

Shaping Sacred Architecture: Religion or Culture?

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Abstract

This paper looks at the impact of formal religion and culture on the shaping of the built form. Specifically, two Catholic churches, St. Joseph's, 1859, and St. Patrick's, 1872-1877, built in Galveston, Texas during the last half of the nineteenth century (19C) are examined. The objective of this analysis is to identify the impact the aforementioned variables had on the form (shape) of these edifices.

These two churches, designated Texas historical landmarks, were built in a time of historical significance for the state of Texas and America. During the last half of the 19C, Galveston was a gateway for thousands of European Catholic immigrants, who brought to Texas a diversity of culture, religions, traditions and skills. As Texas's cultural capital and most dynamic urban center during this era, Galveston boasted the most advanced architecture. It also was the place where the Catholic Church chose to reassert itself in the New World against a Protestant wave being swept westward on a tide of settlement. St. Joseph's was built in response to Galveston's increasing German population. The church is an unassuming wood frame construction typical of many rural wooden churches built in Germany. In similar manner, St. Patrick's was constructed to meet the religious needs of the city's growing Irish inhabitants. Its load bearing masonry construction and Gothic revival architecture can be traced to 13C European churches.

Each variable (Religion and Culture) was examined according to specific criteria established for them. Through the implementation of a *comparative analysis matrix* the data collected for these churches were analyzed against this set of criteria. The comparisons and contrasts are discussed in the paper and conclusions drawn. The results illustrate that culture not religion had the greater impact on the built form of these churches.