Reverend Robert Schuller and his family arrived in the midst of a transformation. Like the Schullers, millions were migrating to Southern California in the decades after World War II. They were drawn to the prospects of better living through sunshine, automotive access, and affordable single-family housing. Together, these neo-suburbanites were reshaping a region defined by the ubiquity of its citrus groves into a landscape better known for its sprawl. For the Schullers, as representatives of the oldest Protestant denomination in the country, the Reformed Church in America, the changing geography was a fertile terrain. They hoped to shepherd the spiritual development of suburbia. They came to build a church.

The postwar cultural atmosphere was well suited to church growth. Public sentiment was more favorable toward organized religion than at any other moment in the twentieth century, and the economic boom fueling the rapid development of new communities seemed to provide most denominations with a license to expand.

1. Schuller was accompanied to Garden Grove by his wife, Arvella, and their two small children, Stacy and Robert Anthony. Although this essay focuses primarily on the reverend, I am well aware that each Schuller has played an important and unique role in the production of this ministry.

2. The Reformed Church in America was established in 1628 as part of the Dutch colonization of New Amsterdam.

3. The Cold War political climate provided an unprecedented level of support for religious belief. In 1954 Congress unanimously voted to amend the Pledge of Allegiance to include the phrase “under God,” demonstrating, as President Dwight Eisenhower would claim in 1955, that “recognition of the Supreme Being is the first, the most basic, expression of Americanism.” Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion*, vol. 3, *Under God, Indivisible, 1941–1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 296. Migration, particularly to western states, created opportunities for expansion into new
The Reformed Church was no exception. Schuller was an agent for westward expansion, charged with the task of translating his small, socially and theologically conservative denomination to the suburbanites of Orange County.

Like that of many entrepreneurs, Schuller’s narrative begins with an idea scribbled on a paper napkin. Garden Grove, the town chosen for church founding, had a rather limited real estate market. Thus, ironically, the very conditions that drew the Reformed Church in America to Southern California also produced a rental market saturated by demand. With no space for assembly, there could be no congregation, and without a congregation, Schuller could not build a church.

While stopped for lunch during the move to Garden Grove, Schuller jotted down a list of potential venues that might be used on Sunday mornings. Upon arrival, he investigated schools, a Masonic temple, empty warehouses, a mortuary chapel, the Elks Lodge, the movie theater, the Seventh-Day Adventist church, and the synagogue. None were possibilities. The local drive-in theater, however, could not operate during daylight hours. Therefore, it was available for use.

Over the next five decades a church that began as an uncanny fusion of pop culture and Protestantism grew into a powerfully sophisticated model of congregation. By 2005, worship was spectacular. Assembled beneath a canopy of glass twelve stories high, the congregation bathed in light. From a pink marble pulpit the now celebrity Schuller sermonized while a professional orchestra, an expert choir, and the fifth-largest pipe organ in the world performed the psalms and hymns. Special musical guests regularly appeared, and Christians as diverse as actress Angela Bassett, Human Genome Project director Francis Collins, and stunt motorcyclist Evel Knievel gave testimony upon the stage. Just three miles from Disneyland and seated on acres of manicured gardens (complete with topiary, statuary, water, and even fire features), the church had become a major Orange County landmark. Thousands visited every week, and millions tuned in to services via cable, satellite, and the World Wide Web. This was the Crystal Cathedral, home to the most visible Protestant congregation in the world.


From origins to climax, the Crystal Cathedral Ministries have played a pioneering and influential role in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century redefinition of Protestant culture. As a drive-in church, the ministry produced spiritual community through the spatial conventions of the automobile and the cinema. The ministry then parlayed this unique expertise with assembly through mediated and mobile conditions into the design of a wholly new kind of church. By the 1960s, the Garden Grove Community Church (GGCC) was operating as a walk-in/drive-in. Through strategic deployments of California modern style, the congregation designed a model for religious assembly that no longer relied on collocation. In an indoor-outdoor setting designed by Richard Neutra, the GGCC extended its reach. By the 1970s, GGCC was regularly broadcasting as the Hour of Power. It had become America’s first television church.

By 1980, the GGCC had been rebuilt as the Crystal Cathedral. Best understood as part of a megachurch movement that has redefined the landscape of Protestant religion, the Crystal Cathedral is an exercise in church that does not look like church. In general, megachurches are more likely to resemble strip malls, stadiums, big-box stores, or corporate campuses than they are sacred spaces. Their sanctuaries exemplify a kind of extreme technological sophistication. Wired with state-of-the-art sound, lighting, projection, and display systems, they compete with the best in secular entertainment venues. Here worship is a main event. Currently, more than 6 million people worship at more than sixteen hundred megachurches, and millions more connect via social and mobile media, feeds, forums, and podcasts. In other words, megachurches take up the material conditions associated with the project of modernization, and thus secularization, in order to create a hypervisible model of congregation. In so doing, they reassert the legibility of a Christian cosmology within contemporary technological conditions.

Analyzing the material history of the Crystal Cathedral not only locates the origins of the megachurch aesthetic within the conditions of postwar social life; it also situates Protestant spatial production within a broader project of twentieth-century cultural re-formation. Alongside digital publics, electronic agora, virtual communities, and occupy movements, churches are sites where collective life is reimagined. By designing for mediated congregation, churches like the Crystal Cathedral align privatized, mobile, and distributed social conditions with a mythic worldview. They are emblems of collective orientation along a vertical

dimension, or the sacred, achieved through the material arrangements better associated with uniquely horizontal dimensions of sociality. In other words, they are the sites whereby mythic cosmology enters a new technological regime.

