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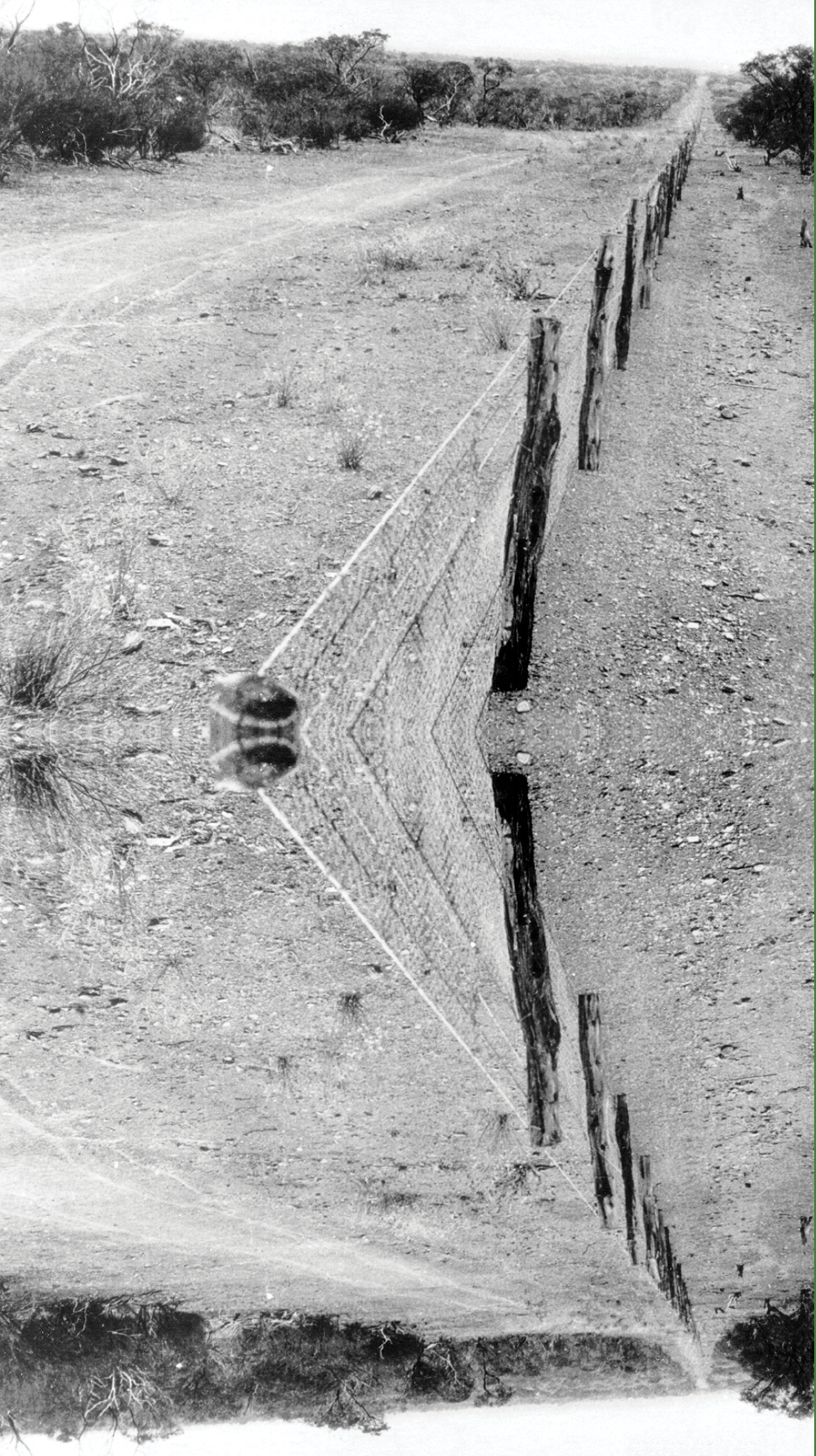
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# feature articles





## Skyscraper Churches and Material Disestablishment at the Fifth Churches of Christ Scientist

Alexander Luckmann

In 1921, the English writer and political theorist W. L. George visited the United States. In *Hail Columbia! Random Impressions of a Conservative English Radical*, the book he published about his trip, George noted the phenomenon of “a big office building and a little church” that seemed to define the modern American city.<sup>1</sup> “What a change,” he exclaimed, “since the Middle Ages!”<sup>2</sup>

The same year George visited the U.S.A., the Fifth Church of Christ Scientist in New York completed a structure on Madison Avenue between 43<sup>rd</sup> and 44<sup>th</sup> Streets that illustrated his observation: the Canadian Pacific Building, a twenty-one-story office building housing a 1700-member Christian Science church.<sup>3</sup> The *New York Times* described it as “the first church to be built within a skyscraper in the world.”<sup>4</sup> Today, the entanglement of religious building projects and real estate development is becoming ever more common in American cities as rising property prices turn the land that

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<sup>1</sup> W.L. George, *Hail Columbia!: Random Impressions of a Conservative English Radical* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1921), 157.

