

Second Baptist Church, CTJ&D Architects, 1986.



Second Baptist Church.



First Baptist Church, S. I. Morris Associates, architects, 1975.

Three recent church buildings in Houston are so conspicuously less than divine that they force one to reconsider the sacred origins of architecture. If any building was treated as "architecture" in most American communities, it was the church. Even the most world-weary and frugal Protestants, such as the early Puritans or the 19th-century Shakers, built their meeting houses and churches with supreme aesthetic attention, albeit according to austere functionalist, self-effacing criteria. Houston's new super churches are a different type of expression of faith, one that adds to the program for the house of prayer the leavening realities of high-speed travel, television, and mass marketing. Super churches neither look like churches nor are they intended solely for churchgoing. Their prayer halls, which they prefer to call "sanctuaries," are built for thousands rather than hundreds of faithful and are engrossed by offices, media rooms, social centers, classrooms, gymnasiums, restaurants, and bookstores, which together provide a theocratic alternative to ordinarily secular pursuits. These sprawling new churches reveal programs as complex as those of medieval monasteries, and, despite their technological worldliness, constitute a retreat from the secular world.

The churches in question – First Baptist Church at the intersection of the Katy Freeway and Loop 610, Second Baptist Church at Voss and Woodway, and Lakewood Church at 7417 East Houston Road near the North Wayside exit of Loop 610 East – owe their gigantism to an expanded definition of community. With the inarrestable triumph of both the automobile and television, the shared interests and services of a community are no longer spatially bound. The despatialized super churches are surrounded by vast parking lots and isolated in the landscape, linked to their congregation by the freeway rather than by local streets; they are to the neighborhood church what the shopping mall is to the corner store. In their reliance on video as an integral part of worship, the super churches conform to the hyper-real

culture of the late 20th century, for which simulations are truer than reality. The legitimating function of television would seem to enhance the veracity of the sermons delivered in these churches – like an electronic Holy Spirit descending on a scattered mass audience. Of the three, Pastor John Osteen's Lakewood Church is the most ostentatious TV ministry, simultaneously broadcasting closeups of the service to the audience in the church on a huge video screen suspended over the stage and to the audience at home on several nationwide networks. The effect of having the large screen inside the church – an innovation embraced by Robert Schuller in the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California (Johnson/Burgee Architects, 1979) – is spectacular: one experiences the service from both near and far, somewhat like witnessing an unveiled Wizard of Oz. The other two super churches are likewise outfitted with sophisticated video control rooms, mobile cameras, and theatrical lighting but confine their in-house broadcasts to video monitors in corridor areas outside the sanctuary. The service at Second Baptist is broadcast on three cable networks to a weekly audience said to number 70,000, while video and audio cassettes of memorable services are available in its bookstore.

The super churches seem to be growth industries as much as ministries of spiritual salvation, which may explain why their buildings are typologically closer to commercial structures than to churches. A significant part of the Sunday service is devoted to welcoming and pinning down newcomers, issuing lapel