**Windshield Worship at the Drive-in Church**

On March 27, 1955, the GGCC began holding services at the Orange Drive-in Theater. Although it was the height of the drive-in craze, worshipping at a windshield theater was a radical, potentially heretical departure from sacred architectural norms. Perhaps it is no more than a curious historical accident, but the drive-in theater was the only possible venue considered by the ministry that fundamentally disrupted the spatial conventions of a church. Although unconventional, warehouses, classrooms, lodges, synagogues, and tents pitched on empty ground all allow for the nave, or common space for congregation. Drive-ins, however, operate through the spatial distinctions of automobiles. Turning a car-filled parking lot into a religious assembly required that the ministry develop a model for congregation that relied on the arrangement of automobiles.

Every week the ministry strategically appropriated features of the theater infrastructure in order to make the space legible as a church. The theater marquee displayed movie billings alongside sermon titles such as “‘Someday Is Today,’ Featuring Robert Schuller with a Supporting Cast of Thousands.” Neo-suburbanites enjoyed secular/sacred double features like “‘To Hell and Back,’ with Audie Murphy and Norman Vincent Peale in Person!” The box office housed church ushers instead of ticket vendors. Sunday school took place on snack-bar picnic benches. The parking lot became a nave. Family cars rather than family pews radiated from the altar. Inclined parking spots guaranteed that every car had an unobstructed view. Speaker boxes, hung from car doors, broadcasted the morning’s sermon. Schuller preached from his elevated pulpit, the tar-papered roof of the concession stand. His wife, by his side, played the organ.

Like an act of transubstantiation, Saturday night’s “passion pit” became Sunday morning’s sacred space. The liturgy, or order of worship, structured the ministry’s reinterpretation of the space. Services opened with a hymn, an invocation, the Lord’s Prayer, and church announcements. A scripture reading and choral music followed. Then the minister solicited the offering. Ushers circulated among

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6. Although drive-in theaters were invented in 1933, it was in the decades after World War II that they came into their own. In 1942 there were only fifteen, nationwide. By 1959, there were more than five thousand. For a history of drive-in theaters, see Kerry Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters: A History from Their Inception in 1933* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1992).
the automobiles passing collection baskets to each family. Schuller delivered the sermon, and worship closed with a hymn, benediction, and postlude. The congregation observed standard rites like baptisms, Holy Communion, and the formal presentation of new members.

At times, the ministry forged explicit connections between liturgy and infrastructure with explicitly instrumental advice about how to practice piety at the drive-in. For example:

Welcome to the first service of worship in the Orange Drive-in Theater. Remove the speaker and place it in your car, adjusting the volume as needed. Pray that God may bless the hour you spend here. Participate in your car. During prayer, bow your head; during the singing of hymns, join in the singing; during the sermon, listen and apply the vital truths to your own life. Return next week with your friends and relatives. Thank you kindly.

Then, after benediction: “Caution! Be sure that the speaker is returned to the rack before you drive away from the park stand.”

Like the red-inked instruction printed alongside the black text of a Bible, these technological rubrics, or ritualized protocols, mapped religious meaning onto the

procedures of moviegoing. They were essential parts of the strategy for helping congregants shift their interpretive frames in a space both foreign and familiar. They helped churchgoers engage the theater as a church.  

Reframing the outdoor theater involved a similarly adept reinterpretation of the relationship between the infrastructure and the setting from a sacred point of view. Promotional materials advertised “Southern California’s Beautiful Drive-in Church” as a place where you could worship in “the shadows of rising mountains” among “colorful orange groves” and “tall eucalyptus trees.”  

This nearness to nature helped connect the GGCC with a long-standing religious-cultural project of reading the landscape as a text authored by the Creator, or, as article 2 of the Belgic Confession reads, the first way of knowing God is “via the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God.” For the residents of postwar Orange County, however, what met the eyes was a pastoral vista of mountains, fields, orange groves, and eucalyptus stands veined throughout with construction projects for freeways and planned communities. Thus reading God’s hand through the landscape required a visual literacy uniquely dependent on the automobile.

Southern California residents were living in what architectural critic Reyner Banham calls “Autopia,” a place that spoke the “language of movement, not monument,” where freeways were the “canonical and monumental form.” Here, vernacular architectures were scaled for automotive access, and thus the region was the birthplace of such roadside innovations as the super station, convenience store, shopping center, drive-in market, auto-laundry, drive-in restaurant, and drive-in bank. The church connected to a suburban idyll of access to natural set-


tings through the modern convenience of the automobile. As advertising slogans promised, “Everyone will have a comfortable seat by an open window and with your own speaker,” so that parishioners could “Come as you are . . . in the family car!” At the drive-in, every car was an enclave within which separate social actions, distinct from the collective experience, might occur. The appeal of this contradictory arrangement was that it negotiated between the pleasures of going out and staying in. Audiences enjoyed the conveniences of private viewing and the experience of the big screen. Viewers were separated into subregions and yet connected through technologies that generated an overarching, albeit mediated, event in view. Every windshield framed the common scene. Speaker boxes, suspended from car doors, penetrated these semiprivate spaces with the broadcast of a soundtrack. The effect is simultaneous privatization and co-orientation. Like a parallel phenomenon, the television in the suburban home, drive-ins were important spatial intermediaries in the postwar era that helped facilitate the shift from public to domestic leisure by offering privatized access to collective life.

