THE INSCRUTABLE SPIRIT OF LOUIS SULLIVAN:
TRANSCENDENTALISM AND AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE AT THE TURN OF THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Isaiah Ellis: The Inscrutable Spirit of Louis Sullivan: Transcendentalism and Modern
Architecture at the Turn of the Twentieth Century
(Under the direction of Randall Styers)

This thesis examines the religious influences on Louis Henri Sullivan (1856-1924), a key

figure in the birth of American modernist architecture and a prolific writer on architecture's

relationship to nature, democracy, and individual genius. Its argument is that, although

implicated in and to a great extent beholden to industry's effects on Chicago's built environment,

Sullivan was intent to raise the stakes of architectural practice and of urban aesthetics more

broadly beyond crude materialism, and to do so he used transcendentalist discourses already at

work in the American architectural world. With the concept of form as its key way of explaining

how Sullivan connected transcendentalists' literary productions to his material practice, this

thesis charts the genealogy of Sullivan's theory of architecture and shows how Sullivan made use

of those theories in his architecture and in writings crucial to his lasting reputation.

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I. Modernism and Spirit

> What is the chief characteristic of the office building? … It must be tall, every inch of it tall. The force and power of altitude must be in it, the glory and pride of exaltation must be in it. It must be every inch a proud and soaring thing, rising in sheer exaltation that from bottom to top it is a unit without a single dissenting line—that it is the new, the unexpected, the eloquent peroration of most bald, most sinister, most forbidding conditions.
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> —Louis H. Sullivan, "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered" (1896).[1]

As the prolific and influential career of the architect Louis Henri Sullivan (1856-1924) began to take flight in the 1880s, he took as many opportunities as he could to speak and write in sweeping terms about his own work as well as the state of architecture in the United States.[2] In one of his most well-known essays, "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered," Sullivan links closely the musings reproduced in the epigraph above with extended enumerations of tall buildings' technological and structural requirements, like uniform floor-plans and the newly-invented electric elevator. Sullivan staunchly opposed utilitarian approaches to tall commercial structures, believing that they squandered "one of the most magnificent opportunities that the

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[1] Louis H. Sullivan, "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered," in *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings* (New York: Dover, 1979), 207.

[2] A brief note on primary sources: this project deals extensively with Sullivan's written body of work, most of which was collected and published decades after his death in the form of edited volumes. The volumes I use contain transcribed speeches, essays published in architectural journals, and personal correspondence found in *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings*. What does not appear in *Chats* has been collected and edited by Robert Twombly in *Louis Sullivan: The Public Papers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). These collections are known as reasonably comprehensive, and other primary source materials are drawn from works of scholarship about Sullivan that quote from letters and other writings not found in *Chats* or *The Public Papers*. I try to remain conscious that this second-hand primary source material has been lifted from its proper context, and I try to avoid using it to lay foundation for my major claims.

Lord of Nature in His beneficence has ever offered to the proud spirit of man"—the opportunity

of social and spiritual actualization through architecture.[3] Sullivan's objections to materialistic

architecture acted as social and spiritual critiques that took as their subject architecture and

democracy as national projects. For Sullivan, the defeat of intuition and creativity at the hands of

expediency was a defeat of cosmic proportions. The powers of the creative mind could only

triumph under the guidance of the "Inscrutable Great Spirit of Nature," which above all else

elevated artistic inspiration to a meaningful plane.

As a theoretical text addressed to architects involved in new skyscraper projects, "Tall

Office Building" offers solutions that are as much transcendent as they are technical. More

specifically, Sullivan's interest lay in the pairing of height and "exaltation" as tall office

buildings' correspondent physical and metaphysical properties—its material and spiritual form

(Fig. 1).[4] In 1898, an anonymous author penned an editorial in the magazine *Forms and*

Fantasies addressing Sullivan's body of work: "if it be true that no man can be a great architect

without being a metaphysician, then Mr. Sullivan is without rival."[5] Sullivan would have agreed

with this observer's conceit: great architecture is something more than material. But, perhaps as

part of his desire for architecture's spirit to remain, like nature's, "inscrutable," Sullivan found

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[3] Quoted in Lauren S. Weingarden, "Louis Sullivan's Emersonian Reading of Walt Whitman," in *Walt Whitman and the Visual Arts*, ed. Geoffrey M. Sill and Roberta K. Tarbell (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 114.

[4] The phrasing of this point came to me when I first read the introduction to Eugenie Brinkema's *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). On p. xiv she proposes that "Affect is not the place where something immediate and automatic and resistant takes place outside of language. The turning to affect in the humanities does not obliterate the problem of form and representation." Needless to say, my project and hers differ considerably. But I take her basic premise to be that the turn toward affect in the humanities has attempted at times to supersede representation as an analytical orientation—hardly the best choice in a world flush with filmic, literary, and architectural creations. I turn, with Brinkema, to the question: what is the content, material, symbolic, or otherwise, of forms meant to do ostensibly non-signifying work?

[5] Quoted in Lauren S. Weingarden, *Louis H. Sullivan and a 19th-Century Poetics of Naturalized Architecture* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 40.

little value in trying to explain the connection between architecture and its transcendent properties until late in his career. "I have no words to characterize what you see here," Sullivan said to a journalist writing about Hooley's New Theater, a project Sullivan completed in 1882 while a junior partner in the firm of Dankmar Adler (Fig. 2). He continued: "The vaguer you are in such matters the better I shall be pleased. It would be fatal to attempt anything like a discursive consideration of art and architecture in Chicago just now. People are not prepared for it."[6] Only a little ruffled by Sullivan's arrogant waffling, the interviewing journalist was content to refer to Sullivan in his final report as the "master spirit" behind the theater's design.

Spirit is an important and problematic word in scholarship on Sullivan and on modernist art overall—as is religion. Art historians often call upon those terms as part of an attempt to affirm their subjects' aspirations to produce socially and spiritually-meaningful work. They thus offer well-meaning historians the opportunity to regurgitate as historical facts the things modernists believed about themselves. Carl Condit, an influential historian of Chicago commercial architecture, argues that while many nineteenth century architects shrank away from "the new structural materials and utilitarian demands" emerging within industrial and corporate capitalism, a heroic cohort of architects in Chicago recognized the problems of their age "with relentless clarity of insight."[7] Unlike those who retreated into the history books to find their eclectic architectural aesthetic, those in the Chicago school "were concerned with the technical and aesthetic problem of creating in the older combination of masonry and iron a form appropriate to the needs and the spirit of the new industrial culture."[8] The term spirit appears

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[6] Quoted in *The Daily Inter-Ocean* (August 12, 1882), 13. See Twombly, ed., *The Public Papers*, 2.

[7] Carl W. Condit, *The Chicago School of Architecture: A History of Commercial and Public Building in the Chicago Area, 1875-1925* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964 [1952]), 11-12.

[8] Condit, 25.

here to be merely idiomatic but, as I will show in this thesis, idioms play key roles in guiding architectural production and interpretation. In Condit's estimation, an architect not "in the spirit" of the times suffered from cultural "malaise," unable artistically to "be nourished by what his age gives him."[9]

For Condit, what connected Sullivan and his Chicago colleagues, and what justified their collective work, was an indefinite and ineluctable capacity of genius capable of filling the cultural void left by architects who either failed to face their *zeitgeist* or cowered before it. The language of spirit and the idea that an era or nation had a particular "spirit," commonplace by the end of the nineteenth century, does not constitute a demand for a new, secular divinity for devotion such as progress or capital. Nature's "inscrutable spirit" was, for Sullivan, a force demanding a direction, an expression, a monument. The spirit to which Sullivan refers made itself known not through devotional literature, not through efficacious artifacts, and not through capital accumulation, but through a shape and shadow on the landscape that told its own story about national progress in the midst of the economic booms and busts that punctuated the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

I argue in this thesis that Sullivan was particularly effective at raising the stakes of architectural practice and of urban aesthetics more broadly. He propounded an architectural gospel in professional settings and in front of practitioners who, though equally enmeshed in the development of modern (and mostly commercial) forms in Chicago and elsewhere, were willing to hear it.[10] Sullivan's concerns were not strictly interior, as my continued use of the terms

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[9] Condit, 3.

[10] See, for instance, the works of Claude Fayette Bragdon, an architect from Rochester, New York, who was an admirer of Sullivan and who developed his own spiritual perspective on architecture and ornament with the help of Annie Besant's school of Theosophy, as well as Sullivan's transcendentalist writings. For more on Bragdon, see Jonathan Massey, *Crystal and Arabesque: Claude Bragdon, Ornament, and Modern Architecture* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009). Daniel Burnham was also an avowed Swedenborgian.

"spirit" and "spiritual" to describe them might suggest. They faced outwards toward the broader urban and social fabric in which he lived and worked. Sullivan hoped to harness architecture as a source of power in service to a society perched on the edge of decay, in desperate need of the divine light of imagination. The central tension of Sullivan's work, and this thesis, thus lies within the relationship between modernism and capitalism in their late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century incarnations. I invoke the word "tension" in the dialectical sense: even though modernism and capitalism reinforced each other materially, ideologically they maintained a relationship of conflict that did not result in the destruction of either, but rather enabled both to gain richer expression as a force in the story of the United States. I do not mean to maneuver a monolithic thing called modernism against a monolithic thing called capitalism for the purposes of putting them at odds. I mean, rather, that the intellectual lineages of modernism shaped capitalism in the literal sense of creating forms to shelter and structure industrial and financial life. If American architecture around the turn of the twentieth century took its shape in the shadow of capital, then it is also true that during this time period buildings and their architects offered more than sites for and representations of corporate power and financial transactions. Furthermore, they also offered ways of understanding the relationship those sites would bear to American society.

II. Nature, Capital, and Form

Historical discussion of Sullivan, like that of many modernists and modernism itself, has largely resembled a kind of artistic hagiography that imagines him as demiurge of an artistic cosmos, manifesting and giving voice to the "national spirit… the people's genius."[11] Condit's

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[11] David Morgan, *The Forge of Vision: A Visual History of Modern Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 196-7. The notion of modern artists as prophets of national spirit and of their art as an attempt at re-

invocations of spirit are comparatively subtle, not on offer as a cornerstone of the finer points he makes in *The Chicago School* about the development of steel riveting and flame-resistant supports for office buildings. Yet they resonate even with architect Anthony W. Barker's 1901 essay on Sullivan, the earliest major piece of historical assessment. Barker writes that "the creed of [Sullivan's] art is therefore democratic and progressive; it finds its inspiration neither in the past nor the future, but in the immediate and the present, and its optimism and vitality are of the kindred of the spirit that has brought forth the greatest art of the world."[12] Sullivan's "kindred spirits" invoked here populate almost every important survey text of modern architecture, which trace the intellectual sources of modernism back to the beginnings of the theory of art Sullivan would popularize: "organic" architecture. In his 1758 text, *Essay on Architecture*, Jesuit Marc-Antoine Laugier set forth a narrative of architecture's mythic beginnings in the lonely quest of "primitive man" to find shelter. Without family or community, Laugier's primitive hero retreats to a cave to escape the elements. Growing weary of the damp darkness, the man resolves to find shelter in the light of day. He finds four strong trees and lays two others, which he has chopped down, atop them, forming two lintels supporting a canopy of leaves (Fig. 3).[13]

Laugier's origin myth uncovered architecture's "original" principles by claiming they were "founded on simple nature."[14] The mythic story also sets the stage for nineteenth century German idealist aesthetes like G.W.F. Hegel and Gottfried Semper, along with British Romantics

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sacralizing a disenchanted world are the second and third of three fundamental links Morgan identifies between modernist art and modern Christianity. The first is the use of Christian symbols and biblical themes as subject matters for art, which on the whole does not apply to Sullivan.

[12] Anthony W. Barker, "Louis Sullivan: Thinker and Architect," *The Architecture Annual, Second Edition*, ed. Albert Kelsey (Philadelphia, PA: The Architectural Annual, 1901), 50.

[13] Marc-Antoine Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture*, trans. Wolfgang and Annie Herrmann (Los Angeles, CA: Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc., 1977 [1758]), 11-12.

[14] Laugier, 11.

like John Ruskin and A. W. N. Pugin, to link architecture with period-specific notions of natural law—and architects as masters, in a certain sense, of that law's dispensation (Fig. 4).[15] From the time Europeans became conscious of a newness to their moment with respect to past ones, in terms of capital, nationhood, and colonialism, architects, art critics, and aesthetic philosophers have kept their ear to the ground, seeking an understanding of the moral implications of technology and industry, interpreting those changes through developments in the arts. Whether tied explicitly to a religious group or not, this lineage of modern aesthetic thinkers and practitioners, along with the specific set of circumstances surrounding industrialization in the North Atlantic, would make it possible for early-twentieth century modernist painter Vassily Kandinsky to write his most famous written text, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911). In that text he argues that true art works toward "the non-material" and that "every man who steeps himself in the spiritual possibilities of his art is a valuable helper in the building of the spiritual pyramid which will someday reach to heaven."[16] Since he wrote explicitly from the perspective of Russian Orthodoxy, and chiefly about painting, it is unclear whether Kandinsky understood the breadth of artistic and religious lineages his claim included.

