

From Mission to Mishmash: How Modernism has failed Sacred Architecture

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By way of reflection on the sesquicentennial of California's admittance into the United States of America, I wish to examine the relationship between architecture, specifically religious architecture, and the development of culture in California over the past 150 years. Of particular interest is the question of how religious architecture has influenced secular culture, and by corollary, how secular culture has influenced religion.

In this paper I will be speaking primarily from the viewpoint of Catholic sacred architecture. This is in no way meant to diminish any other denominational or religious traditions, or to suggest that Catholicism has had a dominant influence on the development of culture in California. Rather, I do so for the following two reasons: first, both in academic training and in professional practice I am most conversant in the history, symbolic signification, and theological underpinnings of the Catholic building tradition; and second, Catholicism does have a central place in California architectural history: from the first mission churches built by Junipero Serra to the most recent ambitious cathedral projects in America—namely, the new

cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles and the new cathedral of Christ Our Light being planned for the Diocese of Oakland. In this paper I hope to show that the secular world (the “business” of California) has adopted certain religious principles to its benefit, and to show that religion has adopted certain secular principles and values to its detriment. Thus I hope to give some insight into the question of changing perceptions and expressions in religious architecture and in secular culture.

Let us first look at what I consider “religious” and “secular” principles. The main value of religion is holiness; that of business is economy. Business asks, “what makes money?”; religion asks, “what makes saints?” Business values “whatever sells” or “what moves the goods”; religion values “what moves the heart.” Religion traditionally has accomplished this through addressing the whole human person, and working in the realm of memory, imagination, and emotion. Business accomplishes its ends through economics of production, functional efficiency, and utility. Religion is necessarily about tradition: “what has been handed on from time immemorial.” Busi-

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ness is about novelty: “what needs can we generate to sell products.” Let us look then, at how business has used these religious principles of tradition, memory, and imagination to achieve its aims, and how religion has adopted functionalism and economic considerations and thereby frustrated its aims.

The Rise of The Missions

In 1769, Father Junipero Serra founded the first mission in Alta California at San Diego. It was designed and built in the dominant style of the age: colonial Spanish baroque, derived from the great European churches, yet smaller, more rustic, and simplified so as to be built with local labor and materials. Over the next 54 years, 21 missions were founded throughout California. Some of these were quite grand, such as San Juan Bautista or Santa Barbara; others were quite simple such as San Gabriel and San Miguel. But regardless of the sizes and the great variety in architectural features (such as façade design or internal arrangement) there are some typical characteristics that can be identified. Using local materials readily available and able to be constructed by the indigenous populations, the missions were built of thick, buttressed adobe walls that were lime plastered and whitewashed. The ceilings and roof were typically of heavy beam construction with wood planks and covered in clay tile. There was little surface decoration on the buildings, usually confined to the main door and front façade, and the windows were deep-set punched openings in the heavy adobe mass. In lieu of a bell tower, the church bells were often hung in a perforated wall called a *campanario*. The buildings were arrayed in the monastic fashion, about a large arcaded courtyard with various ancillary buildings for living, administration, workshops, apothecary and storage. Church cemeteries are frequently found on the side of the church opposite to the courtyard.

The church buildings, whether of a

single nave such as San Gabriel and San Carlos Borromeo, or of a grander basilican form, with side aisles on each side of the higher central nave such as at San Juan Bautista, were typical of European Counter-reformation churches, with a rear choir loft, and a high and prominent preaching pulpit found about a third of the way down the nave, which was surmounted by a large sounding board to amplify the projection. The sanctuary was very much the place of glory, lavished with ornamentation, connected to the nave by a large chancel arch, and terminating the longitudinal church with a massive and elaborate *reredos* that enshrined the high altar, the tabernacle, and statues of the Saints.