Thus worshipping at the GGCC was an exercise in experiencing the mediating logics of a suburbanizing spatial order from a sacred point of view. More than mere appropriation, adopting the infrastructure of the drive-in was central to the missionary task. Like Paul, who described becoming “all things to all men, that [he] might by all means save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22), Schuller hoped to reach neo-suburbanites from vernacular spatial conventions. In the process, the GGCC became a form of mediated congregation equipped with the capacity to stitch together collective experience across mobile, distributed, distinct zones. In the coming years, the congregation would convert this unique expertise into a capacity to produce a manifold worship space. By 1962, the GGCC had been reinvented, this time as a walk-in/drive-in church.


Biorealism and the Walk-in/Drive-in Church

Within its first two years of operation, the GGCC had amassed the financial and organizational resources to erect a small stained-glass chapel. Rather than abandon automotive assembly, however, the ministry operated in both spaces. Holding consecutive services—9:30 a.m. at the chapel, then 11:00 a.m. at the drive-in—strained ministerial resources, but more crucially it underscored the differences emerging within the church. A faction favoring more orthodox strategies for church growth was consolidating. From within a stained-glass chapel, detractors could point to the drive-in as too vernacular an expression of faith. Given a thriving congregation, there was little reason to continue reaching out through unconventional means; it was time to turn an unconventional mission into a proper church. Schuller responded to the growing organizational fissure by presenting his congregation with three options: discontinue the drive-in, separate, or integrate. He positioned integration as the divinely inspired, faith-based option. It was the call to be one church. From his perspective, the job of the believer is to “have a dream that's great enough for God to work a miracle. God's job is to create that miracle!”

God's miracle materialized in the California modern style. In 1958 Schuller approached Neutra, a local architect with an international reputation. Neutra was part of a generation of architects responsible for translating European modernism into the American landscape. His first building, Health House (1929), was built entirely from prefabricated components ordered from Sweet's Catalogue; it was the first all-steel home in America. Its framework required less than forty hours to erect. Thereafter, he became a defining force in California modernism. His indoor-outdoor architectures fused distinctly human factors with a standardized lexicon of materials and structures. By the time Neutra began his rendition of the GGCC he had already erected more than one hundred buildings and authored six books and had been featured on the cover of Time magazine. The walk-in/drive-in GGCC, dedicated on the first Sunday in November 1961, represents an important intersection between California modernism and Reformed Christian-

17. Schuller, My Journey, 239.
18. Every major Neutra building was featured in Arts and Architecture, the vanguard publication for West Coast modernism. He designed four of the Case Study Houses. He was also the focus of special feature issues in architectural magazines like Pencil Points and Aujourd'hui. See Elizabeth Smith, ed., Blueprints for Modern Living: History and Legacy of the Case Study Homes (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), especially the chapter by Thomas Hines, “Case Study Trouvé: Sources and Precedents, Southern California, 1920–1942,” 83–106.
19. Neutra graced the cover of the August 15, 1949, issue of Time. He was the second architect featured. The first was Frank Lloyd Wright.
ity. The final venture required more than $0.5 million, and it dramatically altered the landscape. Four square blocks of agricultural land were developed; ten miles of wire, pipes, sewers, electrical conduits, and water and gas lines and a quarter mile of streets and gutters were laid. The church’s fourteen-story high-rise permanently altered the Orange County skyline.

Although Neutra’s reputation as an architect brought him to the attention of the ministry, it was his philosophy that left the largest impact. Coined “biorealism,” Neutra’s philosophy offered an ecological model for design. Biorealism was predicated on the fundamental recognition that organisms and their environments are interconnected. Therefore, form is an indication of evolutionary processes in particular ecologies. For example, terrestrial lungs were direct responses to
atmospheric chemistry. They were passageways that demonstrated the connection between inner life and outer world. For Neutra, biorealism meant that “there is no escape ‘within.’ . . . our skin is a membrane, not a barricade, and these universal processes reach through it . . . the most remote contours of the cosmos are not just ‘out there someplace’ but causally interlaced with the nearest and deepest folds of our interior landscape.” Therefore, architecture was not an exercise in building spatial distinctions. Rather, it was a task centrally concerned with designing the connections between insides and outsides, selves and worlds.

In fact, Neutra came to California because its mild climate provided the opportunity to re-create human ecological origins through architectural design. For him, “California was not merely another lucrative mecca for new settlement and development”; it was “an ancient anthropological memory.” The setting offered a “propitious mating of climate and technology” that “hearken[ed] back to the temperate African climate where human life had originated” and inspired a “fundamentally fresh form of architectural growth” featuring “buildings agleam with the materials of our own time [that] might fraternize with the soil and psyche of this yet-unspoiled region.” Postwar migration seemed to Neutra an opportunity to reorient the aims of architecture back toward the state of human origins with the help of modern technologies.

