

End Times and Architectural Style on the Christian Campus

Rachel Julia Engler

And the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up.

Revelation 8:7

In a 1984 Yankelovich poll, '39 percent of a sample population agreed with the statement "When the Bible predicts that the earth will be destroyed by fire, it's telling us that a nuclear war is inevitable".¹ Indeed, for many in the twentieth-century United States, apocalyptic thinking of this kind – which marries biblical prophecy with contemporary geopolitical circumstances – was pervasive as a method for framing the world-historical events that occurred in their lifetimes.² As William Martin described in a 1982 cover story for the *Atlantic*, 'a sizable subculture exists in this country, for whom the past, present, and future are interpreted in a manner radically different from the way they are presented to us in secular media and institutions.'³ And while it was then, in that historical context, the atomic bomb that promised the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and allowed for a political and cultural alliance between secular and religious visions of the end of human history, similar conclusions continue to be drawn to meet today's novel horrors.

It is in relation to such a politically inflected anticipation of Christ's Second Coming that this essay considers the contrasting choices of futuristic and neo-vernacular colonial revival idioms – indeed the question of what might be called architectural style – in the building projects of the popular television evangelists Oral Roberts and Pat Robertson. What did stylistic choices implicitly coded by references

to history mean for Cold War evangelical institutions? In a period when such religious cosmologies, specifically those informed by dispensationalist traditions, came into contact with the prospect of imminent nuclear disaster, what was it to build in a revival style, for example to return to a colonial idiom? Did such a vernacular suggest a different horizon of expectation than so-called futuristic or modernistic modes in ecclesiastical construction? More generally, can a style's relation to historical precedent reveal beliefs about the future? A belief in 'No Future'? For, as the Lutheran scholar of religion Martin E. Marty writes, 'whatever else the talk about apocalyptic ends in all its forms assumes, this stands out: the world as we know it and time as we experience and reckon with it ultimately have no future.'⁴

'Ephemera, ephemera, all is ephemera'

The future was in the air at Oral Roberts University – from the central spire of its Prayer Tower, which evokes the Space Needle of the 1962 World's Fair, to the cutting-edge communications technologies to be available to its Christian students.⁵ [Fig. 1] The Oklahoma campus was notable for this gilded expression of modernity: a 1973 article in the *New York Times Magazine* remarked that the school's buildings were 'right out of '2001', and Robert Moses, the New York public official and planner, commented upon his visit to Tulsa, 'the new Oral Roberts University, set on a hill ... is architecturally startling to Ivy League, Gothic, Georgian ancients.'⁶ And there it was in plans and renderings: an

impressive campus laid out along diagonal sight-lines; classrooms and administrative buildings with thin, exaggerated supports tracing their geometric perimeters; and three y-shaped dormitory blocks that evoke, among other things, the dogmatic city plans of highest modernism.

But a kind of ambivalence lay beneath the university's leaders ambitions for the new institution. An article in the July 1964 issue of the campus publication the *ORU Witness*, describing the new university's undertakings, concluded with this subtle but revealing promise:

we intend to keep building until all who are "supposed to meet us" will find room on the campus ... where we hope to see a new man brought forth to meet the challenge of this age and every age until Christ Returns. We are building the University to stand until the return of Christ.⁷

We are building the University to stand until the return of Christ: this is a pronouncement of intent that simultaneously bespeaks endurance and transience. And, when applied specifically to architectural efforts, it suggests a nearly equivocal relation to traditional architectural-historical notions of stability, durability, and permanence.

The promise made at ORU, of the university standing until Christ's return, also demonstrates a prophetic theme and orientation important to its eponymous founder. In 1963, as construction was underway on the tremendous project that would be his university, Oral Roberts (1918–2009) published a slim volume, *The Drama of the End-Time*, in which he asks his reader: 'What lies just ahead? ... Nations are perplexed; great leaders are baffled. ... Marked uncertainty is everywhere. Mistrust hampers any real progress at the disarmament negotiations. Can anyone doubt that we are living in the last days?'⁸ [Fig. 2]

The passage, which puts 'disarmament negotiations' and 'the last days' into immediate dialogue, points to a set of beliefs common to the world of

television evangelism; not only Oral Roberts but also Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Jimmy Swaggart, among others, were adherents of a premillennial dispensationalism that ably internalised nuclear war, among other varieties of political and environmental disaster, as the realisation of biblical prophecy.⁹ Paul Boyer, who has written extensively about this alliance, describes what he terms the 'fundamentalist apocalyptic': a 'literalistic interpretive hermeneutic in which the key texts are viewed not as allegorical representations of spiritual realities ... but as a guide for God's plan for human history, verbally dictated and inerrant in every detail.'¹⁰ For example, nuclear weapons might be understood to have been foretold in scripture, particularly in the Book of Revelation, but also elsewhere; one common citation, mustered in support of the connection, is from 2 Peter: 'The heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat; the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up' (3:10).

