

When Bricks Matter: Four Arguments for the Sociological Study of Religious Buildings

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Sociologists of religion have had much to say about the social structures impacting religious belief and practice but surprisingly little to say about the physical structures that both shape and constrain religious communities of nearly all traditions. In this paper, we present four arguments for the sociological study of religious buildings. Although we rely heavily on social theory to make these arguments, we also draw on empirical evidence from religious buildings in Guatemala and the United States in order to illustrate our arguments regarding the impact of buildings on religious groups and the communities in which they are located. We close with suggestions for research questions that could contribute both to the field of sociology of religion and the wider discipline of sociology.

Key words: theory; embodiment; Latin America; architecture; religion.

Perhaps more than any other social science, sociology is a discipline that employs the language of *structures*. We discuss social structures, economic structures, superstructures, and structural inertia to name just a few. Even that most basic term of sociology—"social structure"—gets used in so many vast and varied ways that it is not altogether clear what we mean to say when we use the term. One thing is for certain though. Sociologists rarely mean to use the word "structure" in its most basic, literal sense. When we talk about a structure, we are hardly ever referring to a *physical* structure.

In this article, we examine the influence of religious buildings as we take seriously the call to explore the role of physical and embodied objects as well as materiality in social life and interaction (e.g., Collins 2004; Griswold et al. 2013; Knorr Cetina 1997; Latour 1993; Law and Mol 1995; McDonnell 2010; Pels

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et al. 2002; Preda 1999). We argue that by ignoring the way physical structures shape social interactions in religious settings, scholars of religion miss a key opportunity to understand the social bodies and spaces we seek to explain and we forfeit one of the richest unexplored data troves currently available. In other words, how buildings reflect and influence religious behaviors and attitudes is often overlooked. By not seriously considering religious buildings, we fail to grasp how people “experience architecture sensuously, holistically, and, as Benjamin pointed out, habitually and in a state of distraction” (Larson 1993:252).

We offer four arguments for engaging in sociological research on religious buildings: they shape and are shaped by religious congregations and other actors, their construction often involves tension and excitement, they provide a venue through which the past can continue to influence the present, and they highlight the need to bring bodies back into the sociological study of religion. Ultimately, religious buildings are material objects created by humans that also interact with social groups in unique ways. To avoid confusion from the long tradition of using the word “structures” in a metaphorical sense, we employ the term “religious buildings” and argue that both the way they take shape and the way they act back on the communities that build them together offer a promising and much-needed avenue of new research. While ours is not a wholly new argument as others have recently called for a renewed emphasis on place and context in sociology (Gieryn 2000) and specifically in the sociology of religion (e.g., Smith et al. 2013), we believe the emphasis on religious buildings offers new theoretical and empirical paths.

ARGUMENT #1: BUILDINGS POWERFULLY SHAPE (AND ARE SHAPED BY) RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS

Religious buildings are, by nature, social phenomena. By this statement, we mean to emphasize that religious buildings are a powerful example of the “social forces” which shape and constrain the formation of groups and the identity of the members belonging to them. For example, the physical structure constructed by a congregation communicates particular values and meanings to those who congregate there as well as to the many who never enter the structure but who nevertheless draw conclusions about its members based on the building’s shape, design, and size. Furthermore, religious buildings are themselves subject to social forces insofar as they are always conceived, designed, and built by a group rather than an individual. Whether that group of individuals is a building committee, a pastor and a few elders, or a denominational planning board, virtually every religious building (or renovation) involves input from multiple members—and often nonspecialists—of the religious body. Even when an architect is employed as is often, though certainly not always, the case, a religious building reflects in some fashion the hopes and needs of the community that builds it. Once built, that religious building can influence the behavior of later users.

In this sense then, a religious building project is an eminently social production that interacts with local understandings and offers possibilities both for stability and reinterpretation (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Gieryn 2002; Williams 1997). A workable metaphor for what buildings “do” can be drawn from the language of communication. That is, religious buildings “speak” both to the community that meets in them and to those whose only notion of the congregation is the building itself and they do this by drawing on the shared vernacular surrounding physical structures of those in their community. Their size, shape, and symbols represent legible signs to outsiders about the kind of community that worships within them. Well aware of this fact, congregational leaders and building committees, upon embarking on a building project, labor long and hard to find ways to communicate actively but also accurately to their neighbors and potential visitors while also meeting practical needs of the members and their liturgies.