<sup>2</sup> George, *Hail Columbia*, 157.

<sup>3</sup> Earlier on his trip, George had also visited the *Christian Science Monitor* office in Boston, which he described as “the most amazing newspaper office in the world.” George, *Hail Columbia*, 33. George was not describing a skyscraper church in his “big office building and a little church” comment; rather, he was pointing out a reversal of size in “an enormous office building against the back of which outlines itself the spire of a church.” George, *Hail Columbia*, 157.

<sup>4</sup> “Skyscraper Church Opens,” *New York Times*, June 6, 1921.

congregations own into their most valuable asset. One hundred years after the Canadian Pacific Building was completed, the Fifth Church of Christ Scientist in San Francisco is attempting to build an apartment building-cum-church on the site of its current church at 450 O'Farrell Street.

These buildings suggest one answer to art historian and religious studies scholar Sally M. Promey's question about the public display of religion: "What is 'religion in plain view' when it doesn't 'look like' 'religion'?"<sup>5</sup> I propose that both the Canadian Pacific Building and 450 O'Farrell use a strategy I call "material disestablishment," in reference to Promey's concept of "material establishment," to downplay their religious aspects.<sup>6</sup> I understand material disestablishment as both a procedural and an aesthetic strategy. It can be expressed architecturally, as a lack of legible religious symbolism or iconography. It can also determine business strategy, as when a religious organization transfers the ownership and/or management of real estate to a developer or investor, thus avoiding direct business profits. At the Canadian Pacific Building, material disestablishment functioned on the level of real estate dealings but not the building's appearance; at 450 O'Farrell, it determines both. I argue that the self-effacement of material disestablishment allows contemporary religious buildings to work in the realm of capitalist real estate, and thus enables religion to maintain its presence in the built fabric of contemporary cities in the U.S.A. Although W. L. George may have correctly noted religion's diminished visual prominence, this need not mean that religion has disappeared from the American city. Urban religious power is sometimes exercised subtly; it is a force field that is often intentionally obscured. I propose that hybrid religious and rental buildings blur the boundaries between sacred and "secular" and lend support to the argument that, despite an immense increase in religious choice, our age is not necessarily irreligious.<sup>7</sup> In this article, I explore and trace the genealogy of this notion, specifically in Christian Science and then extending to an Episcopal church.

Founded by Mary Baker Eddy in 1879, Christian Science holds that all reality is spiritual and the material world is an illusion. A key implication of this belief is that illness

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<sup>5</sup> Sally M. Promey, "Material Establishment and Public Display," *Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material & Visual Cultures of Religion*, 2016, accessed December 31, 2022, doi:10.22332/con.med.2016.2.

<sup>6</sup> On material establishment, see Promey, "Material Establishment and Public Display," and Promey, "Testimonial aesthetics and public display," *The Immanent Frame*, February 8, 2018, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2018/02/08/testimonial-aesthetics-and-public-display/>. I am grateful to Sally M. Promey for her comments on the presentation this paper is based on.

<sup>7</sup> This argument was notably advanced in Rodney Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P.," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 249-273. As Charles McCrary and Jeffrey Wheatley put it, "reports of religion's demise had been much exaggerated." Charles McCrary and Jeffrey Wheatley, "The Protestant Secular in the Study of American Religion: Reappraisal and Suggestions," *Religion* 47, no. 2 (2016): 258.

can be healed by a spiritual process based on Jesus's teachings.<sup>8</sup> The church grew quickly; by 1922, there were 946 Christian Science churches in the U.S.A.<sup>9</sup> Christian Science churches became prominent features of American cities, as Paul Ivey demonstrated in *Prayers in Stone*.<sup>10</sup> Ivey argues that "Christian Science has always been a religion most at home in an urban setting."<sup>11</sup> Though Baker Eddy preferred churches with prominent spires, she did not attempt to influence the architectural decisions of congregations, which chose a range of styles and designs for their churches.<sup>12</sup>

The majority of Christian Science churches built in the 1910s and 1920s, however, favored neoclassical designs. Advocates of neoclassicism within the church argued that it achieved three objectives. First, it set Christian Science churches apart from other churches, giving the religion its own visual identity. Second, it harkened back to the era of Jesus's lifetime and thus symbolized Christian Science's return to a time before the development of Catholicism and Protestantism. Finally, it aligned with the neoclassical architecture favored by the City Beautiful movement, exemplified by the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago where Christian Science had been included in the "World's Parliament of Religions."<sup>13</sup> The City Beautiful movement proposed neoclassical architecture as a way of improving American cities; Christian Science thus aligned itself with what Ivey calls an "architecture of urban reform."<sup>14</sup> Neoclassical Christian Science churches were seen as beacons that could help heal the ills of the city, just as Christian Science practice could heal the ills of the body.