Roberts's forward-looking undertakings in Tulsa – defined as they were not only by a streamlined space-age mode but also by concrete technological sophistication – may seem to be at fundamental odds with his end-times thinking. But such contradiction might also suggest a broader phenomenon, an expansion of the possible spatial effects of the geopolitical moment. If, in some secular cases, the architectural reverberations of Cold War thinking manifested themselves as an orientation toward survival – think of the bunker or the dispersed centre – there was, equally, a contemporary mood by which the insubstantial and fleeting became a vital and counterintuitive response to the prospect of apocalypse. In 1954, John Ely Burchard, then a dean at MIT, suggested in *Architectural Record* that 'historians trying to generalise from our buildings may develop elaborate hypotheses to explain the metal and glass cages as an expression of the feeling of a society with a sense of death, "ephemera, ephemera, all is ephemera", in which



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Fig. 1: Prayer Tower, Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, Oklahoma. Photo: Daniel Thomas.

Fig. 2: Oral Roberts, *The Drama of the End-Time* (Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1963). Photo of author's own copy.

building for permanence was obviously futile and for which there was something symbolic in using fragile and transitory materials.¹¹ Imagine here the shimmering fragility of the curtain walls that in the postwar era descended upon midtown Manhattan – so many noses thumbed at doom.¹²

Burchard's wording is a play on Ecclesiastes, 'Vanity of vanities; all is vanity' (1:2). The reference provides a re-entry into a Christian worldview defined by a sense of the impermanence of earthly concern. And indeed, rather than testifying to ephemerality of a fatalistic or ironic kind – of an empire engaged in a confident dance with its own destruction – Oral Roberts's architecture of glass seems a sign of allegiance to another timestream, suggestive of a logic by which it is not earthly survival, per se, that is germane, and by which the 'end' is not an absolute.

History ought to go someplace

One of Roberts's most immediate peers, in terms of national profile and a parallel involvement in education and broadcasting, is Pat Robertson (1930–), the minister, one-time candidate for president, and founder of both the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) and its partner in Virginia Beach, the Christian Broadcasting Network University (since 1990 known as Regent University). CBN's studio headquarters sit at the head of a symmetrically composed drive, the entrance inscribed in a sloping hand with Matthew 24:14: 'The Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations.' This task of evangelism was, from the network's founding, to be undertaken with the aid of production facilities and broadcast technologies rivaling those of major networks. And yet, the headquarters' exterior – which founder Pat Robertson himself described as 'lovely Colonial architecture' – is incommunicative of these means, staunchly mute about the sophisticated equipment that it houses.¹³

Instead, Robertson's red brick and white columns evoke prominent secular institutions like the University of Virginia and the values – of

gentility, of tradition – associated with such places. The contemporary reiteration of historical styles at the evangelical school might appear, from a certain critical perspective, as a kind of kitsch historicism, the replication of Thomas Jefferson's forms amid the blossoms of interstate off-ramps incongruous at best. But what if the campus at CBN was taken at face value, as an architectural effort to be read against the expressed beliefs of its founder, beliefs to do with the end of history, time, the world? In terms of style, and of style's relation to Cold War-era eschatology, Robertson's institutions serve as a compelling foil to Oral Roberts University.

Robertson has, in the years since CBN's founding, varied in his commitment to a particular prophetic timeline, but at some point he predicted the end of the world by 1982.¹⁴ In February of that year: 'the onrush of events toward the end of the year may see the world in flames.' And then in May: 'I guarantee you by the fall of 1982 there is going to be a judgment on the world.'¹⁵ The world in flames, including, presumably, the new red brick campus of CBN, planned from 1976 and constructed from 1979, based in part on designs by the Durham, North Carolina-based architect, Archie Royal Davis. Why build in a mode evocative of an American past when ultimate destruction – no future – is nigh?