Architecture

Beyond

Redemption

**HOUSTON'S
SUPER
CHURCHES**

Richard Ingersoll

Photographs by Paul Hester



*First Baptist
Church
of Houston*

7401
Katy Freeway



*Second Baptist
Church
of Houston*

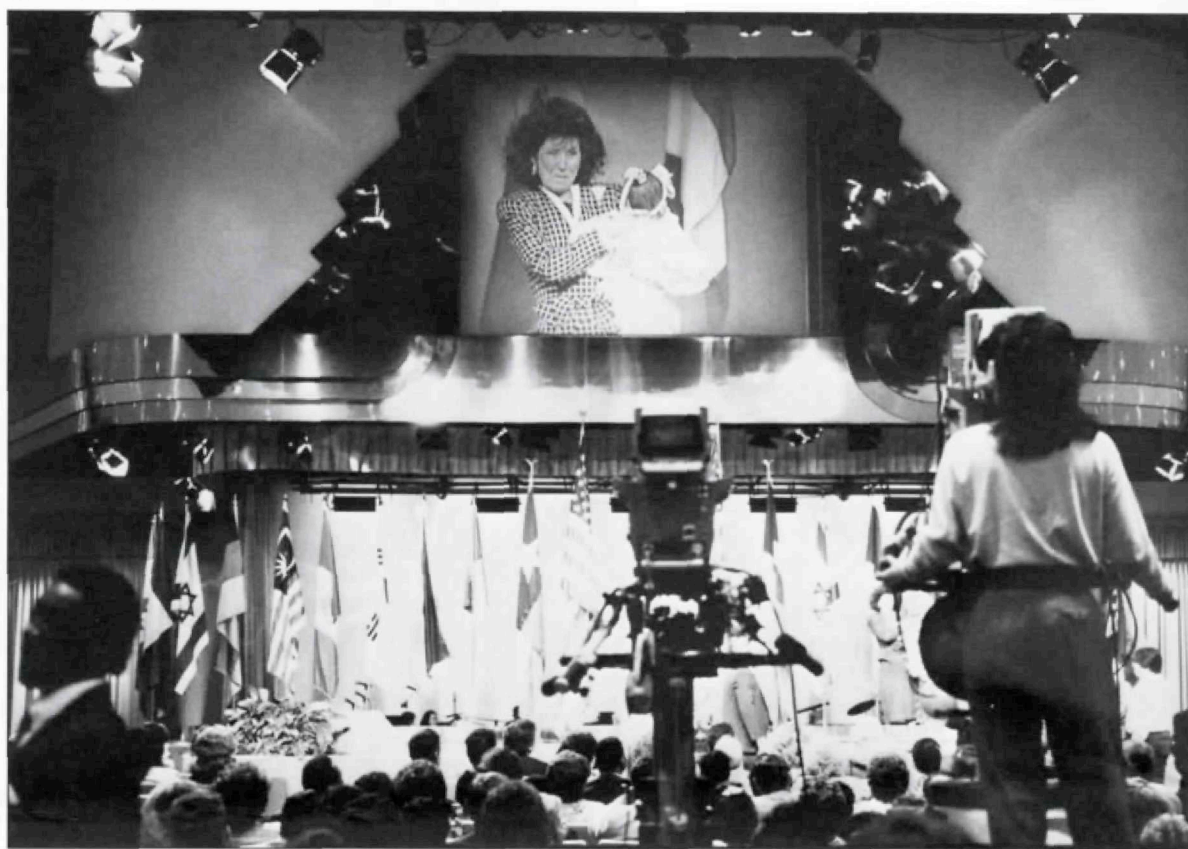
6400
Woodway Drive

buttons so the congregation can identify them, and getting them to commit to a mailing list. In his sermons pastor Ed Young of Second Baptist congratulates the old-timers of his congregation for sacrificing their parking places close to the church (shuttle buses run from the outer parking lots) to the new catechumens. Both Second Baptist and Lakewood Church have ambitious billboard campaigns featuring the smiling faces of their respective pastors: Ed Young welcomes you to the "Fellowship of Excitement," while John Osteen tries to lure you to the "Oasis of Love." Amid the blur of commercial effluvia on Houston's freeways, these pious solicitations could be confused with equally aggressive advertisements for considerably more profane enterprises.

First Baptist and Second Baptist, both located in the city's affluent western region (approximately six and eight miles, respectively, from downtown), are in obvious competition for members and new converts; the former maintains a solid lead in long-term membership, the latter attracts the more upwardly mobile. While there was one black person in the choir of First Baptist and several in the audience, no color darker than suntan was visible at Second Baptist when I visited. Lakewood Church is in a remote area on the decidedly less than affluent northeast side, about eight miles from downtown, where some streets have yet to be hooked up with city services. The Lakewood congregation is ethnically mixed (a significant portion of the audience wears Spanish-language headphones) and economically poor-to-middling, to judge from the make and condition of the cars in the parking lot and the way servicegoers dress. Theologically, Lakewood differs appreciably from the two others, offering a free-wheeling Pentecostalism replete with speaking in tongues, laying on of hands, and the promise of miracles. The theatrics and social tolerance of Lakewood make it radical compared to the more conventional services and congregations of the other two churches.

