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Against 'Nomadism' as Analytic: Pilgrimage Tents at the Hajj Terminal and Mary of Victory, Wigratzbad

a response by Alexander Luckmann

Alida Jekabson's "Skating the Surrounds: Chemi Rosado-Seijo and *El Bowl* in La Perla, Puerto Rico" deals with the tension between the local and the global. She engages with Miwon Kwon's book *One Place after Another*, which argues that starting in the 1990s, some artists "are attempting to reinvent site specificity as a *nomadic* practice."¹ Jekabson describes *El Bowl*, a skateboarding bowl-cum-pool by Chemi Rosado-Seijo in the San Juan neighborhood of La Perla, as an example of one such nomadic practice. Constructed by local residents, it is a site of local agency and pride. Simultaneously, the ascendance of *El Bowl* and its creator into international notoriety creates tension between the local and global. In 2023, the site featured in an advertisement for American Express. *El Bowl* demonstrates how a site-specific artwork can become valorized globally, perhaps in part for its very specificity. For American Express, La Perla and *El Bowl* are stand-ins for informal settlements of the Global South. The extremely local is thus displaced.

I'd like to take up the particular manifestation of tension between local and global exemplified by pilgrimage. According to 2011 figures compiled by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, at least 150 million pilgrimages are likely undertaken

¹ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 43.

annually.² Two structures related to pilgrimage that were designed and built in the 1970s employed tent forms, suggesting a relationship between this architectural form and pilgrimage. Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's (SOM) Hajj Terminal in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (1975-81) and Gottfried Böhm's pilgrimage church Mary of Victory in Wigratzbad, Germany (1972-6) could thus be seen to engage some of the dynamics that Kwon calls "nomadic." I will suggest, though, that pilgrimage is a more appropriate lens through which to view such structures, because it engages with the actual uses to which these spaces were put, rather than employing a fraught metaphor.

The Hajj Terminal was one small part of King Abdulaziz International Airport, whose grounds were approximately the size of Manhattan.³ It was designed to accommodate an increased influx of *hajjis* from an average of 50,000 in the 1960s to 500,000 by 1975. The increase was attributable to the advent of larger aircraft and "the decision by Islamic governments around the world to sponsor national pilgrimage flights."⁴ The terminal moved vast crowds from planes to buses to Mecca during the few weeks of the annual *hajj*.⁵ Since this transfer could take up to 36 hours, the terminal also needed to serve as a place for *hajjis* to sleep, perform ablutions, eat, and socialize.⁶

The terminal consists of fabric roofs suspended from steel pylons (fig. 1). These pylons are doubled into pairs along the sides of the building and squared into sets of four at the corners.⁷ The pylons are arranged on a grid of forty-five meters, covering a total of 440,000 square meters. The covered space is open to the sides, allowing natural ventilation.

There are two clear precedents for this design: tents set up to accommodate *hajjis* and the lightweight tensile structures of German architect Frei Otto.⁸ Architectural

² "Pilgrimage Statistics – Annual Figures," Alliance of Religions and Conservation, December 2011. <http://www.arcworld.org/downloads/ARC%20pilgrimage%20statistics%20155m%2011-12-19.pdf>.

³ Matthew Allen, "The Genius of Bureaucracy: SOM's Hajj Terminal and Geiger Berger Associates' Form-Finding Software," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 80, no. 4 (December 2021): 420.

⁴ Nicholas Adams, *Gordon Bunshaft and SOM: Building Corporate Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 230; Aleksandr Bierig, "25 Year Award: Hajj Terminal," *Architectural Record* (June 2010): 122.

⁵ Mecca is approximately forty-five miles from Jeddah. "Haj Terminal, King Abdul Aziz International Airport, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia," *Skidmore, Owings & Merrill: Architecture and Urbanism, 1973-1983* (Stuttgart: Gerd Hatje, 1983), 382.