By summer 1919, the Fifth Church of Christ Scientist in New York had outgrown its previous location, so it bought most of the block from Madison Avenue west between 43<sup>rd</sup> and 44<sup>th</sup> Streets. Fifth Church tore down the existing buildings on the site, including St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church.<sup>15</sup> The congregation selected A. D. Pickering and Starrett & van Vleck as architects.<sup>16</sup> When the church opened two years later, a number

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<sup>8</sup> The following analysis of the religion's history is largely based on Stephen Gottschalk, *The Emergence of Christian Science in American Religious Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), and Rodney Stark, "The Rise and Fall of Christian Science," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 13, no. 2 (1998): 189-214.

<sup>9</sup> Stark, "The Rise and Fall of Christian Science," 194.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Eli Ivey, *Prayers in Stone: Christian Science Architecture in the United States, 1894-1930* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Ivey, *Prayers in Stone*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Ivey, *Prayers in Stone*, 55.

<sup>13</sup> Ivey, *Prayers in Stone*, 59-60 and 94-95.

<sup>14</sup> Ivey, *Prayers in Stone*, 89-94.

<sup>15</sup> "May Buy Noted Church," *The Sun* (New York), June 28, 1919.

<sup>16</sup> In July 1919, Arthur Donovan (A. D.) Pickering was announced as the architect for the whole building; "Scientists to Build 30 Story Building," *New York Times*, July 17, 1919. By January 1920, Starrett & van Vleck had joined the project; "\$15,000,000 in Office Space Rents for \$99," *The Evening Post* (New York), January 24, 1920.

of tenants leased space alongside it, including the Canadian Pacific Railroad, which gave its name to the structure.<sup>17</sup> The Indiana limestone and beige brick façade, with even rows of windows, rose fifteen stories, above which another six stories were set back (fig. 1). The church occupied five stories. Sunday School and coat rooms were located on the basement and first floor. The auditorium, which was the main worship space, stretched from the first to fourth floors. Finally, offices occupied the fifth floor (fig. 2).



Figure 1. Starrett & van Vleck with A. D. Pickering, *Canadian Pacific Building*, New York, 1919-21. Photo by Wurts Brothers, August 1924. (Byron Company Collection, Museum of the City of New York, Gift of Percy Byron, 1942. 93.1.3.1465.)

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<sup>17</sup> "Canadian Pacific Building," *New York Times*, February 2, 1921; "Skyscraper Church Opens," *New York Times*, June 6, 1921.



Figure 2. Starrett & van Vleck with A. D. Pickering, *Fifth Church of Christ Scientist*, New York, 1919-21. Photo by author, 2022.

Shortly after the proposal was made public in 1919, the *New York Sun* published an article titled “Skyscraper Churches, Religion’s New Anchorage in City’s Vortex” (fig. 3).<sup>18</sup> Author John Walker Harrington described the problem: “How shall religion hold its own in the madding crowd of the cities where spires no longer pierce the skyline?”<sup>19</sup> He noted that many churches had been demolished recently, “partly because they stood on land so costly that it could no longer be left the site of non-productive buildings.”<sup>20</sup> The Christian Scientists were well-placed to find a solution to this issue, the article

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<sup>18</sup> John Walker Harrington, “Skyscraper Churches, Religion’s New Anchorage in City’s Vortex,” *The Sun* (New York City), August 10, 1919.

<sup>19</sup> Harrington, “Skyscraper Churches.” Architectural strategies contrasting with material disestablishment are explored by Thomas A. P. van Leeuwen, Rolf Lundén, and Courtney Bender; see Thomas A.P. van Leeuwen, *The Skyward Trend of Thought: The Metaphysics of the American Skyscraper* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 57-78; Rolf Lundén, *Business and Religion in the American 1920s* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 80-83; and Courtney Bender, “Religious Horizons in New York’s 1920s,” *Grey Room 88* (Summer 2022): 78-101.

<sup>20</sup> Harrington, “Skyscraper Churches.”





Figure 3. W. Leslie Walker, "Study for One of New York's Proposed 'Skyscraper Churches.'" *The Sun* (New York City), August 19, 1922, page 10.

suggested, because they "are a practical folk, who believe that religion is not something detached from the life of every day...."<sup>21</sup> The article reproduced a speculative design by W. Leslie Walker for another Christian Science Church/office building incorporating offices and a clubhouse as well as a church.<sup>22</sup>

Harrington's article claimed that "to all external appearances this skyscraper church [the Canadian-Pacific Building] will be a well-ordered office structure, with an Indiana limestone façade. It will not have any pronounced suggestion of ecclesiastical architecture."<sup>23</sup>

This quote positions the church's design as an example of material

disestablishment. Despite this claim, the church displayed an unpedimented temple front with four Ionic columns flanked by two pilasters on each side, rising to a cornice that capped this section of the building (fig. 4). Across the otherwise bare frieze were the words "Fifth Church of Christ Scientist." This inscription led a 1922 author in *Architecture and Building* to note that "to mark the location of the church structure in the building façade that portion of the front has a certain ecclesiastical emphasis."<sup>24</sup> This modest marking of the church visibly staked religion's claim to the building.