There is a second sense in which religious buildings are uniquely social. While there are many different uses for religious buildings (the National Congregations Study finds religious buildings are regularly used by groups not connected to congregations for art exhibits, as art itself, etc.—see Chaves 2004:233), their primary use is typically for corporate worship. In worship, a *group* of people meets together at a certain time to interact in a very particular way, often claiming to interact with the transcendent or divine. Whereas a home provides a place for an individual or a small group to seek rest, shelter, and privacy, and to interact in patterned ways, in a church, temple, mosque, or synagogue, a group of people, most of whom are typically of no blood relation, gather to do something that can only be accomplished *together*. Other major architectural monuments such as museums, skyscrapers, or government buildings may seek to prompt particular attitudes and behaviors for users or attendees—such as museums attempting to shape national identities and historical interpretations (e.g., Boswell and Evans 1999; Jones 2011; MacLeod 2013; McLean 1998)—but do not share with religious buildings the aim of regularly gathering all members for a shared, deeply symbolic interactive ritual with the supernatural or divine. In other words, the corporate, social nature of worship places unique demands upon religious buildings. Indeed, it is this highly social nature of religious experience that helps to explain why the members of ancient religions describe themselves with singular terms such as “the *body* of Christ” or “the *light* to the nations.” These terms imply that religious individuals see themselves as belonging to a larger unity that is greater than the sum of its parts. Those of us who study such phenomena ought to seek every opportunity available to study such *corporate work* of a religious body.

In addition to religious buildings reflecting social groups and providing space for social activity, in their creation and afterward, religious buildings are objects that exert unique pressure on those who utilize the space. They have materiality even if the design is not fully understood by attendees (Price 2013:183). They are not simply receptacles into which any person entering can impose a new set of meanings and values. The physical structures themselves interact with the social

beings within. Vergara (2005:39) notes, “Through its physical features, a building affirms its presence as the house of God, as something permanent, a home for the religious life, a place to articulate beliefs, and a symbol of the identity of the pastor and the congregation.”

These two dimensions of religious buildings—as social creations as well as material objects—clashes with an assumption often underlying what gets published in the sociology of religion: that the impact of religion can best be understood by looking to the individual and without examining the material objects they interact with. Whether in the myriad studies that use what Smith (2010) calls “variable sociology” to document patterned differences in the opinions and practices of religious adherents, or in the many studies of “lived religion” that employ in-depth interviews, focus groups, or even photo elicitation to understand the ways religious persons make meaning and construct an identity, these approaches all rely on outcomes at the individual level to instruct them in the shape, meaning, and impact of religious *groups*. In fact, excepting some forms of ethnographic work, most quantitative *and* qualitative research could be characterized as proceeding by way of “methodological individualism” since it seeks to elicit information from individuals in order to build claims about a community.

We need studies that emphasize “a complex uncovering of social processes” (Marti 2014:507) that can include “architecture [as] an agent in social contexts” (Reichmann and Müller 2015), an approach for which the study of religious buildings is ideally suited. Incorporating the role of material objects and religious buildings may require new approaches such as actor network theory (Law 2009) or examining interactions between objects and social entities in “object-settings” (McDonnell 2010). To be clear, while we argue that there is much to be learned from studies which examine outcomes at the individual level (whether in small-*N* interview-based studies or in quantitative studies that aggregate individuals), we argue that they remain incomplete so long as they are based on a research design that gathers data about institutions from individual persons. Although researching buildings is certainly not the *only* way to study the social production of a social body, this approach could offer a helpful corrective to the overused tendency of interpreting religiosity through the lens of the individual believer floating free from the influence of physical spaces.

One example of the insights that can emerge from examining religious buildings as material phenomena is illustrated in recent research on American megachurches. While much attention has been paid to the individual experiences in such settings and the theological and cultural shifts present in these large congregations, some of these new churches also aim to present new kinds of religious spaces intended to promote particular behaviors and meanings. In other words, these new types of congregations are not just new social arrangements but are also embedded within and influenced by particular buildings and physical configurations. Churches like Willow Creek view architecture as “an instrument of evangelism” and have worked to create new spaces that do not look much different from corporate office parks or shopping malls (Loveland and Wheeler

2003:127–79) and that are ahistorical in welcoming popular culture (Dickinson 2015). Yet, these new designs are building on previous social histories of church design (Eagle 2015; Kilde 2002). Thumma and Travis (2007) highlight four unique architectural approaches among megachurches as they differ on important features such as the presence or absence of religious symbols, the choice of luxurious versus minimalistic decor, and the size of sanctuaries. Across these styles and even among the churches with more traditional architecture, there is emphasis on presentation and marketing the congregation to a wide range of people. Such research highlights that understanding megachurches must go beyond paying attention to superstar pastors, competitive religious settings, or promoting a particular kind of feel-good religion; it also should include close study of the spaces themselves and the behaviors and attitudes encouraged by them at the corporate and individual levels.

