1. HOUSES OF WORSHIP:
THE ARCHITECTURAL EXPRESSION OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN EARLY AMERICA

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2. François-Jean de Beauvoir, the Marquis de Chastellux, a French military officer who served in the American War for Independence, published an account of his travels in the new republic. In December 1780, he visited Philadelphia. As he walked about this city of 40,000 inhabitants, he was taken by the diversity of churches and meetinghouses that he saw lining its regular grid of streets. One Sunday morning, he resolved to attend as many different places of worship as he could.

However, because most churches began their services at the same time, he was only able to visit the Quakers in the morning and the Anglicans in the afternoon. He noted that “the hall where the Quakers meet is square; there are, on all sides and parallel to the walls, benches and desks, so that people are placed facing each other, without either altar or pulpit to attract the attention. As soon as they are assembled, one of the more elderly makes an impromptu prayer just as it comes to mind; silence is then observed until some man or woman feels inspired and rises to speak. A man talked a great deal of the nonsense about inner grace, the illumination of the spirit, and the other dogma of his sect, which he bandied about but avoided explaining; at length, his discourse ended to the great satisfaction of the brethren and sisters, who all looked inattentive and bored. After seven or eight minutes of silence, an old man went on his knees, dealt us out a very commonplace prayer, and dismissed the audience.

After this dreary and homespun assembly, the service of the Anglicans appeared to me a sort of opera, both because of the music and decorations: a handsome pulpit placed before a handsome organ; a handsome minister in that pulpit, reading, speaking, and singing with truly theatrical grace; a number of women responding melodiously from the pit and the two side galleries; soft and agreeable singing, alternating with excellent sonatas played on the organ; all this compared to the Quakers, or even the Anabaptists and Congregationalists, appear to me like a little paradise in itself than as a road to it.”

7. Prominently located within a block of each other on Second Street on either side of Market Street near the Delaware River waterfront, both of these places of worship attracted many of the wealthiest merchant families and leading professionals in the city, but their contrasting appearance might have suggested otherwise. With plain brick walls, the Great Meetinghouse was constructed in 1755 to replace an earlier structure on the site and would serve as the yearly meeting place of Quakers in the Delaware Valley for 50 years. Measuring 73 feet in length and 55 feet in width, the new meetinghouse had two tiers of square headed windows and a simple wooden cornice that also ran across the two gable ends like so many other structures in the region including the courthouse in the middle of Market Street. The unpainted unadorned interior consisted of few moldings and no carved woodwork. Quaker men and women sat separately in straight-back benches opposite several rows of raised seating, which were occupied by “weighty Friends,” individuals who felt the call to guide the congregation in homilies and prayers. This large but unassuming building was taken down after the construction of an even larger yearly meetinghouse
on Arch Street in 1804, whose interior arrangement provides a good visual clue to what the fittings in the Great Meetinghouse were like.

10. Compared to the well-crafted but austere features of the Great Meetinghouse, Christ Church was considered “in point of elegance and taste, surpassing everything of the kind in America.” Among the largest churches built in the colonies, it is 118 feet long and 61 feet wide. Begun in 1727 and completed in two stages in 1744, it too replaced a much smaller church.

11. Laid in Flemish bond with glazed headers, Christ Church’s two-story brick walls feature pilasters and stone dressings marking each bay. They are pierced by a double tier of oversized compass-headed or arched windows and two doorways and crowned at the eaves by a balustrade ornamented with urns. 12. The east end is dominated by a monumental Venetian window and is framed by Doric pilasters and a dentilated entablature. The east façade featured a carved wooden relief portrait of George II with a crown above. At the west end stands a massive 30-foot square, four-story brick tower, topped by a multistage wooden steeple and octagonal spire capped with a gilded weathervane. Erected in the early 1750s, the steeple of Christ Church overshadowed the Philadelphia skyline, asserting the primacy of the Anglican faith in this religiously diverse polyglot city.

13. Christ Church was laid out in a basilican plan with a central two-story central section crowned with an arched ceiling divided from lower arcaded side wings, which are carried by monumental Doric columns. Sumptuously finished on the interior with raised-panel box pews lining the central and side aisles and upper galleries, 14. the pride of the church was a richly carved freestanding pulpit that stood near the east end where there is an elaborate altarpiece beneath the Venetian window.