<sup>21</sup> Harrington, "Skyscraper Churches."

<sup>22</sup> Walker created this design for "one of the trustees of a prominent church" which remained unnamed. Harrington, "Skyscraper Churches."

<sup>23</sup> Harrington, "Skyscraper Churches."

<sup>24</sup> "The Canadian Pacific Building, New York," *Architecture and Building* 54 (January 1922): 7.





Figure 4. Starrett & van Vleck with A. D. Pickering, *Fifth Church of Christ Scientist*, Canadian Pacific Building, New York, 1919-21. Photo not credited in *Architecture & Building*, January 1922.

The economics of the development, however, demonstrated a strategic self-effacement. The real estate deal was covered in depth by the *Evening Post*, which cited a member of the congregation:

After we purchased the land, prepared the building plans and made other arrangements, a better idea unfolded itself eliminating one of the objections which the church had to the original plan, namely, that to carry it out the church would have to engage itself in a business enterprise. The new plan eliminated this objectionable feature on the proposition that we should sell the land and all the plans to a responsible owner who...would...give us a ninety-nine-year lease on the church structure for a yearly rental of \$1. In other words, the church will get approximately 40,000 square feet of rentable area with an entrance opposite the Hotel Manhattan and one-half block from Fifth Avenue, an area which at present prices has a yearly rental value of \$150,000, for \$1 a year.<sup>25</sup>

This deal belied the member's claim that the church did not engage in a business enterprise. Indeed, the *Evening Post* called it "one of the cleverest and most ingenious

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<sup>25</sup> "\$15,000,000 in Office Space Rents for \$99," *Evening Post* (New York City), January 24, 1920.

real estate deals ever put over in New York City.”<sup>26</sup> But by not becoming a landlord, the congregation was able to separate its spiritual and business dealings. The decision to recognize and avoid the perceived contradiction between Fifth Church’s sanctitude and financial transactions is an example of material disestablishment, expressed through real estate transactions as well as through form.

The building’s renovation in the early 2000s, when glass replaced the masonry walls, augmented the façade’s religious reference.<sup>27</sup> The Christian Science Church’s entrance was untouched, and the contrast with the rest of the building now makes the Church façade’s claim to religion’s place in the city clearer than ever (fig. 5). This conspicuous display contrasts with the congregation’s current status. In June 2022, I attended Sunday service at the Fifth Church. Entering the foyer from East 43<sup>rd</sup> Street, a pair of staircases led me up to the auditorium, a stunning, quadruple-height space that slopes down toward the pulpit at the front. Two aisles divided three banks of seating. Both side banks had a full gallery of seating above them, while the central bank had a gallery above the back. The space was magnificent, with green marble columns and a coffered ceiling offset with rich cream-colored walls. But neither side banks nor galleries were in use. I was one of only eight attendees, in addition to the First and Second Readers leading the service, a far cry from the 1700 for whom the church was built. Fifth Church maintained its physical presence despite what seems to be a significant decline in attendance, suggesting the efficacy of material disestablishment. But material disestablishment may not be able to negate the impact of a shrinking congregation.



Figure 5. Starrett & van Vleck with A. D. Pickering, *Fifth Church of Christ Scientist*, New York, 1919-21, renovated Moed de Armas & Shannon and Gensler, 2005. Photo by Jim Henderson, 2009. (Open access via Wikimedia Commons).

<sup>26</sup> “\$15,000,000 in Office Space Rents for \$99.”

<sup>27</sup> Macklowe called this process “filling in the fingers.” John Holusha, “A New Face on Madison Avenue,” *New York Times*, October 26, 2005.



Fig. 6. Carl Werner, *Fifth Church of Christ Scientist*, San Francisco, 1923. Photo by author, 2022.

On the opposite coast, Fifth Church of Christ Scientist in San Francisco occupies a two-story, unpedimented neoclassical building built in 1923 and designed by local architect Carl Werner (fig. 6).<sup>28</sup> Around 2013, Fifth Church partnered with developer Thompson Dorfman and submitted a plan for a thirteen-story building housing ground-floor retail space, 176 apartments, and about 10,000 square feet for a worship space, church offices, classrooms, and a reading room.<sup>29</sup> Thompson Dorfman would own and manage the apartments, while Fifth Church would own the land—allowing this Fifth Church, like its New York counterpart, to relinquish the commercial role of developer.<sup>30</sup> The project was controversial from the start, as it involved demolishing the 1923 Werner building. Fifth Church eventually received permission to demolish its building in 2018 after invoking the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA),

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<sup>28</sup> Werner built several Christian Science churches in the Bay Area. Ivey, *Prayers in Stone*, 167-168.