Schuller resonated with Neutra’s ecological model of human form but read the underlying mechanisms as Creation rather than evolution, cosmos rather than universe. Senses and nervous systems were proof that humans came from the Garden. They were “channels of tranquility” designed to take in “clouds sliding silently through the soundless sea of space, green trees bending gently in soft breezes,” a “scene of serenity” characteristic of their original setting, the Garden of Eden. God was “like a brilliant cosmic architect” who provided humans with a sensory-nervous complex equipped to translate from outer to inner world. Given origins in a garden, senses and nerves operated as a “built-in tranquilizing system, so that every person, when relaxed, would be sensitive and receptive to receive daily spiritual communication from the Creator.” A healthy psychology, therefore, was tantamount to the state of belief.

For both preacher and architect, the fundamental problem was that humans

were divorced from their natural origins. The onslaught of modernization and its associated tensions were the “negative emotional reaction[s] of an organism that is intellectually and emotionally confused, because it is out of its natural habitat.” Modern material conditions were difficult on the nerves and senses because they worked against the natural state of “deep calm and quiet inner peace” that was prerequisite to hearing the “still, small, inner voice of God.” Neutra cautioned that sensory imbalances were increasingly dangerous propositions. In a world of dwindling resources, traffic jams, and stockpiles of nuclear weapons, “if [we are] to survive at all, it cannot be through slow adjustment. It will have to be through design.”

Biorealism promised to guide the restoration of humans back toward their naturally harmonious state, only this time by design. With biology, psychology, and experience as a “layercake of conditionings” that structures every human being, the designer’s job is to determine “which layers of conditioning are deepest.” The designer is then responsible for “guiding the development of new layers in such a way that the proven ones will be protected.” New technologies and materials should be developed and arranged to ensure that “structural and technical dimensions . . . never divorce human life from nature.” In so doing, designers create curative experiences designed to recalibrate the human senses, thus producing the necessary preconditions for belief.

Schuller read biorealism as a design philosophy in accordance with Calvinist theology. Neutra read the drive-in church as a manifestation of the principles of modern conditions brought to bear on fundamental human concerns. He saw the GGCC as an endeavor that “brought a completely new scale and fresh sensibility to our traditional concept of faith and flock.” The church was an “expression of our contemporary world-culture, and of an evolving world-religion,” an “instrument of aspiration” capable of nurturing a new kind of community “drawn from many far-flung sources, not only in cars, but also [eventually] by way of television and radio.” It was an expression of the human need for spiritual community rendered in modern form.

Neutra specialized in serving the oldest kinds of human concerns through the newest technological conditions. To design buildings in accordance with the

28. Neutra, Nature Near, 76. Neutra distinguished Schuller from his other religious clientele who, “like real-estate developers,” were united in “the spirit of dollars per square foot” (76).
deepest layers of conditioning, he borrowed methods from clinical psychology. His clients completed questionnaires and wrote diary entries and free-form letters. Neutra turned case histories and analyses into functional requirements and then into architectural designs.

With biorealism as a guiding philosophy, Neutra produced a church designed for congregating via multiple spatial arrangements. The church consisted of a sanctuary, flexible meeting spaces, ample parking, ten acres of landscaped gardens, and a fourteen-story high-rise adorned with a ninety-foot blue neon cross. More than twelve hundred parishioners could be seated in the pews of the long, rectangular sanctuary. A lawn running along its eastern face accommodated outdoor worshippers. A parking lot radiated from the northeastern corner. With graded asphalt, and a semicircular arrangement, it preserved the basic format of drive-in worship. Parishioners tuned in via speaker box or radio channel 540.

To sustain the sense of connection among in-pew, on-lawn, and in-car worshippers, Neutra relied on symbolic and structural interplays, particularly with respect to his design of architectural boundaries. The eastern wall of the sanctuary was composed of twelve glass bays. The arrangement provided visual access between indoor and outdoor worshippers and also operated as a numerological reference to the apostles, the human lenses responsible for reflecting Christ’s light on the world. Counterbalancing transparency with opacity, the western wall was built from craggy slabs of stone. Together, they helped focus attention toward the congregation, just as they metaphorically gestured toward the dual nature of Jesus as both the rock and the light.

Careful orchestration of shadows and reflection further amplified the boundary-blurring effects. A cantilevered roof running the length of the eastern wall shaded the glass wall from any glare that might remind viewers that spatial continuity was an optical illusion. Underneath, a 287-foot-long reflective pool conflated the relationships between earth and sky, indoor and outdoor, lawn and building. The mirroring effect helped further dissolve the integrity of boundaries between distinct spaces. Throughout the property, overhangs were trimmed with anodized and brushed aluminum. The silvery appearance of the metal diffused color and light, softening strong distinctions between separate spaces.

29. The total height of the structure was 252 feet. For many years, it and the Matterhorn ride at Disneyland shared the dubious honor of being the tallest points in Orange County.

30. The color silver was a favorite Neutra device. Though he preferred to employ aluminum (rather than wood) around windows, to diffuse light and blur boundaries, he was not above painting materials to achieve the same effect. The prioritization of effects over truth in materials violated a modernist orthodoxy of form and function. Moreover, photographs of his work conscientiously and (often in postproduction) strategically highlighted effects. See Joseph Rosa, *A Constructed View: The Architectural Photography of Julius Shulman* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994).
The altar brought the techniques for integration to a dramatic climax. Located in the upper elevation of the northeast corner of the sanctuary, it featured a twenty-four-by-twenty-four-foot mechanized panel of sliding glass. As services commenced, Schuller could dramatically declare as the wall slid open: “This is the day the Lord has made! Let us give thanks and rejoice!” The indoor-outdoor pulpit, or “Balcony of the Word,” literally connected the spaces, at least from the minister’s point of view. If the original drive-in church relied on the larger cultural experience of mobility and privatization to substantiate reimagining an unconventional architecture into an emblem of faith, this new space relied on the legibility of manifold spaces that could be orchestrated, arranged, juxtaposed, and cross-faded into one another while remaining distinct.