At CBN, 'buildings were... fashioned out of half a million handmade bricks laid in Flemish Bond.'¹⁶ The headquarters building was allegedly inspired, in part, by Monticello, and the architect Davis was described as 'one of the leading authorities in America on colonial architecture.'¹⁷ A feature in *Harper's* magazine claimed that the campus 'got you to thinking not so much about Jesus but about Patrick Henry or Thomas Jefferson.'¹⁸ Furthermore, Pat Robertson's personal office was decorated with eighteenth-century furniture that recalled his own Virginia roots and patrician background.¹⁹

The campus was placed at the intersection of Indian River Road and Interstate 64. An early proposal specified that the 142-acre (roughly 57 hectares) site would include 'International

Headquarters' with 'studios, offices, a 24-hour prayer center, and language translation facilities', 'satellite earth station for sending and receiving television signals for the United States and overseas', the 'CBN Institute, where students ... will be trained in all aspects of radio and television broadcasting to prepare them to communicate the Gospel', as well as a conference center and an 'international, evangelical seminary'.²⁰ The cover of CBN magazine *The Flame* in which these plans for the campus were announced depicts 'a majestic sunrise' at the landing place of Cape Henry, Virginia, of America's first permanent English settlers, 13 years before the Pilgrims.²¹ A description within the issue makes explicit the intended connection between those settlers and the mission of CBN:

as their first official act in the New World, the colonists knelt in prayer around a cross on this beach ... and in a service of prayer and thanksgiving dedicated the new land to Almighty God. ... The light of the Gospel that they brought with them ... from the Old World – is now being broadcast by The Christian Broadcasting Network throughout America. Now God has led CBN to build an International Communications Center in Virginia Beach to claim, from this place of spiritual beginnings, our nation and our world for the glory of Jesus Christ.²²

In other words, Robertson understood his work in Virginia Beach and at CBN to perpetuate that of the colonial forefathers and, moreover, interpreted that continuity as proof of providential will.

On another page in the issue, a painting and a photograph are paired to a similar end. On the left, Englishmen are painted in prayer around a cross: 'the first colonists' first formal worship service on April 29, 1607.' On the right is the painting's pendant, a photograph of the dedication ceremony for the CBN site. Captions underline further similarities: one says: 'both [gatherings] were attended by about 100 persons ... both dedicated the land to the glory of God.'²³ 'The God-fearing colonists

little realized that balmy day that God, in His infinite goodness, would someday establish an international Christian ministry 12 miles away where prayer would be offered 24 hours a day for the needs of people everywhere.'²⁴ The connection between the settling of the New World and the world-converting aims of the television ministry is made explicit again and again. In *The Flame*, for example, in spring 1976:

This unique ministry of preaching the Gospel literally around the world is a fulfillment of the dream of evangelization that God gave the Christian men who envisioned and supported the first permanent English settlement in the New World, Jamestown, located, like CBN, in the Tidewater Region of Virginia.²⁵

The exact timing of this work was meaningful: that the ground for the headquarters building was to be broken in 1976 was seen as 'a fitting gift from North American Christians to God in honor of the Bicentennial.'²⁶ Robertson and his supporters not only connected CBN to the Jamestown settlers but also tied the Bicentennial celebration itself to a project of evangelism.

Robertson's time-jumping – from the 'settling' of Virginia to the television-heavy 1970s – has as its background a specific relation to a providentially inspired telling of history. As Alva J. McClain, then president of Grace College and seminary, wrote in 1956, history 'should have some proper goal. It ought to go someplace ... There ought to be in history some worthy consummation of its long and arduous course.'²⁷ Secular history, without a transcendent eschatological destination, appears, by contrast, aimless, without pointed meaning.²⁸ Further, though, there is a branch of Christian historiography, specifically postmillennial, that is attached to a vision of America's distinct role in history. In this sense, the references to Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson are apt.