⁶ Nicholas Adams, *Skidmore, Owings & Merrill: SOM since 1936* (Milan: Electa, 2006), 262.

⁷ Derek A. R. Moore, "A Terminal Worthy of a Pilgrimage," *SOM*, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, July 28, 2020, <https://www.som.com/story/a-terminal-worthy-of-a-pilgrimage-2/>.

⁸ Adams, *Gordon Bunshaft and SOM*, 231.



Figure 1: Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), Hajj Terminal, King Abdulaziz International Airport, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, 1975-81. Photo Credit: Yousefmadari, 2009, Wikimedia Commons.

historian Nicholas Adams notes that different members of the SOM design team had strikingly different understandings of the design. Engineer Fazlur Khan emphasized the similarity to temporary tents, whereas architect Gordon Bunshaft said that it “just happens to be a coincidence that [the terminal] has a shape like that, but it’s not a tent.”⁹ Yet its visual similarity to temporary *hajj* tents is strong, casting the terminal as one stop on the pilgrimage. This similarity concerned the Saudi clients, who expected a concrete- or steel-and-glass, air-conditioned, “modern” building rather than an open-air structure.¹⁰

The tent is simultaneously a home-like shelter and a demountable, mobile structure; it is thus an appropriate symbol for pilgrimage. As Khan put it, “it gives you a feeling of tranquility and sense of continuity, of transition into the real place, which is Makkah.”¹¹

⁹ Adams, *Gordon Bunshaft and SOM*, 231.

¹⁰ The main reason for the Hajj Terminal’s natural ventilation, and a key factor in the clients’ agreement, is that air conditioning could not be safely employed for only a few weeks out of the year, whereas the tent structure naturally cooled the space beneath it. Adams, *Skidmore, Owings & Merrill*, 263.

¹¹ “Invitation to the Haj: King Abdul Aziz International Airport, Haj Terminal, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia,” *Progressive Architecture* 63 (February 1982): 122. Cited in Adams, *Gordon Bunshaft and SOM*, 231.

After *hajj* tents, the second source of inspiration for the Hajj Terminal was the German architect Frei Otto. In his 1954 dissertation, Otto examined the “fabric ceilings” (*Gewebedecken*) used by Cologne architect Gottfried Böhm in his early church restorations.¹² Two decades later, Böhm designed the pilgrimage church of Mary of Victory in Wigratzbad, a hamlet in the southwest German Allgäu. In 1936, Antonie Rädler, born into a butchers’ family in Wigratzbad, erected a grotto dedicated to the Virgin of Lourdes on her parents’ property. Simultaneously, Rädler practiced resistance to the National Socialist regime, refusing to replace a picture of the Virgin with a picture of Adolf Hitler in the butcher shop she managed. In December 1937, she reported hearing angels sing in her Marian shrine, and pilgrims began to come to Wigratzbad even though Rädler was arrested multiple times and was in hiding from 1940-45.¹³ After the war, the stream of pilgrims increased and began to strain the Marian chapel Rädler had built in 1938-9. They came not to worship or touch a sacred object, but to be in the place where Rädler had received her apparitions. In 1972, Rädler commissioned Böhm to build the church of Mary of Victory.¹⁴

Böhm laid out the church at Wigratzbad as a composition of nineteen hexagons with sides of six meters and an area of ninety square meters each, crowned by a pyramidal roof with a skylight (fig. 2). One enters the wide worship space through a covered porch of six low hexagons. The worship space, itself made up of thirteen hexagons, faces the central altar, located at the back and flanked by two smaller, recessed altars. The roof of the hexagon above the altar is nearly twice as high as those of the other hexagons, emphasizing its importance.