A second brief example involves Catholic and Protestant conceptions of space for priests or pastors and laity within religious buildings (Collins 2010). Catholic churches emphasized sacred space, whether around the altar where only priests could tread or at the entryway with a set of objects (such as a font of holy water). In contrast, Protestant spaces tend not to feature barriers (like screens or communion railings) and the lack of overt religious objects (except a Bible carried by a pastor) is intended to promote leveling among those present. These physical changes to buildings may have been motivated by increasing the energy generated in rituals—not necessarily motivated by doctrine—but they also became defining features of religious buildings themselves and these traits influenced later religiosity.

ARGUMENT #2: RELIGIOUS BUILDING PROJECTS TEND TO GENERATE EXCITEMENT AND CONTENTION

Skeptical readers might argue that even though the vast majority of religious communities build physical structures in order to meet for worship, gather for meals, or conduct their religious affairs, such buildings are not central to the identity of a religious group—at least not to congregations in the “low church” traditions. Indeed, this may be truer for religious groups that emphasize the importance of texts which are portable (Gamm 1999; McGreevy 1996) where theological arguments endorse building only as “a means to another (i.e. religious) end” and therefore of only marginal importance to the group that meets there. If this perspective were true, the minimal attention paid to religious buildings by sociologists of religion might make sense. There is ample evidence, however, that such a view is naïve and misinformed.

One key piece of evidence suggesting that buildings are of considerable importance to religious communities can be seen in the observation that religious building projects frequently involve (a) a great deal of excitement and enthusiasm, and (b) conflict over the exact size, shape, and décor of the proposed

building or renovation. Such discussion and conflict can take place at the congregational level or within a denomination or religious tradition (e.g., Price 2013). Anecdotal evidence suggests that major building projects rarely come off without a hitch. Just how frequently churches split over the size, shape, or price tag of a new sanctuary is impossible to know for sure, and this difficulty results in part from the paucity of research on religious buildings and building projects. But, what is certain is that when a religious community decides to embark on a major building or renovation campaign, the excitement of gaining a new or refurbished “home” typically comes accompanied with tensions over what and how to build or remodel. The new building can also even be the result of difficulties a church faces (Ammerman 1997:107–29), not just the result of new growth or having acquired more resources. Such excitement and/or tension is not unique to the “high church” or otherwise well-to-do religious groups that engage formal architects and build large, impressive structures at great expense. Denominations that build small, relatively unassuming or unadorned structures can be equally divisive when hammering out plans for a building. After all, in these traditions, such as conservative Mennonite, Brethren, or Baptist congregations as well as Quaker meetings, *not* building ornate houses of worship and *avoiding* certain amenities that might communicate worldliness can be just as crucial, just as central to the identity of the believers meeting there, as the tall spires of the Catholic cathedral or the large dome of the Orthodox church.

The very nature of a physical structure, especially one that serves an identifiable community, involves providing a locus of identity for the group that identifies with it. Symbolic interactionists have pointed out that the architecture of a building provides members of the community that identifies with that building, an invitation to self-reflection (Smith and Bugni 2006). Just as important, building projects, especially those that serve a voluntary association, involve the mustering of resources from members including money as well as contributing folk art or construction skills to urban churches (Vergara 2005). Decisions about the proper size of the foyer and whether or not the basement should include an industrial kitchen—not to mention the decision of which architectural firm, if any, ought to be engaged—require concrete, fundamental decisions about the management of monetary resources usually given by members of a voluntary association. Such moments involve delicate diplomacy by leaders who must find a way to help members feel “represented” by the new building and perhaps even excited enough to continue or increase their (typically voluntary) giving.

Finally, decisions about the size and structure of a building can result in significant financial outlays for decades to come as large and architecturally “interesting” buildings can require significantly more maintenance for future generations. Such is the case for St. Paul’s Episcopal Cathedral in Burlington, Vermont. In that congregation, parishioners in the early 1970s responded to the arson that destroyed their nineteenth-century building by launching a national competition that resulted in a contemporary brutalist design. While the innovative modernist building continues to be a source of pride for most members of the church, its

concrete-and-glass design requires significant costs in energy and maintenance for a congregation wrestling with demographic decline due to its location in the “graying” Northeast. In other words, building projects are not abstract arguments over doctrine or politics but rather involve the current and future allocation of money from members whose future giving—indeed, whose future presence—is never fully guaranteed, particularly in societies with high levels of religious competition. The difference between two proposals put before a congregational building committee can easily reach into the millions of dollars, especially when energy costs and future upkeep are considered. Naturally, such differences can easily create division within a committee and a congregation.

