

The Suburban Church: Modernism and Community in Postwar America

David R. Bains
Samford University

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2017 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Bains, David R. "The Suburban Church: Modernism and Community in Postwar America." *The Annals of Iowa* 76 (2017), 368-370.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12421>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

legacy. These passages will be of value primarily to readers who have not visited the Hoover Library.

Overall, this book will be of interest to cultural anthropologists and scholars of theater and performance, but it will have little appeal to presidential scholars or casual visitors to presidential libraries. There is no doubting the sincerity of Kanter's effort, but most citizens who use or visit these libraries will not comprehend her "lens of performance." As they have done since the first presidential library opened in 1941, the American people will come to these institutions to study and learn about the presidents and their administrations. They will not over-think the experience.

The Suburban Church: Modernism and Community in Postwar America, by Gretchen Buggeln. Architecture, Landscape, and American Culture Series. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. xxix, 345 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00 paperback.

Reviewer David R. Bains is professor of religion at Samford University. His research interests include American Protestant liturgical thought and church architecture.

Gretchen Buggeln's *The Suburban Church* is a masterful account of the most prolific era in American church building. Buggeln rigorously, but often lovingly, details the creation and use of suburban churches in the Midwest in the two decades following World War II, a period that witnessed a major transition from historic styles to modern forms. Buggeln describes how church members and architects sought to create spaces that would unite the "family of God" (167) and show that a faith in the transcendent was alive in the present.

In her first chapter, Buggeln traces the international development of a movement for modern church architecture through the 1960s, showing that the Midwest played a leading role. Several midwestern churches, including the innovative and economical Methodist church in Plainfield, Iowa (22–23), garnered national attention. Buggeln's book is based in part on onsite architectural and historical studies of this and 95 other churches. Only a handful are in Iowa, but much of what she says about churches in Minnesota, Illinois, and other states also applies to Iowa.

In chapter two, Buggeln introduces three architects who are the focus of her study. Edward Dart and Charles Stade were based in the Chicago area; Edward Sövik's office was near Minneapolis. Stade and Sövik were Lutherans, and churches were their main area of practice. Dart, an Episcopalian, was also known for his houses and Chicago's

Water Tower Place. Each was celebrated in his own time for his churches. Their different inclinations enable Buggeln to explore the diversity of modern churches. These architects designed churches for many denominations, but they received a substantial number of commissions through their own denominational connections. Accordingly, Lutherans figure prominently. Buggeln focuses her discussion primarily on Protestant buildings. That enables her to investigate various ways architects gave form to a common program. She also highlights denominational variations and significant transitions in design during the 1950s and '60s.

In chapter three, Buggeln examines the role of church members in the building process. Here and elsewhere she draws on more than 60 oral history interviews and careful study of congregational archives to uncover the role church building played in the lives of young suburbanites. Discussion of specific congregations and photos of children lined up with shovels for a groundbreaking make the building process come alive. Buggeln helps us see these spaces as their builders saw them: "fresh and new and clean" modern spaces for vibrant religious communities (36).

Buggeln identifies three major types of modern sanctuaries: tall rectangular buildings pioneered in America by Eliel Saarinen's Christ Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, the A-frame, and the more centrally planned spaces of the 1960s that often had fortress-like exteriors. The A-frame was the most iconic of the three. In chapter four, Buggeln provides a definitive account of this ubiquitous sanctuary form. She focuses on the three architects' midwestern churches, but she also discusses the A-frame's regional variation and global appeal. She argues that it was popular because its steep vertical lines made it "look like a church" yet in an economical and modern way.

In the next two chapters, Buggeln explores sanctuaries and spaces for education and fellowship. She shows how architects used simple, common materials and forms to bring beauty and functionality to their buildings and, as Sövik said, to display that the value of Christianity was "not that it is old but that it is alive" (136). She emphasizes the ways architects sought to realize their clients' desire for buildings that would facilitate a sense of "family at worship" by minimizing barriers between leaders and worshipers. Chapter seven focuses on Park Forest, Illinois, a famous planned community that William Whyte described in his widely read *Organization Man*. Buggeln highlights how similar styles were adapted to different denominational identities. She also emphasizes the role of these buildings in facilitating community for families experiencing physical and social dislocation.

In the final chapter, Buggeln describes the fates of these churches since the 1960s. Some are treasured “historic” parts of larger church complexes; others, such as Messiah Lutheran Church in Burlington, Iowa, have undergone extensive restoration; still others, such as St. Augustine Episcopal Church in Gary, Indiana, are now included on the National Register of Historic Places.

Buggeln’s previous book, *Temples of Grace*, is the definitive work on the iconic New England meetinghouse. This exhaustively researched book is likely to become the go-to work on postwar churches, and not only modernist ones. Mark Torgerson’s *Architecture of Immanence* and Jay Price’s *Temples for a Modern God* are still important supplements, but Buggeln’s work stands out for its detailed analysis of specific church buildings, richly illustrated pages, and consideration of the buildings’ place in the culture of the suburb. Her case studies give substance to the movement and help us see how these churches came alive. Preservationists, church members, historians, and students of suburbs should all rely on this essential work.

The Most Famous Writer Who Ever Lived: A True Story of My Family, by Tom Shroder. New York: Blue Rider Press, 2016. 402 pp. Family tree, photographs, index. \$28.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Marcia Noe is professor of English and director of women’s studies at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. She is a senior editor of *The Dictionary of Midwestern Literature*, volumes one and two, and is editor of *MidAmerica*, an annual publication of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature.

The reader who glances at the title of this very readable book and assumes that it must be about Shakespeare is in for a rude awakening. Its subject is actually Iowa native MacKinlay Kantor, who wrote the New York Times best-selling and Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Andersonville*. But once immersed in the book, the reader comes to understand that the title reflects Kantor’s conception of himself rather than any critical or popular consensus, and that outsized self-image and its consequences function as a thematic emphasis of the book.

Born in 1904 in Webster City, Iowa, Kantor was abandoned by a sociopathic father and raised by an impoverished single mother. A high school dropout, he worked as a reporter for the *Webster City Daily News* and the *Cedar Rapids Republican*, as a columnist for the *Des Moines Tribune*, and as a war correspondent, screenwriter, and novelist, publishing 40 books, including the aforementioned Civil War novel and *Glory for Me*, on which the Academy Award-winning film *The Best Years of Our Lives* was based. For the better part of four decades, Kantor hobnobbed with