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Churches in a Secular Skyline: Fields of Force and Urban Change

a response by Ben Jameson-Ellsmore

The editors of the zine-style volume *FORCE/FIELDS* that inspired the theme of this current issue define a force field as “a barrier that protects someone or something from attacks and intrusions.” They ask “[w]hat are the force fields we hold up? What are the force fields we fight against?”¹ Alexander Luckmann’s “Skyscraper Churches and Material Disestablishment at the Fifth Churches of Christ Scientist” demonstrates that certain New York and San Francisco churches do not fight against, but rather participate in dominant fields of force. They do so through “material disestablishment,” the handing off of real-estate dealings to developers and accepting visual integration into the secular skyline. Far from oxymorons, pitting the incentives of private capital against religious missions, skyscraper churches indicate an alliance. I argue that through this alliance, skyscraper churches uphold fields of force that exacerbate socioeconomic disparity in U.S. cities.

Luckmann begins with W. L. George’s 1921 remarks that tall office buildings in the U.S. had claimed the monumental primacy previously reserved for religious buildings. George followed a century of previous skyline lamenters. In 1831, Victor Hugo proclaimed that print culture had usurped the cathedral as the locus of power, the “life sap” of society flowing elsewhere and leaving Notre Dame cathedral but a vestige. In 1836, Augustus Pugin longed for the purity of the spire-pierced gothic skyline

¹ *FORCE/FIELDS*, ed. Isalina Chow, Madi Giovina, and Tiffany Niles (San Francisco: Perennial Press, 2021).

before it became tainted by unsightly smokestacks, workhouses, and tenements. And in 1904, William James lamented the unseating of the previously uncontested spire of New York's Trinity Church: "so cruelly overtopped and so barely distinguishable" amid the new skyscraper forest.² Each writer understood that a shifting skyline meant shifting centers of power. They witnessed the "sublimation," as Luckmann puts it, of the ecclesiastic skyline into the modern, secular real estate landscape.³ What other urban changes took place between 1921 and now?

While early twentieth century skyscraper churches participated in the for profit real-estate landscape, they also attempted to distinguish themselves through proselytization, charity, and humanitarian aid meant to address mass poverty in industrial cities.⁴ U.S. cities like New York and San Francisco were powerful "vortexes" absorbing flows of information, people, and resources from an expanding hinterland.⁵ These so called "primate cities" were "supereminent" forces, far larger in population size and economic influence than any nearby city.⁶ Populated by skyscrapers and ringed by industrial facilities, their urban cores were machines for capital production. While residential enclaves of wealth emerged in city centers, they were carefully insulated from the lower- and working class residents living in hazardous proximity to their industrial workplaces.⁷ Alongside organizations like the Salvation Army and YMCA, Christian Science offered services to the working class in New York and San Francisco.⁸ They also shared the reformist goals and neoclassical aesthetic of the City Beautiful movement, which envisioned an organized and racially homogeneous landscape of public

² Victor Hugo, *Notre Dame de Paris* (Paris: Gosselin, 1831); Augustus Pugin, *Contrasts: Or a Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages, and Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day; Showing the Present Decay of Taste* (London: Charles Dolman, 1836); William James quoted in Spiro Kostof, *The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meanings Through History* (Belfast: Bulfinch, 1993), 282.

³ William Swatos and Kevin Christiano, "Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 209-228, 225.

⁴ Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

⁵ Gray Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2006); William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991); John Walker Harrington, "Skyscraper Churches, Religion's New Anchorage in City's Vortex," *The Sun* (New York City), August 10, 1919.

⁶ Mark Jefferson, "The Law of the Primate City," *Geographical Review* 29, no. 2 (1939): 226-232.

⁷ Frederik Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1892); James Donald, *Imagining the Modern City* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

⁸ Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 102; Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America*.

infrastructure to counteract the immiseration of the industrial city.⁹ Far from producing an idealized citizenry through urban planning, the movement's parks and boulevards displaced the urban poor within U.S. cities. Meanwhile, the wealthy continued their flight into the suburbs to escape the effects of industrial capitalism.¹⁰

It was postwar deindustrialization, not City Beautiful planning, that ultimately attracted suburbanites back into city centers. Suburban "white flight" was originally enabled by state-supported wealth accumulation and access to automotive transportation. Before being formally outlawed in 1968, the discriminatory practice of redlining classified racially heterogeneous neighborhoods as high risk or hazardous for home loan lending institutions, effectively denying services to ethnic urban communities and sabotaging their mobility and accumulation of generational wealth.¹¹ Restrictive covenants, or neighborhood contracts preventing homeowners from selling to people of color, created impermeable enclaves of white wealth, whose occupants could liquidate property and relocate.¹² These policies immobilized Black and immigrant communities by devaluing their property and thus contributed to the racialized concept of the "inner city."¹³ This pattern inverted in the late-twentieth century, as U.S. companies outsourced industrial production and its health hazards to the Global South.¹⁴ Aggressive gentrification ensued, with white collar suburbanites settling cheap inner-city tenements and industrial lofts, pricing out industrial-era residents.¹⁵

Luckmann's churches thus witnessed a second major urban shift following the initial rise of the skyscraper in the industrial city. Today, New York and San Francisco are "global cities," or late twentieth century postindustrial control nodes for multinational

⁹ Paul Eli Ivey, *Prayers in Stone: Christian Science and Architecture in the United States, 1894–1930* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Jon Peterson. *The Birth of City Planning in the United States, 1840-1917. Creating the North American Landscape* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 25, 374.