These two houses of worship were self-conscious embodiments of the theological principles espoused by these denominations. The distinctiveness of their architectural attributes was shaped by their opposing attitudes toward materiality in Christian religion, whether God was fully present in the physical world or wholly independent of the material universe. Most of those who sat in the pews of Christ Church strongly believed that material things enhanced Christian devotion and served to honor the glory of God. 15. Those who shared the communal benches in the Great Meetinghouse were highly antagonistic to the corporeality of material objects, seeing them as impediments that needed to be cast aside in their search for the light of holiness that was within them all. The Marquis de Chastellux clearly drew the distinction between these two perspectives in his descriptions of the setting and service held by the Quakers and the Anglicans. Whether it resembled his Catholic heritage or suited his aristocratic temperament, he recognized the aesthetics of the Anglican service for what it was, but seemed more mystified by the tone and meaning of the Quaker meeting. Although his comments were typical of many who visited the city, they were by no means the only reaction. 16. In 1788 another French visitor to Philadelphia, Jacque Pierre Brissot de Warville, found the service that he attended at the Great Meetinghouse a far more compelling experience than his countryman.

17. “What a difference” he recalled, “between the modesty of this service and that of the Catholics. Religious reformation seems to have led step by step to greater simplicity of ceremony. You will find fewer and fewer forms as you go from Catholicism to Lutheranism, from Lutheranism to Presbyterianism, and from Presbyterianism to Quakerism and Methodism. It is this way that man’s reason always progresses toward perfection!”

Brisson believed that “the history of Quakerism will expose the fallacy of an argument often advanced that to maintain order in a mass of men it is necessary to have a form of worship which appeals to the senses, and that the more religious services resemble theatrical performances the
greater will be their hold on the people. This theory has produced or justified plain chant, religious music, processions, ecclesiastical decoration. Quakers will have none of this mummery, yet theirs is an orderly society.’”

18. What these French visitors to Philadelphia beheld was the result of the divergent attitudes toward the material culture of Christianity, which were on display to a degree unlike in any other city except perhaps New York. Here were Swedish Lutheran, German Reformed, German Catholic, German Lutheran, Mennonite, Dunkard, Moravian, Scots Presbyterian, Welsh Anglican, New Light Presbyterian, Methodist, Anglican, and Quaker congregations, a veritable hydra of schisms, as one minister put it, where no one denomination predominated. Nearly the fully panoply of Protestant sectarian divisions appeared in the new world in this one city.

The diverse and fractious origins of the Protestant Reformation in Europe provided no uniformity of outlook among its many adherents who had settled in Penn’s green country town. 

19. In the sixteenth century, reformers such as Luther and Calvin sought to purge the Catholic Church of false doctrines and institutional abuses that had evolved over 1500 years. They argued that Scripture alone was the principal source of religious belief and pointed out that many of the Catholic church’s teaching and practices had no basis in either the old or new testament. They found no evidence in the Bible that sanctioned the canonization of saints, the veneration of relics, purgatory, and transubstantiation. 20. However, one defender of the old church countered this argument by declaring that men and women needed to “have a God that they might sensibly see with their bodily and carnal eyes.” Since not everyone could approach God through the intellect alone, relics and images helped people contemplate God’s immanence in human affairs and grasp the divine mysteries represented in such objects. The old church had never relied solely upon scripture, but had the weight of tradition to enrich its authority.

Because the Anglican church emerged from a series of political and ecclesiastical compromises in the mid-sixteenth century, it straddled the doctrinal fence on the nature of religious authority. 21. It followed Protestant precedent in abolishing the Mass in favor of lay participation in Holy Communion; 22. it removed what were considered blasphemous images from its churches, replacing them with Biblical texts, and renounced the veneration of saints and relics. However it retained some vestiges of extrabiblical tradition as a guide to church governance with the retention of bishops and never renounced a clean break with its Catholic past, holding firmly to its claim to an unbroken apostolic succession, leaving the door open for the resurgence of some of the older ceremonies in more propitious times.

The Puritan wing of the Anglican Church took the Bible literally to be the revealed word of God. Puritans wished to rid the Anglican church of its encrusted episcopal hierarchy and worship practices that required a prescribed liturgy, special vestments, implements, and fittings unsanctioned by scriptural authority. 23. Puritans accepted Luther's definition of a church as "a spiritual assembly of souls." A corollary of this view was that it was disassociated from any particular place, whether a shrine, cathedral, or parish church. They rejected any numinous association of a building, space, or object. Boston’s Cotton Mather did not believe in the “Holiness of Places,” but acknowledged that “Every Place is in truth holy, where we receive the Knowledge of God.”

