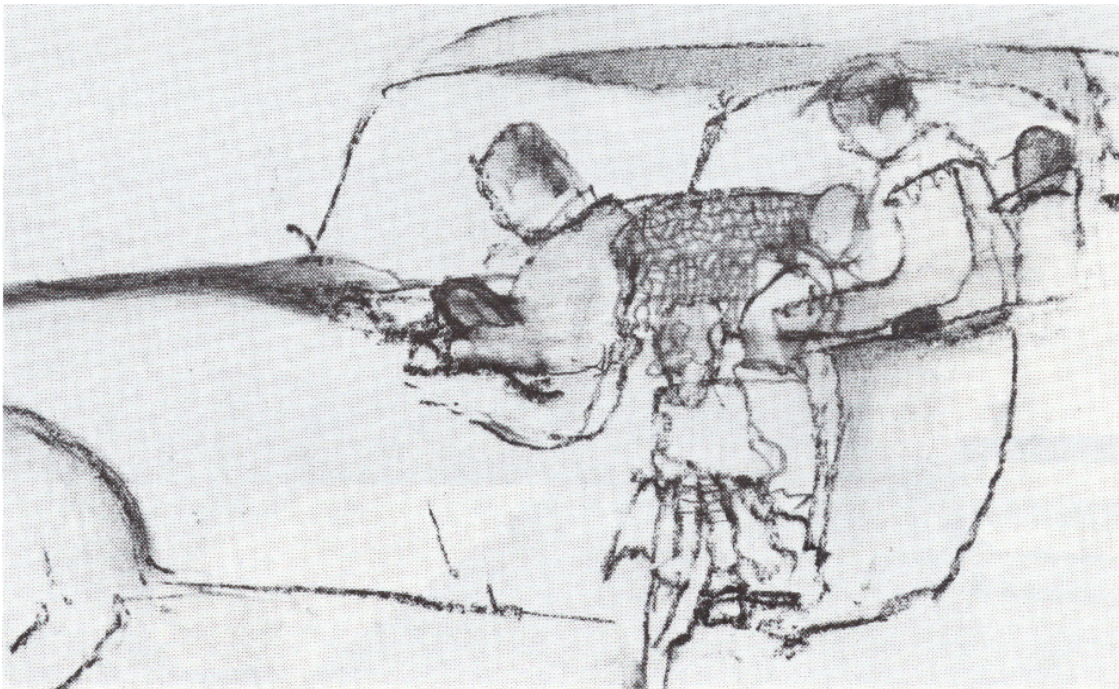


Figure 13:  
*Family In-Car Worship, Sketch Richard Neutra*

<sup>8</sup> Petrov, Antonio. *Superordinary! Aesthetic and Material Transformations of Megachurch Architecture in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: My Doctoral Dissertation at Harvard University, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Merrifield, Andy. *The New Urban Question*. London: Pluto Press, 2014. pp. 13.





Figure 14:  
*Parking, Richard Neutra, Garden Grove Community Drive-in Church, 1961*

to accommodate a steady flow of people, which required surplus parking. “With the development of shopping centers, Americans had become used to the convenience of easy parking. But a look at reality gave evidence that parking wasn’t always easy for churchgoers at ‘superchurches’.”<sup>10</sup> Churches staged parking and utilized the automobile, or other means of transportation, as critical aspects of their religious practice. In fact, they were such an integral part of new religious philosophies of the 1950s and 1960s that they presented a direct analogy for the extension of religion into the geographic, connecting the larger cultural landscape with the collective and the self.

## DETAIL

For Mies van der Rohe, “God is in the Details.”<sup>11</sup> It is the means to fully grasp the ontological nature of architecture and bears fundamental relationships. In the context of religion and the geographic, the tectonic detail, as well as its philosophy, is the site of innovation that contains the geographic, history, aesthetics, atmospheres, economics, detail, and agency. Marco Frascari defined architecture as the result of the design of details and their resolution and substitution. And Carlo Scarpa sees in each detail the story of its making, the makers, placing and

<sup>10</sup> Schuller, Robert Harold. *Your Church Has Real Possibilities*. Glendale, Calif.: G/L Regal Books, 1974.

<sup>11</sup> Mertins, Detlef. Mies. London: Phaidon, 2013.

dimensioning. Within this context, the geographic unveils the cultural strata and order of the detail which is located within the tectonics of the building. This not only illustrates a level of innovation these churches have applied since the seventeenth century, but it also speaks volumes about the agency, and how they have done it.

between geography and worship give answers to questions concerning relocation and novel figuration of religion? Can the aesthetic forms provide impetus? How has this relationship stimulated new perspectives of worship on a geographic scale? Why are they important for architecture, the urban project, and the ways in which challenges in the future are addressed?

## AGENCY

The emphasis is not the accomplishments of the architect but rather, the idea of how architecture grows with the client, custodians, culture and the geography. For example, the participatory spectacle of church services was not only determined by the charisma of the presenter, but it also was a collaborative product with a causal relationship between individual and collective agency. Creativity emerged from the audience and the ambience of the performance merged with the stage. This merging expanded beyond the spatial boundaries of the church and was mediated by traditional images, location, labels, language, and signs. As a result, it transcended everything that defines and makes architecture. It is the source of architectural meaning and process. The expansion generated new possibilities for sacred or religious architecture in a secular world. It is about locating the geographic as the source of architectural meaning in the construction of relationships somewhere between spatiality and representation.

Challenging traditional positions, in order to recast the 'geographic church' as an element of transcendence, help in perceiving and drawing the finest realities (and (im)-materiality's), and also inspires, inventing new meanings and aesthetics. Religious leaders have contributed to a better understanding of geography and architecture; they have influenced the cultural and environmental landscapes as clients and made huge contributions to the American landscape and architectural discourses. In addressing urgent challenges that must be met in designing buildings and cities the participation of religious leaders was vital in discussing alternative visions.

At stake are the morphological characteristics that shape the environment, religion and aesthetics. While some physical manifestations indicate that religion and the environment are not opposites, questions remain. With architecture acting as the physical embodiment for religion can the relationship



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