The Decline of The Missions

The last of the missions, San Francisco Solano, was dedicated on July 4, 1823. This date seems portentous, given that the manifest destiny of the still-young United States, whose Forty-Seventh anniversary was celebrated on that dedication day, was to stretch from sea to sea—and this destiny was to coincide with, and even precipitate, the decline of the mission system in California. Laura Bride Powers wrote of this mission: “This, the last of the California missions, was the very feeblest of all—showing that the mission system under the existing conditions was worn out; the vitality had gone from it and collapse was its inevitable fate.”¹

By the end of the first decade of the Nineteenth Century, the Spanish Empire had already begun to decline, and between the political situation in Europe (then involved in the Napoleonic Wars) and the increasing interest in trade in California among the Americans, British, Japanese, and Russians, the future of California was very much up for grabs. The *presidio* system could no longer defend Spanish interests against incursion or rebellion, and as the Spanish withdrew from Alta California, the missions fell into desuetude. An account from the mid 19th-century speaks

to how quickly the Spanish presence was lost:

A more desolate place cannot well be imagined. The old church is partially in ruins, and the adobe huts built for the Indians are roofless, and the walls tumbled about in shapeless piles. Not a tree or shrub is to be seen anywhere in the vicinity. The ground is bare, like an open road, save in front of the main building where carcasses and bones of cattle are scattered about, presenting a disgusting spectacle.²

While some of the missions were well maintained, and continued as centers of faith, culture, and commerce, such as Mission San Miguel or Mission Santa Barbara, by the middle of the Nineteenth Century, others were reduced to heaps of rubble, such as Mission La Purissima at Lompoc, Mission San Juan Capistrano, and Mission Soledad. In the late 1860s, as part of the general Romanticism of the age, the California missions began to gain a new value in the American esthetic. In the 1870s and 1880s, as the West was won and tourism increased, the California missions became better known on the East Coast by way of California guidebooks and promotional literature. In the early 1880s Helen Hunt Jackson had a series of articles on "Father Junipero Serra and His Work" and "The Present Condition of the Mission Indians" published in *Century* magazine. Accompanying these articles was a lovely series of romantic drawings by Henry Sandham, showing the picturesque missions with their heavy adobe arcades, *campanarios*, mission tiles, and overgrown ruins. Mrs. Jackson's hyperbolic description of the missions captured the imagination of the American public:

The peace, silence, and beauty of the spot are brooded over and dominated by the grand gray ruin, lifting the whole scene into an ineffable harmony. Wandering in room after room, court after court, through corridors with red tile roofs and hundreds of broad Roman arches, over fallen pillars, and through

carved doorways, whose untrodden thresholds have sunken out of sight in summer grasses, one asks himself if he be indeed in America.³

The following year, Mrs. Jackson published her best-selling novel *Ramona*, a picturesque novel concerned with the conditions of the Mexicans and Indians in the American Southwest. Again this novel fed America's romantic hunger for the exotic and the romantic images of the California missions. Within a few years both Southern Pacific and Santa Fe railroads began "Ramona" tours of the mission country. Although it would still be twenty-five years before these railroads adopted the Mission Style for their depots, they nevertheless saw the economic advantage in promoting the mission mystique at an early date.

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, the East Coast of the United States began to discover, and fallen love with, this romanticized portrayal of California. Even Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was taken the by this attraction, and wrote in 1881, "A strange feeling of romance hovers about those old Spanish Missions of California, difficult to define and difficult to escape."⁴ Images of the missions began to appear in advertising for such diverse products as peaches, cough lozenges, housing tracts, and olives. Articles on the California missions were found in *Harper's*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Scribner's*, and *Cosmopolitan* magazines, and a topical book industry was born. With this growing interest came the call for the preservation of these monuments: as William B. Tyler wrote in his book *Old California Missions*, "the Missions are crumbling and decaying rapidly...within five years important repairs will have to be made, or before that time several of them will have crumbled entirely away."⁵ Similarly, from *Drake's* magazine in 1889, Charles Lummis wrote: "Of the many Missions and 'stations' in Southern California, the minor ones are largely hopeless ruins, and even the more important ones have mostly fallen somewhat to decay. In only a

few are pains being taken to preserve the noble edifices from the tireless tooth of Time.”⁶

