



The church of Notre Dame du Raincy by Auguste Perret, 1923

its relationship to the church buildings themselves, the industrial town is depicted as disjointed and devoid of a directional and moral presence. Pugin's point is that the cohesion of the medieval city around its religious edifices—manifested in the architecture of the Christian Gothic—has been undone by the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution.

Such a starting point for a discussion of the early modern church building forms an ironic counterpoint to what many modern architects themselves did with religious buildings, namely, using them as loci for experimentation with the intent of giving expression to the new urban realities, materials, and technologies. For many of the founders of modern architecture, the church building was not so much a distinctive presence outside of industrial society but an integral expression of it.

This move, for instance, is surely the context for the authoritative position achieved by Auguste Perret in his execution of the Church of Notre Dame du Raincy (1923). The church is a pivotal moment in the evolution of modern church architecture in part because its reinforced concrete structure elevates the material of concrete from a maligned building material used only in industrial projects to a medium that could be handled with the care and craftsmanship of precious

stone or wood. Perret was an entrepreneurial innovator in the use of reinforced concrete construction and the church in Le Raincy fully explored the new treatment of reinforced concrete as a particularly appropriate and *rational* means of renewing the religious building type. The building's rationality comes not only from its economy and functionality, but also in that it was derived from nineteenth-century structural rationalist teachings of important French figures who helped to formalize architecture as a discipline—Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, Auguste Choisy, Henri Labrouste, and Julian Gaudet. As historians have pointed out, the church combines both the solidity and rational geometry of Classicism and the daring structural lightness of the Gothic, so that Perret's use of concrete draws the history of the French, Greek and Gothic building traditions into itself.

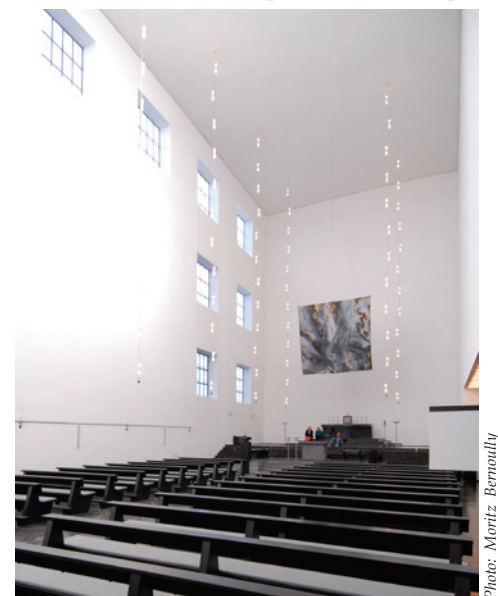
While Perret showed little overt interest in questions of faith or theology, he was nonetheless deeply aware of the powerful place that the discipline of architecture—and, by extension, the church as a monument—held within French cultural tradition. He likewise possessed a deep understanding of his own role within the history of French architectural building and thought, an understanding that is accumulated in the aphorisms published near the end of his life in the *Contribution to a Theory of Architecture* (1952) in which he places his understanding of architecture as a sovereign shelter within a history of building stretching back to the ancients.

The Church of Notre Dame du Raincy may thus be seen symbolically to set in motion a number of ideals that run through the successive evolution of the history of the church building in the early twentieth century: a continued concern for the hierarchical relation of architectural space to the urban fabric; the construction of the church building with an attention to new materials and technology; and a determination to continue to evolve a new language of monumentality within the constraints of a particular religious tradition. The innovations evident in the church of Le Raincy thus served as a fountainhead for a whole tradition of church construction in the first half of the twentieth century. Ferdinand Pfammatter in his 1948 study, *Betonkirche*, calls the church an "astonishing phenomenon" (*überraschende Erscheinung*),

emphasizing its structural clarity as a model for the renewal of religious architecture through a reworking of the typology of the church. As examples of its influence, he points to such churches as Jean Combaz's Sainte Suzanne in Brussels (1928); Saint-Pierre à Roye, Somme (1931) by Duval & Gonse; and the University Chapel, Fribourg (1941) by Dumas & Honegger. Others have noted Perret's influence in such works as Cecil Burns' Christian Science Church, Turnbridge Wells (1933). Yet it was Karl Moser's Saint Antonius in Basel (1927) that extended the concern for materiality and structure into what Peter Hammond called "the full accomplishment of the technical revolution that was begun at Le Raincy."

