

Mysticism and Pragmatism in Modern Religious Architecture

RICHARD LAWSON*

Kahn at Penn: Transformative Teacher of Architecture. By James Williamson. New York: Routledge, 2015. xv + 204 pp. \$163.00 (cloth); \$52.95 (paper).

Temples for a Modern God: Religious Architecture in Postwar America. By Jay M. Price. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. xi + 256 pp. \$82.00 (cloth).

Prayer literally takes *place*. People pray and listen for God in actual places. The idea of “sacred places” seems to imply that God is more likely to be encountered in certain places than in others, and the Celtic intuition of “thin places” affirms locations where the divine breaks through more easily in earthly experience. Divine mystery, for example, may be more easily sensed in an evocative setting such as Durham Cathedral, although mystery is not limited to the grand and the Romanesque. On the other hand, divine creativity may be better grasped where sacred place and nature are gracefully joined, such as the many fine contemporary chapels with windows of clear glass at Episcopal camp and conference centers. While the biblical God transcends all limitations of place, Episcopalians and other Christians have long known the importance of returning to sacred places in order to experience some aspect of the divine nature.

James Williamson’s *Kahn at Penn: Transformative Teacher of Architecture* is a book with a subtle but important connection with Episcopal architecture. Although the author references the Episcopal Church only once,¹ I know for a fact that Williamson is

* Richard Lawson is the rector of Grace-St. Luke’s Episcopal Church and School in Memphis, Tennessee. He has published in the *Sewanee Theological Review*, and his essay “Three Sketches of Symbols and Sacraments” will appear in the upcoming book-length project on the work of theologian Martyn Percy, edited by Joshua Daniel and Ian Markham.

¹ Williamson, *Kahn at Penn*, 10.

an active Episcopalian because I am his parish priest. Williamson is also the architect of two Episcopal churches, including St. George's Episcopal Church (completed in 2007) in Germantown, Tennessee, an inspiring design that resists easy categorization as either traditional or contemporary.

The subject of Williamson's book is the life and work of architect Louis Kahn (1901–1974), who taught at the University of Pennsylvania and maintained his own architectural office in Philadelphia. Williamson was one of Kahn's students. Kahn's architectural buildings are numerous, but two religious designs are particularly relevant for Episcopalians. The First Unitarian Church of Rochester was designed by the Episcopalian Richard Upjohn in the nineteenth century, and subsequently was replaced in 1962 by Kahn's building. Kahn's First Unitarian is a fine example of his mystical view of natural light and shadows. The second example of Kahn's sacred architecture, Hurva Synagogue in Jerusalem, was never built but Kent Larson's *Louis I. Kahn: Unbuilt Masterpieces* includes several computer-generated images of this synagogue.² Hurva reveals Kahn's mastery of the balance between the communal and the individual, as well as the balance between transcendence and immanence.

The subject of Williamson's book, however, is Kahn's teaching and philosophy of education, not his architecture, although these subjects are inseparable. Kahn's philosophy of education and architecture could be described as mystical. For example, Williamson notes Kahn invented a term—*unmeasurable*—to describe what he believed to be the mystical forms of architecture.³ Williamson summarizes:

Kahn taught that the architect must use intuition to discover the eternal, pre-existing "Form" of a building, an understanding of its "existence will," of "what the building wants to be," without regard to the site, the program, or what the architect himself might want to design. The concept recalls the metaphor in Plato's *Republic* of the prisoners whose understanding of the unseen world outside their cave is shaped by the shadows projected on its walls.⁴

² Kent Larson, *Louis I. Kahn: Unbuilt Masterworks* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2000).

³ Williamson, *Kahn at Penn*, 18.

⁴ Williamson, *Kahn at Penn*, 16.

Kahn's teaching style was eclectic, socratic, and deeply influenced by the Talmudic method.⁵ Williamson writes, "Indeed, some of his observations have biblical overtones, such as his enigmatic statement, 'Order Is.' In its economy, ambiguity and sense of much left unsaid, it is reminiscent of Yahweh's revelation to Moses: 'I am that I am.'"⁶ Williamson overlooks the influence of the thirteenth-century Sufi mystic and poet Rumi, whose parable about architecture is cited in full at the end of Kahn's lecture given in 1969 in Zurich, "Silence and Light."⁷

One strength of Williamson's book is that he does not idolize his teacher. He includes critical observations from Kahn's students and colleagues. August Komendant (an engineering consultant who taught with Kahn) thought that Kahn's architectural "strength was in 'what,' not 'how'" and noted that Kahn refused to discuss in the classroom the economics of architecture.⁸

The most original chapter is "Kahn and the Psychology of Creativity," where Williamson tracks influences upon Kahn's mysticism that Kahn himself might not have been aware of, such as Lao Tzu's description of the Tao.⁹ Williamson also describes how Kahn's fascination with forms is complemented by Carl Jung's notion of the unconscious. Throughout this chapter, the author's evocative style and originality are most evident. For example, Williamson writes, "If Form is to become the basis for a work of architecture, if a sculptor is to release the figure imprisoned in the stone, if a poet is to express his or her deepest feelings, it will be necessary to open a window to the unconscious."¹⁰

Williamson recalls that Kahn once cited the mathematician and philosopher Jules Henri Poincaré. Building upon Poincaré's observations, Kahn determined, "The mind is at work while you are resting."¹¹ Williamson's chapter then concludes with recommendations for how to reach a creative breakthrough, including wise words about the necessity of rest and waiting after periods of struggle and distress. This chapter on creativity is helpful for readers from any field who wrestle with the illusive angel of creativity.