Religious studies scholars are uniquely positioned to uncover the breadth of modernists' religious affiliations and to excavate the meaning of the religious idioms by which many of them constructed their theories of art and society. For Kandinsky, it is Russian Orthodoxy; for

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[15] It is worth mentioning here that Pugin and Ruskin were both Catholic. Both championed Gothic revival architecture, and both explicitly made architecture and Europe's early-nineteenth century urban landscape a key site for the expression of the "three centuries of mingled devastation, neglect, and vile repair" wrought in the time since Protestantism's arrival in England. See Augustus Welby Pugin, *Contrasts, or, a Parallel Between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages, and Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day, Shewing the Present Decay of Taste* (London: Charles Dolman, 1836), 35. Pugin was unapologetic in his condemnation of "modern" building forms, which though they were neo-Classical in style, he always associated with Protestantism and contrasted with Catholicism by way of visual comparison (Fig. 4).

[16] Vassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans, M.T.H. Sadler (Toronto, ON: Dover, 1977 [1911]), 21-2.

pioneering French modernist architect Le Corbusier, it is Calvinism and theosophy;[17] for

Sullivan, transcendentalism. Yet it remains tricky to simply "find the religion" in art or

architecture, particularly when, as with Sullivan, the art avoids representing religious figures or

stories and instead lingers on the edge of the abstract (Fig. 5). Adding to this murkiness, as Mark

C. Taylor points out, is modernist architecture's dastardly collusion with fascism in Europe and

capitalism in the Americas.[18] Though Sullivan participated early in his career in the design of a

synagogue, a masonic temple, and Chicago's Moody Tabernacle Church, he made his career and

his reputation designing opera halls, office buildings, and department stores in cities across the

American Midwest and South.[19] In his designs for tall office buildings, Sullivan searched

tirelessly for "eloquent peroration[s]" of modernity's "forbidding conditions," not solutions or

actions against those conditions, as many labor organizers in Chicago and New York did.[20] On

the spiritual plane, argues Robert Orsi, modern American metropolis' vertical growth "drained

away the vitality of the local, making it difficult for city people to feel secure or grounded or

even present on the street."[21] Sullivan did not belong to a religious community, nor did he

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[17] See Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Nicholas Fox Weber, *Le Corbusier: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

[18] Taylor, 11.

[19] There is a reasonable case to be made for including Sullivan in the recent turn towards business history in the study of religion. Key texts in this turn, from religion and the field of history, include Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Walmart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Timothy Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); and most recently, Amanda Porterfield, Darren E. Grem, and John Corrigan, eds., *The Business Turn in American Religious History* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[20] Union organizers in cities like Chicago offered swift and direct responses to the skyscraper phenomenon , often directly addressing their symbolic qualities vis-à-vis class and labor relations. See Joanna Merwood-Salisbury, *Chicago 1890: The Skyscraper and the Modern City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[21] Robert A. Orsi, ed., *Gods of the City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 21. Orsi's implicit argument here is that the story of urban development in the United States is a secularization narrative of urban spaces. On a vague timeline the argument proceeds: where once community flourished in the context of neighborhoods and towns organized around churches, by the mid-twentieth century those communities were forced to disaggregate and their

contribute his time or money to any as a participant. Indeed as an architect working primarily on tall office buildings and opera houses for the wealthy, Sullivan and his design partner Dankmar Adler would fall into current paradigms of American religion as a force disruptive of religious and communal life on the ground.

My thesis thus necessarily departs from a "grounded" perspective on architecture and American urban religious life. Its subject of study, a highly influential man operating at the crossroads of industry and art, seems by all accounts to have believed that people and places "on the ground" found their truest expression in the "proud and soaring" buildings around them, and vice versa. Sullivan forces us all to consider how forms, entwined with but also aside from beliefs and practices, are always at play in the ways scholars talk about religious claims on sites, landscapes, and cities. For example, Orsi's argument against modernist commercial architecture (and thus implicitly against Sullivan) is not only based on an antagonistic dualism, communal life versus capital growth, but also centers around dueling forms: the local neighborhood versus the skyscraper. A study of Sullivan that suspends disbelief about that dualism reveals multiple logics involved in the emergence of the modern built environment. Such a study also points toward the dense genealogies within American religious history that serious consideration of that environment brings into focus, and outlines the shape of the forms Sullivan took as his primary objects of scrutiny in determining architecture's relationship to America's social and spiritual future.

I use the term "forms" often in this thesis, and I mean something specific. Generally the word refers to narrative techniques in literature and specific shapes of architectural elements— "the form of the doorway," "the form of a sphere," and so on. Caroline Levine expands the term

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religious life forcibly to splinter by the intrusions of industrial corridors and other capital-driven spaces. See also Rhys Williams, "Religion, Community, and Place: Locating the Transcendent," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 12(2) (summer 2002): 258-9.

"to include patterns of socio-political experience," such that "the form" of a piece of literature or a created artifact is no longer considered a distinct object, but rather as deeply—even ontologically—enmeshed in its context.[22] A form is a shape, but is also more. A form is a shape with "affordances"—with conceptual tendrils and material echoes buried deep in the socio-cultural world from which that form emerges. As Mark C. Taylor's work affirms, forms travel. They emerge because of multifarious engagements with "common problems" associated with modernity.[23] But does this mean that any idea, any conceptual connection across a group of thinkers, any social context, can be a form, or create one? Levine offers a helpful clarification:

> Is there any way outside or beyond form? My own answer is yes—there are many events and experiences that do not count as forms…fissures and interstices; vagueness and indeterminacy; boundary-crossing and dissolution.[24]

A writer with more of a mind for deconstruction than I might bank on Levine qualifying this claim by arguing that forms themselves are slippery, given naturally to indeterminacy and heterogeneity, and that the forms Sullivan created unintentionally affirmed the capitalist power relations under which he operated, or indeed may have ushered along political and economic hegemony in the United States by helping to establish an iconic form lending iron's solidity to the naturally unstable Anglo-American political project.

These things are important to consider, and may all be true. It is also important to know that Sullivan would never have believed it. He viewed forms as fundamentally transparent, utterly revealing of the ideologies at work within them, and in the minds and bodies of the artists behind them. In a building, he wrote in 1901, "everything is there for us to read … [it] tells us

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[22] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 2.

[23] Ibid., 21.

[24] Levine, 9.

"more truths about him who made it, who thought it, than he in his fatuity imagines; revealing his mind and his heart exactly for what they are worth."[25] As Taylor writes, modernists' tragic flaw was their "aesthetic arrogance"—their absolute confidence in form. "Cooptation of wrong forms was destiny… cooptation of right forms was impossible."[26] Sullivan, like other modernists after him, was not at all interested in abetting or creating indeterminacy within modernity. With forms as his trusted aid, indeed as his only worthwhile tool, he worked to stem modernity's wild flows, and to guide them back towards nature, far away from the world in which he and his contemporaries found themselves. Each section of this work focuses on a different dimension of Sullivan's engagement with and use of forms to solve problems in contemporary American society and spirit. Section One stresses that any characterization of Sullivan's religious thought must begin with its historical referents. His architectural forms had intellectual and aesthetic origins, as did his literary ones: his sources were transcendentalist. The section follows transcendentalist ideas about evolution, human progress, and invention as they traveled from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Louis Sullivan through an unbroken chain of friends, colleagues, and mentors.

Having laid out the historical context, in Section Two I analyze Sullivan's geographic context as he remembered it in his carefully crafted memoirs. This section explores his childhood in rural Massachusetts, his career in Chicago at the birth of the skyscraper, and his life's denouement after what he felt was the death knell of American architecture, the World Columbian Exposition of 1893. Sullivan's relationship to Chicago was in general one of fervent hope that the city would come to embody architecture's potential to grapple with the raw forces

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[25] Sullivan, "What is Architecture?: A Study in the American People of Today," in *Louis Sullivan: The Public Papers*, 181; this essay was printed originally, in three installments, in *The Craftsman* 10 (May 1906): 145-9; and (June 1906): 352-8; and (July 1906): 507-13.

[26] Taylor, 12.

of industrial modernity. He often referred to Chicago as a young man—foolish, but virile, flexible, and still growing. It was hardly the "city of big shoulders" for Sullivan, but he liked that it continually provoked itself to re-invention.

Sullivan's concerns about progress and regression, vitality and decay, virility and feebleness, came together between January 1901 and January 1902 in his most famous text, *Kindergarten Chats*, the subject of Section Three. Originally a serial publication, *Chats* became a monograph in 1918 meant as an evangelistic text on art, democracy, and spiritual growth. Immensely important within the practice of architecture and its study, *Chats* used erotic bodily language to describe buildings as a part of a holistic expression of his spiritual program. I focus on this text because in Sullivan's mind it detailed clearly the spiritual dimensions of his architectural program, and in its comparisons of buildings to male bodies it foregrounds Sullivan's preoccupation with form as a social and spiritual concern.

PART I: METAPHYSICAL RELIGION FROM TRANSCENDENTALIST LITERATURE TO ORGANIC ARCHITECTURE

I. Sullivan's Theory of Architecture

My introduction argued for Louis Sullivan's importance to the infrequently told story of religion's place in the canon of modernist architecture, and for future work on the subject of art, material religion, and U.S. religious history to consider the concept of "form" as a way of broaching the difficult tangle of materiality and metaphysics in discussions around art. Building on that argument, this section delves with as much specificity as sources allow into the roots of Sullivan's thought, finding his architectural theory knotted together inextricably with transcendentalist ideas of progress and growth. My argument here is that transcendentalism and the "organic" theory of architecture together formed the basis for Sullivan's early elaborations on the spiritual dimensions of architecture.

Catherine Albanese's term "metaphysical religion" is helpful for understanding how Sullivan fits within this lineage of aesthetically-minded transcendentalists as well as spiritually-minded architects. For many art historians, the key feature of Sullivan's transcendentalist design is his ornament. Floral yet abstract, naturalistic yet geometric, Sullivan's style of ornamentation echoes the drawings of John Ruskin, the English Catholic political thinker and an important figure in Romantic thought and artisanal design across the nineteenth century North Atlantic (Figs. 6 & 7). Sullivan used ornament to lend artistic and moral credibility to his industrial and corporate buildings, particularly in his designs for "tall office buildings." To adopt Lauren S. Weingarden's terminology, these "Whitmanesque" skyscrapers were Sullivan's way of

"naturalizing technology"—infusing cold steel foundations with the poetic warmth of terra cotta flowers. Yet for Sullivan, ornament comprised only one possibility for linking spirit and form. For a more holistic understanding of that linkage, we should consider Sullivan as a part of a lineage of thinkers who sought to put inspiration into practice in the United States in order to create an aesthetic representative of what they thought of as the American spirit.

After I locate Sullivan within Albanese's evolving framework of metaphysical religion, I analyze several of his early speeches, in whose language his influences become clear. I trace that lineage from Ralph Waldo Emerson through Emerson's lifelong friend and fellow transcendentalist, Rev. William Henry Furness, and through the youngest of the Furness children, Frank, who was Sullivan's first full-time architectural employer in 1873. Though major economic depression that year shortened Sullivan's term of employment, for about eight months the two colluded around floral ornamental designs and aesthetic philosophies whose authors found a readership among both architects and transcendentalists (Fig. 8).

II. Metaphysics and Architecture

My argument requires that I examine very specifically what it meant in the late-nineteenth century for Sullivan to have a "metaphysic" deployed through architecture. I take the specific meaning of metaphysic from Catherine Albanese, whose work charts the development of a strain of religious thought and practice in the United States encompassing transcendentalist literature, Spiritualism and spiritual healing, and what she earlier called "Nature religion." To generalize, metaphysicals are intellectuals or practitioners of any religious persuasion who seek sites of spiritual authority apart from denominational traditions or received interpretations of religious truth, and instead intuitively mine contemporary scientific knowledge about the human body and mind for purposes of physical healing or psychological wellness. Metaphysicals, then,

craft literary, bodily, and (in Sullivan's case) material or architectural testimonies to forces and truths that lie beyond institutional and rational horizons of possibility. Metaphysicals rebel particularly against doctrines emphasizing sin, evil, and suffering, insisting instead that humans exude cosmic energies, embody divinity, and hold the harness of unseen forces at work in the world. An important mantra among the metaphysicals that appear in this section—and throughout this thesis—is progress, the movement of right-thinking humans (though most often men) away from the strictures of the past and into an intellectually and spiritually free future. Importantly, for Sullivan and others technological and artistic forms offered evidence of progress or its lack.

Though the term "metaphysical religion" shows up only in her more recent work, Albanese's texts on transcendentalists give us two helpful points of analysis.[27] First, she investigates and names nature veneration as a continuous religious trend in the United States. For Albanese, nature in its real and imagined forms in North America acted as an "orienting idea" and a primary object of attachment for nineteenth century intellectuals and practitioners of spiritual healing. What kept this veneration alive through the nineteenth century and beyond was a dual view of nature as an ideal place to contemplate higher truth and to build the perfect society, and nature as a site where divine truth presents itself immediately and immanently. The former view conceives of nature as a tool for human enlightenment and mastery of the world, and the latter view emphasizes nature's individual forms and its totality as enchanted substances flush with divine power. There was thus, according to Albanese, a "creative confusion" for

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[27] The progression proceeds as follows: Catherine Albanese, *Corresponding Motion: Transcendental Religion and the New America* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1977); Catherine Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Catherine Albanese, *Reconsidering Nature Religion* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International Press, 2002); and Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

thinkers such as Emerson and Thoreau "between—on the one hand—a view of matter as 'really

real,' the embodiment of Spirit and the garment of God, and—on the other hand—a view of

matter as illusion and unreality, ultimately a trap from which one needed to escape."[28] Sullivan

sidestepped this particular problem with ease. He did not reflect much on the question of nature's

physical and metaphysical composition. Instead, he imagined the relationship between architects

and nature as one of mental effectuality, in that an architect should seek clarity and inspiration in

nature rather than a classroom, and of formalistic guidance, in the sense that the forms of nature

evidenced the most truthful aesthetic solutions for the problems presented by clients' needs and

current building methods and technologies.