Osteen's church boasts Texas' largest "sanctuary," a 123,000-square-foot air-conditioned box. The freespreading space-

frame roof, tucked behind the kind of mansards used to hide ventilation equipment on fast-food outlets, covers several acres. The brown brick exterior envelope is remorselessly utilitarian, with not a single gesture toward religious iconography except the dubious series of lancet windows on the east elevation. The interior is like a sports arena, with a maximum capacity of about 8,250 spectators; as more people pour into the church, floor-to-ceiling drapes are pulled back to reveal successive standing areas that expand the total capacity to 10,000. The indifference to recognizable church architecture makes Lakewood Church closest to the revival tents of the 19th century. In contrast to the building's unself-conscious warehouse appearance, the trappings of the stage area seem to be derived from a completely incongruous idiom, the glitzy decor of TV game shows; and the suspense of wondering what the pastor's wife, Dodie, will do next is indeed more entertaining than "Wheel of Fortune." As a warmup for her husband's weekly sermon, Mrs. Osteen struts across the stage with a microphone, telling stories of horrible diseases that faith has cured, calling on infirm or distraught people in the audience to come forward and have the devil cast out of them, and vigorously talking in tongues (one wonders how this is translated in the headphone versions). The stage background is decorated with huge American flags and a depiction of the solar system, and musicians (who play an eclectic blend of soul and old-fashioned hymns) are situated in an orchestra pit behind the stage. Aside from the new church (designed by Michael Keene, 1987), the other facilities of Lakewood resemble a military boot camp, and can in no way compare with the wealthier super churches.



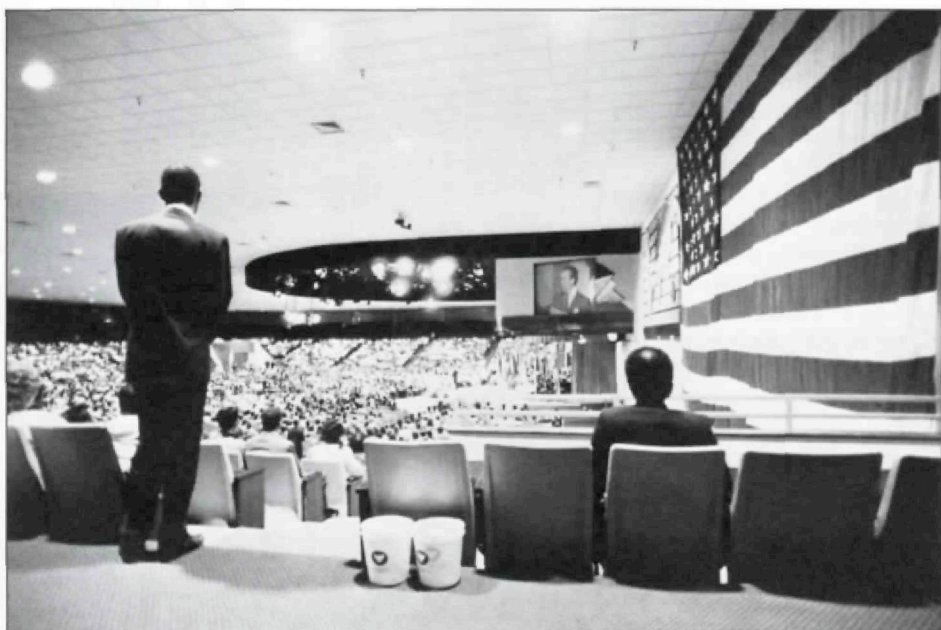
Lakewood Church.