Political interest and legislation for the preservation of the missions began to develop, and groups such as the California Historical Society, the Association for the Preservation of the Missions, and the Landmarks Club were founded for the protection and reconstruction of the monuments. Consciousness was raised nationally through the success of books such as Laura Bride Powers’ popular *The Missions of California*: “Now, I ask, why should not these sanctuaries—which are at the same time sepulchers—be rescued from destruction and preserved to the generations to come?”⁷

The early efforts for reconstruction were somewhat uneven, and at times marred by questionable practices, lack of scholarship, and the dictates of current fashion, as evinced in the case of San Luis Obispo, which in the 1870s had its façade covered in wood siding and its interior beam ceiling and tile floor also covered in wood. Soon, however, architects, historians, photographers, and academics began to focus on the desperate needs of the missions. The earlier Romantic impulse slowly gave way to more dispassionate and historically accurate scholarship through the work of photographers such as Edward Vischer and Adam Vroman, artists such as Henry Chapman Ford, Ariana Day, and Edwin Deakins, and historical research of J. J. O’Keefe, Ella Sterling, and Laura Bride Powers.

But notwithstanding best efforts and good intentions, we must still ask how accurate can a “restoration” be that took a decrepit heap of crumbling adobe, and transformed it into a completely integrated historical timepiece with an elaborately decorated *reredos*, heavily stenciled beams, period furnishings and sacred art, and such. Recent archeological work by Msgr. Francis Weber at San Fernando Mission has caused some rethinking of the original reconstructions. How much of this work was influenced by the late Nineteenth Century es-

thetic sensibilities, and how much was affected by the simultaneous desire both to create and to justify the emerging taste for Mission Style, which was growing as a commercially viable industry?

The Development of The Mission Style

Such questions are not without foundation. The selling of California was inextricably bound up with the romance of the missions. One of the key figures in the promotion of Romantic California was the *Los Angeles Times* newspaperman Charles Fletcher Lummis, who founded the Landmarks Club. As Dr. Karen Weitze notes in her carefully researched book, *California’s Mission Revival*, “As early as 1895, Lummis shrewdly noted that the missions were the ‘best capital Southern California has’” and saw links with missions as “a model for the ‘architecture of modern California.’”⁸

The Mission Style was thus to be the vehicle for California’s economic prosperity and national stature, as evinced in the enormous California pavilion, built at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago by Page Brown with assistance from Bernard Maybeck. Arguably, it became merely another style to be added to the architect’s grab-bag serving the late Nineteenth Century’s taste for eclecticism. Regardless, through the work of excellent regional architects such as Irving Gill, Bernard Maybeck, and Julia Morgan, the artists and writers in Charles Lummis’ circle at Arroyo Grande (seen, for instance, in Clyde Brown’s house in San Encino called “The Abbey” (1909)), and the widespread acceptance of the Mission Style for the residential market, this style came to embody the history, romance, and quality of life that California promised. “California” was sold as a paradise regained, “a peaceful land, as it was founded in love and peaceful sacrifice.”⁹ The Mission style was thus co-opted since “the mission buildings still stand, monuments to the greatest and most peaceful conquest the world has ever known.”¹⁰

The style became *de rigueur* for the

railroad: even relatively new Victorian stations were demolished and replaced with Mission style ones. Many hotels catering to the burgeoning tourist industry also adopted the style and, with it, the historical associations and romantic evocations for their tourist patrons. Frank Miller, the developer of the Riverside Inn, unabashedly promoted his establishment as a “monastery” where “the tower... is like that of Carmel Mission where Father Serra is buried, and the buttresses are like those of San Gabriel Mission.”¹¹ No more grandly could Mission Style have been writ large than at William Randolph Hearst’s San Simeon estate, by Bay Area architect Julia Morgan. Even the service buildings—garages, pump houses, and stables—were designed to reflect the romance and allure of the new Eden established on West Coast.

