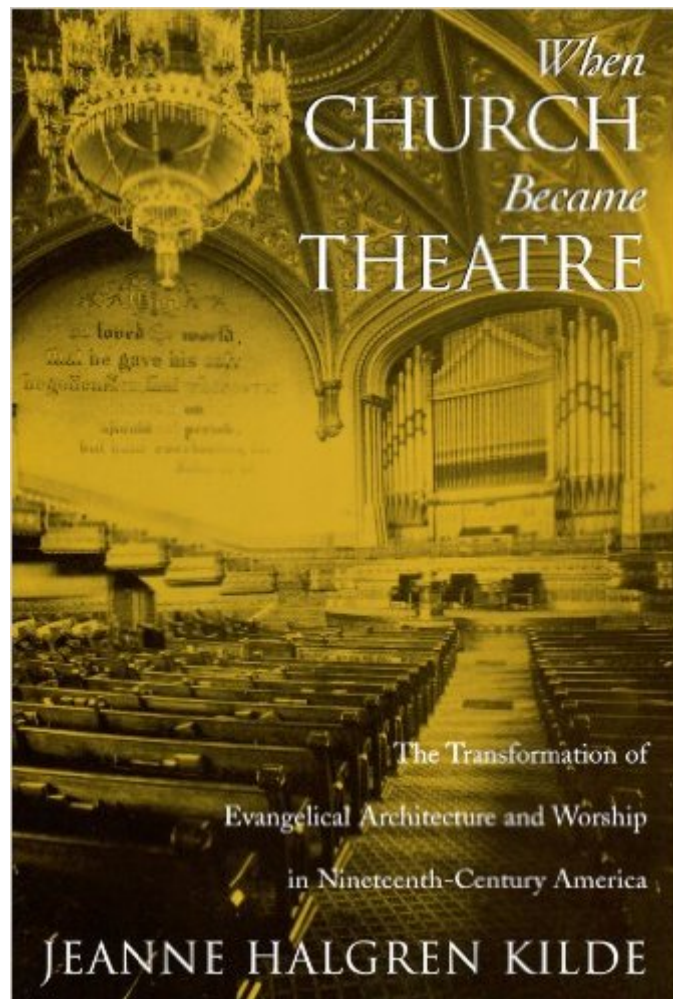


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When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation Of Evangelical Architecture And Worship In Nineteenth-Century America



Synopsis

For nearly eighteen centuries, two fundamental spatial plans dominated Christian architecture: the basilica and the central plan. In the 1880s, however, profound socio-economic and technological changes in the United States contributed to the rejection of these traditions and the development of a radically new worship building, the auditorium church. *When Church Became Theatre* focuses on this radical shift in evangelical Protestant architecture and links it to changes in worship style and religious mission. The auditorium style, featuring a prominent stage from which rows of pews radiated up a sloping floor, was derived directly from the theatre, an unusual source for religious architecture but one with a similar goal-to gather large groups within range of a speaker's voice. Theatrical elements were prominent; many featured proscenium arches, marquee lighting, theatre seats, and even opera boxes. Examining these churches and the discussions surrounding their development, Jeanne Halgren Kilde focuses on how these buildings helped congregations negotiate supernatural, social, and personal power. These worship spaces underscored performative and entertainment aspects of the service and in so doing transformed relationships between clergy and audiences. In auditorium churches, the congregants' personal and social power derived as much from consumerism as from piety, and clerical power lay in dramatic expertise rather than connections to social institutions. By erecting these buildings, argues Kilde, middle class religious audiences demonstrated the move toward a consumer-oriented model of religious participation that gave them unprecedented influence over the worship experience and church mission.

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Customer Reviews

The exterior and interior designs of church structures testify not only to economic standing and technological advances; they also witness to broader cultural changes and to the religious and social motivations of the builders. The disclosure of these motivations-and the meanings and values associated with the buildings themselves-is the subject of Kilde's study of nineteenth-century evangelical architecture. Of particular interest to her are the changing politics of space: statements of power, authority, and relationship (between God, clergy, and laity-and with "the world") made in stone, wood, and glass; the correlation of "sacred" and "secular" designs; and the reciprocal influences between the style or function of worship and the disposition of the space. Although Kilde's study progresses from the Federalist style at the beginning of the nineteenth century, to the Gothic revival at roughly mid century, and to the neomedieval auditorium at century's end, throughout she keeps an eye on the theater-style church and the (internal and external) dynamics that brought its increasing popularity. Particularly interesting was her treatment of buildings associated with revivalist Charles Grandison Finney as a case study on the emergence of the theater design from experiments in the early decades of the century. Helpful as well was her discussion of the ongoing evolution of the theater style as it adjusted to meet the needs of revivalism and of the family-oriented congregation. Because of her multidisciplinary approach, Kilde's well-researched contribution will be valuable to scholars of architectural history, cultural studies, church history, and liturgical studies.

A thoughtful, well written, and very informative examination of the development of the "auditorium church" in the late nineteenth century, along with some discussion of its decline and eventual resurgence in popularity in the twentieth century. Although the book is an excellent treatment of the subject, it does have, in my estimation, several weaknesses:(1.) For a book that addresses an architectural subject, it doesn't have nearly enough illustrations - although because the author is a social and religious historian, instead of an architectural historian, this is understandable.(2.) Because the book is concerned more with the origins of the auditorium church than with its spread, it focuses mostly on major churches in large Northern and Midwestern cities, and doesn't pay much attention to the spread of the auditorium church plan to smaller communities and the construction of auditorium churches in brick or wood instead of stone. The widespread adoption of the auditorium church in the South is scarcely alluded to at all.(3.) In part because of that focus on Northern cities, the last chapter, addressing the decline of the popularity of the auditorium church, completely misses the entire phenomenon of the use of the auditorium plan in countless Neoclassical-style

churches in the 1910s and 20s. The book asserts that the "neomedieval" auditorium churches were directly supplanted in popularity by churches exhibiting a more formal and liturgically-directed Neo-Gothic style as early as the 1910s. In the South, however, the adoption of Neo-Gothic architecture for evangelical churches did not become widespread until the late 1920s and early 1930s, after the Neoclassical style had been popular for two decades.(4.

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