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## BOOK REVIEW

### **White Elephants on Campus: The Decline of the University Chapel in America, 1920-1960**

Margaret M. Grubiak

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014

184 pages, \$28.00 USD (paperback)

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Reviewed by Thu Do, Saint Louis University

In her book, *White Elephants on Campus: The Decline of the University Chapel in America, 1920-1960*, published by the University of Notre Dame Press in 2014, architectural historian Margaret M. Grubiak argues that the chapels and other religious-like buildings on campus in the early twenty century represent an attempt to broker a new role for religion. Grubiak supports her thesis by thematically and chronologically describing and analyzing the architecture of the chapels and religious buildings at five elite universities, most with a Protestant heritage: Harvard University (Unitarian), Johns Hopkins University (Quaker), Princeton University (Presbyterian), Yale University (Congregationalist), and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She concludes that because the core mission and identity of these institutions are no longer religious, the magnificent chapels and other religiously-inspired structures on their campuses have become white elephants.

The term “white elephant” is not typically used for architectural or historical analysis; in fact, it was coined in a cartoon featured in the 1927 Princeton Tiger student newspaper, wherein a child stands in front of Princeton’s newly completed neo-gothic chapel, asking her mother, “Mummy, is that thing a white elephant?” Ironically, Princeton’s chapel was completed when religion and mandatory religious services on American campuses were being challenged under the pressures of pluralism, the ascendance of a scientific paradigm hostile to religious truth, and the influence of the German research university model. Grubiak believes that under these pressures, the university presidents and architects of these institutions used religious neo-gothic architecture to affirm the centrality of religion to university culture. Grubiak

argues that the large-scale chapels and religious buildings promoted religion on campus in four principal ways: a) serving as an advertisement for the health of religion; b) appealing to the emotions of students; c) symbolically occupying the center of campus; and d) expressing the relevance of religion to academic work.

Grubiak attempts to help readers understand how the architecture and locations of the chapels and other buildings with religious structures reflect the shifting fortunes of religion within higher education during the early/mid-20th century. Throughout the book, Grubiak draws upon her interdisciplinary knowledge of architecture and history to describe the key architectural features of the buildings, supplementing these descriptions with a selection of historical and contemporary drawings and photographs. Grubiak further considers the implications of the chapels' physical locations and their architecture relative to the rest of campus. The chapels and religious-like buildings became means to boast to the public of the college or university's religious earnestness.

Grubiak draws attention to an important question about the purpose of architecture for the spirit of campus. University presidents and architects believed that the physical context shaped the content of learning. They constructed their academic buildings in neo-gothic forms as they recognized the power of architecture to affect the character of their institutions and the experience of students. They attempted to retain an architectural presence of religion on campus by building towering classrooms and cathedral-like libraries on campus. These iconic buildings, rooted in neo-gothic imagery but patient of both sacred and secular interpretations, presented religion as a pervasive background to university life, learning, and research. These academic cathedrals evoked, in other words, the unity of knowledge gained from science and religion.

Finally, Grubiak believes that the design of the modern chapel at MIT conveys a different meaning. Though originally non-religiously affiliated, MIT attempted to connect with religion by building a modern, interfaith chapel. According to Grubiak, the presence of the chapel at MIT asserts the importance of moral character and knowledge revealed through religious faith, reminding the university and its scientists of how to use scientific knowledge morally and ethically.

Grubiak's architectural and historical evidences satisfactorily demonstrate a changing role of religion in higher education in at least five campuses in the early/mid 20th century. However, it is at least debatable that these chapels or their equivalents have become "white elephants." One wonders if these build-

ings still link the student to the cosmos, as MIT's architect Saarien anticipated, providing "a place where an individual can contemplate things larger than himself" (p. 112). Grubiak does not discuss the current effects and usages of these chapels. Nor does she investigate other religious traditions. On Catholic and other religiously affiliated campuses, chapels often symbolize the mission and identity of the university and are used for worship. In both religiously affiliated and religiously unaffiliated schools, then, the chapels may serve as more than "white elephants." Further research on the present effects of these chapels on campus will be helpful.

The sample of campuses that Grubiak chose to study is not representative. Since Grubiak focuses only on the five elite universities, one is not sure if she envisages case study of the American universities in the northeast, or of American universities as a whole. While Catholic educators and others will appreciate the book since it helps them interpret the meanings of neo-gothic and religious-like buildings on Catholic campuses, such as Boston College, they may not be sure if their interpretation is legitimate. Adding studies of chapels on Catholic and other religiously affiliated campuses may help fill this gap.

Overall, the text contributes to a larger conversation about the importance of campus architecture. It helps readers understand the meaning of religious architecture and the role of religion in American higher education during the early/mid 20th century. Though the author's work has a narrower scope than that of George Marsden, James Burtchaell, and others who have discussed the secularization of religiously affiliated universities, Grubiak's study implies that more than a chapel is needed to signify and serve the diverse religious body of students on contemporary college/university campuses. This book is recommended to Catholic educators who wish to learn about the meaning of chapels and religious architecture on campus, although it offers less insight into their symbolic value on Catholic campuses in particular. Those interested in Catholic education will need to seek supplementary resources.

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