<sup>29</sup> Blanca Torres, "Exclusive: Fight between church and historic preservation group shows why it's so hard to build in San Francisco," *San Francisco Business Times*, November 2, 2018, <https://www.bizjournals.com/sanfrancisco/news/2018/11/02/fifth-church-of-christ-scientist-housing.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Torres, "Exclusive: Fight between church and historic preservation group."



arguing that “the Federal Religious Land Use Act states that cities cannot force churches to preserve historic buildings if the church is going to redevelop a property for other uses that fit the church’s mission and comply with zoning.”<sup>31</sup> The Planning Commission approved the proposed 13-story replacement, known as 450 O’Farrell, in June 2021. Subsequently, under community pressure, the Board of Supervisors rescinded approval.<sup>32</sup> By this point, Forge Development Partners had replaced Thompson Dorfman as developer, and Gensler had joined as architect. In response, Fifth Church’s attorneys wrote to the Board of Supervisors that Fifth Church had “faced extreme and unreasonable delays in the land use approval process by the City, which have severely impeded the Church’s religious exercise,” imposing a “substantial burden.”<sup>33</sup> In March 2022, Fifth Church and Forge sued the Board of Supervisors, claiming that the Board’s vote violated a number of laws.<sup>34</sup> That lawsuit, and thus the project’s approval, is pending as of December 2022.

Forge’s website presents the development as an ideal scenario.<sup>35</sup> The congregation had shrunk and no longer needed its large building, which was expensive to maintain. Building apartments could help address San Francisco’s housing crisis. It would thus serve Fifth Church’s humanitarian mission—harkening back to Christian Science’s healing of urban ills—and create a more manageable, appropriately sized worship space: what Forge delightfully calls a “turnkey church.”<sup>36</sup> The initial project, which included 176 primarily affordable apartments in a range of sizes, enjoyed broad community support. However, concerns emerged as the project changed. Forge, who

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<sup>31</sup> Torres, “Exclusive: Fight between church and historic preservation group.”

<sup>32</sup> Laura Waxmann, “O’Farrell developer, church threaten lawsuit after S.F. upholds appeal,” *San Francisco Business Times*, December 1, 2021, <https://www.bizjournals.com/sanfrancisco/news/2021/12/01/forge-threatens-to-sue-over-group-housing.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Robin N. Pick, letter to San Francisco Board of Supervisors on behalf of Fifth Church of Christ Scientist, (August 25, 2021), 1-2. Fifth Church attempted to use what Sara Galvan has called “the unwanted phenomenon of extrajudicial enforcement” of RLUIPA, in which a religious institution threatens an RLUIPA lawsuit to get zoning permits approved, and regulators acquiesce rather than going to the expense and potential embarrassment of litigation. However, such a course may prove less effective when the plaintiff is relatively small (like Fifth Church) and the defendant relatively large and powerful (the City of San Francisco). Sara C. Galvan, “Beyond Worship: The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000 and Religious Institutions’ Auxiliary Uses,” *Yale Law & Policy Review*, 24, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 231-232.

<sup>34</sup> Gabriel Poblete, “SF Church, developer sue city over rejected 316-unit Tenderloin project,” *The Real Deal*, March 17, 2022, <https://therealdeal.com/sanfrancisco/2022/03/17/sf-church-developer-sue-city-over-rejected-316-unit-tenderloin-project/>.

<sup>35</sup> “450 O’Farrell, San Francisco, CA,” *Forge Development Partners*, accessed October 17, 2022, <https://www.forgedevelopmentpartners.com/tl-450>.

<sup>36</sup> “450 O’Farrell, San Francisco, CA.”

would own and operate the rental units, argued that the original scheme would not be financially viable, and changed their proposal to 316 rental micro-units of between 345 and 500 square feet targeting “the City’s often overlooked middle income workforce.”<sup>37</sup> Housing activists argue that most of the units are in fact market-rate, and label the scheme a “tech worker dorm.”<sup>38</sup> The activists say that there is plenty of housing for single adults in the neighborhood, and that what is really needed is family housing—the kind Fifth Church originally planned.

Gensler’s proposed design shows no clear religious symbols or other indications that the complex includes a church and Christian Science Reading Room.<sup>39</sup> A façade of projecting concrete frames generous windows. Three blocks of street-fronting apartments shield a taller, uniform backdrop, breaking up the massing of the street façade. Although Fifth Church has tried to leverage its status as a religious organization to pressure the City into approving the project, no traces of religious use are visible from the outside. Like Fifth Church in New York, the actual management of property is shifted to a developer, although Fifth Church San Francisco still owns the property. 450 O’Farrell, then, deploys material disestablishment in both its form and its financial structure.