Architectural analysts have often treated the church as a discordant composition. The glass facade and balcony have seemed to place outdoor worshippers in the midst of competing visual conventions — filmic, theatrical, and live action — thereby generating a “mediated realm” where “superimposed events occurred simultaneously in incommensurable locations,” thus never “resolving into a single image,” and instead remaining “blurred across an animated visual field.”31 Characterized by its “confused sense of direction” and underdeveloped realization of the “design possibilities inherent in [the automotive] condition,” the GGCC has been regarded as lacking the coherence ascribed to more orthodox modernist edifices.32 Its panoply of sightlines have been interpreted as “visual traps” that constantly threatened to deflect focus from the altar.33 Thus Sylvia Lavin writes: “No matter where the audience was, Schuller was always also somewhere else. . . . Although there was apparently nothing to see but spectacle, there was nothing to see . . . in traditional terms.”34

Despite multiplied visual orders and an explosion of spatial arrangements, the space and its conventions clearly played with church members. In part, the ability to perceive a connection with others, whether they be outside, inside, in-car, seated, central, peripheral, mediated, direct, or invisible, points to a new cultural understanding of space with which the ministry connected. The “discordant elements” of automobile, garden, and sanctuary hang together because each differently accommodates a common performance, namely, worship. This was a congregation well equipped to recognize collective experience across spatial

33. Lavin, Form Follows Libido, 127.
34. Lavin, Form Follows Libido, 124.
distinctions, and Neutra, with detailed studies of his clients, was able to bridge
between the structure of the church and this unique capacity. Thus the architec-
tural effect of boundary blurring was a way to capitalize, as a designer, on a sort
of *performative gestalt*, a capacity to recognize common orientation and collec-
tive action across spatial disjunctures and distinctions.

David Leatherbarrow points to a “topographical continuity” at work in Neu-
tra’s architectures. Neutra’s spaces “demonstrate how settings that are distant and
distinct from one another can also be interconnected, how they can remain apart
and be joined.”35 Volumes are not forged into unified spaces, and flows are not
regulated by systematic protocols. Rather, the occupant’s senses are drawn across
spatial boundaries. They are invited into an exploration—at both conscious and
unconscious levels—of analogies, similarities, and connections. By using “visual
tricks and illusions,” the architect plays on the perceptual machinery through
the construction of space, “suggest[ing] things that are not really sensed.”36 The
material techniques are as much an exercise in psychology as architecture, and
in phenomenology as they are in design. “For Neutra the real machine in the
garden—albeit a highly sophisticated one—is the human, whose daily experi-
ce could be exquisitely calibrated by his or her environment.”37

Thus, the walk-in/drive-in church broke with modernist tendencies toward reg-
ulation, de-differentiation, and abstraction of architectural space. Moreover, the
fundamentally religious purpose of the structure provided a coherent and cultur-
ally specific meaning to its form. Criticisms of the building fall short where they
do not read the space through the worldview of its occupants.

The project drew congregants toward a collective vision, albeit one that
required coordination among many points of view. In this new kind of structure
for religion, the ministry materialized a radically phenomenological proposition:
a church does not require the collocation of bodies, nor does it require that pos-
tures and arrangements all align. In fact, collective experiences can be strength-
ened when the boundaries are designed. In material conditions built to reconcile
multiple spatial arrangements into a collective spiritual view, the congregation

Lamprecht is pushing back on a statement made by Thomas Hines about Neutra’s architectures as
reference to Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*, concerning the integration of technologies and
their discourse in Romantic visions of the American landscape.
had produced an architectural foundation for subsequent forays into television broadcasting. In 1970 the ministry launched the first televised weekly church program in Southern California. As the *Hour of Power*, the GGCC extended into domestic space.

**The Crystal Cathedral: Emblem of Mediated Congregation**

By the late 1970s, the church was operating at capacity. The parking lot was overflowing, the *Hour of Power* was broadcasting nationwide, and the ministry was looking to expand. The Schullers were impressed by a magazine image of the Fort Worth Water Gardens, an urban park of pools, fountains, and falls formed in concrete slabs. Its design seemed to indicate that the architects had a keen sensitivity to the relationship between site and setting, and a fine capacity for generating natural effects in modern materials. The architects’ aesthetic promised compatibility with the existing Neutra design. However, soliciting a design from the Johnson/Burgee architectural firm did not expand the ministry’s commitment to biorealism. Rather, it expanded their ambitions on an entirely different scale. In 1980 the GGCC became the Crystal Cathedral, a pioneering megachurch and an emblem of mediated congregation.

If Neutra was well known by the time he and Schuller met, then the firm’s principal architect, Philip Johnson, was, by extension, famous. He helped define the public understanding of modern architecture and then built one of its canonical works. In 1930 he became the founding director of the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art. In 1949 he completed the Glass House, a transparent cube almost wholly uninterrupted by internal divisions. It is a masterful rendition of transparency as visual control. By the 1970s, Johnson was busily reinventing himself as a postmodernist and creating some of this movement’s defining forms. The AT&T building (now the Sony Tower), a skyscraper clad in pink granite and topped with open pediments, looked more like a piece of furniture than a Manhattan high-rise. Nicknamed the “Chippendale,” the building signaled a new role for ornamentation, pastiche, and hybridity on the world-architectural stage. As a rule maker, rule breaker, and broker of the next game, Johnson was well equipped to position the ministry’s migration toward a new stylistic moment in a different spatial arrangement.