¹² Frei Otto, *Das hängende Dach* (Berlin: Bauwelt Verlag, 1954). See Manfred Speidel, “Gottfried Böhms Kirchen. Eine Typologische Studie,” in *Gottfried Böhm*, ed. Wolfgang Voigt (Berlin: Jovis, 2006), 84. The most remarkable of Böhm’s textile ceilings is in the Parish Church of the Three Magi in Neuss near Cologne (1947), whose black, grey, and gold decorations serve to underline its softness. Frei was critical of Böhm’s non-structural fabric ceilings. However, he later wrote glowingly about Böhm’s church of St. Paulus in Velbert. Otto, “Rheinische Kirchenbauten und hängendes Dach,” *Bauwelt* 46, no. 51 (1955): 1047-50; cited in Speidel, “Gottfried Böhms Kirchen,” 92 n17. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

¹³ Much of this story follows the recounting in Wiebke Arnholz, *Form und Funktion der modernen Wallfahrtskirche* (Marburg: Tectum, 2016), 171-72. It is difficult to find trustworthy accounts of apparitions. For an analysis of German Catholic pilgrimage that ends when Wigratzbad’s prominence begins, see Skye Donye, *The Persistence of the Sacred: German Catholic Pilgrimage, 1832-1937* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022).

¹⁴ This was not Böhm’s first pilgrimage church. Probably his best-known work is the Church of Mary, Queen of Peace in the town of Neviges (1964-68).



Figure 2: Gottfried Böhm, Mary of Victory, Wigratzbad, Swabia, Germany, 1972-76. Photo Credit: Michel Decrevel, 2008, Wikimedia Commons.

The commission called for “prefabricated parts that can be easily assembled on the spot, so as to make possible adaption to later requirements,” as “the growth of this place of pilgrimage cannot be foreseen.”¹⁵ In response, the structural system consists of green corrugated steel connected to red-painted steel Warren trusses and columns. Above the skylights are caps with small balls atop them – like the pompom on a sleeping cap – which can be propped open for ventilation, giving the ensemble a jaunty appearance. A basement housed a dormitory with twenty-four beds for pilgrims.¹⁶

The pyramidal hexagons, like the fabric roofs of the Hajj Terminal, resemble tents. An early review called the Wigratzbad church a “steel tent.”¹⁷ Böhm described it as “made up of many tent-like parts.”¹⁸ More recent commentators also described the

¹⁵ Hans Klumpp, “Stahlzelt: Wallfahrtskirche in Wigratzbad = Tente an acier: église de pèlerinage à Wigratzbad = Steel tent: pilgrimage church in Wigratzbad,” *Bauen + Wohnen* 31, no. 11 (1977): 432.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Ignaz E. Holay, “Zelte Gottes,” *DB: Deutsche Bauzeitung* 131, no. 8 (1997): 68.

building as resembling a “tent camp,” a “tent city,” or “pilgrims’ tents.”¹⁹ One could question the tent metaphor at Wigrazzbad. Writing about Böhm’s earlier pilgrimage church of Mary, Queen of Peace in Neviges, Karl Kiem points out that “the wide-brimmed hat, the walking stick and the cape-like coat belong to the traditional equipment of a pilgrim, but not a tent.”²⁰ The light materials at Wigrazzbad, however, are fundamentally different from the massive faceted concrete of the Neviges church, making such an interpretation appropriate. The tent church has a longer history in Böhm’s work, dating to St. Albert in Saarbrücken (1951-54) and even to his father Dominikus’s St. Elizabeth in Birken (1929-30).²¹ Moreover, the tent church draws on an established idea of faith as a whole as a pilgrimage or wandering.²² Perhaps most intriguingly, a 1954 directive of the Archdiocesan Council of Cologne described church buildings as “the tent of God among the people,” suggesting that this relationship is not necessarily unidirectional.²³

Notwithstanding Bunshaft’s protestations, the Hajj Terminal and Mary of Victory both formally reference tents, and Mary of Victory is also designed for easy de/reassembly (at least in theory). These buildings thus evoke mobility. But it is pilgrimage, not nomadism, that they reference; in Jeddah, it is *hajji* tents, not traditional Saudi Arabian black tents, that provide a formal precedent.