Albanese's second helpful move is to eliminate, in later work, the notion that nineteenth

century transcendentalists "confused" matter and spirit for one another and muddled the

hierarchies between them. By placing nature veneration in the broader context of Enlightenment

rationalism as well as Anglo religious perceptions of the New World, Albanese comes to "a

second definition of the term 'Nature'" that would have been much more meaningful to Sullivan:

nature was "the law that turned sun and stars in their orbits, ordering the regular motion of the

planetary bodies" as well as the political organization of rights-bearing citizens.[29] Natural law

sets human polities, ecosystems, and the cosmos itself in harmonious motion—"a grand

symmetry of order and form."[30] If we think of matter and spirit as the constituent forms (which is

to say, the shapes) of a universal order, we get closer to a nuanced reading of religion's role in

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[28] Albanese, *Nature Religion*, 82.

[29] Albanese, *Reconsidering Nature Religion*, 8.

[30] Ibid.

the mind and works of metaphysicals.[31] In her 2007 book, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*,

Albanese argues that Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as healers like Phineas Parker Quimby,

"found the ingredients for Self-transformation in a 'Spirit' immanent in matter, so that—like the

Hermeticists of old and the worldwide spiritual teachers they admired—they could be as gods,

identified with a power of 'Good' that kept on giving."[32] Conceived as both a gift (the effect of

nature) and giving (the effectual cause of the human power to act on the world), spirit as

Albanese describes it here is in energetic conversation with the material world through its

intellectual and practical expositors. The question of what forces or projects guide artists' hands

was crucially important to Sullivan, and it provides the best frame for studying his own work.[33]

Sullivan was not an advocate for bringing nature as such—plants, grass, trees, and bodies

of water—into the city. He was a spiritual aesthete, believing inspiration and its translation in

form to be both cosmically powerful and socially effective. In this respect, we can contrast him

with Frederick Law Olmsted, another famous nineteenth century designer of urban spaces,

whose spiritually inflected notion of democracy led him to posit that designed natural spaces,

like Central Park in New York City, would foster interpersonal encounters in a rapidly de-

personalizing city. Olmsted attempted to insert nature into the city as a means of moral and

democratic development, proposing a social symbiosis between city and countryside.[34] Sullivan,

on the other hand, proposed that city buildings be designed according to the principles of nature.

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[31] We also get further away from the problematic notion that permeates Albanese's earlier work of an unbroken tradition passing from an American indigenous tribe to a Transcendentalist-oriented architect working in a commercial metropolis built on indigenous lands.

[32] Albanese, *Republic*, 258-9.

[33] In some of his later written work, Sullivan discusses an "architectural alphabet"—pier, lintel, and arch—as the building blocks for an aesthetic and moral theory of architecture, which I discuss in section three.

[34] Carol J. Nicholson, "Elegance and Grass Roots: The Neglected Philosophy of Frederick Law Olmsted," *Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society* 40(2) (Spring 2004): 335-6, 337. See also Jeffrey L. Machor, *Pastoral Cities:Urban Ideals and the Symbolic Landscape of Early America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).

While Olmsted worked with pieces of nature designed to create social accord within a city, Sullivan worked with pieces of a city designed in accordance with nature (Fig. 9). The intellectual lineage that enabled Sullivan to conceive of design in this way—as natural without involving plants or animals—displays the ways he wanted to create forms corresponding to divine realities rather than venerate already-existing forms in nature. Scholars of religion cannot consider metaphysical religion on the whole, transcendentalism in particular, or architecture as a practice elaborating its ideas or ideologies without occupying a space between matter and spirit, shape and concept—the space of form, in which orderings of matter exist in order to address problems its creator has identified. I will now examine how these ideas emerge in Sullivan's early speeches and their resonances to Ralph Waldo Emerson and the people linking him to Sullivan intellectually.

II. Inspiration in Nature, Mass, and Ornament

In 1886, Sullivan delivered a speech on "Inspiration," which is known as the first public expression of his spiritual program and a crucial step in his contributions to broader conversations happening in the American architectural world.[35] Attendees at that year's annual meeting of the Western Association of Architects (the group's third) must have expected the keynote remarks directly to address their technical expertise, their understandings of composition, or at least the state of their profession. Were they to ask—and they must have— Sullivan would have insisted that if they knew better, they would be satisfied with his remarks' relevance to their cause.

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[35] Machor, 102. Sullivan reportedly sent a draft of the speech to Whitman himself to pay his respects, to insist on their kinship as poets, and to ask for his comments on the essay. Sullivan would later quote from Whitman in his 1889 essay, "The Artistic Use of the Imagination." He also read an entire section of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* as exemplary of the true artist's necessary connection with their natural surroundings. That speech was originally published in *Building* 11 (October 19, 1889): 129-130. It can be found in Twombly, ed., *Public Papers*, 62-66. Twombly notes that the editors of *Building* omitted the Whitman passage.

The speech opens with the "tender light of dawning spring" emanating from "the ardent sun," which, "flushed and impatient, pulsates hotly toward the summit of the heavens," melting winter snows and waking up the earth—and with the earth, the soul.[36] It presents the seasons, and indeed life itself, as circular and progressive, not as linear or even repetitive—spring emerges to thaw the ice of winter and to best previous springtimes in its verdant splendor. "Through lesser springtime…courses mysterious life, unfolding toward greater, ever greater, ever broadening springtimes," with each most recent thaw more fully "comprehending and so transmitting the past, fulfilling the present, gestating the future—ever fecund and joyous."[37] Creativity emerges along with spring from the cold dark of winter, signaling and even bringing about a "melodious succession" of times, peoples, and artistic styles. The disciplinary term "art history" would likely have struck Sullivan as wrong-headed. It was not the past of art but the rhythms of time that the artist with something important to say must heed. Inspiration lived and died on the turning of these rhythms. That is to say, it depended utterly on its temporal context.

"Of such [rhythms] are we," Sullivan told his fellow Western architects. "High above our struggling, joyous verdure, our parting mists, our urgent and propulsive dawn, posed serenely, soaring ever toward the azure heights rises the immortal spirit of man… a spring song to the waiting soul, a hymn of praise to nature's bounty, a sweet and unnamed outburst of itself."[38] The evocative image of man's spirit soaring into "azure heights" must have resonated with his audience, who as architects working in and around Chicago would have been well aware of the recent applications of steel foundations and scaffolding, as early as the 1860s, in the construction

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[36] Louis Sullivan, "Inspiration," in Twombly, ed., *Public Papers*, 11-12.

[37] Sullivan, "Inspiration," 12-13.

[38] Ibid., 12.

of tall buildings. The other image hinted at here, one Sullivan would explore in his next delivered

speech in 1888, is one of pine trees as unique "individuals" within their taxonomic lineage.[39]

"Ever unsatisfied" to merely identify the pines' traits, Sullivan argues, the right-minded

investigator would see that each pine tree "possesses a subtile [sic] and permanent charm of

personality." In discovering this, the investigator "draw[s] nearer to nature's heart."[40] The

energies spilling out in the turning of the seasons take on unique forms as they course through

human, arboreal, and architectural bodies. Each achieves a uniqueness that inheres in their being,

which Sullivan interchangeably calls "style" and "soul."[41] Each is "an outburst of itself."[42]

These remarks on the height of pine trees constitute the first iteration of Sullivan's

fascination with the metaphysics of height. This fascination would continue through much of his

career, manifesting in a preoccupation with youth and virility, as I will show in the next section,

and with male bodies specifically, as I will show in the final section. Some of his major buildings

of the 1880s anticipate the ways he later linked nature and bodies, including a balance of angular

volumes and curvaceous ornament, which he saw as representing the masculine and feminine

energies in architecture. Take, for example, the nine-story Wainwright Building, completed in St.

Louis in 1892. The tall, smooth terra cotta surface covering its base dominates the sidewalk,

minimizing and dominating passing pedestrians (Fig. 10). As the façade moves upward, its unity

dissolves into a series of vertical supports that, on the street-level, are so pronounced as to evoke

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[39] Recent historical research has shown that trees of all kinds had quite a vibrant cultural life in the nineteenth century—e.g. the Civil War was often visualized as a struggle between Pine and Palm. Trees had myriad and contested meanings, but their usefulness as symbols emerged in their propensity to naturalize the discourses employing them. See Deagan Miller, "Reading Trees in Nature's Nation: Toward a Field Guide to Sylvan Literacy in the Nineteenth-Century United States," *American Historical Review* 121(4) (October 2016): 1120.

[40] Sullivan, "Style," in *Public Papers*, 50.

[41] Ibid., 49-50.

[42] Ibid., 50.

the idea of height itself, as well as to exaggerate the impression the nine-story building gives as it looms over the sidewalk (Fig. 11). Accenting the bottom of each support as well as each of the façade's windows and the main doorway are small linear wreaths of ornament, set in different patterns on each story. Collectively, these small strips of detail echo the much larger horizontal band of "modular" ornament at the building's capital (Fig. 12).[43] From the ground level, the ornamental features at the building's top look like fine-grained clouds; in actuality, they are comprised of repeating modules: plant stems and leaves curling around each other to form semi-circles of stems crowned and bookended by leaves.

For Sullivan, his early mentor Frank Furness, and many others, the proper solution to design problems was, as Furness himself advocated, to turn to the forms "daily presented" to humans by nature.[44] Scholars like Lauren Weingarden have interpreted their mutual vision as progress toward a transcendentalist ornamental design,[45] but Sullivan's treatment of the Wainwright Building displays just as much a commitment to shaping ornament in tandem with the qualities of the building's body—its height, its girth, and the angular shapes that surround and support its ornamental detail. The Wainwright's ornament performs the same visual operation as the mass of the building does; its patterns are repetitive like the seasons and recursive like the leaves and branches of trees. The Guaranty (1896) and Condict (1899) buildings maintain the same aesthetic, with the abstract turning of the leaves atop the

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[43] According to online dictionaries the term modular means composed of a set of independent units that "fit together to form a more complex structure." My use of the term "capital," as well as base and shaft, is a concession to the theory that many office buildings of Sullivan's era were designed with the structure of the classical column in mind.

[44] Frank Furness, "Hints for Designers," in *Furness: The Complete Works*, ed. George E. Thomas, Jeffrey A. Cohen, and Michael J. Lewis (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991), 348.

[45] Sullivan, "Tall Office Building," 112-4. See also my introduction, p. 1. Despite Sullivan's apparent prohibition on "dissenting lines," these buildings are also consistently listed among his greatest successes as an ornamentalist.

Wainwright having made way for the next heralds of art's great Spring: the row of angelic figures emerging from the Condict's vertical supports (Fig. 13 & 14).

My analysis of Sullivan's progressive ornamentation across the 1880s suggests that his solutions to the design problem of the tall, tree-like building operated on the level of structural as well as ornamental detail. Sullivan's interest in recasting the "stone and mortar" of buildings as trees or, as I will discuss in the next section, as human bodies, imbues angles, bricks, and stone with the metaphysical significance that comes with embodying a natural entity. Though a properly "virile" system of ornament is not itself a spiritual good for Sullivan, it would act to uplift the "spiritual and emotional quality" that "resides *in the mass of a building …* from the level of triviality to the heights of dramatic expression."[46]

IV. The "Active Powers" of Architecture

The real value of height as a form of exaltation, enhanced through an accompanying ornamental scheme, would for Sullivan emerge organically from an architect's "protean thought and action… roused and sustained in eagerness by the touch and impulse of desire."[47] Though speeches like "Inspiration" and their corresponding ornamental projects found their literary voice in Whitman's poetry, they also evoke shades of Emerson's quasi-evolutionary thought concerning human endeavor. Where Sullivan writes that "imagination rising quickly to the heights makes thoughtful action magically vocal and complete," we are reminded of Emerson's famous text, *Nature*, where he avers that "the intellectual and the active powers seem to succeed each other" in art. "Therefore does beauty, which [comes] unsought… remain for the

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[46] Sullivan, "Ornament in Architecture," in *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings*, 187, 190 (emphasis in original).

[47] Sullivan, "Inspiration," 16.

apprehension and pursuit of the intellect; and then, again, in its turn, of the active power."[48] With

cyclical rhythms foregrounded in both texts, here Emerson and Sullivan both set up beauty,

intellectual activity, and action as a natural progression of the forces of human life and the

inevitable result of the forces of nature. Emerson's version of the eternal cycle, in which

"nothing divine dies," is not merely about "barren contemplation," but more importantly "new

creation."[49] This is how Emerson manages to link beauty—through its first cause, nature—to

what was new about his context. People "no longer [wait] for favoring gales, but by means of

steam" they make real "the fable of Aeolus's bag, and [carry] the two and thirty winds in the

boiler of [their] boat."[50] Even the most utilitarian of arts, Emerson recognized, provided unique

opportunities to project, or at least exhibit, the power latent in human ingenuity and in so doing

to meld the material and mythological. Far from abandoning the material world, as the oft-

bandied label "idealist" would suggest, Emerson finds a great deal of potential for enchantment

in the grit of American ingenuity.[51] Emerson is known among art historians primarily for linking

both high art and industrial craft with the divine potential of the human mind and of human

progress.[52] True to form, in *Nature* he did not readily separate the "natural" or "spiritual" from

the technological.

