Ryan K. Smith

Gothic Arches, Latin Crosses: Anti-Catholicism and American Church Designs in the Nineteenth Century


Louis P. Nelson, editor
American Sanctuary: Understanding Sacred Spaces

New studies of sacred space in American culture continue to argue for the relevance of “the sacred” as a powerful historical presence and an important perceptual framework in the American imagination. Through interdisciplinary methodologies, based primarily in the broader analytic frameworks provided by cultural studies and visual culture studies, they examine sacred spaces not as timeless, metaphysical entities, in the tradition of Mircea Eliade, but as historically specific and often contested configurations of relationships between human agents and objects, in specific places and in wider social contexts, whose powerful though unstable meanings are multivalent and changeable over time.

Locating his study at an intersection of nineteenth-century material-culture studies and religious history, historian Ryan K. Smith, in Gothic Arches, Latin Crosses, boldly asserts that changing social conditions brought about by capitalist development emphasized new relationships between middle class individuals and the objects they used to establish their Christian identities. These changes caused a transformation in the production of Protestant worship spaces when new architectures, rituals, and objects were introduced from an unlikely source. Smith argues that many of the common features found in mainline Protestant churches today, including the crosses, candles, sanctuary flowers, stained glass, and Gothic architectures, were appropriated from Roman Catholicism. He posits that by the late nineteenth century, in an attempt to assuage the threat posed by Catholicism, many Protestant congregations began “employing symbolic crosses, investing in Gothic atmospheres, and sanctifying altars with flowers and colors, hoping to provide a more vibrant worship experience, project a more ‘churchly’ appearance, and defuse some of the peculiar attractions of the Roman Catholic Church” (10).

The Protestant suspicion of images, beginning with Martin Luther and John Calvin, held that Catholic symbolism was a violation of the second commandment, which prohibited the worship of false idols. Protestants settled on a pious iconoclasm and developed a range of ideas that underpinned unmediated worship without the need for special architectures, ritual objects, ceremonies, or saintly intercessors, especially in America. With increasing waves of immigration between 1820 and 1840 over one thousand new Catholic churches were built across the country, a phenomenal increase of 885 percent during that period alone (19–20). With this rising Catholic public profile and proximity to Protestant congregations, the Protestant press kept their members informed of new, often grand Catholic construction efforts, acknowledging their beauty while revealing competitive rivalries.

Roman Catholic worship also attracted many young and interested onlookers who became inspired by the artful rituals and emblems of Catholic worship, and Smith claims that the “charms of Catholic churches prompted the conversion of thousands of nineteenth-century Americans,” suggesting that many believed that Catholic art could “sway religious affiliations” (44) and that Catholic symbolism was an “effective proselytizing tool” (69–70).

According to Smith, this combination of apprehension and appreciation inspired changes that revitalized Protestant worship. In terms of architectural history, Smith undertakes a comparative study of both Catholicism and Protestantism that reveals a significant connection between attacks on Catholicism and the Protestant appropriation of Catholic architectural design and ritual decorations. He does not treat the rise of Gothic Revival and the ensuing “artistic swell” as merely a picturesque “episode in taste” (12). He focuses on church symbols such as the cross, the architectural idioms of the Gothic and Romanesque, and the increasing use of “Catholic-based customs in Protestant devotions, including the spread of candles, flowers, robed choirs, and holy festivals” (16). As Smith puts it, “under the shadow of cross-crowned steeples, non-Catholics felt the tug of novelty and mystery” (34).

In a well-argued and elegantly written text, Smith discusses the social and
cultural dynamics of these changes throughout the nineteenth century, arguing that the "adoption of Catholic architecture, symbolism, and pageantry involved many different factors—denominational background, region, youth, and wealth, among others" (13). With the building of new Catholic chapels and cathedrals, Americans were given opportunities to view a religion that emphasized direct access to the sacred through ritual mediations with objects and in spaces that engaged the senses. The shift was most apparent in the spark provided by the Anglican Church, where emphasis on the church's historical continuity with pre-Reformation Christianity had already been debated. Among Anglicans a conscious revival of the Gothic style, religious symbolism, and sacramental art was well underway. Smith argues that the Lutherans also already had significant symbols, and that the Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and even the Baptists, to greater or lesser degrees, joined in the appropriation of what had been primarily Catholic imagery.