Material disestablishment is opposite yet complementary to Sally M. Promey’s “material establishment.” Promey posits that Christian things in public space—ranging from a cross to an adopt-a-highway sign listing a church—privilege certain types of liberal Protestant religious belief and organization “and thus influence decision-making at all governmental and administrative levels.”<sup>40</sup> Promey cites zoning laws that locate schools near churches, as well as the visual prominence of church spires, as evidence for the continued conception of the United States as a Christian nation. Material establishment occurs when symbols are legibly religious.

By contrast, material disestablishment conceals the presence of religion. In these instances, a passerby would likely be unaware that the building had anything to do with a religious organization. But material disestablishment does not reduce the importance of religion in the public sphere. Rather, as Winnifred Sullivan and Lori Beaman observed, “removing religion from the realm of the religious to the domain of the secular, in particular religion that is sometimes denominated culture or heritage, can reposition

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<sup>37</sup> “450 O’Farrell, San Francisco, CA.” See image at Andrew Nelson, “Planning Department Approves 450 O’Farrell Street in Tenderloin, San Francisco,” *SF Yimby*, June 30, 2021, <https://sfyimby.com/2021/06/planning-department-approves-450-ofarrell-street-in-tenderloin-san-francisco.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Tim Redmond, “A tech-worker dorm in the Tenderloin? Or the end of the Yimby narrative?,” *48hills*, September 6, 2021, <https://48hills.org/2021/09/a-tech-worker-dorm-in-the-tenderloin-or-the-end-of-the-yimby-narrative/>.

<sup>39</sup> “450 O’Farrell, San Francisco, CA.” See image at <https://www.forgedevelopmentpartners.com/tl-450>.

<sup>40</sup> Promey, “Material Establishment and Public Display.”



Figure 7. Pelli Clarke & Partners, *Trinity Commons*, 2013-2020. Photo by author, 2022.

majority religion as part of the social fabric and thus not *really* as religion.”<sup>41</sup> Material disestablishment allows church-led real estate development to satisfy the various interests and opinions of the church’s congregations, the state (as represented by regulatory and zoning bodies), real estate agents, tenants, and the various publics who might interact with or have opinions about the building. Material disestablishment thus allows churches to better navigate competing forces while hiding the continued power of churches to shape the urban fabric of the U.S.A.

The term “disestablishment,” as I use it, is not opposed to the legal term “establishment.” That is, material disestablishment neither necessarily supports nor opposes the establishment clause in the First Amendment, which states that

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion...”<sup>42</sup> Rather, material disestablishment sublimates the visibility of Christianity to the general public, the tourists and residents who walk, ride, and drive past buildings owned and/or operated by religious organizations. Material establishment and material disestablishment both reinforce religion’s presence in American cities, by making religion visible in some cases and invisible in others.

Trinity Commons, a real estate development project completed in 2020 in downtown Manhattan, further demonstrates the utility of the concept of material disestablishment (fig. 7). Developed by Trinity Church Wall Street, an Episcopal church that owns \$6 billion of real estate in New York City, Trinity Commons houses gathering

<sup>41</sup> Winnifred Fallers Sullivan and Lori G. Beaman, “Neighbo(u)rly Misreadings and Misconstruals: A Cross-border Conversation,” in *Varieties of Religious Establishment*, ed. Sullivan and Beaman (New York: Routledge, 2016), 7.

<sup>42</sup> U. S. Const amend. 1. Sally M. Promey has suggested that “nonestablishment” may be a more apt term than “disestablishment,” since I am not suggesting that the buildings I focus on were established to begin with. I am grateful to her for this insight, which I hope to pursue in future work.



and office spaces for the church in a ten-story “podium,” which is topped by seventeen floors of rental office space.<sup>43</sup> Spatially, this arrangement expresses what the congregation considers an appropriate combination of religion and business: in the words of Trinity parishioner and former Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, “The mission and the real estate are being discussed together in a very positive way.”<sup>44</sup>

It was not always thus. The first plans for Trinity Commons, revealed in 2013, split an already divided congregation. Reverend Dr. James Cooper, the church’s rector and self-appointed Chief Executive Officer, incurred criticism for allowing the closure of Trinity’s homeless drop-in shelter and overspending on its concert series.<sup>45</sup> In 2011, Cooper suggested devoting “more of the church’s funds to turn the [offices] into a new state-of-the-art complex” and “told the vestry he might have to borrow money for the project or work with a private developer to build a condo tower above the new church building.”<sup>46</sup> Ten of the church’s twenty-two-member vestry board resigned in protest or were forced out, including Citigroup’s Head of Global Real Estate Thomas Flexner, whose resignation letter noted Cooper’s “almost obsessive desire to redevelop 68-74 Trinity Place [now Trinity Commons; the street number has been changed to 76] into a sort of mega-monument.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Image of Pelli Clarke & Partners, *Trinity Commons*, programming diagram, c. 2018-2020 is viewable through the follow link: <https://pcparch.com/work/trinity-commons>. Jane Margolies, “The Church With the \$6 Billion Portfolio,” *New York Times*, February 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/08/nyregion/trinity-church-manhattan-real-estate.html>; “The Rector, Church-Wardens, and Vestrymen of Trinity Church, in the city of New-York and Subsidiaries: Consolidated Financial Report December 31, 2020 and 2019,” [https://trinitywallstreet.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/trinity\\_church\\_wall\\_street-2020\\_audited\\_financial\\_report.pdf](https://trinitywallstreet.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/trinity_church_wall_street-2020_audited_financial_report.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> “The Future 76 Trinity Place Unveiled,” Trinity Church Wall Street, October 26, 2016, video, 2:54, <https://trinitywallstreet.org/videos/future-76-trinity-place-unveiled>.