24. This aversion to sanctifying material objects or spaces, led New England Puritans to call their fixed places of worship meetinghouses. Isaac Chauncy noted that although some people called a building used for public worship a church, there was "no just ground in Scripture to apply such a trope to a House for a Publick Assembly." 25. They put this belief into practice in New
England by using their places of worship for a variety of secular activities including town meetings and courts of law. New Englanders erected what Mather described as “modest and handsome Houses for the Worship of God; not set off with Gaudy, Pompous, Theatrical Fineries, but suited unto the Simplicity of Christian Worship.”

26. The third source of religious authority was lodged in the intuitive power of human reason and grew out the Reformation's concern for the inner spirit of man. It was a protest against the outward forms of Catholicism and rooted, like Puritanism, in a belief in God’s transcendent nature. A fringe element of English reformers in the mid-seventeenth century believed that every human had it within themselves to see the light of God, which would lead them to a spiritual awareness. 27. The Quakers asserted that Truth or religious authority came from within. The Bible may have been a useful guide in the search for the inner light, but is was no more than an aid.

In the nature of their worship, Quakers believed like the Puritans that the church consisted of individuals gathered together by God's spirit. However, once gathered together, Quakers had no need for a "hireling priest" since everyone looked toward their own inner spirit for guidance. 28. This concern for the struggle to accept the light within naturally led Quakers to suspect the materiality of worship, which they believed clouded a person's vision of the inner light. Quakers argued that it was necessary to cast off "the evil ways and vanities of this world. Our words are few, our apparel and houses plain, being stripped of all unnecessary things." They maintained that highest form of truth and beauty was spiritual. 29. William Penn asserted that "the Less Form in Religion the better, since God is a Spirit: For the more mental our Worship, the more adequate to the Nature of God; the more silent, the more suitable to the Language of a Spirit."

30. Whether Anglican or Quaker, the impact of Protestant theology on the arrangement and decoration of early American churches and meetinghouses was overwhelming. Reformed worship emphasized listening to the word of God through prayers and sermons and required centralized auditory space. 31. Except for Quaker meetings, Protestants churches were organized around the pulpit. 32. The most common form, the so-called meetinghouse plan, consisted of a squarish rectangle with the principal entrance on one of the longer walls with secondary entrances sometimes on the two shorter gable ends. The pulpit stood opposite the main doorway against the back wall and was often surrounded by a three-sided gallery. Benches or pews were arranged in different directions to face the central pulpit. 33. Although popularly associated with New England Congregationalists, the form did not originate nor was it peculiar to that denomination or region, 34. but was the ubiquitous choice of nearly all Protestant groups throughout the American colonies who constructed variants of the boxy meetinghouse plan. 35. The only exception was the Anglican church of Virginia which maintained an older linear church form that had been popular in England in the early 17th century when the colony was settled.

36. If the Protestant emphasis on hearing the word explicated in communal worship shaped the centralizing plan of most churches, there was no agreement among the many denominations on how they would be ornamented. Features considered appropriate by one group might be thought indecorous by others. Degrees of ornamentation distinguished the form and finish of their places of worship. All groups acted within a sliding scale of elaboration to create structures consonant with those attitudes. 37. Liturgical denominations—Anglicans and Lutherans—deemed it fitting if not obligatory to celebrate the “beauty of holiness” in the material manifestations of divine worship. Expensive textiles used for the adornment of the pulpit and altar and large pipe organs that reverberated throughout the sanctuary served to glorify the majesty of God. 38. Cherub heads floated in clouds painted on ceilings, gazed down from altarpieces, and supported baptismal fonts.
Calvinists and Quakers deeply mistrusted physical representations of their faith and sacramentalization of space and objects. They saw ornament as a distraction to public devotion and studiously avoided those features they considered superfluous or even blasphemous such as sculpture or even enriched moldings.

Although Georgian design and classical details provided a universal language of construction and ornamentation, they were flexible enough to accommodate the subtle gradations of embellishment between Quaker asceticism at one end of the scale and urban Anglican ostentation at the other. As a result, the denominational affiliation of early houses of worship can be read on the outside and the inside by the presence or absence of certain features and levels of ornamentation in ways that became impossible to distinguish in the early nineteenth century.