Smith outlines the debates about the appropriateness of Gothic architecture in Protestantism and pinpoints one of the most salient defenses of its use—the connection of the Gothic style with nature imagery, already in use in Protestant churches, and supported by John Ruskin and his followers: "America's Protestants, when told that Gothic church designs derived from nature's forests and caves, or perhaps from England's native genius, or from Palestinian traditions, or from biblical command, or even from some vague 'universal language,' could rest assured that there was something else going on in 'Catholic' architecture, and that they had a stake in it" (109). By the 1840s, American Protestants had several substantial church designs in the Gothic style, including Richard Upjohn's Trinity Episcopal Church in New York (1846).

There remained, however, important differences between Protestants and Catholics. While Catholics described their churches as sanctified houses of God, Protestants continued to believe that God was not in any one particular space. Also crucial were the debates that emerged in Protestantism regarding the use of symbols in a context that emphasized commemoration rather than reenactment of Jesus's passion. Smith concludes that, baptism aside, Protestants appropriated forms that centered on "the senses of sight and hearing rather than the more intimate senses of touch, smell, or taste," preferring to "savor devotional atmospheres with their eyes and ears" (153). He also suggests that Protestants tended to generalize Catholic imagery and were selective in their use of it, but this adoption came with accepting the idea "that art, as perceived through the senses, could offer legitimate avenues to God" (15), though Protestants attempted to distinguish between "proper" uses for religious symbols distinctly different from Catholic ones.

Smith also argues that Protestants deemed the Gothic style of architecture a tool that could engage and actually challenge the rise of Catholicism. The Gothic Revival and romantic interest in the senses of sight and hearing rather than the more intimate senses of touch, smell, or taste," preferring to "savor devotional atmospheres with their eyes and ears" (153). He also suggests that Protestants tended to generalize Catholic imagery and were selective in their use of it, but this adoption came with accepting the idea "that art, as perceived through the senses, could offer legitimate avenues to God" (15), though Protestants attempted to distinguish between "proper" uses for religious symbols distinctly different from Catholic ones.

Smith concludes that although the Protestant appropriation of Catholic art was only one of the encounters in what was a dynamic relationship, it was a most decisive element, "for it articulated a shift in the very nature of the church itself" from a body of believers to more of a place, as "churchly" churches became focal points in the production of Protestant religious identities at this critical time of national self-definition (157).

Editor Louis P. Nelson's American Sanctuary: Understanding Sacred Spaces, the outgrowth of two graduate research seminars and a symposium including senior scholars, argues for a more hermeneutical understanding of sacred spaces, established through relationships between viewers/subjects, objects, and spaces. The resulting collection views American sacred space through the lens of lived experience: to redefine the study of American sacred space by addressing "what sacred spaces mean to the people who construct and inhabit them" (4).

Nelson is suspicious of the traditional qualitative link between the aesthetic and the holy: "In the context of architecture, the associations that allow architectural qualities to generate feelings of awe, mystery, humility, comfort and other emotional responses are culturally constructed. Therefore, the sacred cannot be manifest in the material—the beautiful cannot be holy—without human agents who are burdened with culturally dependent beliefs and rituals that allow places and objects to be so interpreted" (4). Taking as his point of departure Lindsay Jones's The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison (2001), Richard Kieckhefer's Theology in Stone: Church Architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley (2004), and editors David Morgan and Sally M. Promey's The Visual Culture of American Religions (2001), Nelson identifies three key points that unify the vision of the authors in the text: places become inscribed as sacred through belief and practice; sacred places are inextricably linked to sociopolitical iden-
ties; and sacred meanings are not stable but mutable and changeable. Nelson views his volume as a corrective to the idea that sacred space, as solidified in architectural form, can become permanently sacred. Instead, American Sanctuary frames the sacred as a precinct for the production of transformational effects that can later be contested and recast by different users.