In the secular realm, just up the road from the Christian Broadcasting Network, lies so-called

Colonial Williamsburg, an open-air museum of eighteenth-century Virginia life, a project that calls upon history, and historical style, in parallel pursuit of a Cold War diplomatic vision.²⁹ As John D. Rockefeller III said of his family's philanthropic support of the project, the hope was to use Colonial Williamsburg to 'indoctrinate visitors in the importance of American ideals.'³⁰ This is a critical comparison: the deployment of the colonial revival style at CBN connects both to a specific vision of the network's relation to history and place and to a patriotic anticommunism that was both of its time and fundamentally underwritten by a perception of the particular role of the United States in world history.³¹ This vision of the United States dates back to writings by eighteenth-century theologian Jonathan Edwards, who figured the New World as the founding site of Christ's kingdom, and persisted into the twentieth century, when even those who otherwise held premillennialist beliefs at times 'adopted a type of postmillennialism which teaches that the United States has a divine mission as the last best hope of humanity.'³² It is useful to acknowledge the doctrinal mismatch of these positions, and yet, its holders were thereby able to square prophetic claims about world history with a sometimes politically inflected orientation toward patriotic exceptionalism.³³

Style at the End

In both cases, that of gold glass Oral Roberts University and that of red brick CBN, there is an apparent contradiction between what is said and what is done, between belief and action in the world – the end is coming; one builds as if it weren't. Timothy Weber observes in *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming* that at the Moody Bible Institute, for example, 'while the students were being taught that Christ might return at any moment, the Institute's administrators were building for the future in case he did not.'³⁴ It is a mode that is so common as to be defining. As Martin E. Marty observes, 'however much consistency concerning views of the end critics or cynics might demand, it is evident that many of

the leaders and followers in apocalyptic movements and traditions are able to live with more than one apparently contradictory set of expectations and investments.'³⁵

From the perspective of architectural history, it is surely worth considering how the imbuing of history with apocalypse-laced meaning intersects with the characteristically giddy meaninglessness of postmodernism. But what's more: design undertaken within the framework of an apocalyptic narrative troubles notions of permanence and durability historically vital to architectural discourse. And of course the question of how to build in a context of global precarity is not unique to a specific theological position; climate scientists warn that 'nearly 500 US churches built in low-lying coastal areas are in danger of flooding at least once a year by 2050, should seas continue rising amid unchecked climate change.'³⁶ Cold War-era, Revelation-inflected construction could reveal something about the style and nature of everyday building that continues in the face of such profound environmental disaster.

According to Oral Roberts's timeline, and to the general position of pretribulationists, the church will be raptured – in other words, the Rapture will occur – before the hardships of the Tribulation. Which is to say, the horrors accompanying the end of today's world will come, inevitably, but the saved will be exempted from them, spared the suffering to befall the unredeemed. This kind of doubled certainty resonates with our own moment of environmental devastation – those whose capital will directly or indirectly usher in its grotesque climax are sure, not by theology but by the very fact of their age and the irony of generational timing, that they will not be here when the inevitable comes to pass. It is a state of mystical exemption with an inconceivable toll.

