

*Mission Building: Architectural Discourse at Conservative Christian Schools of Architecture*

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Project Description

This project will investigate the nature of architectural education at colleges and universities that have an expressly Christian, non-Catholic mission. What makes a school of architecture Christian? What are the connections between a school's religious mission and its architectural discourse? The research will focus on three institutions: Judson University in Elgin, Illinois, which promotes itself as the only fully-accredited evangelical Christian school of architecture; Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, an Adventist school of architecture; and Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a liberal arts college in the Christian Reformed Church with an undergraduate pre-architecture program.

According to a 2004 Pew Research Center survey of American political attitudes, 30% of the American public describes itself as "born-again or evangelical" Christian, up from 24% in the 1980s. Despite historical ambivalence about participating in secular culture, over the last twenty-five years conservative Protestants have exerted a growing influence on politics, the mass media, and the arts. The recent accreditation of Judson and Andrews (2004 and 1987, respectively) announces the arrival of conservative Protestantism in architectural education. What does this mean for architectural discourse in general?

In his essay "The Opening of the Evangelical Mind" (*The Atlantic Monthly*, October 2000), political scientist Alan Wolfe describes a growing movement at conservative Protestant universities to adopt the ideals of liberal education in an effort to improve the quality of Christian scholarship. At the same time, it is routine at these institutions for professors and students to sign declarations of faith, promising that their work will serve the religious mission of their church and school. Architecture school, as a site for artistic expression and intellectual exploration, provides a unique space for these conflicting ideals to mix.

After advancing my research, I intend to write an article of the sort found in *The New Yorker* or similar publications—an extended essay that has scholarly value but a journalistic tone, employing descriptive, narrative forms of writing. Thoughtful, accessible, and critical writing on architecture has become too uncommon in the popular media, to the detriment of our political and cultural discourse. Thus a secondary motive of this project is to produce an engaging article that can attract the attention of a general intellectual audience.

Despite the size and socio-political power of conservative Protestantism, it is still largely regarded as an outsider group in American intellectual discourse. The relationship of Christians to secular society is often characterized by mutual suspicion, especially in the polarized political environment of recent years. In this context, I feel I must identify myself, however imprecisely, as someone with a secular, liberal perspective—an outsider in the Christian world. It is my sincere goal to be open about my intentions, respectful of my subjects' beliefs, and when necessary, critical without being pejorative.