Since sociologists of religion have relatively few opportunities to observe tension among community members—as Dawne Moon (2004) and others have observed, religious congregations tend to avoid topics that may involve conflict whenever they can—the social process leading to the construction of a new or renovated building provides a unique opportunity to witness the way congregations actually handle tension and allocate resources. As Kilde (2002:11) suggests, “church buildings and spaces are political places, places in which social power and authority are asserted, tested, and negotiated.” Do major givers have more to say in the design process? How do leaders create a sense of ownership in light of the fact that some, even most, design proposals must ultimately be rejected since only one building can be constructed?

The construction of religious buildings also often involves interaction between a religious community and professionals in the field of architecture and related vocations. While these actors are serving at the behest of a religious community, their understanding of the structure may differ and their vocational context or Bourdieuean field (Jones 2011; Larson 1993; Zukin 1991) may push them in particular directions. A number of scholars have examined the role of architects producing iconic buildings within a new global structure. Sklair (2010) argues that iconic buildings are no longer produced by religion or the state but rather a global capitalist class operating within a hegemonic system of globalization. Similarly, Kaika (2010, 2011) suggests crises and globalization can lead to “autistic architecture” where large buildings have little in common with their immediate surroundings, are intended to attract attention, and have a shorter life cycle. In this increasingly global system, architects are now traveling to and drawing from a wider range of contexts in their designs (McNeill 2009). These overarching pressures may be more present in larger projects or global cities yet even architects designing smaller or more humble religious buildings may feel some influence.

The exciting and contentious nature of religious buildings can also spill over to the public realm where a variety of actors—from neighbors, local officials, and a broader public—can be involved and influenced. For example, the construction of new buildings amidst increasing populations can bring to the fore questions of community identity (Eiesland 2000). The physical characteristics of a structure are rarely neutral in the interpretations of a broader community, as discussed in

the role of the public in the development of more ambiguous war memorials in recent decades (e.g., [Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991](#)). When religious architecture highlights the otherness of a minority religious group, conflict can arise over what is allowed and how the building is interpreted by others ([Chen 2002:232](#); [Jones 2011](#)). This has been the case with proposals for mosques in the United States, Britain, and Switzerland ([Biondo 2006](#); [Guggenheim 2010](#); [Jia et al. 2011](#)).

Even “familiar” religious architecture and groups can provoke disagreement from local residents. Wheaton, Illinois, dubbed by some as the “Protestant Vatican” for its collection of churches, a religious college, and religious organizations, has experienced its share of opposition regarding religious buildings even as the city seal features a church steeple (amongst other tall buildings in the community) and the community has a reputation for a large proportion of conservative Protestants. Residents successfully lobbied the city to set guidelines for future construction by several sizable churches near the downtown ([Stewart 1989](#)). The city and congregations underwent negotiations ([Mehler 1990](#)), and one of the major churches moved to an adjacent suburb in order to get the space they wanted to further their growth ([Goldsborough 1999](#)). In this case, the buildings prompted the opposition, not necessarily the social groups involved or their particular values. While religious congregations and organizations can be centers for rallying NIMBY support against unwanted land uses, their architectural decisions can prompt the ire of neighbors who view these buildings as threats.

ARGUMENT #3: BUILDINGS EXERT HISTORICAL INFLUENCE FROM THE PAST

If Peter [Berger \(1963\)](#) is right in his insistence that the closest “companion” to the sociologist must be the historian, we have, it must be said, all too frequently ignored his advice. In our zeal to explain the “breaking news” in the religious world, we have typically relied on just enough history to provide “context” for explaining the present. Paying attention to religious structures could help steer the subdiscipline of sociology of religion toward a more robust appreciation and a more thorough empirical analysis of the historically situated nature of all religious communities. Indeed, architecture influences not solely through “discourse and codified practices” but also through “artifacts that are useful and can be beautiful” ([Larson 1993:16](#)).

Buildings are “time-stamped” in at least two ways. First, the actual dates of commencement and completion of construction on a religious building demonstrate the nature of a religious community in a given time and place while speaking to the prevailing religious and architectural social networks ([Collins and Guillén 2012](#)), even as historic structures—like Notre Dame de Paris—are contested and reinterpreted by later generations ([Murphy 2011](#)). In some cases, earlier building features like cornerstones are later altered by later religious groups occupying the building ([Vergara 2005](#)). Communities that engage in a

building project are typically rich in members, resources, or motivation, or a combination of these. Sociologists studying religious buildings can learn about the particular history of a congregation (or even an entire denomination) by merely observing the *dates* of construction of its buildings, let alone other physical aspects of the structure.