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[48] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, in *Essays and Lectures: Nature; Addresses and Lectures; First and Second Series; Representative Men; English Traits; The Conduct of Life* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1983), 18.

[49] Emerson, *Nature*, 18.

[50] Ibid., 12.

[51] Some scholars have qualified Emerson's status as an exemplary American thinker by referring to his involvement in the colonial and race relations of his time. See Colleen C. O'Brien, "'What Mischief Would Follow?': The Emersons, Haiti, and Romantic Racialism," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 58(2) (2012): 219-254.

[52] See also Menocal, *Architecture as Nature*; and Madden, "Transcendental Influences." Indeed Emerson appears as the "gravitational center" for American Transcendentalism on the whole in literary studies and the broader historiography on Transcendentalism. See Albert J. Von Frank, "On Transcendentalism: Its History and Uses," *Modern Intellectual History* 6(1) (2009): 191.

Emerson is particularly important in helping us understand how Sullivan came to find a meeting point between Transcendentalist thought and architectural theory, and sculptor Horatio Greenough represents the first link between the two. In his influential collection of essays on architecture, *Form and Function*,[53] Greenough, an avid reader of Emerson, defined organic architecture as architecture developed according to the functional problems a given building was meant to resolve. Rather than advocate for certain proper patterns and proportions in building design, as European architects often did, Greenough argued that "the law of adaptation is the fundamental law of nature in all structures."[54] Evoking a Darwinian evolutionary framework, Greenough's comments mirror Emerson's claim that "arising out of eternal Reason, one and perfect, whatever is beautiful rests on the foundation of the necessary."[55]

Inspired by Greenough and his resonances with Emerson, Sullivan's early speeches constitute an exemplary case study in what architectural historians call the theory of "organic" architecture. As clearly illustrated in Sullivan's early writings, in addition to being a method for design organicism was a way of thinking, writing, and speaking about architecture. It was a series of ideas aimed at shaping design. It was also a way of reframing architectural history and practice in terms of its consonance with a transcendent principle of individualism and, on a civilizational level, of progress. Louis Sullivan would come to understand and deploy this principle in dynamic ways. For Sullivan, nature—along with its "Inscrutable Spirit"—would

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[53] *Form and Function* was a collection of essays written and published separately before Greenough's death in 1852 and collected under their current title in 1947.

[54] Quoted in Mark Mumford, "Form Follows Nature: The Origins of American Organic Architecture," *Journal of Architectural Education* 42(3) (Spring 1989): 26.

[55] Ibid. This particular link between the beautiful and the necessary would, later in the century, inspire the writings of Claude Fayette Bragdon, a young architect from Rochester, New York. Bragdon's *The Beautiful Necessity: Essays on Architecture and Theosophy* reveals not only his influence by theosopher Annie Besant but also his admiration for Louis Sullivan, whom he visited in Chicago in the 1890s and brought along with him to one of Besant's lectures.

provide the honest seeker with aesthetic taste and moral judgment. For Sullivan, leaves and trees were "primordial forms" ripe for representation, ultimately featuring in his later, broader commentaries on the character of civilizations, from Egypt and Rome to Western Europe to the United States. To the extent that Sullivan's ideas remained consistent as they traversed scales big and small, they anchored themselves in notions of "growth and decay, the elemental rhythms of birth and death."[56] As art historian Lauren Weingarden points out, this interpretation of architecture is distinctly Emersonian in its attempt to unify the fine and utilitarian arts and to use nature as a "picture-language," a representation of deeper truths.[57]

Greenough and Emerson shared a concern for what Emerson called the "real foundations" of human life, which they specifically distinguished from institutional knowledge production associated with doctrinaire Old World religious institutions.[58] For Emerson, tradition and institutional structure stymied life-affirming expression, restricting the vocabulary of life and meaning to those that custom and liturgy provided—a poor substitute for "the sentiments" that inspired, among other things, religious art and architecture.[59] These real foundations, more urgent than priestly dictates and more fundamental than traditions, would buttress a morally and

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[56] Quoted in Weingarden, 19-20; original in Sullivan, "Kindergarten Chats," 125.

[57] Weingarden, *19th Century Poetics*, 21-22. At 22, Weingarden quotes Emerson's notion of "picture-language"; this concept originates in Emerson's "The Poet," in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1844), 1983.

[58] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Religion," in *Essays and Lectures*, 883. See also his "Harvard Divinity School Address."

[59] Emerson, "Religion," 883-4, makes a fascinating analogy to marriage: "It is with religion as with marriage. A youth marries in haste; afterwards, when his mind is opened to the reason of the conduct of life, he is asked, what he thinks of the institution of marriage… 'I should have much to say,' he might reply, 'if the question were open, but I have a wife and children, and all question is closed for me.'"

socially significant art free of the yoke of tradition, and bound instead to nature.[60] Greenough

argues in a similar vein that, if American artists were content to look to Europe for guidance in

the arts and accept Old World wisdom as truth, they "might as well [propose] a national church

establishment."[61] In Americans' blind acceptance of received aesthetic principles, "systems and

manner take the place of sound precept. Faith is insisted on rather than works. The pupils are

required to be not only docile, but submissive. They are not free."[62] Europe and "religion" serve

Emerson and Greenough as dramatic foils for American artists who sought inspiration not in

their craft's past, but within themselves, their continent, and their cities.

It is not enough to claim that Emerson, Greenough, or Sullivan seem to espouse

American individualism. If Emerson or Greenough meant to stake claim to individualism, they

did so in a very specific space at the meeting point of religion and the arts. Acknowledging the

existence of this intersection in their writings is crucial to understanding the full social and

cosmic impact that Sullivan and others expected "organic" forms to have as they attempted to

cultivate an American style. For Sullivan as for Greenough, European art was form without

function, religion without inspiration. It stood as a dramatic foil to the evolution necessary for

the emergence of inspired style. The idea of American art as an "organic" enterprise was thus

closely linked to Northeastern elites' preoccupations with finding within individuals spiritual

alternatives to churchly intellectualism, at least in the sense that the path artists and seekers alike

were to follow was one of invention rather than imitation.

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[60] I would argue that the "foundations" architects like Sullivan latched onto were more important to them when considered in and of themselves—linking them overtly to a tradition would have, in Sullivan's mind, denuded their spiritual significance.

[61] Greenough, *Form and Function*, 43.

[62] Ibid., 44.

V. Between Emerson and Sullivan: American Transcendentalism and American Architecture

The Unitarian movement from which Emerson hailed is probably the first place most religious historians would look to explicate individual invention as a religious idea in the nineteenth century United States. Most Unitarians and Transcendentalists showed minimal interest in Greenough's thought relative to Emerson, but many of them supported the notion that breaking with certain kinds of tradition, particularly those associated with Old World religious institutions and aesthetic practices, would allow for a greater appreciation of both male and female individuals as godly in their capacities.[63] Among that group was William Henry Furness, the leader of Philadelphia's Transcendentalist salon, a life-long friend of Emerson and father to Frank Furness, Sullivan's first architectural mentor.[64]

Emerson and Rev. Furness attended Harvard Divinity School together, parting company when Rev. Furness moved to Philadelphia in 1825 with his new bride, Annis P. Jenks, to lead the Philadelphia chapter of the Unitarian Society.[65] Rev. Furness often shared his love (and his translations) of German idealist and aesthetic philosophy with Emerson through private correspondence, and between poetry readings, Bible studies, and frequent visits from Emerson as well as noted abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Lucretia Mott, the Furness family parlor became the center of Philadelphia's liberal intellectual life in the antebellum period. At the same time that Emerson was sending the final drafts of *Nature* off for publication in 1836, Furness was

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[63] These debates occurred mostly among males, but in a letter, Emerson enumerated various artistic and spiritual figures according to whether they represented the "male" or "female" energies present in America. Greenough was listed as representing a female energy.

[64] See Ralph Waldo Emerson and William H. Furness, *Records of a Lifelong Friendship, 1807-1882*, ed. Horace Howard Furness (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910).

[65] Joseph Priestley founded the Philadelphia Unitarian Society in 1794. See Michael J. Lewis, *Frank Furness: Architecture and the Violent Mind* (New York: Norton, 2001), chap. 1.

writing his "Remarks on the Four Gospels," which earned him the scorn of some of his former Harvard Divinity classmates and unkind comparisons to Emerson. In "Remarks," Furness argues that Jesus was a human being and that Jesus's propensity for "unprecedented wisdom and greatness always speaking and acting from within" stemmed not from divine parentage but from "the very manner of Nature."[66] Two years later, Emerson argued in his "Harvard Divinity School Address" that Jesus "belonged to the true race of prophets" because of his singular ability to "estimate the greatness of man."[67] Furness and Emerson maintained a close personal and intellectual dialogue before, during, and after these well-known texts were written. The exact nature of their influence on each other's writings is unclear, but they shared two important concerns: the individual as creator, and Jesus Christ as the individual par excellence. We are reminded of the lonesome scenario in which Laugier's "primitive man" founded architecture, as well as Sullivan's persistent erasure of his longtime partner, Dankmar Adler, from post-facto accounts of his success.[68] A large part of public consciousness today of genius architects— including Sullivan's own pupil Frank Lloyd Wright—is the result of Sullivan's and Wright's collision with transcendentalism and with each other in the 1870s and 1880s.

Rev. Furness's enthusiasm for aesthetic philosophy influenced all four of his children, especially Frank, though it is not entirely clear whether or in what specific ways Frank Furness

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[66] Quoted in Mark B. Orlowski, "Frank Furness: Architecture and the Heroic Ideal" (Ph.D. diss. University of Michigan, 1986), 16.

[67] Orlowski, 17. Orlowski contends that Furness's account of Jesus influenced Emerson's "Harvard Divinity School Address." His evidence lies in the two texts' similarities, but he offers no records of conversations between the two authors around these specific works.

[68] Not only did Sullivan attribute many of the firm's buildings to his own genius, but he also fudged the process by which he and Adler came to be partners in his 1924 memoir, *Autobiography of an Idea*. He writes in the autobiography that he and Adler met by happenstance and created a partnership of equals. In fact, Adler had been running a successful practice since the mid-1870s, and Sullivan had bounced between several temporary drafting jobs in Chicago before landing a permanent position at Adler's firm in 1878. Where Sullivan's account states that he was a full partner in the firm by 1879 or 1880, his employment records suggest that in fact he was a draftsman until 1879, then a junior partner until around 1883, when he was finally made full partner.

directed Sullivan towards the writings of Emerson, Greenough, or his father.[69] Frank showed a promising inclination towards the arts as a child, but almost none for his authorities at school, an attitude that Rev. Furness was comfortable cultivating and that bonded Frank and Sullivan as colleagues.[70] Furness collected several medals in service to the Union Army in the Civil War, and after traveling the American West for several years he returned to Philadelphia, opening up an architectural practice and joining the newly founded Philadelphia branch of the American Institute of Architects in 1868. Rev. Furness played a continuing, if minor, role, in Frank's career, giving a lecture at the AIA's 1870 annual meeting on architecture and German idealism.[71] For his part, Frank wrote very little except to urge artists to look for the "everyday forms" nature presents to its viewers for aesthetic ideas.[72]

Emerson and Rev. Furness's shared thoughts on art and spirit offered aesthetic cues as to how their lofty ideals might emerge in artistic practice, cues that Sullivan took up in dynamic ways. It is easy, for example, to transpose the image of the tree—a singular organism, feeding on planetary energies by reaching downward into the earth as well as up towards the sky—onto the theologically and aesthetically-inflected ideas of the individual circulating in transcendentalist circles. Sullivan's concern with the material valences certain built forms could carry linked directly to his exposure to transcendentalist notions of progress—of the dialectical "intellectual and active powers." In an 1886 letter to Walt Whitman, sent along with a copy of his speech

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[69] All of Annis and Rev. William's children showed a great inclination toward the arts. Their eldest, William Henry, Jr. (1827-1867) became a painter; Annis Lee Furness (1830-1908) became a translator of German literature; and Horace Howard Furness (1833-1912) became an eminent scholar of Shakespeare at the University of Pennsylvania.

[70] The first and only formal architectural training program Furness did seek out, a relatively informal workshop with the famous Richard Morris Hunt, ended within two years on account of Furness's joining the Union Army in 1861.

[71] Orlowski narrativizes this ten-year stretch of Furness's life in chapters two through six of his dissertation. I have not yet been able to obtain a copy of Furness's talk at the AIA.

[72] Furness, "Hints to Designers," in *Frank Furness: The Complete Works*, 358.

"Inspiration," Sullivan extolled his honored recipient as "a man who can resolve himself into unison with Nature and Humanity … who can blend the soul harmoniously with materials."[73] Whitman worked with words in just the way Sullivan, as an architect, desired to work with building materials.

Sullivan's vocabulary of height and exaltation remained relatively undeveloped in early essays like "Inspiration," but they would reappear ten years later in "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered." While the later essay weaves some of the motifs elaborated in "Inspiration" into detailed considerations of the structure, material, and function of tall office buildings, the younger Sullivan was content to claim that his poetry was born among the trees and within the turning of the seasons. Sullivan's comparison of buildings to trees and—later in life—to human bodies stems from the transcendentalist focus on the divine individual and the unfolding, recurrent cosmos. If, as Lewis Mumford has argued, these musings did not amount to a "coherent aesthetic theory which was directly applicable to architecture,"[74] at least they provided a foundation on which the idea of organic architecture could rest.