Before they diminished with the rise of the Greek Revival style in the 1830s, denominational distinctions were manifest in the shape and scale of apertures. Compass-headed windows appeared in Anglican, Lutheran, and some Presbyterian churches, but were deliberately avoided in Congregational, Quaker, and Baptist meetinghouses. Pulpit windows were occasionally shaped in such a fashion in New England meetinghouses, but the rest of the openings remained conspicuously flat-headed and domestic in scale. Like dwellings, most two-story meetinghouses contained double tiers of windows.

Builders of Anglican churches often used scale to great effect. They enlarged the size of apertures to fit the scale of the building. At Christ Church, Lancaster County, they were proportionally increased to balance the massing of the 26-foot high walls. The windows are 6 feet wide and 14 feet in height and accentuated by rubbed and gauged brickwork and stone dressings to enhance their effect. As one early nineteenth-century minister recalled in the colonial period, “the long round-topped windows and corresponding forms of doors” of the Anglican churches “were held in great aversion by the descendants of the puritans, and were always pointed out, and sneered at, as peculiar to prelatical houses of worship.” Anglican churches often contained a Venetian window in the east end, which gave them a liturgical orientation and imbued them with a grandeur that was consciously missing in meetinghouses.

Interiors consisted primarily of plain plaster walls, which remained sparsely decorated except in some. German Lutheran churches that continued the tradition of painting Biblical scenes and hanging portraits of Martin Luther and other leaders following the principle of adiaphora, that such embellishments did not affect the theological bedrock of the faith. Anglican churches seldom had any wall decorations except a few Biblical quotations and the fundamental articles of the faith framed in tablets or arranged in richly carved architectural altarpieces. At St. James, Goose Creek, two round-faced cherubs support an open Bible at the keystone of the reredos arch window. Just above them in the tympanum of a scrolled pediment is the coat of arms of George I. Funerary monuments and hatchments decorated the walls and alleys of many urban Anglican churches.

The windows in Dutch Reformed churches in New York were sometimes filled with coat of arms and hatchments of leading families of merchants.

Denominations led by an educated clergy invested in elegant pulpits, many of which consisted of richly carved, molded and inlay woodwork. The best stood on a wine stem bases with a winding staircase rising to a polygonal paneled box, sometimes gilded with enriched moldings, carved swags, IHS monograph, and winged cherubs, making them the costliest pieces of ecclesiastical woodwork in the American colonies, further enhanced with expensive imported textiles including cushions and tassels. The pulpits in Presbyterian, Congregational, and Baptist meetinghouses received little of the lavish ornamentation that characterized their better Anglican counterparts. Because they were anchored to the wall, they were far less a sculptural presence than...
the freestanding ones in Anglican churches. The product of a joiner rather than a cabinetmaker, most consisted of a series simple raised panels with very little if any carved work. Pilasters and entablatures were executed in the simpler classical orders.

55. The restraint exercised by Congregationalists proved unsatisfactory to most Baptists and Quakers who preferred even simpler manifestations of the joiner’s craft. They considered turned balusters, and most moldings as excessive forms of display. Pews were few as congregants sat on forms or railed-back benches. Most Quaker meetinghouses contained flush sheathing around the walls and flat panels in gallery breastwork. All interior trim was left unpainted. Yet it is highly misleading to think of this woodwork as plain in the sense that it was cheaply fashioned, rather it was the product of highly skilled craftsmen working within a very self-conscious code of ornamentation purified of excesses.

56. Anglican altars, Lutheran pulpits, and 57. Mennonite benches were invested with meaning, providing the symbolic avenues through which God made his presence known to worshippers. There were not merely the results of local happenstance or a reflection of the social hierarchy of a community, but the conscious application of highly prescriptive codes of architectural ornamentation. 58. In 1752, New Light Presbyterian Charles Tennent probably summed up the attitudes of most Protestant denominations in early America when he observed that “true soundness of Doctrine, Purity of Worship, and the Power and Presence of God are infinitely more necessary and valuable, then external ornaments.” So long as the use of appropriate ornaments remained subordinated to these higher concerns, Tennent saw no reason to completely shun their use in houses of worship, especially in cities like Philadelphia where denominational competition was strongest, a position many less sanguine contemporaries refused to adopt. 59. How could they be assured that spires, Venetian windows, and other features were constructed for the glory of God and not for the vanity of man? If Tennent’s perspective won few Friends at the time, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, more and more Americans, including many from the growing ranks of Methodists and Baptists, were inclined to believe the former rather than the latter. The old theological certainties, which had shaped architectural design for more than two centuries, had begun to lose their currency. 60. Within a generation, most felt comfortable worshipping in Greek temples.