Even more important though is the fact that religious buildings from the past continue to exert influence on later social groups. The structures do not just sit benignly; their materiality affects groups using the buildings and those in the neighborhood. Three examples suffice here. The first is taken from a study of state buildings, the second from urban churches in the Chicago region, and the third from a study of religious buildings in Guatemala.

Paul Jones (2011), a British sociologist of architecture, notes that the state building projects of nineteenth-century Europe helped to cultivate an intensive period of nation-building in which major state architectural projects became key moments of debate in a vociferous struggle over how to situate the nation with regard to the past. When the British government embarked on a rebuilding of the House of Westminster in the 1830s, a “Battle of the Styles” ensued that pitted proponents of the Gothic style against supporters of Neo-Classical architecture. At stake was not an aesthetic preference but rather a momentous debate over whether the growing British empire was to be a new kind of Holy Roman empire—profoundly religious and Christian—or an enlightened republic in the Graeco-Roman tradition. (The Gothic proponents won the battle over Westminster, but later projects initiated the Neo-colonial style that ultimately won the war.) As this example clearly shows, the symbolic dimensions of buildings extend well beyond the religious sphere. Whenever a major building is built with an aim to “represent” a group—be it an organization, a congregation, or a nation—excitement, tension, and even conflict are likely to ensue, especially since the physical durability of the structure adds lasting impact to the material symbolism embodied in the building. Thus, government capitol buildings can operate in a variety of symbolic ways that are particularly important for the modern nationalism of recent centuries (Vale 2008). Such buildings of power embody historical winners for later generations to see and experience even as the outcomes of these historical contingencies continue to affect nations and social groups. Religious buildings add the unique dimension of representing a relationship not only to the wider society (or world) but also to the Divine. The vast interior and soaring verticality of the European cathedrals communicate not only the cultural hegemony of Christianity in that place and time. They communicate to the worshipper (both then and now) the grandeur of God—a God whose vast magnificence reminds the adherent of her relative smallness by comparison.

In the numerous neighborhoods of Chicago, older church buildings abound even as many of these structures house new religious groups or have been retrofitted for altogether new uses. Numerous buildings from Mainline Protestant denominations or Jewish synagogues (Cutler 1996; Kieckhefer 2004) have since been purchased or used by black or new immigrant churches, particularly in

neighborhoods where white flight after World War II turned over communities from ethnic whites to new groups. In contrast, Catholic parishes had a different relationship with their building and sense of place. Hence, Catholic congregants left for the suburbs with new parishes built but the older urban buildings remained and often became home to newer waves of Catholic worshippers (Gamm 1999; McGreevy 1996). These older buildings then shape what is possible for worship and social gatherings by later users.

In Cicero, a working-class suburb of Chicago, a church built by Presbyterians in the early twentieth century was purchased and occupied in the 2000s by Comunidad Cristiana Vida Abundante, a large and growing Latino congregation. The large windows, designed to maximize natural light, were kept mostly covered during worship in order to allow for the utilization of video and overhead projection screens as well as to allow for enhanced artificial lighting of those on stage. Meanwhile, ushers kept strict control of seating, generally moving congregants as close as possible to the altar/stage. When the congregation outgrew the space and built its own worship center in 2012, no windows were used in the new sanctuary and arena-style seating brought worshippers closer to an enlarged, artificially lit stage.

Similarly, Vergara (2005:17–19) describes how a former synagogue turned Christian church in Brooklyn was both left the same and altered to suit its new Christian occupants: the brick façade continues to have Jewish symbols, the lobby has both older Hebrew tablets on the wall while the new congregation added tablets in English, and the sanctuary now includes a drop ceiling and an overhead projector. This is not uncommon: some of these older buildings used by newer religious groups continue to feature the architecture and signs of previous neighborhood inhabitants. In contrast, building a new structure would allow the congregation to design the space that shapes interactions and worship from the beginning.

Data regarding the ongoing historical influence of religious buildings also abounds outside of the United States. For example, during a recent trip to Guatemala, one of the authors of this paper was given a tour of two “new” religious buildings with sharply contrasting visual cues about the past. On the outskirts of Guatemala City, a sprawling new church campus somewhat unselfconsciously christened “Ciudad de Dios” (City of God) was finished and dedicated in 2013. The project involved a capital campaign of US\$55 million and the finished construction has been paid for in full, thanks to the donations and “faith promises” of thousands of members of the Casa de Dios church that meets there. The central sanctuary building—there are multiple buildings on the campus as well as a multi-level parking garage—seats several thousand and is thoroughly “modern” in the sense that it does not contain traditional elements of “ecclesial” architectural design. Resembling a basketball arena from the outside and a theater in the main sanctuary, the building is intentionally absent of easily recognizable religious symbolism except insofar as the “footprint” of the building resembles a dove when seen from the vantage point of an airplane. Thus, viewed from the ground, the shape and décor of the building do not call to mind the historical Christian church. The building is abstract and contains no steeple or spire. A conversation with

the architect revealed that the design process was directed entirely by a four-member committee including the lead pastor, the architect, the builder, and one other church leader. For inspiration, the committee visited two other structures: Rev. Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, which meets in the remodeled Compaq Center that was formerly home to the Houston Rockets, and the Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas, Nevada.