<sup>45</sup> Nick Pinto, “Lead Us Not Astray, Reverend James Cooper,” *Village Voice*, December 12, 2012, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2012/12/12/lead-us-not-astray-reverend-james-cooper/>; Julie Shapiro, “Turmoil at Trinity Church Amid Board Member Exodus,” *dnainfo*, March 8, 2012, <https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20120308/downtown/turmoil-at-trinity-church-as-board-members-resign-en-masse>.

<sup>46</sup> Shapiro, “Turmoil at Trinity Church.”

<sup>47</sup> Nick Pinto, “As Trinity Church’s Election Nears, Financial Disclosures and a Looming Lawsuit,” *Village Voice*, March 28, 2013, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2013/03/28/as-trinity-churchs-election-nears-financial-disclosures-and-a-looming-lawsuit/>; Isabel Vincent, “Towering ambition: Trinity Church set to build after fight,” *New York Post*, August 4, 2013, <https://nypost.com/2013/08/04/towering-ambition-trinity-church-set-to-build-after-fight/>; Isabel Vincent, “Trinity Church’s board in open revolt against Rev. James Cooper’s extravagant ways,” *New York Post*, March 18, 2012, <https://nypost.com/2012/03/18/trinity-churchs-board-in-open-revolt-against-rev-james-coopers-extravagant-ways/>.

These complaints reveal an unease with Trinity's secular real estate activities. Flexner's comment in particular takes issue with Trinity Commons' monumental aspect. Since Flexner does not challenge Trinity's huge and iconic church, he presumably does not think a monumental building is inherently inappropriate for a church property. Rather, Flexner suggests Trinity Commons monumentalized the wrong ideas: perhaps the Reverend's own ego or the institution of Trinity Church rather than its mission.

Despite the controversy, Trinity commissioned proposals from architecture firms for what would become Trinity Commons, with a plan for six or seven stories devoted to church activities and twenty-five stories of residences.<sup>48</sup> Trinity chose the design by Pelli Clarke Pelli (PCP).<sup>49</sup> The Trinity Court Building was demolished in 2015, the same year Reverend Dr. William Lupfer succeeded Cooper. After the competition, the residences were shelved in favor of rental offices, which Lupfer said would allow the church to ensure that "all tenants will share the church's core values."<sup>50</sup> Likely in part to respond to the controversy, both Trinity Church and the architects emphasize the design process's communal aspect.<sup>51</sup>

Trinity Commons is located directly behind Richard Upjohn's Trinity Church, which is a major icon of American religious establishment.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, Trinity Commons gives little external expression of its religious function. The twenty-seven-story building, completed in 2020, is divided vertically into "a 10-floor podium open to the community with gathering spaces, basketball courts, classrooms, studios, administrative offices and meeting rooms," and seventeen narrower floors of rental office space above.<sup>53</sup> The podium is composed of glass walls with projecting aluminum piers and horizontal accents painted bronze, which the PCP website describes as a "tartan grid" that "references Trinity Church's Gothic expression."<sup>54</sup> Although the paint color is that of Trinity Church's brownstone, the material and architectural form are so

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<sup>48</sup> Irene Plagianos, "New Residential Tower May Soar Above Historic Trinity Church," *dnainfo*, July 2, 2013, <https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20130702/financial-district/new-residential-tower-may-soar-above-historic-trinity-church/#slide-6>.

<sup>49</sup> PCP is now Pelli Clarke & Partners.

<sup>50</sup> Nikolai Fedak, "Permits Filed: 68 Trinity Place Gets Height Increase, Will Stand 44 Stories Tall," *New York Yimby*, September 2, 2014, <https://newyorkyimby.com/2014/09/permits-filed-68-trinity-place-gets-height-increase-will-stand-44-floors.html>; E. B. Solomont, "Trinity quietly scraps plans for FiDi condo development," *The Real Deal*, February 24, 2016, <https://therealdeal.com/2016/02/24/trinity-quietly-scraps-plans-for-fidi-condo-development/>; Keiko Morris, "Historic Trinity Church Wall Street Unveils Plans for New Tower Space," *Wall Street Journal*, October 23, 2016.

<sup>51</sup> "The Future 76 Trinity Place Unveiled."