While the churches were not as quick to pick up on the obvious marketing possibilities as were secular interests, many churches were built in this style. For instance, the façade of St. Stanislaus in Modesto shows the obvious influences of Mission Revival with its twin domed towers, Spanish tile, the quatrefoil rose window, the articulated central door, and the baroque sweep of the steps. The Mission Style became part of the religious landscape across the country—even to the Good Shepherd Catholic Church in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, which clearly expresses the spirit of the California missions with a Spanish tile-capped squat bell tower, mission gable, and the decorated entry portal and window surrounds.

European Influences

Yet even in its heyday, the Mission Revival style had its critics. As Sally Woodbridge writes, “There were from the beginning critics who pointed out that perhaps an essentially ecclesiastic mode made an inappropriate pattern for residences, shops, and warehouses, and who further observed that the temporary never-never

land of an exposition was the proper locale for such a spurious style.” The obvious commercial implications meant “For the developer a single plaster arch on the front parapet of a flat roofed box became the standard shorthand for a romantic and largely mythical past.”¹²

Furthermore, the intellectual climate in early Twentieth Century Europe spurred an aggressive critique of Nineteenth Century historicism, architectural eclecticism, and artistic Romanticism, all as being lifeless vestiges of the old bourgeois political order. The deliberately ahistorical functionalism of the Bauhaus brought to the fore a new set of values for the articulation of sacred architecture. In brief, these new values were (1) reductionism, (2) liturgical centralization, and (3) architectural transparency. The Bauhaus modernists had their own eclectic and syncretic version of a religion—a stitched-together religion combining elements of Mazdaism, Neo-Platonism, Theosophy, Anthroposophy, and Masonry, along with the writings of Lao-Tze, Aquinas, Swedenborg, and Rilke, with their own mythos, liturgical expression, and ascetical practices.

The urge toward reductionism, a search for “first principles” upon which to base a new architecture, can be seen most clearly in one of the earliest expressions of functionalism applied to the question of religious architecture, the 1920s church of Corpus Christi in Aachen Germany, by Rudolf Schwarz, a noted architect and student of the priest-philosopher Romano Guardini. This impulse toward pragmatic functionalism, and away from the vast tradition of Christian architectural styles, unleashed an iconoclastic pogrom across Europe.

Not untypical is the remodeling done to the *Zisterzienkirche* in Mehrerau, Austria, by the architect Hans Purin, an example which shows clearly the movement toward reductionism: three articulated bays with their expressive masonry buttresses are covered over with blocky primary forms which obscure the delicate

gable design, the string courses, and other architectural details which gave a human scale to the original façade. The rose window with its delicate tracery is “abstracted” to a simple punched circle, as if it were an opening to a birdhouse. The central portal, expressing the entrance to the church as an entrance into heaven itself, is covered up, forcing visitors to use the side doors. The depictive statuary, from an era that had more consideration for the dignity of the human body, was changed to a modern abstractive composition in which the human form can only be suggested through crude primal shapes. Even the cross surmounting the gable on the original façade, unambiguously signifying that this building was a place of Christian worship, was removed. As can be expected, the interior of the church suffered a similarly ignoble fate: stripping away the highly ornamented and iconographically instructive plaster vaults, devotional niches, historic side altars, and even the elaborately carved pews in favor of open-backed benches.

It would seem from these examples that the movement toward reductionism essentially states that in order to know the essence of a human person one must be eviscerated and stripped down to one’s structural skeleton. Time does not allow for a fuller explanation of why this urge toward reductionism fails to engage the person in a fully human matter, or why it violates principles of classic Christian anthropology, or why it is particularly inappropriate for sacred architecture. My purpose here is simply to point out the genesis of this impulse, so is better to understand the effects of this mindset on sacred architecture.