In San Juan, Atitlán, a thriving indigenous Mayan village on the shores of Lake Atitlán, the same coauthor toured a new Catholic church building being constructed on the town square. A smaller community worships here than worships at Casa de Dios, but the church is similarly proud of its ongoing building project and has received contributions of money and time from many of its parishioners. In this instance, not only does the "new" sanctuary keep the "traditional" 1:5 rectangular dimensions of a Catholic church, the new building is being built in the same style as the original and with the same locally quarried volcanic stone that was used in the original building. Furthermore, the congregation has decided to preserve the original façade of the much smaller sanctuary that was mostly demolished to make way for the new building. When completed, the "new" church will incorporate the façade of the building originally constructed at the behest of Spanish priests in the early sixteenth century.

Taken together, these two building projects reveal starkly opposing orientations toward the past, both palpably present in the religious landscape of Guatemala today. At Ciudad de Dios, as well as at several other large megachurches in Guatemala City, religious symbolism is avoided almost entirely. Such a design suggests that what is emerging at these congregations is something new and distinct from the Christian past. Neither the traditionally Roman Catholic cruciform shape nor the recognizable Protestant rectangular shape is utilized and no cross or steeple is present. Meanwhile at La Iglesia de San Juan, the congregation took pains to preserve a façade that reveals a strong connection to both the Roman Catholic religious past and, due to the preservation of the locally quarried volcanic stone, to the congregation's embeddedness in its own local history and landscape. As these examples visibly illustrate, religious buildings themselves exert historical influence by providing crucial opportunities for congregations to communicate to their members and their surrounding community in ways that embrace important elements from the past, or that draw a contrast to the past. The religious building is thus part of an ongoing conversation involving congregants and the community that materially invokes both present and past—even more modern church buildings "react" to earlier church structures—on a regular basis.

ARGUMENT #4: STUDYING RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS BRINGS BODIES BACK TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

We have discussed thus far the multiple ways religious buildings interact with both adherents and nonmembers in the community, but religious buildings provide

much more than a “legible symbol” to onlookers. They shape and constrain the gathering of real bodies in time and space. Religious buildings provide attendees both position and location (Griswold et al. 2013) as they make meaning of the event in which they are participating. That religion not only involves but largely *survives* due to such gatherings of bodies often escapes sociologists of religion, although a growing number of scholars have begun to remark upon this tendency and work to correct it (Brenneman 2012; McElmurry 2009; McGuire 1990; Neitz 2004; Warner 2007; Winchester 2008). Nevertheless, how to effectively study *variation*—across time, space, and denomination—is no simple task. Apart from the important but sometimes limited method of ethnographic research, we have few mechanisms for exploring adequately the changes in the patterns through which religious groups orchestrate the gathering and movements of bodies worshipping together.

Religious buildings offer a treasure trove of data for understanding how religious communities expect bodies to interact. Architects have developed a basic grammar for understanding the impact of elements like height, light, and the distribution of barriers and how these factors shape interactions and power relations of human beings in a space. Sociologists could build on this grammar and extend it by paying attention to the subtle patterns and variations across the built spaces for worship and other religious gatherings. In addition, emerging disciplines such as “spatial syntax” offer potential tools for “reading” the patterns of power built into a physical–social structure.

For example, Mexican architect and Pentecostal theologian Daniel Chiquete (2006) has shown with his research that Mexican Pentecostal churches of the Sinaloa region tend to construct their sanctuaries according to a 1:1.5 ratio rather than the more typical elongated rectangular ratio of 1:4 or 1:5 used by Catholic churches in the same region. In other words, rather than a long, “stretched-out” rectangle, perhaps with perpendicular wings made possible by the cruciform shape, the typical Pentecostal sanctuary of the Sinaloa region resembles a “fat rectangle” often with the stage jutting into the seating itself. Uniting worshippers in a tighter “knot” and bringing them closer to the leaders or performers on stage are moves that call to mind Randall Collins’s (2013) description of the phalanx formation. Collins argues that the physical organization of the phalanx, by bringing soldiers into closer proximity, capitalized on positive feedback loops of emotional energy, and in doing so reduced the frequency of desertion while allowing generals to bring their troops into direct confrontation with the enemy despite the overwhelming tension and fear of experiencing physical harm. We posit that Pentecostal congregations have used the tighter proximity of worshippers provided by their worship spaces in order to enhance their success at creating positive feedback loops of emotional energy that (a) can be carried into future encounters, (b) builds collective sense of solidarity, and (c) keeps parishioners coming back. Desertion is thus discouraged in both the short term (because the service is emotionally rewarding, not boring) and the long term (due to shared solidarity with the group and the desire to return frequently to an emotionally engaging experience).