First Baptist and Second Baptist both follow the conservative teachings of evangelical "born-again" Christianity. Baptism is the major sacrament, celebrated at the beginning of each church's Sunday service in a spotlight, full-immersion font located high above the podium and choir. In both churches the pastor and his assistants sit on the podium in Hepplewhite-style armchairs, looking almost as if they were at home, watching the whole thing on television. The facilities programs of the two churches are nearly identical, although Second Baptist invariably has larger and conspicuously more expensive versions. Both grew from previous churches that relocated after the building of the freeways and have in recent years undergone a second growth. First Baptist, led by Pastor John Bisagno, has a membership of 22,500, one of the largest congregations in the country. It was moved to a tan brick structure designed by S. I. Morris Associates on its present freeway site in 1975. The church seats 3,335 and has a choir that holds close to 400; the pastor mentions in his sermons his dream of adding balconies to the auditorium (and thus catching up with Second Baptist). A curious practice at both churches is the custom of applauding after special musical numbers, a convention that seems to have filtered down from television shows. Pastor Bisagno is a sincerely jolly man who during the course of the service has new babies brought to him, has young couples who are trying to have children come forward, and mentions the grievously ill by name so people can pray for them. There is high audience participation and always lots of movement in the auditorium, which in plan is a quarter segment of a circle. The firm of Denny Ray Wines has recently added a six-story office building housing Sunday school classrooms (10,000 people attend weekly) and a three-level commissary; the restaurant on the ground floor is called the

Garden of Eatin'. Beside this is a gymnasium structure known as the Christian Life Center that boasts two basketball courts, a jogging track, a fitness room, a sauna, a whirlpool, four racquetball courts, Ping-pong tables, a crafts studio, and a four-lane bowling alley, providing a serious if still golfless alternative to the country club. Leftover space between the buildings has been landscaped into a small garden with a winding path, known as "The Oasis." First Baptist is so crowded on Sundays that many members are forced to watch the service on video monitors outside the sanctuary, but the biggest problem - as elsewhere in Houston - is adequate parking, and the church is considering building a parking garage.

If one were not able to read, it would be nearly impossible to identify the sober, featureless volumes of First Baptist as a church. Like early Christians adapting their churches to the administrative typology of the basilica, these Christians of the age of information have adapted their buildings to the office typology of big business. First Baptist is neither any worse nor any better than a standard speculative office building. The Puritans and Shakers, while consciously rejecting architectural worldliness, made an art of their humble minimalism, but this will never be suspected of First Baptist. It is a tribute to the congregation that it does not require architecture to lift spirits or identity itself - but how unfortunate this attitude is for the rest of the city.

Ed Young's Second Baptist has fewer members (15,000) but larger, more conspicuously "architectural" facilities - including a new church that retains some of the traditional iconography of church architecture. Still, it would be hard to claim that the extra expense and more overt ecclesiastical citations are un-



Lakewood Church, Michael Keene, architect, 1987.



Lakewood Church

7417
East Houston Road

problematic. Second Baptist's complex sprawls over 42 acres, like a shopping mall. When the congregation moved to its present site outside the Loop, its first new structure (1967) was a neo-Georgian church with a basilica plan, interior barrel vault, and Gibbsian steeple, designed by Harold Calhoun of Wirtz, Calhoun, Tungate & Jackson. Arcaded courtyards were provided as links between the various buildings of this earlier phase, but unfortunately this sensible strategy for growth was subsequently abandoned. In 1986, Second Baptist added an enormous octagonal "worship center" capped with a disproportionately small dome that is an unintentional parody of the Dome of the Rock. Also designed by Calhoun's office, it has double tiers of balconies and seats 6,000. The raised podium is placed directly in the center of the octagon, and from the ceiling above hangs a sinister-looking octagonal tabernacle containing the sound amplifiers. Anyone who has been inside medieval central-plan baptistries will understand the inherent acoustical problem, which in this case is multiplied many times; neither the pastor, nor his 300-member choir, nor the "world's largest singing Christmas tree" can be heard without the aid of microphones, a shortcoming that takes some of the live "excitement" out of the fellowship. Other features, such as the innovative communion trays that hold dozens of thimble-size plastic wine cups, each with a quarter-inch of bread on its rim – communion for thousands in just a few minutes – also reduce the sense of direct participation, and there is noticeably less milling around here than at First Baptist. Pastor Young, who vaguely resembles Pat Boone, is much more the focus of the service. The pride, and greatest expense, of Second Baptist is the pair of three-story stained-glass windows, views of which are partially obstructed by the pseudo-Assyrian columns holding up the perimeter of the