38. By the time the cathedral was completed, Johnson had been featured on the cover of *Time* (January 8, 1979) and was the recipient of two of the architectural profession's highest accolades, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Gold Medal (1978) and the Pritzker Prize (1979).
Schuller wanted an all-glass church. No doubt shaped by the experience of open-air preaching, the request revealed Schuller’s theory of a Christian ideal. A glass house of God provides sanctuary but not separation. “Worshippers [would] be able to see the world outside and seek and sense emotional connection with other humans—even strangers! No fences, no ceilings—that is what my faith is all about!”39 Transparency along horizontal and vertical dimensions would sig-

nify the elimination of barriers between people and between a congregation and their God. The properties of glass materially demonstrate the evangelical spirit. Schuller preached that the “healthy follower of Christ” is “emotionally open” and “transparent.” “Others can see God’s goodness reflected in his or her life.”  

The new structure would substantiate this interpretation at the scale of a mediated congregation.

The architects delivered a design for the largest space-frame structure in the world. A webwork of 16,500 interlaced steel beams, it would hold aloft 11,012 panes of mirrored glass. Three thousand worshippers would be accommodated underneath its transparent canopy. Twelve stories high, more than four hundred feet long, and over two hundred feet wide, it was an architectural marvel in the heart of earthquake country, a technological testimonial for faith. To connect interior and exterior the design extended the use of mechanized glass already present at the walk-in/drive-in, but the effect was radically scaled. Nine-story-high rear walls, nicknamed the “Cape Canaveral doors” for their resemblance to a rocket launchpad, could be folded back for services. Fountains, both inside and outside, would elevate on command. The building was designed for broadcast. Outfitted for filming and production, it packaged a very particular vision of worship. A congregation housed in a luminous space and frequented by celebrity guests made for an appealing vision when viewed worldwide.

The extent to which this hypervisible model of church appealed can be inferred from the success of the fund-raising campaign for its construction. Although part of the strategy involved securing million-dollar gifts from individual donors, the economic elect did not provide the majority of the contributions. Instead, the ministry amassed resources from its viewing audience. By presenting its mediated congregation with the option of buying in, the ministry bridged belief and spatial production in a postmodern architectural style. Materials became metaphors. A minimum pledge of $500 purchased a pane of glass, or “Memorial Window”; a ceiling light, or “Memorial Star”; a beam, or a “Pillar of Steel.” Each component of the church was an opportunity for the individual expression of faith. Mailings mapped the logic from personal contribution to collective belief by framing the relationship among donation, meaning, and material:


41. In February 1977 California law prohibited the construction of any building whose exterior walls were composed of more than 50 percent glass. The architectural plans for the Crystal Cathedral were filed ten days before the law went into effect.
Look back in your own life. Do you remember who was a pillar of steel when you most desperately needed support? Who gave you a solid, secure framework so you could find the strength to reach out for new possibilities? Who kept you from collapsing when you thought life was not worth living? These people were your pillars of steel!

And I believe that the Crystal Cathedral is going to be raised up by people who are Pillars of Steel . . . These people will be unique. They will understand that God calls some people to be windows so his light can shine through them. He calls others to be shining stars, reflecting the beauty of God’s great love. And he calls others to be strong, to quietly labor without fanfare or acclaim — to be pillars of steel . . .

I believe God will make it possible for you to send $500 and become a pillar of steel — as he promised the Old Testament prophet: “I have made you today as an iron pillar” (Jeremiah 1:18).42

The idea that the capacity to donate indicates that God has made possible the conditions for donation extends a well-familiar relation between ethic and accumulation. Familiar to social and cultural analysts through Max Weber, Protestantism, particularly its Calvinist variety, provides the crucial spiritual orientation for the crystallization of economic practices into a rational capitalist order.43 Weber’s thesis highlights the centrality of the doctrine of predestination in the orientation toward works within the world. Predestination is a theological position in which humans are saved only through the grace of God. Salvation is absolute, total, and irrevocable, thus predetermined. Believers, plagued by a fundamental uncertainty about their spiritual status, are driven to look for signs of their unconditional election through their works and fortunes within the world. Building the Crystal Cathedral aggregated the efforts of the invisible and distributed elect such that proof of God’s glory might perform at a different scale. The materialization of a hypervisible worship space demonstrates the strength of Christianity to believers and nonbelievers alike:

The steel pillars will form a web of strength to shield the shimmering glass from the earth’s wind and tremors, and to make an inspiring statement to the world — that people who may appear fragile or vulnerable to life’s unexpected and potentially threatening storms and shocks — can actually stand strong! They can survive beautifully when they are welded together by an emotional support system — welded with Christ’s love!44

42. Fund-raising mailing, Crystal Cathedral Ministries archive, Garden Grove, Calif.
44. Fund-raising mailing, Crystal Cathedral Ministries archive, Garden Grove, Calif.
The ministry then explicitly connected the collective effort back to the distributed individuals through commemorative keepsakes, miniatures, plaques, certificates, and medallions.

