

# Disneyland or Holyland? The Crystal Cathedral, an Architectural Wonder

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## Summary Statement

This study examines how the Crystal Cathedral, a Protestant megachurch, located in Southern California just miles from Disneyland, established. The research uncovers how the social actors surrounding the Cathedral made decision based on spiritual and spatial realms and reveals how sacred and profane measures coincided to develop a utopian existence surrounding the architectural wonder.

## Topic

The topic of sacred place invites the contemplation of divine mystery in the built form. It encourages a deeper understanding of place formation, human presence in space, and the role significant places performance on human life. The sacred distinguishes itself from the profane in that it is set apart from society and transcends the everyday life.<sup>1</sup> Religious architecture is an attempt to produce a place of connection and to reinforce religious ontological positions in the world where an interaction with the sacred is found, and the meaning and significance of human existence are heightened.<sup>2</sup> However, Colleen McDannell pronounces there is, "little evidence that American Christians experience a radical separation of the sacred from the profane".<sup>3</sup> Erica Robles-Anderson further explains, "Megachurches take up the material conditions associated with the project of modernization, and thus secularization, in order to create a hyper-visible model of congregation. In so doing, they reassert the legibility of a Christian cosmology within contemporary technological conditions".<sup>4</sup>

In this case study, a modern American religious megachurch is presented. This specific case embodies the motion of both culture and religion revealing that built environments are references to something beyond themselves; they are reflections of the culture they serve, they are created and changed continuously by the ways humans use them, and the meanings humans attach to them. Through spatial, sociological, and spiritual connections, the Crystal Cathedral, a sacred place for many, distinctively represented a modern utopia while blending the sacred and profane.

## Scope / Case Study

The Crystal Cathedral delighted in dramatic design and extravagant ministry. This case study walks the audience through the emergence of the Cathedral and uncovers how the social actors

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<sup>1</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Barrie, *The Sacred In-Between: The Mediating Roles of Architecture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (London: Yale University Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Erica Robles-Anderson, "The Crystal Cathedral: Architecture for Mediated Congregation," *Public Culture*, 24 (2012):577-599, accessed March 2016, doi:10.1215/08992363-1630672

interpret both the sacred and profane to create an awe-inspiring site. From 1955 to 2000, unprecedented religious principles and spatial miracles surfaced. Reverend Robert H. Schuller, founder and the creator of the "Possibility Thinkers Creed" lead the way. Throughout the years, the impossible became possible using his mantra,

When faced with a mountain I will not quit. I will keep on striving until I climb over, find a pass through, tunnel underneath, or simply stay and turn the mountain into a gold mine! With God's help!<sup>5</sup>

Beginning as a drive-in theatre, a walk-in drive-in theatre soon followed. A chapel in the sky was then imagined and eventually the Crystal Cathedral was built. The buildings on the site, including the Crystal Cathedral, used operable windows and vast amounts of glass to open those inside, to nature outside, with hopes of establishing a connection to the heavens above. Schuller's upbringing paired with his training while designing with renowned architects Richard Neutra, Phillip Johnson and John Burgee helped him understand the tranquilizing response triggered in a person by nature. Schuller explained, "Once inside the Crystal Cathedral your life is like a window to let God's light shine in and let the glory reflect into the world".<sup>6</sup>

After the Cathedral was built the spectacle surrounding the site continued to rise. The Cathedral then became a television studio for *Hour of Power*, the world-wide television ministry. This use of media provided additional exposure for the emerging utopia and revolutionary ministry; Ann Loveland and Otis Wheeler describe, "Extending outward rather than upward, the megachurches signaled that the church's mission is to the world-not to itself...".<sup>7</sup> This technology represented a religious culture more diverse than previous, one that eventually led to the idea of today's digital religious practices.

To further add to the utopian environment, lavish gardens were planted, elaborate sculptures were commissioned and arranged throughout the site, a prayer spire extending higher than the Cathedral was erected, a Visitor's Center was built, and tour guides were trained to escort visitors around the site daily. Was this Disneyland or was this a holy land? Nonetheless, a utopia for stakeholders near and far emerged.

### **Intended Conclusions**

The sacred and profane uniquely came together to create a utopian environment. This unique merger helped to create a world-wide spectacle which embraced culture as it inserted theology into its design. This utopia, filled with vision, commitment, care, and spiritual innuendos fostered an idealistic environment. The Crystal Cathedral was a place so memorable, that when the socio-economic demand outweighed the religious infrastructure the new stakeholders compassionately and respectfully processed the loss by paying tribute to the previous utopia, the meanings held, and the investments made by so many.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert H. Schuller, *Tough Times Never Last, But Tough People Do!* (Nashville, TN: Bantam Books, 1984)

<sup>6</sup> Erica Robles-Anderson, "The Crystal Cathedral: Architecture for Mediated Congregation," *Public Culture*, 24 (2012):577-599, accessed March 2016, doi:10.1215/08992363-1630672

<sup>7</sup> Ann. C. Loveland and Otis B. Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 259.