¹¹ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

¹² Eric Avila and Thaïsa Way, eds., *Segregation and Resistance in the Landscapes of the Americas* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2023).

¹³ Rebecca Kinney, *Beautiful Wasteland: The Rise of Detroit as America's Postindustrial Frontier* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Richard Williams, *Why Cities Look the Way they Do* (New York: Polity Press, 2019), 8; Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Great Inversion and the Future of the American City* (New York: Knopf, 2012).

¹⁵ Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy* (London: Sage, 2019), 245; Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996); Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1982).

finance, insurance, real estate, and technology industries.¹⁶ In the global city, global and local speculative interests compete, inflating land value in the urban center beyond all previous levels and exacerbating gentrification in the process.¹⁷ The local working class was increasingly priced out, forming a new lower class suburban commuter workforce.¹⁸

The skyscraper church responds to these trends. From the 2010s to 2022, San Francisco had the most expensive housing market in the world, temporarily surpassing New York.¹⁹ The drama surrounding the projected Fifth Church of Christ, Scientist building in San Francisco's Tenderloin district relates to the increasingly stark demographics of U.S. urban centers. While local activists slow the area's wholesale gentrification, the Tenderloin is also in need of newer and safer affordable housing options to replace its aging single room occupancy hotels (SROs).²⁰ The church's chosen developer planned to demolish their aging neoclassical building and reconstruct it for its now smaller congregation, while also creating a residential development to generate revenue and provide for their lower-income neighborhood. Harkening to the church's original humanitarian mission to heal urban ills, the upper floors were originally planned as affordable housing for San Francisco's "missing middle" or priced-out working- and middle-class families.²¹ However, after passing major milestones in the approval

¹⁶ Sharon Zukin, *The Innovation Complex: Cities, Tech, and the New Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy*; Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹⁷ Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Kostof, *The City Shaped*, 279; P. Moscovitz, *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2017); Roger Keil, *Suburban Planet: Making the World Urban from the Outside In* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016); Sassen, *The Global City*.

¹⁹ Roland Li and Nami Sumida. "S.F. metro area retains no. 1 spot as most expensive place to live in the U.S. Here's how costs compare to the rest of the nation," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 14, 2021, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/San-Francisco-metro-area-retains-No-1-spot-as-16701789.php>; Alex Schultz, "San Francisco Ranks Among the 10 Most Expensive Cities in the World," *SF Gate*, December 2, 2022, <https://www.sfgate.com/local/article/san-francisco-most-expensive-cities-17625251.php>.

²⁰ SROs or single room occupancy hotels are an important mode of affordable housing for lower income adults in dense and expensive U.S. cities. For a history of SROs in San Francisco and its Tenderloin district see Paul Groth's *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

²¹ "San Francisco Approves 316-Unit Fifth Church of Christ, Scientist New Church and Essential Housing Project," *The Registry*, June 29, 2021, accessed February 10, 2023, <https://news.theregistrysf.com/san-francisco-approves-316-unit-fifth-church-of-christ-scientist-new-church-and-essential-housing-project/>.

process, the church-allied developer pivoted to lucrative but less affordable tech worker dorms.²²

Relinquishing asset management to developers holds the church's real-estate dealings at arm's length, supposedly leaving their not-for-profit mission untarnished. But while offering spaces to "heal through prayer," the Church also allies with developers who exacerbate surrounding socioeconomic disparities that make such healing necessary. Despite their project now being stalled, the Church's strategy of material disestablishment succeeded. News articles on the subject hardly mention the church, focusing instead on the conflicts between the developers, City Hall, and the anti-gentrification Tenderloin Housing Clinic.²³ Material disestablishment obscures the reality that some religious organizations are at the center of contemporary fights over who can live in the city, upholding the force fields of real estate that price out the middle and working classes.

²² Tim Redmond. "A tech-worker dorm in the Tenderloin? Or the end of the Yimby narrative?," *48hills*, September 6, 2021, <https://48hills.org/2021/09/a-tech-worker-dorm-in-the-tenderloin-or-the-end-of-the-yimby-narrative/>

²³ Aneela Mirchandani, "Amid San Francisco's Housing Crisis, a Church's Plan to Build is Shot Down," *The Click*, December 8, 2022, <https://theclick.news/tenderloin-church-rebuild/>; Randy Shaw, "Tenderloin Groups Mobilize to Save Family Housing," *Beyond Chron*, January 19, 2021, <https://beyondchron.org/tenderloin-groups-mobilize-to-save-family-housing/>.

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