Small bits of glass in homes and offices were tangible proofs of a “living force all across America” and a symbol “reflecting [the] spiritual power in 10,000 windows.” The fund-raising campaign for church construction was wildly successful. In an atmosphere of great economic uncertainty and spiraling inflation, the building was erected debt free. Its total cost was $21 million. Explicitly articulating the church’s connection between spiritual progress and material transformations, Schuller offered the following prayer at the Cathedral’s dedication: “Lord make my life a window for your light to shine through and a mirror to reflect your love to all I meet. Amen.”

In addition to structuring a common point of symbolic orientation for a distributed congregation, the Crystal Cathedral also allowed believers to locate their efforts as part of a larger tradition of religious achievement through great architectural works. The ministry made liberal use of Johnson’s prestige, emphasizing that it “retained America’s leading architect, Philip Johnson, and commissioned him to design a cathedral that will be a marvel of technology . . . and stand for hundreds of years as a reflection of God’s ageless love.” The ministry tapped into the cachet of Old World cultural works through frequent references to Chartres, Notre Dame, Rheims, and St. Paul, while simultaneously asserting their capacity for upstaging: “The Cathedral will be longer, higher, and wider than the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris”; “I am convinced that the Crystal Cathedral will rank with the great Cathedrals of Paris, Istanbul, London, Berlin, Moscow”; or “I have stood inside the most impressive cathedral in the world, at Cologne, but even that will not compare in emotional impact and spiritual excitement to the Crystal Cathedral.”

The Crystal Cathedral was both timely and timeless:

From the first pillars of Memphis, through the flying buttresses in the medieval cathedrals and the great domes, the ultimate dream was to build a cathedral without a single pillar or column. For years it looked impossible. But then it finally happened. For the first time in architecture a building stands. It’s a Cathedral, the length of a football field, plus a hundred feet. Yet there is not a single column or pillar to support the ceiling. The

45. Fund-raising mailing, Crystal Cathedral Ministries archive, Garden Grove, Calif.
46. Fund-raising mailing, Crystal Cathedral Ministries archive, Garden Grove, Calif.
47. Fund-raising mailing, Crystal Cathedral Ministries archive, Garden Grove, Calif.
48. Fund-raising mailing, Crystal Cathedral Ministries archive, Garden Grove, Calif.
building? It’s the Crystal Cathedral. But it was only possible when and after the time was right and we had steel and space frame engineering.\textsuperscript{49}

Blends of historical associations and futuristic gestures were hallmark features of Johnson’s postmodern designs. The Crystal Cathedral is no exception. Neither crystal nor cathedral, the building is structured as a hybrid application of religious, theatrical, and corporate conventions. The Crystal Cathedral is built around a cruciform floor plan, a common layout for churches. Its exterior takes its shape from the space frame that connects each of the vertices to create an oblong star. The structure is draped in the reflective glass of a curtain wall. Its interior rotates the traditionally longitudinal arrangement of parallel pews by ninety degrees. The resulting configuration is that of amphitheater seating within a longitudinal space.\textsuperscript{50}

Believers make their way from the parking lot through the gardens, approaching a building that dominates the skyline. At the entryway, or narthex, the field of vision endures a sudden narrowing; a low concrete ceiling supporting the overhead balcony occludes the sky from view. The view then dramatically opens up again under the transparent canopy. Viewers are treated to the kind of architectural sublime generated by the verticality in a Gothic cathedral and the collective experience underneath a common nave. The complex coordination of multiple spaces practiced at the Neutra sanctuary receded. In the process, the structural logic of the church shifted: an ecological theory of relation between the inner life and outer world gave way to a method of transparency that keeps sacred and profane worldviews apart.

The curtain wall that skins the Crystal Cathedral allows the building to simultaneously mirror its surroundings as it occludes the interior from view. Thus entering the sanctuary is like stepping through the screen. Once inside, the world reappears, but the worshipper is hidden from view. Or perhaps, more accurately, worshippers are visible to one another and hypervisible, as a congregation, to the entire world. With cameras trained on the congregation and the church, the completion of mediation places believers on the production side of the screen.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{49} Fund-raising mailing, Crystal Cathedral Ministries archive, Garden Grove, Calif.

\textsuperscript{50} Although Kilde in \textit{When Church Became Theatre} offers an account of the Crystal Cathedral as part of the tradition of nineteenth-century evangelical architectures, I would argue that the unique institutional history of this congregation establishes its church as convergent rather than continuous with these earlier Protestant forms.

\textsuperscript{51} For a parallel case of the relationship between the architectural curtain wall and the logics of mediation at work in the corporate sector, see Reinhold Martin, \textit{The Organizational Complex: Architecture, Media, and Corporate Space} (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).
Spectacular images of their coordinated practices underneath the luminous Southern California sky can circulate as representations of the Christian capacity for assembly. The resulting worship practice bears the marks of a shift toward the mediated and televisual. For example, guests whose performances are particularly well received by the audience are met with rounds of clapping or even a standing ovation. The transference of a theatrical practice onto the worshipping body is not the only reorganization brought about by the integration of technologies of visibility into the sanctuary.