VI. Conclusion

It would limit our understanding of Sullivan and his work to insist that that he was a "religious" person per se, that he was a part of a "religious movement," or that he "had a religion" easily identifiable in his texts. Sullivan was an architect. Architecture was for Sullivan a mirror for individuals' and societies' self-understanding and self-reckoning and a vehicle for

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[73] Quoted in Weingarden, "Louis Sullivan's Emersonian Reading," 102-3.

[74] Lewis Mumford, *The Highway and the City* (New York: Brace & World, 1963), 27; see also Naomi Tanabe Uechi, *Evolving Transcendentalism in Literature and Architecture: Frank Furness, Louis Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013), 19.

whatever expressions the divine may seek on earth. In 1935 Hugh Morrison wrote in his influential biography of Sullivan: "coming to a general statement of Sullivan's theory of architecture…it must be reiterated that we are dealing with something comparable to a religion. Sullivan's conception of architectural design is far more vital than mechanical or utilitarian functionalism on the one hand, or than 'abstract composition' on the other. It takes on the dimensions of a whole life."[75] "To understand Sullivan's ideas concerning architecture" is, for Morrison, to understand Sullivan's "conception of God, his ideas of man and human powers, and his beliefs about social order" that is "indissolubly fused with his ideas of architecture."[76]

In this section I have explored the origins and some of the components of that "indissoluble" fusion: Sullivan and his teachers' engagements with some of the best-known figures in the American transcendentalist pantheon. Sullivan often argued that the intellectual projects underlying architects' creations offered a clear window into their attitudes toward democracy and human potential and thus towards America as a site of artistic, and spiritual, invention. The character of America's buildings, then, embodied the potentialities and pitfalls of American society writ-large. If we do not keep Morrison's vocabulary of "religion," and I think it is hard to keep, we might opt for a term like "force." For Sullivan, buildings did not merely stage the unfolding drama of American capitalistic democracy, they acted in it. The next section examines how Sullivan imagined that action, and in what contexts architectural practice would prove most effective in alleviating modernity's moral and aesthetic malaise.

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[75] Morrison, 206.

[76] Ibid.

PART II: Architectural Ideas and the Sentiments of Development in the Great West

I. The Matter of Architecture

In my introduction, I laid out the argument that scholars of material religion, religion and modernism, and American religious history should reexamine the frameworks used to interpret modernist architecture as "religious" or "spiritual." In Section One, I traced the genealogy of Sullivan's nature-based spiritual language to transcendentalist writers and architects who trained Sullivan in his craft. That genealogy was meant to address one of two problems that have emerged around my broad contention that historians of American religion should find Sullivan relevant to their narrations of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century: how can we talk about Sullivan as "religious," or involved with religion, when no evidence exists that he ever attended any religious services and that he remained almost entirely separate from denominational life and the conversations around that life? This section addresses a second problem stemming from my understanding of Sullivan's relationship to Chicago: how can religious studies scholars talk cogently about a city's architecture, and indeed a city's whole history, as "shot through" with religious valences and spiritual sentiments?[77] By "religious valences," I mean linkages of urban space to widely-recognized religious identities—Catholic,

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[77] By "shot through," I mean interlocked with and interminably affected by what we understand to be "spiritual." Here I refer to several discussions of the phrase "shot through" that took place in Elizabeth Olson's seminar on the Geographies of Religion, and in texts by Kim Knott that we read there. See Kim Knott, *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis* (London: Equinox, 2005); see also Knott, "From Locality to Location and Back Again: A Journey in the Spatial Study of Religion," *Religion* 39 (2009): 154-160.

Protestant, Jew.[78] It is not those specific valences, but vaguer and harder-to-trace "spiritual sentiments" surrounding Chicago and its architecture that I aim to examine here.

The two examples of spiritual sentiments I employ here are: (1) Sullivan's enduring reputation as a "prophet of modern architecture," and (2) the city of Chicago's reputation as a predestined monument to Anglo-Americans' triumph over indigenous peoples, over European cultural influence, and over nature. This section is thus about how Sullivan elevated Chicago and how Chicago elevated Sullivan, the historiography on each elevating the other from the level of crude economics to the lofty heights of sentiment and, sometimes, divine destiny. To view Sullivan's ideas as removed from the forms of westward expansion, industrial capitalism, or the ideas about cities and nature that attended and reinforced those phenomena is to miss something critical about the religious context of the late-nineteenth century United States. Through the work of art historians like Carl Condit and Hugh Morrison, Sullivan has gained a reputation as the spiritual leader of the "Chicago School" cohort of American modernists, who according to their admirers forged a new aesthetic based on unprecedented and therefore socially powerful forms.[79] By the end of his life, Sullivan had planted his flag in the pitched battle between nature's spirit and capital, and he staked his reputation on being on the side of art, of spirit. My argument in this section is that there is no talking about Sullivan's "spirit"—or, indeed, American architecture's at the turn of the twentieth century—without talking about Chicago as its catalyst and provocateur.

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[78] See Robert A. Orsi, ed., *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Livezy, *Public Religion and Urban Transformation: Faith in the City* (New York: New York University Press, 2000);Timothy Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

[79] Carl W. Condit, *The Chicago School of Architecture: A History of Commercial and Public Building in the Chicago Area, 1875-1925* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964 [1952]).

My own commitments warn me against glorifying the nineteenth century titans of industry who financed the architecture of the Chicago School as a whole with the labels of spirituality and religion. Yet there is very little historical analysis of Sullivan that does not verge on hagiography, and there could be very little hagiography of Sullivan had he not made deliberate attempts to frame and memorialize his own career, particularly towards its end. I thus begin my analysis with Sullivan's last written work, *The Autobiography of an Idea* (1924), a highly imaginative memoir that spiritualizes his quest for a new architecture and illuminates what Chicago offered to the religious imagination of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century United States.

II. City, Country, and the Naturalized Life

Sullivan lived the last year of his life in a cheap hotel in Chicago. It had been almost twenty-five years since the partnership that earned him his fame was dissolved, nearly twenty years since his last major project, the Schlesinger and Mayer Store (1901-4), was completed (Fig. 15), and over five years since he had sold the majority of his belongings at auction in an attempt to set his finances straight. It had not worked. Able to secure only a few commissions since Schlesinger and Mayer, Sullivan depended on friends and former colleagues for money and on alcohol to mitigate the continuing threat of nervous breakdown.[80] Though he maintained a

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[80] A number of theories exist to explain why Sullivan struggled so deeply to continue his career after his partnership with Dankmar Adler dissolved. The predominant theory is that Sullivan was quite difficult to work with, unable to compromise his principles to serve the needs of his clients and unwilling to hear them out. According to this theory, Adler was the conciliatory partner, the fixer who enabled Sullivan's tortured genius. An opposing theory posits that Sullivan was never as special an architect as he is remembered. His genius was solely confined to ornament, while all of the structural innovations associated with Sullivan were in reality Adler's. Supporting evidence for this theory includes the fact that Sullivan was approached by a great many wealthy Chicagoans who hoped he could design a house for him. Robert Twombly's 1986 biography of Sullivan details these commissions and the rejection of his designs, one after another, from all of his domestic projects (and a few of his commercial ones as well). A third theory, which comes to me second-hand through someone who knows one of the chief executors of Frank Lloyd Wright's estate, is that Sullivan struggled throughout his life with a particular kind of mental illness that left him ill-suited to work in collaboration with others, and this mental illness got worse as Sullivan grew older and began to drink more heavily. Apparently this was Wright's theory, though like many of Sullivan's admirers, he never talked

significant following among organizations like the Young Draftsmen of Chicago, Sullivan's

vision for American architecture seemed in danger of dissipating before the very forces with

which Sullivan had contended. Exhibits on his work, framed as retrospectives, were held as early

as 1915, while Sullivan was very much alive and looking for commissions.[81] In pondering these

facts, on top of his immediate anxieties surrounding money, food, and drink, Sullivan may have

felt that he was the still-living subject of a very grand funeral.

Two breaths of fresh air came in 1923, the final year of his life: the first was a

commission from the Art Institute of Chicago (established in 1879) to create a study of his

"system of architectural ornament," complete with drawings and explications. The second was a

publishing deal to write a memoir. Sullivan took up that task with gusto, writing 330 pages in

under a year for publication during the year of his death, 1924, under the title *Autobiography of*

an Idea. As its title suggests, Sullivan wanted to tell a story about his philosophical and spiritual

trajectory from youth to prominence. The text chronicles, in a third-person voice, his childhood,

his educational experiences, and his career up until 1893. It contains no hint of the fall from

grace signaled that year by a market crash, and then two years later with the dissolution of his

partnership with Adler.[82] His autobiographical reflections, positive and negative, form a narrative

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explicitly about this period in Sullivan's life. He only wrote about it bitterly in his memoir of his time in Sullivan's office, *Genius and the Mobocracy* (New York: Horizon, 1971).

[81] Van Zanten, 7.

[82] Sullivan's narrations are notoriously unreliable as concerns other architects and architectural projects. The key example here is his treatment of the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. In *Autobiography* he frames the event as a dire setback for the advancement of American art and architecture. Yet Sullivan was asked, and agreed without complaint, to design its Transportation Building, which was among the most beloved of the whole affair. At the height of his career in 1893, Sullivan could well have afforded to refuse the project but, as some scholars have suggested, he hoped that his role would increase in breadth and prestige as the event planning proceeded. See David H. Crook, "Louis Sullivan and the Golden Doorway," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 26(4) (Dec. 1967): 250-258.

of his own enchanted life and of architecture's contributions to commercial capitalism in

Chicago.

Rather than concluding with its author's end-of-life misfortunes, *Autobiography* ends

with a hopeful, but barbed, account of the development of Chicago architecture from its birth in

the skyscraper ("something new under the sun") to its supposed death at the 1893 World's Fair.

A climactic moment from *Autobiography*'s concluding chapter is worth quoting at length:

> The passion to *sell* is the impelling power in American life. Manufacturing is subsidiary
> and adventitious. But selling must be based on a semblance of service—the satisfaction
> of a need. The need [for the skyscraper] was there, the capacity to satisfy was there, but
> contact was not there. Then came the flash of imagination which saw the single thing.
> The trick was turned; and there swiftly came into being something new under the sun. For
> the true steel-frame structure stands unique in the flowing of man and his works; a
> brilliant material example of man's capacity to satisfy his needs through the exercise of
> his natural powers.[83]

Though the preceding five pages describe the technological development and architectural

innovation that would make the steel-framed skyscraper possible as a slow, evolutionary process,

Sullivan quickly turns the story on its head, arguing that its creation comes "swiftly" in a "flash

of imagination." This turn was set up a few pages earlier, as Sullivan described his tutelage at the

hands of a French mathematician, Monsieur Clopet, who was fascinated by "rules that admit of

no exception," which is to say, rules that accord with the principles by which nature itself

functions. Sullivan hints at these principles as he contrasts "selling" with "manufacture." Mere

manufacture may be senseless, causeless, and unfettered from common sense. It is mechanical

without the assurance of something more. Selling, on the other hand, satisfies a need and thus

represents a function cloaked in a commodity form. That form must wed itself to needs, causes,

and principles, not unlike the way architecture's forms must wed themselves to buildings'

intended functions. As awkward as the distinction between selling and manufacture may seem to

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[83] Sullivan, *Autobiography*, 310 (emphasis in original).

a twenty-first century reader, Sullivan's insistence on its reality shows one of the ways the idea of spirit makes its way into the story of modernism—through the elevation of forms and processes that signal "the flash of inspiration," and not merely production and exchange.

For Sullivan, time spent in natural surroundings fostered inspiration. At the beginning of *Autobiography* he describes his childhood in rural Massachusetts, where he and his father, Patrick Sullivan, would fish and swim almost every day. Indeed the rural geographies of his childhood and the urban ones of his adult life each informed his reading of the other, perhaps leading him to follow many urban boosters and historians in associating Chicago with nature.[84] *Autobiography* begins with extended reflections on his connection with nature as a child.[85] Sullivan is quick to mystify his father's bodily movements. "He [Patrick] must have been a pagan, this man, for in him nature's beauty, particularly in its more grandiose moods, inspired an ecstasy, a sort of waking trance, a glorious mystic worship."[86] A precocious and excitable child himself, according to *Autobiography*, Sullivan "would sit beside his father on a great boulder watching him fish with pole and line. He would remain patiently there, inspirited by the salt breeze, listening to the joyous song of the sea as the ground swells reared and dashed upon the rocks with a mighty shouting…It seemed to lull him. It was mighty. It belonged to him. It was

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[84] Chicago's official motto is "urbs in horto"—the city in the garden. See William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991); see also Peter A. Coclanis, "Urbs in Horto," *Reviews in American History* 20(1) (March 1992): 14-20, for a brash and snarky review of Cronon's book. Coclanis wrangles with Cronon over his "(Birken-)stock condemnations of accumulation" that harbor resentment of "man's need for cities" as well as apparent ignorance with respect to Marxian renderings of the town-and-country narrative. For me, this debate rings true in terms of Sullivan, who never faced up to his own contributions to capitalist accumulations and socially-violent urban development, but rather presumed to condemn it on the basis of its not taking the right forms.

[85] Virtually all of these reflections center around Sullivan's father. His mother receives short shrift in *Autobiography*, appearing only in a highly sentimental, domestic role, which was unlikely given that both Sullivan's parents worked in Boston.

