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Modern Christian Architecture, Long Neglected but Still Looking for a Home in Contemporary Debates

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Review of part 4 of Richard A. Etlin (ed.), *The Cambridge Guide to the Architecture of Christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, 1056 pages (ISBN: 978-1-10847-151-0). The book's final part includes essays by leading scholars that focus on the most widely acclaimed Western architects of Christian architecture. While it succeeds in demonstrating that ecclesiastical architecture was more central to the modern movement than generally accepted, most of the essays remain rather inward looking, both by downplaying the place of religion in modernity and by remaining Western-centric in their scope. This review was commissioned alongside the one of parts 1 to 3 authored by Nikolaos Magouliotis. Both reviews should be read together for a comprehensive account of this two-volume set.

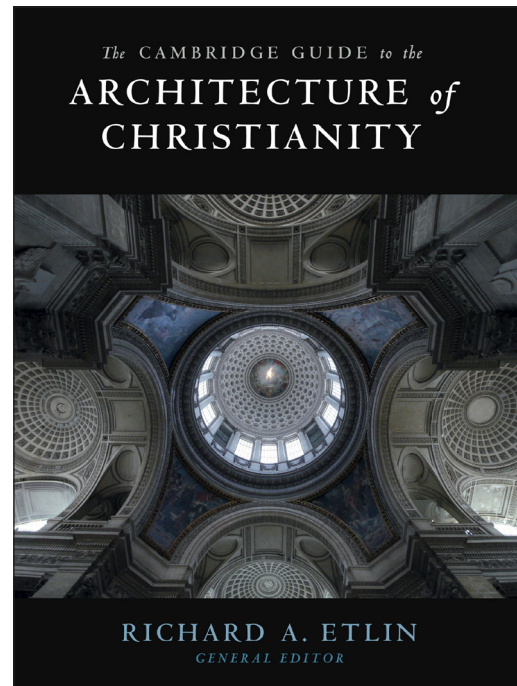
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Part 4 of *The Cambridge Guide to the Architecture of Christianity*, entitled 'Modern Christian Architecture', focuses on the 20th century and foregrounds the place of church design in the modern movement. Building on the revisionist body of literature of the past few decades, the chapters taken together show persuasively how church design was a more original and integral part of architectural modernism than mainstream accounts have acknowledged. It has long been a historiographic oddity that some of the most famous modernist works of architecture are churches and monasteries, while at the same time, modernism's leading advocates continue to treat the movement as an essentially secular project. One only has

to think of Le Corbusier, whose sacred works have arguably played a greater role in ensuring his legacy than his strident urban and housing projects, to see that the idea that modernism is thoroughly secular is questionable.

Editor Patrick J. Quinn is well placed to edit the book's section on the 20th century, not only because he is an architectural historian but also because he has had a long and distinguished career as a church designer. Quinn covers a lot of ground in his introductory chapter, offering a cross-section of themes to which many of the authors return. The section follows a straightforward (implicit) logic. Apart from two thematic chapters focussing on procession (by Thomas Barrie) and liturgy (by David Stancliffe), part 4 essentially features three types of chapters: studies of individual architects and their legacies (ranging from canonical figures Frank Lloyd Wright, Auguste Perret, and Louis I. Kahn to specialists such as Pietro Belluschi); surveys of national traditions (specifically German, Irish, and Japanese); and reviews of regional traditions (Central European, Scandinavian, and North American). Hannah Malone's chapter on cemeteries presents an exception, since it focuses on a building type that also incorporates landscape (the latter being largely absent from the other essays). It traces deeper continuities from the 19th into the 20th century, examines how cemeteries reflected spiritual, social and political needs and processes, and considers cultural transfers between national and regional frameworks. One wishes more chapters had taken such an inclusive contextual approach that has the effect of challenging the view of modern



religious architecture as a specialist subject. By dedicating whole chapters to individual architects, the section also necessarily produces omissions, even with respect to the canon, Studio Aalto being but one of the most obvious. Studio Aalto designed five major churches in three countries, including a Catholic parish church in Riola, Italy, and the absence of any reference to these ecclesiastical designs in Niels Jakubiak Andersen's chapter on Scandinavian architecture is particularly curious.

Part 4 assembles some of the leading scholars who have shaped the field, including Kathleen James Chakraborty, Karla Britton, and Joseph Siry, and their chapters provide authoritative and accessible syntheses of research published in more extended versions elsewhere. In this way, part 4 makes a very valuable resource for any student or scholar seeking to get an overview of modern Christian architecture and its historiography. Previous volumes that have offered global surveys have either lacked academic rigor or focussed on more selective themes within modern religious architecture. The present volume presents a welcome remedy to the absence of religious architecture as a theme in standard accounts such as those provided by Kenneth Frampton and William J. Curtis. Religious architecture more widely is more and more absent from the curriculum, yet architects continue to design places of worship with little or no exposure to it in their education.

The very focus on the modern movement of course also comes with its own challenges. The emphasis on heroic individuals who single-handedly give rise to new traditions, as well as the privileging of specific national practices conventionally linked to the modern movement, contributes to the Western-centric limitations that Nikolaos Magouliotis notes with respect to the first three parts of this volume. Few of the chapters engage with the wider conceptual shifts that have taken place in the literature on modern architecture. For instance, perspectives from post-colonial and gender studies, central to many current debates, are almost absent here. Undoubtedly, the editors have sought to include variety and originality in the volume. A chapter by Radoslav Zuk on Ukrainian church design in North America shines a light on the sort of topic that usually gets little attention in the literature. This chapter sits rather isolated in the volume but nevertheless shows how religious architecture intersects with wider questions of identity and migration. Nonetheless, part 4 might give its readers the highly misleading impression that modern Christian architecture is essentially limited to the Global North and thus shares the drawbacks Magouliotis has pointed to in the preceding parts.

Another limitation of Part 4 is that it does not advance on longstanding debates in the historiography of modern Christian architecture, in particular regarding the relationship between liturgy and architecture. David Stancliffe provides a succinct

survey of the liturgical reform movements in both the Catholic and Protestant churches, but in effect, he restates the high-minded hopes that these reforms could be achieved through architectural innovation. Yet from where we stand more than seventy years on from Vatican II and contemporaneous changes in the Protestant conception of worship, can we claim that architectural interpretations really contributed to religious renewal? Did the many spatial innovations of 20th-century church design reach the hearts and minds of ordinary believers? How can one ascertain if they offered new forms of participation that 'traditional' churches apparently did not? A bitter irony about the great wave of post-war European church construction is that it came in the wake of unprecedented secularisation, at least for the established denominations across Europe. Stancliffe's chapter raises the question of whether it would be better to move beyond these traditional debates.

Finally, *The Cambridge Guide to the Architecture of Christianity* certainly presents a monument of scholarship that will be a significant reference point for students and scholars for some time. Yet one cannot but express worry about the future of architectural history publishing when one considers the price of these two volumes. At €540, who can afford this? Even academic libraries will struggle to justify the expense at a time when students and academics alike increasingly rely on electronic resources. *The Cambridge Guide to the Architecture of Christianity* is generously illustrated but not exceptionally so, thus hardly justifying the high cost. Indeed, the sequence of color plates in the middle of both volumes seems somewhat old-fashioned. Part 4 includes few of the original architectural drawings, despite the fact that these can reveal so much about the dynamic evolution of the design process, the siting of buildings, and the complex web of reference and intentions architects brought into play in their works. To be sure, neither the editors nor the authors can be blamed for the limitations of academic publishing. One would hope that the book is soon released as an e-book. They should only be commended and congratulated for producing a milestone in architectural history.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