Articulating the significance of the mediated congregation, Schuller preached: “What have we built? We have built a new kind of church for a new kind of society, never before in the history of Christianity has there been a church that was destined in the dreams of God to be a television church for a television society.”52 The church was a traditional form of religious institution equipped to work within the material conditions of its historical moment. It was a demonstration that “God wanted a television church for a television society” because, ultimately, television was the mediating logic best equipped to reach distributed potential believers. “Television leaped right over into our living rooms crossing whatever boundary . . . moral, political, theological, anything you can think of” and therefore provided the infrastructure for mediating eternity in a new aesthetic form.53

During the 1980s and 1990s the ministry greatly expanded its televangelical activities. The *Hour of Power* became the only ministry broadcast via the Armed Forces Network. By 1985, the program had more than 2 million viewers within 170 markets in all fifty states. With the help of media tycoon Rupert Murdoch, the program began airing across Europe. The very first broadcast relayed via Murdoch’s satellite Sky Channel was the *Hour of Power*. Murdoch guaranteed that the show would be broadcast for free, in perpetuity. In 1995 the ministry became the first to broadcast church services via NBC Europe, a network of stations reaching 70 million households. The same year, Stan Hubbard, owner of US Satellite Broadcasting (USSB) and the Hubbard Media Group, also promised a place for the *Hour of Power*, for free, as long as his company continued. Perhaps most remarkable was that the ministry was the first ministry to appear on television in the USSR. Three weeks before the fall of the Berlin Wall, with Mikhail Gorbachev’s approval, Schuller appeared on air. Today the *Hour of Power* is still the only Protestant program broadcast in Russia.

52. Sermon booklet, Crystal Cathedral Ministries archive, Garden Grove, Calif.
53. Sermon booklet, Crystal Cathedral Ministries archive, Garden Grove, Calif.
Conclusions

Viewed through the lens of one of the most prominent ministries of the previous century, spectacularly large Protestant churches bear the traces of underexplored exchanges among seemingly disparate cultural phenomena. As the GGCC and then the Crystal Cathedral, this ministry forged a series of intersections among media, architecture, and religion. Vernacular roadside architecture provided the infrastructure for religious assembly. California modernism contributed directly to the rise of televangelism. Televangelism, in turn, made possible the design and construction of an early megachurch. Braiding together these transformations in media, culture, and space were a set of more diffuse concerns operating throughout the second half of the twentieth century. In an era increasingly defined by distributed, mobile, and mediated social conditions, cultural institutions like the church responded by reinventing the architectures for collective life. Emblematic of this re-formation, the Crystal Cathedral makes visible the possibility for mediated congregation moving precisely through the technologies and spatial dynamics we often take to be fundamental to religion’s decline.

Despite, or perhaps because of, religion’s centrality, we have a tendency to lose sight of the analytical significance of what Émile Durkheim referred to as the “eminently collective thing.” Perhaps this is because a kind of parallax occurs when viewing religion through the thesis of modernity. The result is a kind of systematic distortion in our view. Religion appears to be precursor to modern sociality and therefore an elementary form. It determined organization in a historically prior age. Modernity demythologized the world and therefore produced a secular age. Collective life no longer required a vertical dimension, such as co-orientation toward the sacred. The hallmarks of a modern social order are the forms of association that require no sacred dimension: markets, spheres, and now, perhaps, networks. Spiritual associations operate by a different logic, and therefore their contributions to the production of modern social life sometimes go unseen.

Flaws in our regard for religion through the lens of modernity are already being traced. To scholarship that reasserts the presence of religion in the public sphere and to work that calls into question the explanatory power of secularism

as a theory that accounts for contemporary social life, I add a complementary cri-
tique. Chief among those mechanisms that brought about a modern, and therefore 
secular, age were electronic media and technologies for rapid transport. Together, 
they reordered space and time, categories fundamental to experience. In so doing, 
they changed the dominant worldview. By making it increasingly impossible to 
maintain a mythic understanding, technologies are characterized as agents of reli-
gious decline.

Megachurches bring the contradiction into focus. Their numbers and their 
style suggest that religion is alive and well in the contemporary. In fact, those 
modern technologies presumed to be disruptors of tradition have also operated to 
extend their reach. Spectacular Protestantism provides an opportunity to under-
stand the migration of a cosmology into new material conditions. Transformations 
in the church during the past half century demonstrate how materials, aesthetics, 
and practices help believers confirm a mythic worldview. Through acts of con-
gregation, believers take the logics of mediation to be confirmations of the sacred 
dimension in everyday life.

A Few More Words about God’s Glass House

I began following the Crystal Cathedral Ministries in 2005, fifty years after the 
found ing of the Garden Grove Community Drive-in Church and just weeks before 
Schuller retired as senior pastor. Since that time the ministry has undergone dra-
matic changes in fortune. After multiple experiments with organizational strategy 
and worship format, the Crystal Cathedral declared bankruptcy. As I write the 
final lines of this essay, the Crystal Cathedral is in the process of being purchased 
by the Catholic Church, and its founders, the Schullers, have resigned from the 
board of directors. Perhaps the rapid turn in fortunes is a lesson in the patent 
inability of charisma to routinize. After all, churches led by celebrity pastors 
rarely survive leadership transitions. Perhaps like many other media organizations 
shaped by the paradigm of broadcast, they failed to capitalize on the network and 
therefore went into decline. Perhaps the purchase by the Catholic diocese exposes 
a contradictory logic in megachurch movement writ large. Spectacular largesse 
may indicate that, in time, the cathedralization of Protestantism will neces-
arily come to an end. For now, whether and how this mediated congregation will 
reform through networked social conditions remains another story for a later time.