Derivation and the Spirit

If some architects used church buildings as an opportunity to innovate within a cultural tradition, for others contemplation of the human spirit in the face of modernization played a stronger role as a derivative source for thinking about architecture. It has been persuasively argued, for example, that the origin of Mies van der Rohe's concern for "the building art" as a spatial expression of spiritual decisions was informed by the Catholic Reform Movement in Germany during the Weimar Republic. This movement was given inspiration by the priest, philosopher, and theologian Romano Guardini, as well as the church architect, theorist, and urban planner Rudolph



Fronleichnamskirche, Aachen by Rudolf Schwarz, 1930



German Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe, International Exhibition of Barcelona, 1929

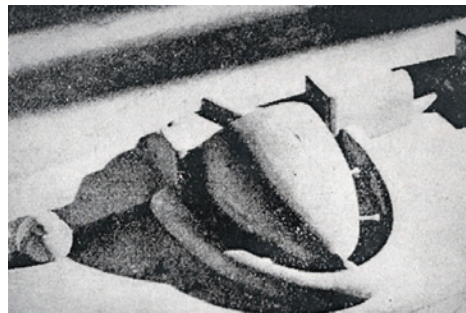
Schwarz. Thus, aside from Mies' contribution to the building methods that became characteristic of his work and was often duplicated by others, he held a strong philosophical concern for the spiritual foundations of architecture in an age of technology, arguing that building could not be viewed as merely a matter of function and technology.

Schwarz' 1938 book, *Vom Bau der Kirche* (On the Building of Churches), exerted a profound influence on Mies' sense of the spiritual dimension of all architecture. Intended by Schwarz to be "a primer for church building—no more but also no less," the book was translated into English in 1958 with the suggestive title *The Church Incarnate*. At the most obvious level, Schwarz's book is a re-thinking of the typological organization of the Christian church. The book's underlying structure is based upon his system of seven "plans" or diagrams, outlining various patterns for the arrangement of sacred space and the symbolic and metaphysical manifestations that lie behind this spatial ordering. Given the book's theological focus, it is striking that the English translation included a foreword presenting a surprisingly strong endorsement from Mies—an endorsement that was largely responsible for bringing the book to the attention of English-speaking audiences: "It is not only a great book on architecture, indeed, it is one of the truly great books—one of those which have the power to transform our thinking."

What Mies shared in particular with the reform-minded Schwarz and Guardini was a deep metaphysical and even religious concern for the problem of the spirit, especially in regard to harnessing the drive of technology and science in the modern era. For him,

to terms with the salient technical phenomena of the modern epoch, with all its consequences.¹ In this respect, the spatial effect created through the primary features of Mies' Barcelona Pavilion of 1929—the building's steel skeleton placed on a grid, the experience of the body progressing through the configuration of interlocking planes and free-standing screens—has been read as a synthesis in material form of a new understanding of the body and space. In light of Mies' own written statements on the reevaluation of space, building, and its connections to the spirit, the pavilion may be seen as a symbolic expression of the possibility for material to give shape to a deep understanding of human existence. As Mies himself expressed this ultimate concern in spiritual terms: "For the meaning and justification of each epoch, even the new one, lies only in providing conditions under which the spirit can exist."

Against the highly refined Miesian vision, one may set as a contrast the trans-national influences on the exploration of the spirit in architecture as evidenced by the 1932 "League of Religions" project, carried out by an obscure but telling figure, the young Chilean Surrealist Robert Matta. As his



The model of Roberto Matta's League of Religions thesis project

the key question was one of value, through which one could fix ultimate goals in order to establish effective standards. As the historian Fritz Neumeyer observes, what Mies, Schwarz, and Guardini shared in common was a search for the means of "building" as a reality that could come

thesis project at the School of Architecture and Urbanism at the Catholic University of Chile, this project was not directly focused on the church building type, but is indicative in its intellectual guises of a similar concern for the spirit as Mies, yet in this case through a concern for the organic rather than technological. Because of its interfaith approach, Matta's League of Religions project suggests a search on his part for a means of expressing a universal spirituality. In making this exploration, Matta appeals to the use of natural, biomorphic forms rather than traditional historical precedent as an inspiration for spiritual design. This turn to the organic and away from the prevailing rationalism of European modernism reflects skepticism toward traditional religious beliefs as Matta had encountered them through his rigorous classical Jesuit training. One might observe, therefore, that between the two architectural trends toward "the rational and the geometrical, [and] the irrational and the organic" (to borrow Giedion's dichotomy), the League of Religions project is self-consciously situated toward the organic end of the spectrum. Moreover, this early experimentation with biomorphic form seems to anticipate Matta's embrace of the Surrealist impulse that he encountered in Paris later in the 1930s.

One might situate these concerns with the spirituality of architecture within an intellectual matrix (following from an observation suggested by Kenneth Frampton) that is rooted in two seemingly interrelated factors in European architectural culture prior to the Second World War.² The first turns on how the work of a number of architects may be read in the vein of the "avatars" of an emergent modernity who felt the need throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century to develop a new anthropocentric, universal religion in order to compensate for the loss of traditional faith. The second factor then concerns the ways in which the loss of traditional faith was accompanied not so incidentally by the dissolution of the rationalist form most commonly associated with Modernism, towards more organic expressions.