roof. The southwest window depicts the Creation (with Texas bluebonnets prominently present in Paradise) and the Fall; the northeast window is devoted to the Second Coming as described in the Revelation of John. The entry lobby for the school and offices has a triple-height, mirror-lined atrium with fountain that seems more appropriate for a hotel than a religious institution. The sports area, called the Family Life Center, just slightly edges out First Baptist with a jogging track, two basketball courts, an eight-lane bowling alley, four handball courts, an aerobics center, billiards and Ping-pong tables, a whirlpool, a sauna, a steam room, and a crafts studio. Its private grade school has 900 students and is much in demand. The Family Life Center is decorated with the same colored neon lights that one might find in discothèques. The playful naming of the Second Edition bookstore and Second Helping restaurant is reminiscent of Avis Rent-A-Car's "We're Number Two" advertising. Such obvious derivations of commercial culture give one second thoughts about whether the purpose of all this is to prepare for the Second Coming or to up the ante on First Baptist.

It is difficult to associate the architectural poverty of these churches with humility or to excuse their urbanistic omissions as by-products of spiritual detachment. Like the buildings of so many other commercial and institutional enterprises in Houston, from corporations to shopping malls, hospitals, and universities, they have obscured and neglected the public face of their mission. The members of these super churches are asked to accept the Bible with blind faith, a suspension of disbelief that might be even more advisable when considering their own buildings. ■



Freeway Baptist Church, 149 Winkler Drive, Edward Koerber, architect, 1972.

SIGNS OF FAITH

In 1890, Louis Sullivan advised the readers of the *Chicago Tribune* that "the church spire in the city is a thing of the past." Three decades later, H. L. Mencken could write in characteristic good faith that "otherworldliness is of the very essence of ecclesiastical architecture. The moment it is lost we have the dreadful 'plants' that barbaric Baptists and Methodists erect in the Pellagra and Goitre Belts. . . . When men really begin to build churches like the Bush Terminal there will be no religion any more, but only Rotary."