Notes

1. Daniel Wojcik, *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 1. As Charles Strozier puts it, 'the apocalypse is more than the subtext. It is the ground of fundamentalist being.' Charles Strozier, *Apocalypse: On the Psychology of Fundamentalism in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 11.
2. Wojcik, *The End of the World*, 3.
3. William Martin, 'Waiting for the End: The Growing Interest in Apocalyptic Prophecy', *The Atlantic*, June 1982, 31–37.
4. Martin E. Marty, 'The Future of No Future: Frameworks of Interpretation', in *Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age*, vol. 3 of *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (New York: Continuum, 1998), 461.
5. I am grateful to the staff at the Holy Spirit Research Center, Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, Oklahoma, who in autumn 2019 pointed me to the possibility of a connection with the Space Needle and World's Fair architectures.
6. Edward B. Fiske, 'The Oral Roberts Empire', *New York Times Magazine*, 22 April 1973, 18; Robert Moses, 'Notes and Comments on a Brief Visit to Tulsa', *Newsday*, 16 March 1968, 14.
7. 'Eight Major Goals', *ORU Witness*, July 1964, 5.
8. Oral Roberts, *The Drama of the End-Time* (Tulsa: Oral Roberts, 1963), 5.
9. Wojcik, *The End of the World*, 7.
10. Paul Boyer, 'The Growth of Fundamentalist Apocalyptic in the United States', in *Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age*, vol. 3 of *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (New York: Continuum, 1998), 140.
11. John Ely Burchard, 'Architecture in the Atomic Age', *Architectural Record* 116, no. 6 (December 1954): 120.
12. See, for example, Peter Blake, 'Slaughter on 6th Avenue', *Architectural Forum* 122 (June 1965): 13–19.
13. 'A Personal Message from Pat Robertson', *The Flame*, n.d., special edition, 7. All issues of *The Flame* were consulted at the Special Collections Research Center at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina, where they are held as part of architect Archie Royal Davis's papers.
14. Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 138.
15. Ibid.
16. Dick Dabney, 'God's Own Network: The TV Kingdom of Pat Robertson', *Harper's*, 1 August 1980, 34.
17. 'CBN International Headquarters, a Bicentennial Gift to God, Fulfills First Colonists' Dream of World Evangelization', *The Flame*, February–March 1976, 4–5.
18. Dabney, 'God's Own Network', 34.
19. Ibid. The architect's papers include specifications for the project that indicate the use of prefinished architectural woodwork, specifically the use of exposed American walnut in the president's office and conference rooms on the third floor. See CBN Specifications, 241.51.1, Archie Royal Davis Papers, MC #241, Special Collections Research Center, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC.
20. 'God's Word to CBN for 1976: Communicate the Gospel', *The Flame*, n.d., special edition, 3.
21. Ibid., and also see the cover of this issue.
22. 'God's Plan to CBN for 1976', *The Flame*, n.d., special edition, 4–5.
23. 'God Reasserts His Claim on America', *The Flame*, n.d., special edition, 6.
24. 'America's First Prayer Meeting Held in Virginia Beach', *The Flame*, n.d., special edition, 6.
25. 'CBN International Headquarters, a Bicentennial Gift to God, Fulfills First Colonists' Dream of World Evangelization', *The Flame*, February–March 1976, 4–5.
26. 'America's First Prayer Meeting Held in Virginia Beach.' *The Flame*, n.d., special edition, 6.
27. Alva J. McClain, 'Premillennialism as a Philosophy of History', in *Understanding the Times: Prophetic Messages Delivered at the 2nd International Congress on Prophecy, New York City*, ed. William Culbertson and Herman B. Centz (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1956), 23–24.

28. 'Late-twentieth-century prophecy writers, like their predecessors, view history as predetermined. ... What are the implications of this conviction that history represents the unfolding of a divine plan? First, it reflects a profound dissatisfaction with "secular" versions of history. Without an eschatological goal, observed one writer, history is meaningless' and 'most historical scholarship seems pointless – a mere recital of facts, signifying nothing.' Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 312.
29. In 1983, for example, Ronald Reagan hosted Margaret Thatcher, Pierre Trudeau, and Helmut Kohl, among others, in Williamsburg, for an economic summit meeting of the Group of Seven. On the occasion, and in his dinner toast, Reagan noted, 'our countries were linked by a multitude of mutual interests and by a shared commitment to freedom and democracy. Williamsburg, as a site, was the site of the first representative assembly and the second university in the Colonies which then became the United States. It has been a particularly appropriate place in which to rededicate ourselves to these principles.' US, Department of State, *Bulletin* no. 2076 (July 1983): 20, <http://www.g8.utoronto.ca/summit/1983williamsburg/toast.html>.
30. Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002).
31. In 1988 Robertson ran as a candidate in the Republican presidential primary, a marked expression of patriotism and involvement in the worldly world for someone with a potent vision of the flames that lie beyond it.
32. Robert G. Clouse, 'The New Christian Right, America, and the Kingdom of God', in *Modern American Protestantism and Its World*, vol. 10 of *Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, ed. Martin E. Marty (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1993), 281, 285. While premillennialists believe in a literal eschatological chronology as laid out in the Book of Revelation, which specifies that the second coming of Christ will precede and begin the reign of peace known as the Millennium, postmillennialism puts forward the progressive, often reform-oriented, notion that Christians should themselves work toward a kingdom of peace on earth and that, after its achievement, Christ will return. For an overview of Christian apocalyptic narratives in the United States, see Matthew Avery Smith, *American Apocalypse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
33. 'There has always been inconsistency on the part of premillennial dispensationalists with regard to the interpretation of world events and their desire to be patriotic Americans. On the one hand they were forced to admit that America was just another secular power, but on the other hand they wanted to preserve their country as the unique expression of God's purpose in a sinful world.' Clouse, 'The New Christian Right', 288.
34. Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 45.
35. Marty, 'The Future of No Future,' 462–63.
36. Sebastian Malo, 'Nearly 500 U.S. Churches Face Climate-linked Flooding Threat, Scientists Say', *Reuters*, 2 May 2019. link: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-climatechange-churches-idUSKCN1S903J>.

Biography

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