In the first instance—the move toward a more anthropocentric, universal spirituality—one could cite such phenomena as Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical movement, which resulted in the construction of the "Goethea-



Photo: wikipedia.org

Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland, by Rudolf Steiner, 1924

num" in Dornach, Switzerland dating from 1908, with a second larger building begun in 1924. Intended as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the Goetheanum is a strong statement of German expressionism, relying on spiritually expressive forms even while experimenting with modern concrete construction. A related strain within the culture of

the German architectural avant-garde between the turbulent years of 1914-19 is evidenced by the more familiar Bauhaus Proclamation of 1919, given behind the woodcut image of Lionel Feiniger's Cathedral of the Future, which was also identified at the time as the Cathedral of Socialism. This proclamation called for the creation of a

utopian craft guild that would make a unified creative expression of the plastic arts, with an emphasis on "creative artists as the spiritual counterpoints to the practical technicians." In both cases, the search for a universal, secular spirituality is the dominant motif.

In the second instance—the dissolution of rationalist form in favor of organic expressions—one could contrast the overt rationalism of such pioneering projects as Perret's Notre Dame du Raincy with the organicism of the Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí's La Sagrada Família in Barcelona (begun in 1882). In contrast to the rationalism and structural logic of Le Raincy, as

discussed above, Gaudí's La Sagrada Família embraces a formal exaggeration and natural form related to the Art Nouveau movement, that also evokes the later Surrealism of Salvador Dalí, Marcel Duchamp, and André Breton (with whom Matta was to become familiar). It was Breton who noted that the architecture of the Art Nouveau movement was the first among all the arts to move towards surrealism by excluding the external world and turning toward the inner consciousness of expressing the internal world visually. In La Sagrada Família, Gaudí draws upon influences ranging from Gothic to Moorish, creating what might be characterized as evoking "another" Modernism lying outside the traditional constructional logic of modern architecture—a prime expression of the strain of a derivative use of religious ideas which contributed to shaping any number of architectural works that share the concern for developing a new more universal spirituality of building.

Aesthetic Summation

A third trajectory within modern religious architecture is the summational aspect which some buildings had within the corpus of certain architects who were eminent teachers and representatives of new architectural languages: this would include, for example, among others, Theodore Fischer and Dominikus Bohm and the Catholic reform architecture in Germany, Otto Wagner in Austria, Hendrik Petrus Berlage in the Netherlands, and Karl Moser in Switzerland. These figures often turned to the religious building as a culmination of their



Photo: AK @ gaudifansers.com, flickr.com

Templo de la Sagrada Família, by Antonio Gaudí, begun 1882

Photo: cckao1, flickr.com

Saint Leopold am Steinhof, Vienna, by Otto Wagner, 1907



Most Sacred Heart Church, Prague, by Jozef Plecnik, 1928

inventiveness with new structures, or as an expression of a complete vocabulary drawn from numerous architectural languages: classical, modernist, and vernacular. In such cases, the church building had the effect of freeing the imagination of the architect from all stylistic conventions, and allowed for a freer association with forms.

By way of example, Wagner's Saint Leopold am Steinhof in Vienna of 1907 provides a fresh reading of materials, ornamentation, and their relationship to structure. Above all, the church presented a new interpretation of ornament in relation to metalwork, the radial ribwork, the thin sheets of Sterzig marble, and the gold and copperwork which stress the salient features of the building's structure. In turn, Wagner's church had a notable impact on the work of his prize student, Jozef Plecnik, who himself was raised in a deeply religious family. This formation, combined with his early tutelage by Wagner and the influence of the texts of Gottfried Semper, shaped Plecnik's belief in material as the basis of architectural form. Plecnik's Church of the Most Sacred Heart in Prague (1928-31) openly demonstrates how he adapted elements derived from numerous architectural traditions—from the trabeated forms of Classicism, to vernacular construction methods and regional building traditions.

In the United States, Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple in Oak Park (1907) might in one sense be said to be analogous to Perret's Notre Dame du Raincy in terms of its innovation with concrete construction, the strength of the influence of its forms, and the ways in which the building helped to provide an essential foundation for a "new ar-

chitecture" with wider implications for the field extending well beyond the programmatic need for providing space for religious worship. Yet the building also summarizes Wright's own utilitarian and transcendentalist background by giving full expression to his aesthetic and philosophical stance. Wright's intention for Unity Temple to be "a modern meeting house" underscores the importance of the seated congregation within the three sides of a square room and its galleries with the focus on the central pulpit at the front. Here the building is understood in relation to Wright's concept of architecture as a place of gathering rather than architecture as a sanctuary. Wright's radical approach to the temple—so unlike traditional church architecture at the time—was set out in a lecture he gave at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1931, in which he said of the Unity Temple that it represented:

An entirely new sense of architecture, a higher conception of architecture; architecture not alone as form following function, but conceived as space enclosed. The enclosed space itself might now be seen as the reality of the building. The sense of the "within" or of the room itself, or the rooms themselves, I now saw as the great thing to be expressed as *architecture*.³

Similarly, Bernard Maybeck's First Church of Christ, Scientist in Berkeley, California (1910-12) is in many ways as expressive of a particular tradition as Wright's Unity Temple. Maybeck's building does not appear in a traditional church

form on the exterior; its scale combined with its wooden trellises and wisteria vines and concrete tracery create a space that is more intimate than imposing. Of Maybeck's work Paul Goldberger has written:

Maybeck was interested in the way buildings made people feel; he cared about the auras his buildings possessed, about the emotions they inspired, about the thoughts they brought forth. [...] He knew that there is no such thing as the completely new; he also knew that no work of art worth anything can be made entirely from things that have come before. He felt no conflict, and his work was proof that total originality need not demand total rejection of what is familiar and comfortable. In the end, he takes his place not only among the greatest of California architects, but also among the select group of architects throughout history who, like Hawksmoor, Soane, and Lutyens, pushed and pulled traditional languages in ways that others could not imagine, and in so doing made poetry.⁴

Conclusion

Recognizing that the critical assessment of the religious building in modern and contemporary architecture is an often ignored subject within most schools of architecture, the Yale School of Architecture organized an interdisciplinary symposium on the topic "Constructing the Ineffable" in 2007 with architects, theologians, phi-



Unity Temple, Oak Park, IL by Frank Lloyd Wright, 1907



Photo: National Register, flickr.com

First Church of Christ, Scientist, Berkeley, CA, by Bernard Maybeck, 1910

losophers, and historians. Since many new contemporary religious buildings built over the last two decades have received substantial attention within the popular press, it seemed like an opportune moment to explore the subject, especially as many prominent working architects on the current scene have in fact engaged it in their own work. The symposium set out to examine this large corpus of contemporary sacred architecture and the cultural attitudes that give it shape. In this sense, the speakers at the conference in effect addressed two foundational questions posed by Vincent Scully in his keynote address: What do we consider sacred today? And how is that expressed in built form?

What emerged from this dialogue was a confirmation that a broad audience is eager to address the ideas that have shaped attitudes to sacred space within the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Many participants came to this discussion with a belief that the topic of the religious building, especially in the historiography of twentieth century architecture, has been unfairly ignored. Indeed, some leading architect-scholars asserted that in comparison with the past, the twentieth century lacked a compelling religious building tradition (with the exception of a few outstanding examples such as Le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp) — presumably thereby accounting for why modern religious architecture has not caught on within professional schools as a topic for in-depth historical and critical inquiry.

From the symposium, there emerged a sense of the need for a more nuanced historical perspective that could reas-

sess contemporary religious architecture's modernist roots. Contrary to assumptions, the relation between modern architecture and religion is emerging as a more complex and often contradictory relationship than previously assumed. The significance of the pursuit of the "rational" for modern architects—in relation to the lucidity of construction, structural logic, and economy—is not in doubt. On the other hand, one could argue that there has been relatively less emphasis placed by modern architects on a search for the relationship of the built environment to patterns of myth, ritual, and the archetypal aspirations of the human spirit. Yet as this essay has reasserted, the place of spirit in leading innovative approaches, sustaining derivative appropriations, and offering summational exemplars of modern architecture cannot be overlooked.

Most of the great modernist architects in fact displayed a real interest in, and sensitivity towards building religious work. Although the religious building has perhaps been the most problematic architectural type of the twentieth century, it has never ceased to challenge the architect. In a century when building types were expanding to keep up with meeting the requirements of a modernist mass society—including such varied forms as the shopping center, the factory, the airport, and hydro-electric dams—the religious building type persisted as an indication of human presence, symbolic myths, and archetypal bonds in the midst of radical

and absolute change. If we follow this thread, there emerges a more nuanced picture of the narrative of modern architecture that brings forward the very serious ideas on the relationship between the spirit and the formation of new materials and technologies. These achievements suggest that there is a stronger narrative of concern for the spirit to be traced within the history of modern architecture than many critics have observed.



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(Endnotes)

- 1 Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless Word: Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 166.
- 2 Kenneth Frampton, "The New Spirituality and the Cathedral of the Future," a paper given at the conference Middle Ground/Middle East: Religious Sites in Urban Contexts, Yale School of Architecture, January 21-22, 2011.
- 3 Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1932), 153-4.
- 4 Paul Goldberger, "Building Poetry, Part I," www.maybeck.org/scholars.html, accessed June 14, 2012.



Photo: andrewsack.com

Design for the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, Liverpool, by Sir Edwin Lutyens, 1930