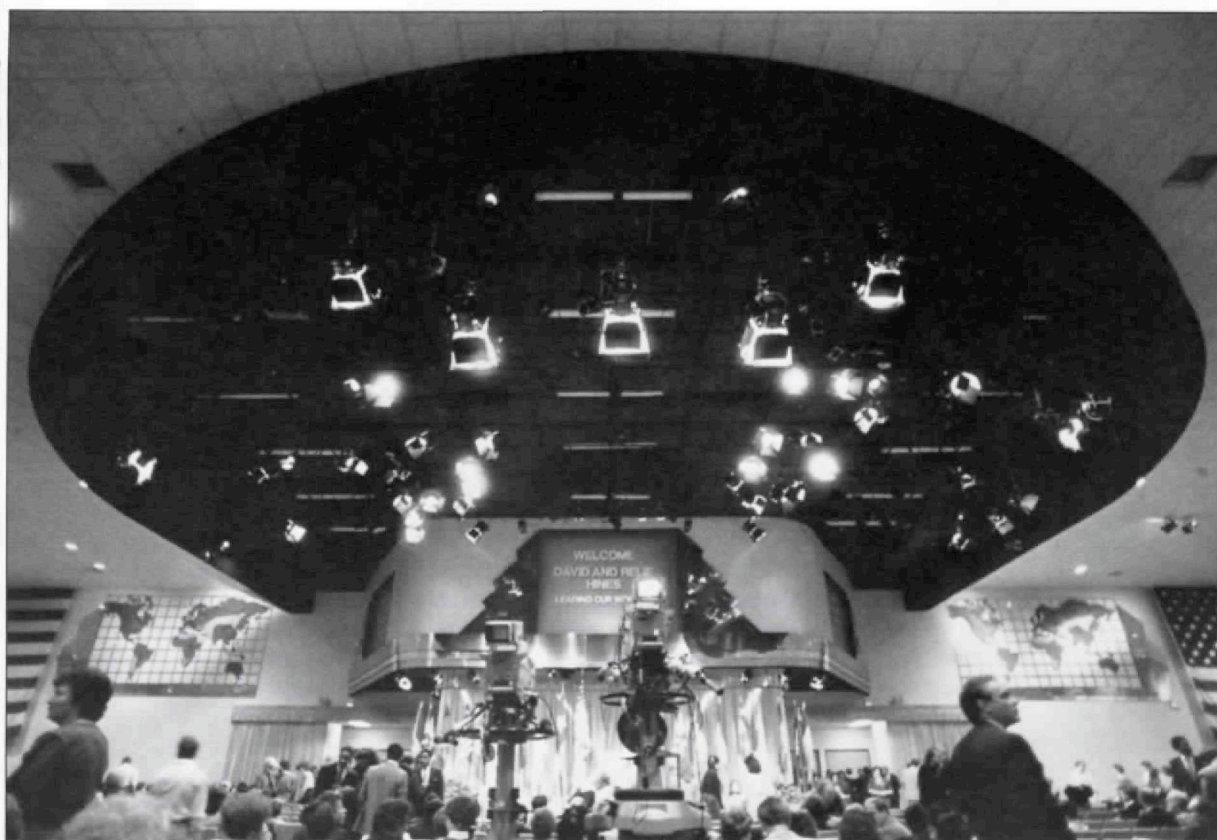
Church architecture has grown discernibly less churchlike in this century. Frank Lloyd Wright, in delineating his design for the Unity Church and Parish House (Oak Park, Illinois, 1906), felt obliged to sort out its secular and templar halves with a handwritten postscript. The ambiguous office-factory rationalism of Alberto Sartoris's unbuilt Notre Dame du Phare for Fribourg, Switzerland (1931), that graces the cover of Kenneth Frampton's *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (Thames & Hudson, 1980) requires a similar parenthetical explanation: "(church and religious center)." Nor is self-revelation a predictable virtue of later modernist indulgences. The ecclesiastical correlation of Le Corbusier's great hat-roofed pilgrimage chapel at Ronchamp (1950-55) has mystified admiring observers from James Stirling ("an unnatural configuration of natural elements such as the granite rings at Stonehenge") to Stanislaus von Moos ("both more and less than a church"). The Crystal Cathedral, Philip Johnson's Chartres-order with plumbing, is a purposefully noncommittal Alpine airplane hangar packaged *in vitro* for evangelist Robert Schuller, though as Frances FitzGerald notes, "it melds perfectly with the prosperous glass-sheathed office buildings of Anaheim, California," while preempting Richard Neutra's comparatively mild-mannered drive-in church (1962) for the same congregation.

In Houston, new signs of faith can be divined on sheds both decorated and un. One particularly praiseworthy example, the Freeway (now Hopewell) Baptist Church, offers a completely integrated building sign, in contrast to the ad-on scrollwork of its Torah-topped soul-mate, the First Hebrew Christian Church (Los Angeles, 1905, since departed). Here the Book manages not to replace the building, as Victor Hugo had feared in *Notre Dame de Paris*, but is reborn in a neo-baroque epiphany of *architecture parlante*. More down to earth is the Lewis Baltz-like retreat from the temptations of postmodernism witnessed in the architectonic though not, despite the impression conveyed by a neighboring sign, liturgical minimalism of the Chinese Bible Church. Sparing most worldly expense, this starter church occupies a shoebox catacomb aboveground in the concrete pastures of an industrial park near the West Belt. Righteous as these are, who knows what lies beyond?

Drexel Turner



Chinese Bible Church, 9630 Clarewood, Suite A-12, Beltway Service Center.



Lakewood Church.