American Sanctuary is divided into four overlapping areas of concern: “Inscription,” with essays studying rhetorical and spatial practices; “Identity,” with essays addressing the establishment of sacred identity by specific groups of makers and users; “Instability,” with essays outlining how meanings and frameworks of “the sacred” are unstable and changing; and “Method,” with a single essay by Jeanne Halgren Kilde, who self-consciously employs religious historian and theorist Catherine Albanese’s comparative and contextual analytic categories of creed (beliefs and doctrines), cultus (ritual practices), and code (moral and ethical strictures) to more fully “develop deeper connections between architecture and religion” (230).

In her study of the megachurch revolution in populist evangelism, Kilde demonstrates the usefulness of Albanese’s categories. For instance, she submits that megachurch designs solidify centuries of itinerant evangelical tent meetings and more recent large-scale arena spectacles. Because of the evangelical “creed of salvation, the code of proselytization, and the cultus of revivalism, the desire for large-capacity worship spaces naturally developed as an evangelical imperative” (237).

Gretchen Buggeln’s insightful study of the rhetorical uses of “the sacred” reveals “how architecture, ritual and language work together to establish the sacred meanings of a place” (18). According to Buggeln, and relevant to Smith’s overall argument, what emerge in the early nineteenth century are competing ideas and therefore tensions about the function of the meetinghouse as public hall or special worship place. Her essay studies uses and definitions of “the sacred” by Congregational ministers who were redefining worship spaces and experiences as the sacred and the secular began to part ways: “the bottom line is that Congregationalists became comfortable referring to their houses of worship as ‘churches,’ and this indicates a remarkable change in their understanding of these spaces. ‘Church’ for early New Englanders would have smacked of popery” (33).

All of the essays in American Sanctuary attempt to expand our ideas of sacred space and place. Besides Buggeln’s study, under the “Inscription” rubric Paula A. Mohr studies the conflation of nature, religion, and architecture in Central Park, suggesting that the civilizing and moralizing tendencies of the rustic architecture, bridges, and arbors in Central Park were designed to have a sacred function. Jennifer Cousineau studies the changing boundaries of the sacred precinct of the Jewish eruv in New York City. Under the “Identity” rubric John Beardsley recounts the recycling of nonart salvage materials as elements and metaphors of personal and social salvation in recent African American yard shows. Joanne Punzo Waghorne’s essay on the Sri Siva Vishnu and Murugan Temples in Washington, D.C., studies the community’s changing perceptions of the Hindu Temple “from holy house to divine palace” (106). Paula M. Kane studies the Catholic Church’s struggles with changing demographic and economic factors that affect parishes in urban areas, and the continuing impact of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (Vatican II, 1962–65) on church interiors and decorative programs. She reveals that the appropriations studied by Smith have been reversed: it appears that Catholic Church architecture after Vatican II has been influenced more by Protestant ideals of communal association than by its own traditions in architecture. Kane contributes an excellent study of José Rafael Moneo’s Our Lady of the Angels Cathedral in Los Angeles (2002) emphasizing patronage issues, power struggles, and the church’s mission in a changing cityscape.

Under the “Instability” rubric Erika Meitner offers a meditation on the function and practice of the mezuzah in demarcating Jewish domestic space as sacred. Jeffrey F. Meyer asserts that “public memorials and monumental architecture are constantly subject to revision . . . because of ritualized acts performed by a committed, believing community” (217), and studies the changing meanings of the Lincoln Memorial and Tiananmen Square. His approach sums up to primary focus of American Sanctuary:

Changes in myths are easy enough to spot when there are corresponding architectural changes that call attention to them. In the nineteenth century, when Congregational meetinghouses became ‘churches,’ with naves and spires, or in the twentieth, when Catholic churches abandoned the remote and high position of the altar and placed it in the midst of or facing the congregation, it was clear that a change in religious and theological meaning had occurred. But when the architectural arrangements remain exactly the same, the viewer is easily deceived by the old dream of permanence and change is harder to discern. Rather than formal modification, meaning changes through hermeneutics, and by that I do not mean the interpretations of scholars; I mean the understandings of ordinary people as they form communities and act out rituals (217–18).