One of the more exciting possibilities opened up by the study of religious buildings involves the potential for linking up to the theory of interaction ritual chains in fresh and productive ways. In this emerging social theory, most prominently articulated by Randall Collins (2004), the proximity of physical bodies, coupled with elements such as “barriers to outsiders,” “shared mood,” and “mutual entrainment,” combine to create powerful catalysts of emotional energy within a co-present group of persons. Indeed, the lead author’s own research among small Pentecostal congregations in Central America—most of which worshipped in unadorned, even homely buildings in poor neighborhoods—provided the inspiration to examine the possibility that physical structures matter immensely and that Collins’s theory provided tools for understanding the dynamics behind Weber’s (1978) “charisma” and Durkheim’s (1995 [1912]) “collective effervescence.” In such congregations, the smallish structures combined with the utilization of well-amplified electronic instruments appear to provide effective “maximizers” of emotional energy for the congregants who meet in them. Put differently, the financial limitations that compel neighborhood Pentecostal churches to build or inhabit modest structures counterintuitively enhance the emotional effect of their frequent worship services by making it easier to regularly fill a sanctuary with bodies and sound.

The importance of including bodies in the study of religiosity is underscored in recent research regarding the privatization of faith in the United States. The famous example of “Sheilism” in *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al. 1985) suggested a new kind of spirituality that is notable in part because it can be done solo, without the traditional religious congregation or community or building. The rise of the “spiritual but not religious” coincides with an increasing number of Americans living alone (Klinenberg 2012). How exactly does disembodied religion, separate from religious buildings and congregations, operate? Have recently constructed sanctuaries changed their architecture to better accommodate a more private religious experience? Indeed, some have argued that the Protestant meeting house design employed from the Reformation onward emphasizes a specific interaction between attendee and preacher (e.g., Kilde 2002; Loveland and Wheeler 2003), whereas more communal architecture—say with open seating in the round (Kieckhefer 2004)—promotes more interaction between attendees. One congregation in northern Indiana, a small but growing conservative Presbyterian congregation founded in the early 1990s, met for about a decade in a rented space using stackable chairs. When the congregation finally built its own space, the congregational leaders opted to purchase pews rather than movable chairs. By doing so, the congregation was able to provide visual links to religious tradition while also adding durability to a particular arrangement of bodies in the space—that of bodies facing forward toward a minister located the far end of a space.

Even understanding what a social space like a religious building means often requires embodied interactions. As Kieckhefer (2004:9) notes, “Response to a church is learned . . . the lesson is learned gradually, through experience of

liturgy and by life within community, and by absorbing principles of interpretation learned from others.” Part of the process of joining a religious group includes becoming accustomed not just to practices and meanings (Luhman 2012) but also its spaces and regular behavior therein. Given the different worship practices of religious traditions and denominations (Chaves 2004), some of this variation might be attributed to or at least reinforced by unique spaces that influence bodies.

In one of only a tiny handful of published sociological articles focusing on religious buildings (also including an analysis of the architecture and material culture of two Catholic churches as well as the homes of their parishioners—see Konieczny 2009), Sally Gallagher (2005) employed ethnographic research on three congregations in the urban Northeast. She found that these churches utilized their buildings in highly intentional ways both to influence interactions with God and other attendees and to appeal to a particular social class and liturgical taste. For example, the interior “high culture” design of a Presbyterian sanctuary promoted “dignity, richness, and [the] enduring history of the community,” while a newer Baptist church met in an old school auditorium with a limited set of “visible indicators that one is in a church rather than a theater” (Gallagher 2005:73). Meanwhile, the lack of any seating at all helped worshippers at the Greek Orthodox St. Andrews congregation “enact” the story of Salvation (on their feet) rather than listen to it preached from a pulpit or stage. With these examples, Gallagher (2005:84) argues “the ‘stuff’ of local church culture” along with theological and liturgical distinctives, are “embodied and reflected in the buildings themselves.” Yet, even studies using the lens of interaction ritual chains to examine religious experiences (e.g., Baker 2010; Wellman et al. 2014) can focus primarily on social interactions, worship, and sermons while devoting little attention to spaces.