[86] Sullivan, *Autobiography*, 14.

his sea. It was *his* father fishing."[87] These moments create a circular structure within *Autobiography*, returning when Sullivan discusses the peak of his success in Chicago, looking out over Lake Michigan from his office window. "Then, as now, was the great Lake with its far horizon, the sweeping curve of its southern shore, its many moods, which every day he viewed from his [office] windows…In such momentary trance his childhood would return to him with its vivid dream of power, a dream which now had grown to encompass the world."[88] Indeed, in his entire residency in Chicago, including his impoverished later years, Sullivan never lived more than a few blocks away from Lake Michigan, except when visiting his summer home in Mississippi (which he designed and built for himself in 1890). Though the Lake makes no appearances in earlier speeches, in *Autobiography* Sullivan asserts that his work fed off the Lake's "power," elevating his purpose to one that "encompass[es] the world."

As the title of his memoir suggests, Sullivan was intent on crafting a version of himself in which he and his architecture were tragic heroes, their careers and ideas felled by architects and citizens alike who excused bad and artless work in the name of efficiency and capital growth. The Louis Sullivan of *Autobiography* did not end his days in financial ruin and personal despair. He ended his days a proud soldier in the battle for architecture's soul. Sullivan never acknowledged it, but his work, like many of his contemporaries, was a key enabling feature in local capitalists' investments in spaces for the movement, storage, management, and sale of goods. The economy thus presided closely over his architectural career, shaping it in 1873 with an economic depression, and effectively ending it with another in 1893. He would never have thought to call the building industry his master. Nor did he have many specific negative

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[87] Ibid., 22-3 (emphasis in original).

[88] Ibid., 317.

comments on the consequences of industry for public life, as have many artists, writers, and scholars who have contributed to its reputation as the "city of big shoulders," the West's brutish city. In his accounts of Chicago and his time there, Sullivan saw Chicago's material provocations—particularly its visual ones—as sure signs of its transcendent promise.

III. "The Racket of Cities"

Sullivan entered the architectural profession less than ten years after its emergence as a professional discipline in the United States, and soon after he found himself at the cutting edge of the profession and of American urbanism overall. In January 1871 he entered (but did not finish) the architecture program at The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the first of its kind in the country (inaugurated in late 1865). After his time at Paris's Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Sullivan bounced around several temporary jobs in Chicago architecture firms before landing a more permanent arrangement in the firm of Dankmar Adler, where he became a full partner in 1883. He joined the American Institute of Architects (est. 1867), and in 1884 he was a founding member of the Western Association of Architects based in Chicago. Sullivan was present for, and often took delight in posing, many of the big questions these new organizations allowed their members to ask at their annual meetings. As the century moved forward, two sets of questions predominated in these settings: what is architecture's relationship to engineering, industry, and the country's commercial future, and what is to become of architecture's relationship to art? By the 1860s, metallurgists working on behalf of large corporate clients had induced chemical changes to wrought iron that that increased its tensile strength a hundredfold. Wrought iron, then steel, along with the increasing price-by-square-foot of urban properties and demand for rental office space, brought dramatic changes in the pace of construction and would come to shape the

visual dynamics of Chicago's architecture over the next five decades.[89] These new techniques

brought tourists from all over the country who sought to catch a glimpse of steel-framed

buildings with completed walls on top and bare foundations on the bottom. Viewers regularly

characterized this sight as preternatural, since all previously-existing construction technologies

required that a building's base be constructed first.[90]

At this time, the architectural industry was no less dependent on the heavy hand of

corporations than the timber or railroad industry. European commentators, already suspicious of

barbarism in the former colonies, strongly insisted that art and engineering were irreconcilably

separate and referred to many American architects, particularly in Chicago, as "builders" rather

than architects.[91] Careful to avoid the label of mere builder, the bulk of nineteenth century U.S.

architects searched for high-brow forms in history books, chiefly studies of neo-Classical

Renaissance and Arabesque architecture. It was Sullivan's fear, and canonical art history's

foregone conclusion, that the dual impulses toward corporate utilitarianism, on the one hand, and

historical eclecticism, on the other, pitted the power of the almighty dollar squarely against

people like Sullivan who sought to develop a uniquely American style based on natural law

rather than history. In the canon of architectural history, a small heroic cohort of Chicago

architects led by Sullivan finally faced head-on the structural and artistic problems posed by the

"utilitarian demands" of industry "with relentless clarity and insight."[92] What both spirit and

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[89] Thomas J. Misa presents a detailed narrative of iron's development and use in railroad and architecture in *A Nation of Steel: The Making of Modern America, 1865-1925* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). See especially Misa, 1-91.

[90] Misa, 44.

[91] Joanna Merwood-Salisbury, "The First Chicago School and the Ideology of the Skyscraper," in Peggy Deamer, ed., *Architecture and Capitalism: 1845 to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 36.

[92] Condit, *The Chicago School*, 11-2.

society needed in this moment, according to the standard historical account, was a singular idea born of inspired vision in the place where innovation was destined to happen.

As Sullivan muses on the genesis of the skyscraper in *Autobiography*, he writes:

> The architects of Chicago welcomed the steel frame and did something with it. The architects of the East were appalled by it and could make no contribution to it… For the tall office building loses its validity when the surroundings are uncongenial to its nature; and when such buildings are crowded together upon narrow streets or lanes they become mutually destructive.[93]

For Sullivan the social problem most commonly associated with large, nineteenth-century cities, social and spiritual decay, was not only a question of what went on in the spaces between the solid volumes of the built environment, but also of a populations' ability to flesh out built forms according to their condition (or, more realistically, to "appoint" architects to do so).[94] New York architects could not work with the skyscraper form specifically because New York's "narrow streets" and "crowded together" buildings prevented them from engaging it. The connection between the city and its architects' (or citizens') character here, which we might expect in a spiritually-oriented analysis of urban architecture, hardly registers at all in this passage. Yet there is an unseen connection between the city itself and its best minds that shapes the conditions of possibility, like the nutrients helping a seed to germinate.

The forms that could perform that work were fundamentally tied to the effects of capitalism and American expansion on urban form throughout the nineteenth century. William J. R. Curtis is worth quoting at length on this subject:

> Nothing expresses the instrumentalism of American growth more directly than the land ordinance grid of the late eighteenth century mapping out future territory for colonial expansion and occupation: a total abstraction ignoring differences of topography and obliterating all traces of indigenous memory. As a rule, the North American town was

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[93] Sullivan, *Autobiography*, 310.

[94] Sullivan refers to this "appointing" of architects in *Kindergarten Chats*, 34.

also laid out following a rectilinear system … and (unlike its Catholic colonial relative to the south) was based upon the principle of free-standing objects surrounded by spaces.[95]

Sullivan was very much a product of this development, as was Chicago. What Mark C. Taylor writes about Le Corbusier's relationship to European capitalism is also true of Sullivan's relation to capital's American incarnation: "In Le Corbusier's idealistic vision, the hand that inflicts the wound offers the cure. The arrival of industrial society holds the promise of a harmonious community…the architect must labor to *build* this ideal world."[96]

Taking inspiration from nature in that quest meant that, in most of his writings, Sullivan viewed America's "great cities"—including Chicago—with ambivalence. In an earlier manifesto on architecture and American life, Sullivan writes: "My conclusions have been reached not in the racket of cities, nor in the study of garrulous philosophies, nor in libraries, nor in schools, but in the bounteous open air, within the infinite peace of Nature."[97] Chicago and New York both confounded Sullivan's ideals for inspired architectural education and creation, each representing "the opposite poles" of American urban experience. Chicago's grotesque industrial landscape and New York's historical architecture were each "express[ions] of certain phases of degeneracy afflicting our land and people."[98] Even as his beloved site for architectural transformation, Chicago could not have afforded Sullivan what rural Massachusetts did in terms of commune with nature and with the natural capacities of his body. Just as he lived near the Lake for as long as was financially possible, so did he maintain membership in athletic clubs around the city—

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[95] Curtis, 34.

[96] Taylor, *Disfiguring*, 112 (emphasis in original).

[97] Sullivan, *Kindergarten Chats*, 114.

[98] Sullivan, *Chats*, 115.

usually in the company of colleagues—until his finances demanded he cut back on his club

memberships.

With terms like "degeneracy," Sullivan approaches a rather puritanical idiom of urban

condemnation. Ultimately, though, his idiom was not one of sin versus sanctity, but youth versus

old age, virility versus feebleness, strength versus sickliness. Chicago, unlike New York, was

young, and therefore visionaries like Sullivan had substantially more opportunities to impact its

growth than in that older, stodgier metropolis to the East.[99] Growth and age are crucial tropes in

defining this force, and they figure prominently in Sullivan's other attempt to offer a holistic

treatment of architecture and society, *Kindergarten Chats*.[100] Chicago was "young, clumsy, [and]

foolish," a fault vastly preferable to New York's feeble decrepitude. Only in a place like

Chicago, with its stubborn geology and the effluent lifeblood of lumber, grain, and cattle that

moved through it, could raw energy be harnessed in the name of the "Infinite Creator."

Autobiography and *Kindergarten Chats* both give the impression of a kind of energy particular to

the modern city, a kinetic, masculine force guided by nature, but deployed in the bustle of city

streets.[101]

Sullivan's late-1874 arrival in Chicago thrust him into a city still working feverishly to

make up ground lost in the 1871 fire in both commerce and construction. Sullivan writes of the

city in *Autobiography*: "Louis thought it all magnificent and wild: a crude extravaganza, and

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[99] See Robert Twombly, "Beyond Chicago: Louis Sullivan in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* 54(4) (November 1985): 409. The passage he quotes from *Kindergarten Chats* (at 109 and 111) reads: "New York is old—its sins are fixed, the damage is done. Chicago is young, clumsy, foolish, its architectural sins are unstable, captious, and fleeting; it can pull itself down and rebuild itself in a generation, if it will … There can be no new New York, but there may be a new Chicago."

[100] I will discuss in much greater detail this work's history, form, and content in the next chapter.

[101] Sullivan repeatedly refers to Nature as "her" in *Kindergarten Chats*,114, and elsewhere throughout the text. I set up this dichotomy in Sullivan's words with few qualms because his male body imagery is so pronounced in his discussion of urban buildings.

intoxicating rawness, a sense of big things to be done … The pavements were vile, because hastily laid; they erupted here and there and everywhere in ooze. Most of the buildings, too, were paltry … But in spite of the panic, there was a stir; an energy that made [Louis] tingle to be in the game."[102] This sensuous language, full of "rawness," "ooze," and "tingling," resembles the more erotic, bodily language he used in a previous text, *Kindergarten Chats*, to describe architecture. It signals vitality, potential, and openness to the effects of those eager to "be in the game." Chicago, by its nature, ascribes to the theory of growth Sullivan elaborated with respect to trees in his earlier writings. In the next section, I will examine how Sullivan follows the more sensuous, erotic dimensions of that theory in *Kindergarten Chats*, but for now note that the conflict Sullivan observes between Chicago builders and architects, on the one hand, and its stubborn geography, on the other, seems less like an impediment placed on human ingenuity by nature and more a spark preceding the "light of Imagination" he and other late-century Chicago architects thought of themselves as embodying.

IV. The "Daemon" of Innovation

For Sullivan architecture proved the most accurate measure of a society's social and spiritual vitality, as his comments on pavement and urban bustle suggest, but in the 1870s buildings likely seemed an afterthought to the other unprecedented feats that had guided Chicago through the last two decades' explosive population growth. By the end of the Civil War, Chicago had surpassed other Western commercial hopefuls like St. Louis and Cincinnati to fulfill the prophecies that real estate boosters had been expounding about each city. Chicago's emergence

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[102] Quoted in Morrison, 15-16. Eminent historian of the American West William Cronon discusses this quotation in his magnum opus, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 14. Chicago faced two distinct challenges in 1873: that of rebuilding the city center after the fire, and that of establishing an urban infrastructure in spite of an uncooperative terrain of soft, marshy soil.

as the destined hub for American expansion laid conceptually powerful foundations upon which

citizens and scholars could view Chicago's subsequent explosive development as the result of its

very own "Daemon: Innovation."[103] Indeed Chicago's development over the course of the

nineteenth century from a small hamlet on recently-captured indigenous territory to a powerful

industrial center inhabited by more than a million required infrastructural feats that would soon

become the stuff of Chicago lore in the eyes of citizens and scholars alike. In the late 1860s the

Chicago River's sanitation became an issue, as did Lake Michigan around the river's mouth. In

1868 engineers dug a tunnel nearly two miles long under the lake to pipe unpolluted, fresh water

to the municipal water company. In 1871, in an effort to preserve the lake's still-depreciating

water supply, engineers reversed the current of the Chicago River, taking the municipal sewage

away from the lake for just under a year, before gravity and natural currents set the river back on

its natural course.

These reflections on Chicago, especially in light of Sullivan's consistent fascination with

growth as ordained by nature and its spirit and in light of Chicago's reputation as a larger-than-

life, mythical metropolis, shed some light on the central question of this section: how are we to

talk about cities as forms rather than inert containers for people, as "religious" or even "spiritual"

in any way? Sullivan was neither the first nor the last to view the major American metropoles (at

the time, New York and Chicago) as fraught with power.[104] From the environment of the city as

a whole to the structural and ornamental components of individual buildings, Sullivan felt that

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[103] Lloyd Lewis and Henry Justin Smith, *Chicago: The History of its Reputation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1929), 10. See also ibid., 64, where Lewis and Smith discuss another self-identified Chicago "prophet," John Stephen Wright. Wright was an investor and risk-taker who made and then lost huge sums of money over the course of his life. Lewis and Smith write: "He plunged on, orating, writing, publishing his versions of what the city must become, and even when he was coming to his end, a poor man, he was nevertheless crying the immeasurable future of Chicago, seeing it as the only true city of America and himself as its prophet."