For the most part, the authors of American Sanctuary reject what Nelson views as a misconception among designers that “an architectural form can itself be sacred” (11). Instead, the essays propose models of the sacred as itself a producer of effects in lived experience, instantiating and naturalizing a variety of power relationships found elsewhere in so-called profane society. Within these constructed spaces, objects are reframed and take on new and transformed meanings in relation to viewers and subjects. Hierarchies and rituals are established; identities are produced and held in place. The phenomenological, geographical, philosophical, and anthropological insights explored in various ways by scholars as diverse as Gaston Bachelard, Yi Fu Tuan, Michel Foucault, and Paul
Q. Hirst continue to remind us that spatial relations in constructed spaces, as forms of subjectification, are significant to the enframing or embodying of our ideas about our personal, gender, ethnic, cultural, social, political, and national as well as spiritual identities.

Stephen Lekson’s provocative essay in “Palaces in the United States?” Perhaps sacred.” and construct experiences of “the sacred.”

Palaces, he argues, are seen as material expressions of powerful states, and the term is widely applied to a diverse range of structures found in many parts of the world. But rarely is “palace” used when discussing Native American structures because, Lekson maintains, it is frequently assumed that Native Americans did not have states—“no states, therefore no palaces” (99).

Of course, there were native states in the Americas before the arrival of Europeans, and Lekson singles out as an example the vibrant Mississippian state whose bustling metropolis of Cahokia thrived between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries near what is today St. Louis, Missouri. Although Lekson’s essay, like many in this volume, is directed at an anthropological audience, it raises key issues about how architectural historians classify native architecture of the Americas, the role of palaces in Native American architecture, and why scholars so often marginalize these structures.

In their introductory essay, the editors Jessica Joyce Christie and Patricia Joan Sarro relate the journeys that led them to the topic of palaces and in what way palaces—which they say are the material manifestation of the relationship between architecture and political power—serve as the unifying theme of the book. In the succeeding twelve chapters, seventeen authors examine this topic from a variety of perspectives.

The sites chosen come from across the Americas. In Mesoamerica, examples include the elaborate elite compounds nestled within the dense urban fabric of Teotihuacan and the beautiful courtyard houses carefully positioned on the hilltops of Monte Alban. In the Andes, authors explore distinctive structures such as the impressive adobe remains made for the Chimú elite on the dry northern coast of Peru, as well as the private compounds hidden behind the enormous and foreboding walls built by the powerful Wari state in the central highlands. In North America, the investigations range from the majestic Puebloan Great Houses in the southwest to the deceptively complex community houses of the northwest coast. As the editors note, large areas of the Americas are unrepresented, but the book is not meant to be comprehensive; rather it surveys a broad swath of Native American architecture from the earliest times until the late fifteenth century, irrespective of contemporary national borders.

While the topics explored in the book concentrate primarily on three regional zones, the book is organized not by area, but by four themes. The first section is devoted to the question of the identification of a palace within a site or culture. In particular, the authors question whether palaces existed in specific contexts and, if so, how they were configured. The second part looks at how political ideology can be mapped out in palaces, by spatial practices within a building, a site, or across a region. The third section examines the evolving relationship between material remains and social status across time and sometimes space, revealing shifting cultural beliefs and priorities. In the final section, essays consider palaces comparatively, both within a singular site and between two very different cultural groups.

For the most part, the essays in this volume range widely in approach and topic, offering fresh perspectives and new data on what we know about the architecture of some of the best known sites in the Americas. An example is an essay written by one of the editors, Sarro, “Rising Above: The Elite Acropolis of El Tajín.” Located on the Mexican gulf coast, El Tajín is a site densely packed with temples, elite residences, and notably, seventeen separate ball courts. While much research has been devoted to the site because of the ball courts, Sarro turns her attention to the area where multiroom structures associated with the elites have been placed. In a nuanced analysis, she explores the role of spatial practices—such as the manipulation of movement and views—in creating an exclusive enclave for elites, and bolsters her argument by examining other types of material culture—such as artwork and furniture. Sarro also discusses the definition of a palace and how it has been debated in the field, most notably in Palaces of the Ancient New World, edited by Susan Toby Evans and Joanne Pillsbury. This excellent volume, published two years earlier, was the first to bring together a series of essays examining how the term “palace” may (or may not) have related to specific architectural types in the pre-Columbian Americas. The present volume continues this investigation.

Many of the most interesting essays in Palaces and Power challenge in different ways the very notion of a palace. For example, in “Looking for Moche Palaces in the Elite Residences of Moche Site,” Claude Chapdelaine argues that the assumptions...