CONCLUSION

The above four arguments together make the case for a new or renewed emphasis on the religious buildings that are so important to religious groups and broader society. When sociologists and other scholars discuss religious structures, they should include the physical structures in conjunction with the social structures that shape social life. As Gieryn (2002:65) suggests, “In buildings, and through them, sociologists can find social structures in the process of becoming.” If Stevens (2002) is correct that the writings in the sociology of architecture could be read “in a single day,” thoughtful, empirically grounded, and theoretical informed research on the sociology of religious buildings promises to advance the sociology of religion.

We argue that deeply examining religious buildings provides needed correctives as well as new opportunities for the sociological study of religion. If “all architecture is social architecture” (Rakatansky 1995), studying religious buildings offers an opening for the sociology of religion to help lead the discipline of

sociology in accounting for materiality and physical space. Studies of religious buildings can contribute to the growing body of literature on materiality where “the choreography of objects, words, and bodies” (Griswold et al. 2013:361) is critical for understanding social life. Meaning making involving buildings is in part cognitive (Harvey 2010), includes affect or emotions as users inhabit spaces (Kraftl and Adey 2008), and incorporates changed behaviors based on the physical configurations present. These examples of durable materiality could also enhance sociological discussions of agency and structure (e.g., Sewell 1992) as Gieryn (2002:41) argues, “Analysis must respect the double reality of buildings, as structures structuring agency but never beyond the potential restructuring by human agents.” Even as religious buildings are constructed by people, they also are “dynamic agents in the construction, development, and persistence of religious traditions” (Kilde 2008:3).

Additionally, emphasizing religious buildings can help further the spatial dimension of sociological analysis (e.g., Gieryn 2000). The importance of spatial context is often limited in sociological studies, typically measured through a region variable or some information about the neighborhood or community of an individual or social group. Focusing on religious buildings would help provide a reminder that “[space] possesses the dual characteristics of being both a product of social relations and a producer of social relations” (Gottdiener 1994:xv). The scope of influence of religious buildings extends beyond the actors within; they also exert influence in the surrounding streetscape (Jacobs 1961). These structures are often rooted in traditions stretching back millennia, offering unique opportunities to observe both change and continuity. Moving toward examining religion in everyday life (Ammerman 2014) would require more analysis of spatial and physical realities and how individuals and groups are influenced religiously by the architecture and space both within religious buildings and secular spaces (Cadge and Konieczny 2014; Williams 2010).

Moving forward with this new research focus could take multiple forms. One path might involve examining the social process of the construction of religious buildings from start to finish. How do religious congregations make these decisions, and how do they interact with outsiders who also have a stake in the process? Or, to put it differently, what do religious groups believe a building can or should *do* for them, and how do these beliefs vary across social class and religious tradition? A number of scholars have examined the end results—the influence of religious spaces—but less attention to the process. A second research approach could involve examining religious buildings over time in communities (e.g., Guggenheim 2013). What has happened to religious buildings in older urban neighborhoods as well as newer suburban communities? How have these structures shaped the surrounding area as well as adapted to changing conditions? Religious buildings are not just part of the background scenery in many places or simply places where collections of individuals regularly gather; instead, such buildings continue to shape and be shaped by their surrounding context as time passes. A third approach could involve visual sociology and the utilization of

time-lapse photography in order to document and examine the actual movement of human bodies within a worship space. Where do bodies move, meet, and interact with the most frequency during the course of a service? A fourth option for studying religious buildings as well as for other research that involves buildings would be to pay attention to the architectural dimensions of built structures that could influence social actors. These dimensions may include: the scale of the building; how the use of materials for the interior and exterior provide insight into the material resources and status of the group and affirm or revoke traditional and/or regional uses of these materials; the use of light; how sacred and profane spaces are delineated; whether and how the space encourages individual or group activity; how the building draws upon known architectural styles or innovates in particular ways; and how the physical form of the building compares to surrounding structures or spaces. These four broad approaches are just part of a series of questions and methods that could develop if the emphasis on religious buildings were to be taken seriously by social science.

Extending the analysis of religious buildings beyond what they reflect or say about their inhabitants or builders—examining buildings as structures that are influencers and influenced by other structures—could produce exciting benefits both for the sociology of religion and other areas within sociology. At the least, including buildings as important structures could help make the sociology of religion more holistic in its approach to religious experiences and better attuned to the collective and embodied nature of religious traditions. To the extent that they shape both perception and interactive action, the bricks (as well as the wood, glass, and stone) used to create a religious building, *matter*. It is time sociologists paid attention to them.

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