Pilgrimage calls into question the threshold that is the theme of this volume: if the *via sacra* extends from your house to the place of your pilgrimage, what is the essential threshold? As Gottfried Böhm noted, “movement – that is, the pilgrimage to a place where one experiences the religious experience differently, in a new form, and in various ways – this must be the meaning of pilgrimage. The worshipped picture can serve only as a point of reference, not as a goal.”²⁴ Developments in pilgrimage studies over the last fifty years have decentered the material object or site of pilgrimage to

¹⁹ For “tent camp,” Wolfgang Pehnt, “Self-confident Proximity: A Text from 1984 on the Work of Gottfried Böhm,” trans. Jeremy Gaines, in *Gottfried Böhm*, ed. Voigt, 43. For “tent city,” Speidel, “Gottfried Böhms Kirchen,” 125. For “pilgrims’ tents,” Ingeborg Flagge, “Die Rolle des Lichtes im Werk Gottfried Böhms,” in *Gottfried Böhm*, ed. Voigt, 208.

²⁰ Karl Kiem, “The Multi-layered Concrete Rock: The Pilgrimage Church in Neviges,” in *Gottfried Böhm*, ed. Voigt, 76.

²¹ Hugo Schnell, “Gottfried Böhms neue Kirche in Wigrazzbad im Allgäu: Ein Zeichen im gegenwärtigen Kirchenbau,” *Das Münster* 30, no. 1 (1977): 1-9, 6.

²² Schnell, “Gottfried Böhms neue Kirche”: 6-7.

²³ *Kölner Diözesan-Synode 1954* (Cologne: Bachem, 1954), 793. Cited in Walter Zahner, “Liturgietheologie und Architektur,” in *Neue Kirchen im Erzbistum Köln 1955-1995*, ed. Karl Josef Bollenbeck (Cologne: Erzbistum Köln, 1995), 53.

²⁴ Cited in Arnholz, *Form und Funktion der modernen Wallfahrtskirche*, 163.

focus on the social and spiritual trajectory of the journey.²⁵ In a German context, as Rudolf Schenda wrote shortly before the Wigratzbad commission, “exaltation is no longer the result of a miraculous experience but of the experience of the whole journey.”²⁶ Recent scholarship describes pilgrimage as “a continuous state of instability – between earth and heaven, between movement and place, between a process and its outcome.”²⁷ The specific site is merely one part of the pilgrimage journey, which in turn is simultaneously a time of difference from everyday routine and part of the pilgrim’s longer – often lifelong – spiritual journey.

Kwon’s *One Place After Another* builds on James Meyer’s 1997 argument that “two nomadisms have emerged” in contemporary art.²⁸ For Meyer, “lyrical” nomadism consists of “a random and poetic interaction with the objects and spaces of everyday life,” while “critical” nomadism “locate[s] the structures of mobility within specific historical, geographical, and institutional frameworks.”²⁹ Kwon concludes *One Place After Another* with a criticism of “nomadism” and its “seductive allure” that demands “physical and psychical experiences of mobilization and destabilization.”³⁰ She rejects an opposition between sedentariness and nomadism. In its place, she calls for a “relational specificity” that understands different places not as discrete but rather as interconnected.³¹ It is this thread of Kwon’s thinking that Jakobson, like other recent scholars, picks up on: the idea that what is intensely local can also have global valences, and that the circulation and movement of artists and artworks is central to the production of that art’s meaning.³²

²⁵ See Dionigi Albera and John Eade, “International Perspectives on Pilgrimage Studies: Putting the Anglophone Contribution in its Place,” in *International Perspectives on Pilgrimage Studies: Itineraries, Gaps and Obstacles*, eds. Albera and Eade (New York: Routledge, 2015), 1-22. In a German context, Iso Baumer called for this refocusing as early as 1977. Baumer, *Wallfahrt als Handlungsspiel: Ein Beitrag zum verstehen religiösen Handelns* (Bern and Frankfurt am Main: H. Lang, 1977), cited in Helmut Eberhart, “From Religious Folklore Studies to Research of Popular Religiosity: Pilgrimage Studies in German-Speaking Europe,” in *International Perspectives on Pilgrimage Studies*, eds. Albera and Eade, 116.