The movement toward liturgical centralization likewise has a complex history, and is a convergence of diverse threads: the German romantic sensibility of Grail imagery and the knights of the Round Table; the liturgical experiments of Romano Guardini at Burg Rothenfels for the Catholic “Quickborn” youth movement; experiments in theater design where the proscenium arch is destroyed; a pragmati-

cally functionalistic approach to church design that valued the centrality of the altar as the genesis and *raison d’être* of the church building around which the congregation gathers; and the widespread desire to cleanse the Christian church of its historical accretions into what Otto Bartning called a “holy melting-pot” (*heilige Mischkrug*)—again evoking a circular form as expressive of the liturgical assembly. Bartning, who was a Lutheran, designed a series of Expressionist churches in the 1920s based on concentric or star forms with complex organic structural systems.

The third principle of architectural modernism, transparency, can be understood as a removal of hierarchical boundaries to express the ultimate unity of all things. This understanding involves the socialist critique of classical society and the hierarchy intrinsic to traditional religions, conflated with the theosophical, gnostic, and hermetic religious views of the early modernists. In an interesting development (*Crystal*, by B. Essers (1924)) the impulse toward transparency was emblemized in the form of the crystal. Surprisingly, this form had both moral and even cosmological implications for the modernists. As Wolfgang Pehnt explains: “glass stood for a brighter awareness, clearer determination, and that ‘utter gentleness’ which glass possesses in spite of its sharp edges.”¹³ More insidiously, E. Michael Jones argues that Walter Gropius embraced the transparency of glass as a way of removing natural human barriers and boundaries respectful of traditional family structure and monogamous sexual relationships.¹⁴ As for the cosmology of the crystal, Bruno Taut was to write: “Glass—molten, liquid earth only afterwards becomes solid and yet transparent, shimmering, sparkling, flashing, teeming with endless reflection in the light of space,”¹⁵ and Hendrikus Wijdeveld was to comment “We want to crystallize the infinity of the cosmos and give expression to its form.”¹⁶ Thus it is not surprising to see the Bauhaus expression of religious sensibility best expressed in the crystal, as the numer-

ous religious projects of Wassili Luckhardt indicate. For Rudolf Schwarz, the culmination of religious architecture was to be found in his Sixth Plan, called “the Sacred Universe” or “the Dome of Light,” which was an architectural evocation of the Resurrection and the *Parousia*: “The building consists of light, light breaking in from all sides, light shining forth from all things, light fused with light, light turning to face light, light the answer to light. The earth is transformed into a star; her stuff afire, she is a monstrosity of rays about the child in the center, her altar a flame, the people a sea of fire and each one of them a star.... Heaven is everywhere, earth everywhere, the one melting into the other.”¹⁷

Back to California

With this history as background information, we can better understand the shifts in religious symbol structure. We can thus locate the intention of Phillip Johnson in his design of the award winning Crystal Cathedral for Rev. Robert Schuller. In plan, the crystalline form orders the assembly space. The exterior minimalism in architectural detailing is entirely subservient to the requirements of the space-frame structural system. It is interesting that Johnson assiduously avoids any symbolic referent to traditional religious architecture in this building; was this a necessary limitation given the *a priori* decision to utilize “modern” materials? Hardly. Johnson was quite willing and able to evoke Gothic archetypes within the same material limitation of glass curtain wall construction for the commercial cathedral he designed for PPG industries.

Given the unbearably broad scope of religious architecture, I shall conclude by limiting myself to three projects, which I consider indicative of the probable future of sacred architecture in California. The first project, the proposed new Catholic cathedral for the Diocese of Oakland, shows the results of the limited competition in which three major international firms par-

ticipated. The first proposal, by Ricardo Legorreta of Mexico, was the most humble of the entries, a simple exercise in functional massing. The plan is a quatre-sected rectangle, the spines of which form a cross from the “God’s eye view,” though without apparent functional necessity. The curving tiled wall is opposed to the rectilinear half with the flat roof, perhaps suggesting the sacred parts of the building set against the utilitarian spaces, though this is unclear from the model.