[104] Sullivan, *Chats*, 115.

cities were immersive vehicles for the spiritual health of their citizens—grounds on which the

work of a distinctly-modern spirit could manifest through brick, iron, and ornament. What

specific effects they might achieve depended entirely on the energies they evinced and the

inspiration they sewed in common travelers and genius engineers alike. The surprisingly few

pages Sullivan devotes to reflecting on cities at large combine with the kinds of reflections on

buildings I outlined in the previous section to form a relatively holistic cosmology about the

American urban built environment. For Sullivan, the "light" of imagination, though provided by

nature and cultivated through "organic" thought, must do its spiritual, indeed its salvific, work in

the city and through the built environment. Lauren Weingarden and others have noted the

Emersonian timbre of these proclamations. Emerson, like Sullivan, engaged in a highly

ambivalent celebration of the city's potential and, according to literary critic Michael Cowan,

"came increasingly to the belief that his entire nation was a new sort of urban complex—a 'city'

whose thrust was ideally implied by the most positive connotations of 'Western' and a 'West'

whose highest values were connoted by the most ideal meanings of 'urban.'"[105]

One way that Sullivan advocated directly for improvements in the urban landscape was

by joining a rising tide of criticism against so-called "shirt-front" buildings whose popularity

blossomed as Chicago's post-fire development reached its peak in the 1880s. Sullivan defined

"shirt-front" as a strategy for building, where for expediency's sake an architect subjects a

structure's front face to careful design while allowing its side and rear faces to remain as bare

brick. This design strategy became problematic as the increasing use of iron supports and the

recently-invented electric elevator allowed for the construction of buildings that stretched high

above their older neighbors, leaving many more unsightly side and rear faces visible than

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[105] Michael H. Cowan, *City of the West: Emerson, America, and Urban Metaphor* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 35.

before—another of young Chicago's foolish mistakes. Popular press and architectural publications alike began to receive editorials and essays critiquing these partially-designed buildings.[106] Sullivan, among others, began to advocate for the design of "all-around structures," and in fact Adler and Sullivan's tall building designs change between the early 1880s and his 1896 publication of "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered" (Fig. 16 & 17). Sullivan as well as critics discussing his work noted buildings like the Auditorium Building (Fig. 18) as a welcome relief from the "monotony" pervading post-fire commercial architecture.[107] In much of his work, Sullivan explored what came to be a "defining feature of both modern architecture and modern skylines, their three-dimensional character uniting fairly simple design, structure, and real estate in a singular tectonic expression."[108] To design in three dimensions was to make holistic aesthetic decisions that sought to make kinetic the potential of every inch of a building's height, width, and girth; to apply the heat of imagination meant to temper the chill of capital; to grow ideas naturally rather than mechanically.

V. Conclusion

As I imply in my discussion of Sullivan's position in Chicago's history, it is important to consider Sullivan's religious thought as shaped by a place, and by the conditions of social and spiritual possibility it evoked by way of its changing form. However, by "place" I do not mean that Sullivan's buildings and writings correspond to some kind of "local" religion that we could find on a map or in a neighborhood. The "location" of religion in Louis Sullivan's work, to use

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[106] Richard Bluestone explicates this shift in attitude throughout his article, "Louis H. Sullivan's Chicago: From 'Shirt Front,' to Alley, to 'All Around Structures,'" *Winterthur Portfolio* 40(1) (Spring 2013): 65-98.

[107] Bluestone, 78.

[108] Bluestone, 65.

Kim Knott's term, is in Sullivan's ways of expressing relationships between places like Chicago and socio-cultural forces like architecture. For Knott, "locating" religion is about relating religion to other spatial and temporal dimensions of life. Consequently, to "locate" religion in Sullivan's life and work means to set aside the assumption that a building, based on its proximity to capitalist ideas (not just processes), needs classification within a binary discourse of sacred and secular. Sullivan's thoughts relating his architecture and cosmology to the modern American metropolis are illegible within those dichotomies. It is best to think of Sullivan's work as expressive, architecturally and poetically, of that which seemed immanent in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century American imagination: the city and its forms.

Sullivan was no exception in his preoccupation with the problems and possibilities of urbanism. He felt that a properly-American architecture, "like a new species of any class… must be a growth, that slow and gradual assimilation of nutriment and a struggle against obstacles."[109] It must grow organically from a "spontaneous architectural feeling" that works intuitively, in concert, with "the law[s] of variation."[110] To this end, Sullivan was interested in structures that grow from an idea into an arboreal, or sometimes a human, body. In other words, structures that emerge organically from material nature, shaped by abstract force, which material works make real. He was interested in the ways nature's vocabulary could become architecture's vocabulary in a city tied to nature in form and in destiny. This vocabulary traversed scales, from the ornamental detail, to the shape and spacing of a city street, to the verve and vitality of a whole city, and back again. The next section focuses on one particular discourse Sullivan deployed to

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[109] Sullivan, "Characteristics and Tendencies," 3.

[110] Ibid., 3, 7.

articulate the fundamental truths that tied these scales together: the discourse of bodies—

arboreal, architectural, and human.

PART III. BUILDINGS AND "BODY" LANGUAGE IN *KINDERGARTEN CHATS*

I. Sullivan's Gospel

The previous two sections have taken us through the beginnings of Sullivan's life and career, his early speeches and their use of nature-oriented language coming from what Catherine Albanese calls "metaphysical religion," and Sullivan's reframing his life and legacy in ways that minimize his professional and personal fall from grace. *Autobiography of an Idea* was his last attempt to solidify his legacy with the public as a "prophet" of American architecture, but it was not his first.

While Sullivan wrote with other architects in mind in his early career, beginning in 1901 he sought to engage a broader public with a serial publication called *Kindergarten Chats*. His most thorough and succinct statement concerning the spiritual dimensions of architecture, *Chats* has played a key role in scholarship about Sullivan's intellectual background and his theories of architecture, including transcendentalism. It originally appeared in fifty-two installments in the professional journal, *Interstate Architect and Builder*, between January 1901 and January 1902. With the help of Claude Fayette Bragdon, an architect and Sullivan fan working in upstate New York, Sullivan consolidated the series into a book in 1918, with the explicit aim of reaching for an audience beyond the world of architecture. Having grown increasingly frustrated with the state of American architecture and with his growing irrelevance as a practitioner following an ungraceful exit from the Association of American Architects in 1908, Sullivan did not know in 1918 that he would have another chance to expound his ideas or to redeem his own reputation in the memoir commissioned the year before his death.

This attempt to reach the public, to intervene in the aesthetic course of things, failed to garner the attention it sought, though it sought attention quite confidently. Indeed, the text's self-indulgence likely rendered it unreadable for those not already brimming with admiration for, or at least curiosity about, its author. Structured at times like a Socratic dialogue and at others like a Romantic excursus on the seasons, *Chats* features a teacher (Sullivan) holding court with a young and attentive, but unimaginative and overly academic male pupil. From Sullivan's perspective, this pupil embodies an American architectural malaise very much in need of a spark of inspiration from a wise teacher. Through his tutelage, Sullivan is able to assert his judgments on objects at all scales, from particular buildings and architects, to tulips, to "the people," to American metropolises, to divinity's evidence in the turning of the seasons.

As a work conceived in parts and later unified with intent on Sullivan's part, *Chats* shows that Sullivan saw all these scales as linked to the ebb and flow of social forces through architecture. "If we would know why certain things are as they are in our disheartening architecture," he writes in an early chapter, "we must look to the people; for our buildings, as a whole, are but a huge screen behind which are our people as a whole."[111] In spite of statements like this, which seem to make claims about the hierarchy of buildings' representational and material qualities, I have suggested throughout this thesis that we not limit Sullivan to the position of an idealist and that we should search for forms rather than just concepts or divinities. I argue now that the pervasive discourse in *Chats* is more visual than conceptual and that Sullivan's characterizations of buildings is more erotic and embodied than metaphorical.

II. Genesis and Growth

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[111] Sullivan, *Chats*, 24.

The main argument of *Chats* consists in "broadly trac[ing] physical appearances to their moral causes, and moral or social impulses to their manifestations in brick and stone."[112] As I have shown in the first two sections of this essay, Sullivan argued that a particular impulse—that of nature and the seasons—should steer design towards the images of the tree and the young man—forms he saw as effectual in solving practical problems while challenging convention. The literary form of *Chats*—a dialogue between teacher and pupil—reinforces the supra-biological interest in youth Sullivan expresses in his musings on Chicago and in the outsized chunk of his memoirs he devotes to remembrance of his childhood. By using the term supra-biological, I suggest that Sullivan saw something more in biology than the mere transmission and development of human genes and microorganisms.

Convinced that growing up begets a harmful preoccupation with the material concerns of life, Sullivan would to the last hold on to an idealized notion of youth as an open and inspired time where the divine entered and was welcomed prior to the distraction of practical concerns. "Realities are images very difficult to awaken in an atmosphere of unreality and falsehood," he tells his pupil, "but you are young; and while there is youth there is still hope, for there is still heart."[113] The last clause in this statement contains two implicit exhortations: that one should remain young-at-heart for as long as possible in the face of expectation and social demands; and that "hope" may be measured in a young heart's potential to support proper growth. The second of these themes deserves further exploration; what makes every pine tree unique and every nourished sapling grow, for Sullivan, is their being subject to, and thus perfect within, immutable laws written into the domain of nature.

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[112] *Chats*, 33.

[113] Ibid., 30-1.

Staunch opposition to stasis, imitation, and historicism, in favor of creation and growth,

guides *Chats'* often lofty language and pretensions to evangelism:

> Imagination alone is that distinguishing quality which marks apart an architect from that which vulgar persons call an architek. In the beginning, I say, was the architek—without form, and void, and darkness was upon it. And the Inscrutable Creative Spirit moving through the darkness said: Let there be light—and *Imagination* was that light. And the Great Spirit found it good, and he separated the light from the darkness.[114]

The "architek" represents Sullivan's dissatisfaction with modernity writ-large; modern urbanites,

in Sullivan's estimation, generally privileged money over experience and occupational

proficiency over intuition and creativity.[115] For Sullivan, the triumph of the technocratic

"architek" over the imaginative architect was a defeat of cosmic proportions. The passage's

Biblical referent underscores the cosmological heft of this battle, its desired chronological

progression, and its hope that an artless "void" must give way to creation, no matter how bleak

the outlook. The light of "Imagination" forms the first real point of differentiation on an earth

created for human commune with the "Great Spirit."

Sullivan's proposition that reality is composed of "images" so "difficult to awaken" is

also revealing of his preoccupation with the visual content, more than the experience, of

architecture. Art historian Richard Etlin has argued the opposite, that Sullivan "sought to instill

in his audience" a "deep aesthetic and spiritual experience" in which "the individual could feel

deeply the power and rhythm of [the] 'flow of life'" as well as "the moral force … the existential

power which reveals to us our inherent, latent capacities" for the development of Self and

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[114] Ibid., 58 (emphasis in original).

[115] See for example Ibid., 61, where the dialogue proceeds as follows: "[Sullivan:] So many people are half-dead. They go their way in a kind of dull somnolescence. Show them a Dollar, they brighten up; talk sense, they yawn…And through the mist they call life, they wander, formless and dim. This class is sprinkled through all the social strata from top to bottom—it is confined to none. It is the empty class—the pessimists… [Pupil:] For heaven's sake what has all that to do with architecture? [Sullivan:] It has everything to do with the New Architecture, something to do with the old."

society.[116] Indeed the notion of "rhythm" does appear in Sullivan's writing, and as Etlin notes Sullivan's ornament is generally carried out in a rhythmic pattern along his buildings' faces.[117] Yet when we ask what sorts of bodies, what sorts of experience, and what sorts of embodied and experiential meanings Sullivan identifies as important, we see that if Sullivan was in fact trying to convey a "spiritual experience," its content was not, strictly-speaking interior to humans seeing architecture. It was, rather, fundamentally about the power of picture, of visual poetry.

Sullivan's interest in youth as a life-space of creation and "heart" thus matched his interest in the growth and maturation of both plant and human form. A buildings self-transcending visual impact offered a more valuable artistic currency for Sullivan than the rhythm or even the "experience" of a building. The eroticism of Sullivan's reflections on form becomes more apparent in his discussion of Henry Hobson Richardson's Marshall Field Wholesale Store in the early installments of *Chats* (Fig. 19). An influential piece of architecture in its own right, Marshall Field lies along with the rest of Richardson's oeuvre "on the knife edge between utilitarian form and symbolic representation."[118] A palace for commerce, its severe exterior and large, arched windows referenced Renaissance palaces, while its massive size and squared shape maximized the interior commercial space. Besides being one of the first and most influential block-long industrial buildings in post-Great Fire Chicago, and besides providing inspiration for Adler & Sullivan's Walker Warehouse and their famous Auditorium Building (Figs. 18 & 20), Marshall Field represented, for Richardson as well as for Sullivan, a move toward an

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[116] Richard A. Etlin, "Louis Sullivan: The Life-Enhancing Symbiosis of Music, Language, Architecture, and Ornament," in *The Orchestration of the Arts—A Creative Symbiosis of Existential Powers: The Vibrating Interplay of Sound, Color, Image, Gesture, Movement, Rhythm, Fragrance, Word, Touch*, ed. Marlies Kronegger (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2000), 165-182, particularly 165-6.