⁵ Williamson, *Kahn at Penn*, 24–26, 28.

⁶ Williamson, *Kahn at Penn*, 28.

⁷ Louis I. Kahn, *Silence and Light* (Zurich: Park Books, 2013), 49.

⁸ Williamson, *Kahn at Penn*, 34.

⁹ Williamson, *Kahn at Penn*, 89.

¹⁰ Williamson, *Kahn at Penn*, 92.

¹¹ Williamson, *Kahn at Penn*, 93.

The only weakness of the book is that it could have benefited from closer editing. There are a few redundant summaries of Kahn's approach, such as the duplication of one entire sentence on page 173 from page 99. Nevertheless, Williamson's prose is similar to good architecture: intriguing and evocative, not simplistic or claustrophobic. For one final example, Williamson's short description of Kahn's relationship with modernity is a gem: "Without abandoning Modernism, Kahn found a way to inject a human touch, which he instilled in his students."¹²

If Kahn's focus was the *what* of architecture, Jay M. Price's focus is the *how*. *Temples for a Modern God: Religious Architecture in Postwar America* includes one reference to Kahn, noting that Kahn's lecture at the annual National Conferences on Church Architecture was part of a shift "from the pragmatic to the theoretical."¹³

It is the pragmatic, however, that fascinates Price. He describes how the story of postwar American religious architecture is really a story about suburbia: "For a people on the move, there is great assurance in having a territory or a plot of land that is safe, stable, and comfortable. That tradition went back to the Puritans, but it became particularly evident in the years after World War II, in a time when everything from modern industry to atomic war to communism seemed to threaten the tranquil prosperity of the average American."¹⁴ Price's image for religious expansion within suburbia is "a negotiated conversation."¹⁵ Architects talk with builders, of course, but other major players in this conversation included building committees, consultants, and denominational architectural offices. Money and race played a huge role, too.¹⁶

One strength of Price's book is that his description of the pragmatic side of architecture does not completely obscure his view of architecture itself. For example, Price thoughtfully summarizes modernism's philosophical rejection of the gothic and colonial revivals: "Modernism's rejection of imitation also helped create a religious

¹² Williamson, *Kahn at Penn*, 183.

¹³ Price, *Temples for a Modern God*, 161.

¹⁴ Price, *Temples for a Modern God*, 52.

¹⁵ Price, *Temples for a Modern God*, 79.

¹⁶ Price, *Temples for a Modern God*, 50–51; 62–64.

architecture that was less tied to a specific tradition than to general concepts of ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion.’”¹⁷

Price’s book includes several grainy but useful black-and-white photographs of modern religious buildings. He includes a photograph of one Episcopal building, the chapel of the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, noting that it “reflects a movement in the 1960s and 1970s away from triumphal, impressive architecture. In a time when ‘mission’ shifted to encompass social issues instead of planting suburban congregations, designers, architects, and consultants advocated modest spaces with seating and other features that could be moved to accommodate various worship settings.”¹⁸ Price’s description of this Episcopal chapel foreshadows his conclusion in the final chapter, where he makes a bold prediction. After surveying all types and sizes of twentieth-century religious buildings, Price predicts that “lowbrow vernacular” buildings will be the most useful in the future because they are more adaptable “to the ever-changing nature of demographics, liturgy, theology, worship, art, and architecture.”¹⁹

Price’s prediction is debatable, of course. Adaptability is an important quality, but adaptability alone should not determine the form of sacred space. Flexible spaces that are not inspiring or mysterious are mere containers for liturgy and for other activities. People who view sacred architecture as something more than utilitarian are rightly disappointed by such spaces.

The Episcopal Church’s newest seminary chapel is not defined by pragmatism alone. Designed by Robert A. M. Stern, the dean of Yale’s School of Architecture and the head of Robert A. M. Stern Architects, Virginia Theological Seminary’s Immanuel Chapel (completed in 2015) is consistent with the colonial architecture of the campus, but this chapel is not an imitation or revival of a form from the past. Within the space, the eye must look up (the natural light and the gigantic iron chandelier are mesmerizing), while down below there is a feeling of warmth and hospitality. Thus, the chapel makes room for the interplay of transcendence and immanence. The chapel is clearly designed for the centrality of the Holy Eucharist, yet the flexibility of the interior is balanced by form, beauty, and permanence. The space is so flexible that it can accommodate a small group reading the daily

¹⁷ Price, *Temples for a Modern God*, 142.

¹⁸ Price, *Temples for a Modern God*, 137.

¹⁹ Price, *Temples for a Modern God*, 182.

office or hundreds of people receiving communion. There are also intriguing ambulatory spaces within the chapel plus an oratory for private prayers and reflection. This chapel has been certified by the U.S. Green Building Council as a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Gold building because it uses less water and energy and thus helps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. As for the future of religious architecture, Immanuel Chapel points in a very different direction from “lowbrow vernacular.”

Nevertheless, Price’s book rightly raises the subjects of flexibility and affordability in architecture, subjects that—in addition to environmental sustainability—architects like Kahn should consider, too. Williamson’s and Price’s books thus complement one another. The mystical and the pragmatic belong together, and one without the other is missing something vital.