More ambitious is Skidmore-Owings-Merrill San Francisco’s entry, a towering wooden container sheathed in a glass curtain wall shell. In the mind of the designer, Craig Hartman, the layering of skins speaks to the many layers of covering on the tent of dwelling that Moses was commanded to construct in the desert. The design approach intentionally avoids the figurative and symbolic, instead seeking to express the spirituality through the play of light, both filtered through the louvered side walls, and as manipulated through the sculptural skylight designed by the New York artist Jamie Carpenter, who specializes in light as an artistic medium. The construction system was intended to allow cool air from earth tubes to balance the internal environment by rising naturally through a plenum between the two skins.

The winning entry, by the Spanish-born architect Santiago Calatrava of Zurich, is also the most ambitious of the entries. Typical of Calatrava’s engineering approach to his architecture, the building is a structural skeleton of articulated concrete ribs—as if creating a sort of ribcage from some primordial gigantic sea creature—again serving as a framework for the filtering translucent glass panels. The interior view shows the radiating seats about the central altar. In both form and liturgical sensibility, this purportedly modern building is merely a continuation of the 80-year-old trajectory established by the Bauhaus modernists. So Oakland will get a giant concrete bishop’s miter for its new cathedral.

NEXUS

I hope with this lecture we have gained some better insight into the shifts in religious architecture across California's history. The patterns I described can, I believe, be applied as well to all sacred architecture in the developed Western countries. The particular influences of the California missions certainly give a unique flavor to the architectural tradition in the Golden State, though it seems ironic that the religious tradition which bore these buildings so quickly discarded it for functionalism (no doubt for purportedly economic reasons), while the commercial enterprises originally adopted, and recently recovered, the Mission Style for cultural and economic reasons: look at any Von's or Safeway supermarket recently built around here to see the resurgence of this as a perennial style that bespeaks the California lifestyle.

16. *Quoted in id.* at 37.
17. RUDOLF SCHWARZ, *THE CHURCH INCARNATE*. 180-181 (Cynthia Harris, trans. 1958).

NOTES

NB: This paper was delivered with a large series of explanatory slide images that cannot be reproduced for the purposes of this publication.

1. LAURA BRIDE POWERS, *THE MISSIONS OF CALIFORNIA* 104 (1897).
2. *Quoted in* KAREN WEITZE, *CALIFORNIA'S MISSION REVIVAL* 3 (1984).
3. HELEN HUNT JACKSON, *FATHER JUNIPERO SERRA AND THE MISSION INDIANS OF CALIFORNIA* 91 (1902).
4. Agnes M. Manning, *San Carlos de Monterey*, *OVERLAND MONTHLY*, July 1884, at 43-44; *quoted in* WEITZE, *supra* note 2 at 7.
5. WILLIAM B. TYLER, *OLD CALIFORNIA MISSIONS* (1889).
6. Charles Fletcher Lummis, *The Old Missions*, *DRAKE'S MAGAZINE*, March 1889, at 191; *quoted in* WEITZE, *supra* note 2 at 13.
7. POWERS, *supra* note 1 at 106.
8. WEITZE, *supra* note 2 at 15.
9. NOLAN DAVIS, *THE OLD MISSIONS OF CALIFORNIA* 108 (1926).
10. *Id.* at 107.
11. *See* illustration in *TOWARD A SIMPLER WAY OF LIFE* 195 (Robert Winter ed., 1997).
12. SALLY WOODBRIDGE, *BAY AREA HOUSES* 81-82 (1976).
13. WOLFGANG PEHNT, *EXPRESSIONIST ARCHITECTURE* 74 (1973).
14. *See, e.g.*, E. MICHAEL JONES, *LIVING MACHINES* 20, 34ff, 57, 84, 90 (1995).
15. *Quoted in* PEHNT, *supra* note 13 at 74.