<sup>52</sup> So much so that it forms the cover image to the book *Varieties of Religious Establishment*, edited by Winnifred Fallers Sullivan and Lori G. Beaman (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>53</sup> "Trinity Commons Wins AIA New York State Award," *Pelli Clarke & Partners*, November 5, 2021, <https://pcparch.com/news/trinity-commons-wins-aia-new-york-state-award>.

<sup>54</sup> "Trinity Commons: Home for inclusive congregation."

different that this reference does not quite carry over; slender aluminum supports in a glass façade reflect and hold light differently from a brownstone wall. Nevertheless, the grid is elegant, and the warm wood of the interiors invites passersby into the building.

According to the architects' website, "at the heart of the Commons is Parish Hall—a flexible space that accommodates 300 people for events and worship."<sup>55</sup> The communal religious space of the Parish Hall in the podium grounds the high-rise. The division between the religio-communal spaces in the podium and the purely commercial office spaces is explicitly visible from the exterior. Walking along Trinity Place, the Podium and Trinity Church can be understood as a pair, linked by a pedestrian bridge. The Trinity Commons Podium interior is furnished in natural wood and green fabric. An altar and a holy-water font near the entrance to the building underline its religious function.

Above the podium, the aluminum horizontals disappear, replaced inside the tower walls by a bronze-colored screen for the mechanicals between office floors. The dense bronze aluminum grid returns on the mechanical top floors. From most vantage points, the rental floors of Trinity Commons, stepped back behind the Podium, read separately from the Podium. Trinity Commons thus gives architectural form to Trinity's dual role as church and corporation, with the religious forming the base to the commercial. Material disestablishment allows Trinity Church to navigate the conflicting demands of rental real estate and a vocal congregation. Gale Brewer's duality of religious mission and real estate makes Trinity Commons' dual role explicit: the podium houses the mission, the upper floors the real estate.

PCP also emphasizes the reflection of Trinity Church in Trinity Commons' façade. But because Trinity Church is dark and often shaded by taller surrounding buildings, the early-twentieth-century office blocks along Broadway and Wall Street stand out in the reflection more than Trinity Church.<sup>56</sup> The reflection remains a fitting symbol, though. Above the podium, the transparency of Trinity Commons dematerializes Trinity Church, helping the financial and symbolic power of Trinity's normative Protestant Christianity disappear into the glassy space of rental real estate.

Religious organizations in twentieth- and twenty-first-century America have employed an array of strategies to capitalize on rising land values, while navigating religious principles, the real estate market, and many other factors. Trinity Commons and 450 O'Farrell employ material disestablishment as both a procedural and a formal strategy, using it to disappear behind a developer façade. Fifth Church of Christ Scientist New York, on the other hand, makes a clear, legible religious claim to public space. But all three projects use material disestablishment to engage in the business of

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<sup>55</sup> "Trinity Commons: Home for inclusive congregation."

<sup>56</sup> This is the case both in evening-time professional photographs and in my own experience on a sunny morning.



real estate, legitimating them as players in the capitalist real estate market while hiding that very power.

Material disestablishment, as I propose the term, is a strategy that churches employ to align their business dealings with their religious values, aiming to satisfy business partners in the real estate market, congregation members, “the public” of non-congregation-affiliated individuals, and “the state” as represented by regulatory and approvals bodies.<sup>57</sup> My three case studies show different relationships to these groups: Fifth Church of Christ Scientist New York and Trinity Commons struggled to satisfy their congregations, for instance, while Fifth Church of Christ Scientist struggles to satisfy the state and the local public. Material disestablishment may also engage with megachurches that, as Jeanne Halgren Kilde has pointed out, “rarely sport steeples or Christian iconography,” creating an “everyday, secular appearance...intended to attract worshippers who might be alienated by or uncomfortable with traditional church architecture....”<sup>58</sup> Such a connection would be a fruitful site for further inquiry.

I propose my analysis as a first step toward a genealogy for the ever-more-common skyscraper church, an important part of what Sally M. Promey has elsewhere called “the sense of multiformity and juxtaposition in the visual landscape of contemporary American religions.”<sup>59</sup> Although this quote describes a visually exuberant and explicitly religious landscape—with legible symbols of Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant houses of worship—my analysis suggests that the very absence of explicit religious symbolism may be just as important a component of this multiform landscape.

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<sup>57</sup> For a close discussion of the various audiences and agents in “public display,” see Sally M. Promey, “The Public Display of Religion,” in *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, eds. Promey and David Morgan (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 27-48.

<sup>58</sup> Jeanne Halgren Kilde, “Space, Architecture, and American Religious Diversity,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, September 26, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.467>. See also Margaret Grubiak, *Monumental Jesus: Landscapes of Faith and Doubt in Modern America* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 118.

<sup>59</sup> Promey, “The Public Display of Religion,” 47. An excellent overview of this visual landscape is provided in Kilde, “Space, Architecture, and American Religious Diversity.”

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