²⁶ Rudolf Schenda, “Wallfahrten,” in Martin Scharfe, Schenda, and Herbert Schwedt, *Volksfrömmigkeit* (Stuttgart: Spectrum, 1967), 95, cited in Ingrid Lukatis, “Church Meeting and Pilgrimage in Germany,” *Social Compass* 36, no. 2 (1989): 204.

²⁷ “Introduction: Christian Pilgrimage, Landscape and Heritage,” in *Christian Pilgrimage, Landscape and Heritage*, eds. Avril Maddell et al., (New York: Routledge, 2015), 3.

²⁸ James Meyer, “Nomads,” *Parkett* 49 (1997): 206.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 160.

³¹ *Ibid.*; emphasis in original.

³² See also Ahyoung Yoo, “The Nomad’s Baggage: Imagining the Nation in a Global World,” *InVisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture* 26, May 6, 2017, <https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/the-nomads-baggage-imagining-the-nation-in-a-global-world/#fnref-6346-11>.

Yet Kwon and Meyer do not consider more deeply the terms they use. Anthropologist James Clifford dislikes “nomadism,” a term that, as he wrote thirty years ago, is “often generalized without apparent resistance from non-Western experience.”³³ I think Clifford’s criticism applies to Meyer and Kwon, who employ the figure of the nomad without attending to the political realities of actual nomadic life. Meyer discusses Renée Green, an artist who, when provided with an apartment in a Le Corbusier-designed housing complex during a group exhibition, instead pitched a tent. Meyer writes that “this shelter within a shelter alluded to the nomad’s plight of never having a home, for as Green suggests, to be a working producer today is to be constantly – often unpleasantly – on the move. The conditions of nomadic practice are hardly optimum.”³⁴ But to be a nomad is not a plight; it is a way of life. It is merely a way of life that does not align with the static and bordered presumptions of the modern nation-state, leading to political marginalization of groups such as the Tuareg in North Africa. To be very clear: an internationally exhibiting artist, no matter how little time they may spend in one place, is not a nomad. The artists Meyer discusses are away from their (fixed) home, a profoundly different understanding of home from that of nomadic societies. Meyer’s imposition of the concept of a fixed home upon nomadism shows the limits of his categorization. Nor, I think, does nomadism hold up as an analytical frame within which to view place. It focuses on the movement of an individual artist – who is conflated with the group life of many nomadic societies – rather than the characteristics of the place they are in. Kwon thus falls victim to the very “seductive allure” of nomadism that she explicitly rejects.

In pilgrimage, on the other hand, it’s the journey that transforms the destination. In 1992, Clifford imagined “rewriting Paris of the twenties and thirties as travel encounters...a place of departures, arrivals, transits.”³⁵ This description applies equally to the Hajj Terminal and to the tiny Allgäu hamlet of Wigratzbad. Clifford’s preferred paradigm was travel. But, although not as capacious as travel, Clifford also noted that “‘pilgrimage’ seems... a more interesting comparative term to work with [than nomadism].”³⁶ As this response suggests, I am interested in architecture that engages with the embodied and directed but impermanent and mobile condition of pilgrimage. I propose that pilgrimage, with its dual focus on motion and location, pilgrim and site, is a more helpful analytic than nomadism in understanding the intersection of the local and the global.

³³ James Clifford, “Traveling Cultures,” in *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 110.

³⁴ Meyer, “Nomads,” 208.

³⁵ Clifford, “Traveling Cultures,” 104.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

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