[117] Ibid., 167.

[118] Curtis, *Modern Architecture*, 44.

authentically-American aesthetic. Sullivan noted the austerity of Marshall Field's exterior, as well as its "virile force." "Here," he wrote, "is a *man* for you to look at… a real man, a manly man."[119] The visual resonances between Marshall Field and Adler and Sullivan's Auditorium Building thus correspond to the "manly" aesthetic usually ascribed to industrial forms.[120] In both works, arched, Renaissance-style windows sink deeply into an austere stone façade. Because of the buildings' girth and because its height apart from the tower is not substantial enough to draw the eye vertically, the rhythmic arrangement of windows on each level lends not musicality or finesse, but power, height, and weight to the buildings' overall composition.

Virility as a concept for design in *Chats* may be a symptom of commercial spaces' presumed segregation by gender from the domestic sphere. Yet for Sullivan the social ramifications of masculine language remained beside the point. Rather, Sullivan "mean[t] that stone and mortar, here, spring to life, and are no more material and sordid things, but, as it were, become the very diapason of a mind rich-stored with harmony."[121] The pervasive erotic metaphors (a "diapason" is a grand swelling) evoke the elevation of Richardson's own body (and by extension, Sullivan's) to the level of art by way of their material re-composition as bricks, stones, and steel. The reverse is also implied: the likening of Marshall Field's to a biological entity imbues its angles, curves, and stones with significance beyond their measure and arrangement.

III. Bodies and Letters

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[119] Sullivan, "Kindergarten Chats," 29 (emphasis in original).

[120] See Mona Domosh, *Invented Cities: The Creation of Landscape in Nineteenth-Century New York and Boston* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

[121] Sullivan, *Chats*, 29.

Sullivan had begun to read buildings erotically in earlier speeches about the role of ornament in façade composition, where he asserts that a building must look "well-formed and comely in the nude." Though a properly "virile" system of ornament is not itself a spiritual good in Sullivan's earlier writings, it would act to uplift the "spiritual and emotional quality" that "resides *in the mass of a building*."[122] Here Sullivan distinguishes proper architecture primarily by the symbolic value of its physical and aesthetic properties, and only in small measure by its relation to actual human bodies. As I mentioned in Section One, Sullivan also drew inspiration from Walt Whitman's poetry, which expresses erotic fascination with the male form and masculinity.[123] Robert Twombly, art historian and biographer of Sullivan, has suggested that Sullivan himself was a closeted homosexual. For Twombly, this is the hidden source behind Sullivan's masculine architectural language as well as his admiration for Whitman. If true, Twombly's theory would also lend credibility to a Freudian reading of Sullivan's preoccupation, in *Chats* and in the last pages of *Autobiography*, with the tall office building.[124]

In stressing the sensuality of Sullivan's masculine theory of architecture, Twombly defers a discussion of the broader social freight of forms in favor of biographical speculation. It is clear that Sullivan saw buildings' immaterial powers as synthesized from some combination of the mental "impulses" and physical being of the architects themselves. Yet there is no evidence in Sullivan's published documents that his affinity for Whitman was sexual, or even interpersonal.

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[122] Sullivan, "Ornament in Architecture," in *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings*, 187, 190 (emphasis in original).

[123] For extensive treatments of Whitman's eroticism, see Vivian R. Pollak, *The Erotic Whitman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Mark Maslam, *Whitman Possessed: Poetry, Sexuality, and Popular Authority* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Michael Robertson, *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). See also Whtiman's *Calamus* poems, which Pollak and Maslam both discuss at length.

[124] Robert Twombly, *Louis Sullivan: His Life and Work* (New York: Viking, 1986), 399-400.

Sullivan sought Whitman's artistic approval,[125] and imitated Whitman's style in much of his early writing. Sullivan wanted inclusion, with Whitman, in the canon of nineteenth-century "native" artists of North America—those credited with developing an Anglo style not only distinct from European origin, but also arising from nature and thus manifesting at every level of design the energies—bodily and otherwise—of the whole project of American art. Included in Sullivan's copy of *Leaves of Grass* was the short poem "Mannahatta," an exhortation about New York's city skyline that had to have interested Sullivan. The poem begins:

> I was asking for something specific and perfect for my city,
> Whereupon, lo! upsprang the aboriginal name!
> Now I see what there is in a name, a word, liquid, sane, unruly, musical,
> self-sufficient;
> I see that the word of my city is that word up there,
> Because I see that word nested in nests of water-bays, superb, with tall and
> wonderful spires.
> Rich, hemm'd thick all around with sailships and steamships—an island
> sixteen miles long, solid-founded,
> Numberless crowded streets—high growths of iron, slender, strong, light,
> splendidly uprising toward clear skies.[126]

As Kimo Reder notes in a close reading of the work, Whitman visualizes Manhattans' indigenous name as a visual object encapsulating, at a textual scale, the rhythm and dynamic height of a literal urban skyline.[127] He argues that Whitman "believed in a sensual correspondence not only between objects and their names, but also between words and their component letters."[128] It is easy to see how the "tall and wonderful spires" of the capital "M" and the "slender, strong, light" shafts of the letters "h" and "t" would rise "splendidly…toward clear

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[125] See Lauren S. Weingarden, "Louis Sullivan's Emersonian Reading of Walt Whitman," p. 119, n. 35.

[126] Walt Whitman, "Mannahatta," in *Leaves of Grass: The Complete 1855 and 1891-2 Editions*, Ed. John Hollander (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1992), 585.

[127] Kimo Reder, "Whitman's Metro-Poetic Lettrism: The Mannahatta Skyline as Sentence, Syntax, and Spell," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 35(1) (2017): 88-114.

[128] Reder, 88.

skies" in what amounts to both a metaphor for height and a testament to the many scales at which

nature's correspondences can harmonize. In subsuming an indigenous name into a celebration of

an industrial skyline on former colonial soil, Whitman also reveals a fundamental presumption

nineteenth-century metaphysicals that he shared with Emerson and Sullivan: the presumption of

affinity (or even continuity) between the enchantments of older traditions and the angularities of

a letter, a word, a name.[129]

In *Chats* Sullivan discusses an "architectural alphabet"—pier, lintel, and arch—as the

building blocks for an aesthetic and moral theory of architecture, glorified by their supposedly

unadulterated use in ancient Greek and Egyptian architecture. The idea of an alphabet distills

Sullivan's earlier musings on trees, growth, and "young" and "old" cities into a more portable

concept, a universal grammar for design mirroring earlier Romantic discourses on aesthetics. In

his famous text, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, John Ruskin writes that "truth, decision, and

temperance […] have a representative or derivative influence over the works of the hand, the

movements of the frame, and the action of the intellect […] thus every action, down even to the

drawing of a line or utterance of a syllable, is capable of a peculiar dignity in the manner of

it."[130] Ruskin and Sullivan share a mixed metaphor of doing and speaking, each emphasizing the

relationship between action—"works of the hand"—and the component parts rendering those

works legible and powerful. Ruskin's "syllables" and Sullivan's "alphabet" are two ways of

writing "poetry" into material objects as a function of their design. To create a grammar for the

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[129] It is worth noting Kathryn Lofton's 2011 book *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press), which begins: "What is Oprah? A noun. A name. A misspelling." The implication of these first lines are that the literal meaning of such a word is immaterial to the symbolic value of its central form: the "O." The O as a symbol of completion or, more accurately for most viewers, of aspirations towards fulfilment that Oprah seeks to aid, and journeys to the Best Life that Oprah seeks to bring full-circle.

[130] John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1961 [1849]), 12.

writing of architectural poetry, in Sullivan's case, is to create a system for the ordered use of parts to craft wholes expressive, literally or poetically, of a larger order of things.

IV. Conclusion

The links I have drawn here between city skylines, buildings, alphabets, and grammars show just how deeply Sullivan meant for his theses on nature to run through the craft of architecture and the arts more broadly. For Sullivan, the form of the male body inspired him holistically to rethink every scale of design. In *Chats*, Sullivan tells his pupil that "every building you see is the image of a man whom you do not see … That the man is the reality, the building its offspring."[131] Sullivan's language of image help us conceive of his eroticism and "body" language as not just a subconscious claim to a non-normative sexuality, but also as a distinctive manifestation of modernist reactions against historicist techniques of building and ornamentation, namely his replacement of historical idioms with "organic" (i.e. naturalistic) ones.[132]

Because Sullivan so admired Whitman in particular, and for historians of architecture is the most important of the poet's disciples, it is easy to see Sullivan imagining *Chats* as his *Leaves of Grass*. Rather than follow the scent of capital accruement with their "heads down,"[133] the text exhorted Chicagoans look at buildings, be taken in by the attractions of good design, and understand how organic architecture—which is to say, naturally-conceived and anti-artificial work—should be put together. Virility and intuition, then, are means both to gravitate towards

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[131] Sullivan, *Chats*, 24.

[132] See Sherman Paul, *Louis Sullivan: An Architect in American Thought*, 59-66, for a succinct account of Sullivan's attack on academic architectural education.

[133] Sullivan, *Chats*, 25.

particularly potent artists and also to distinguish their art as an "outpouring of a copious, direct, large and simple mind,"[134] and not one deadened by Old World vocabularies. If American artists' and thinkers' "long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands" indeed "[drew] to a close" at the end of the nineteenth century, as Emerson prophesied in "Self-Reliance,"[135] then it makes sense that those artists, and Sullivan in particular, would view the end of the century as an opening to change the core idioms of design, rather than just making alternative design choices. For Sullivan the guiding metaphor was masculinity, and its execution was in poetry—its power and its form lay in the basic structures of the architectural alphabet.

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[134] Sullivan, "Kindergarten Chats," 30.

[135] From Emerson, "The American Scholar," quoted in Randy L. Friedman, "Religious Self-Reliance," *The Pluralist* 7(1) (Spring 2012): 27.

CONCLUSION: ARCHITECTURE, RELIGION, AND THE HUMANITIES

I have argued in this thesis that Louis Sullivan, a key founder of American modernism, drew on idioms gleaned from transcendentalism to propound architecture's potential to act on scales big and small to improve, and indeed to enchant, American urban modernity. He proposed this first to architects, linking architecture's potential to that of iron and steel construction. He then looked to the city of Chicago more broadly, hoping that the city's already-enchanted view of itself could carry over to a new beginning free of the artlessness of corporate materialism. Finally, as his architectural career seemed all but over, he reached out to the public in a last attempt to communicate his artistic Gospel. Though he seems to have failed in these tasks while living, after his death Sullivan's influence grew exponentially, to the point that today there is no conceiving of modernist architecture in the U.S. without the ideas he popularized: that the tall office building should cultivate the concept of height in its aesthetic; that ornament should be used sparingly, in a delicate balance with the mass of a building, which should itself be born of the same artistry as the finest Gothic reliefs or the most delicately-written poem; and that a building's form should emerge naturally from a careful consideration of its function.

If modernist literature's motto is, as Langston Hughes wrote, to "make it new," then modernist architecture's is "form follows function," its argument, made explicit and disseminated widely by Sullivan, being that with the right principles at hand something new would emerge. Whether Sullivan's ideas—or his architecture—were "new," exactly, is a subject art historians wrestle with. I do not have a stake in that fight. If we want to take Sullivan's

modernist mantra seriously, then true creation need not yield something new, just something

necessary. To examine the intellectual influences on architecture, whether religious or otherwise,

requires an account of the forces responsible for the making of what is new or necessary.

Japanese Marxist Kojin Karatani links architecture to the very beginnings of philosophy

in Plato, who, according to Karatani, proposed "making" as a replacement concept for

"becoming," which Plato saw as a flaw in human nature that always entails falling short of an

understanding of Being, the mythic object of human aspiration.[136] Others like Jacques Derrida,

Elizabeth Grosz, and John Rajchmann see in architecture a unique opportunity to usurp and

subvert the neo-Platonic and structuralist-linguistic legacy of "signification," in order to consider

human community and world-making as a process underway in matter as well as signs.[137]

Others, very recently, have referred to buildings as "agents," hoping to find in the history of

architecture politically-useful episodes of human interactions with their built environment.[138]

The questions Sullivan asked in his day about what architecture can do, and what that has to do

with the impulses behind its creation, continue to generate innovative analyses and pose thorny

political questions. I hope that the following three questions, inspired by this literature, may

become live in religious studies and in the academy more broadly.

First, what is the relationship between architecture and the terms and concepts typically

used to constitute the provisional category "religion": beliefs, practices, sites, icons, rituals, and

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[136] Kojin Karatani, *Architecture as Metaphor: Language, Number, Money*, trans. Sabu Kohso (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), 5-15. Karatani thus equates "the will to knowledge" with "the will to architecture."

[137] See Jeffrey Kipnis and Thomas Leeser, eds., *Choral Works: Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997); John Rajchmann, *Constructions* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998); and Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture From the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Boston: The MIT Press, 2001).

[138] Annabel Jane Wharton, *Architectural Agents: The Delusional, Abusive, Addictive Lives of Buildings* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

so on?[139] It is easy to see how buildings—or to use a more recent example, monuments honoring Confederate soldiers and ideologies—can become "icons," aesthetic manifestations of a person's or community's claims to their own destiny and the destiny of others. It will take more probing on the part of American religious historians and scholars of visual and material religion to develop holistic analyses of the sentiments surrounding the production, reception, and continual re-imagining of built environments not easily associated with "a religion" or "religious" people. Through the concept of form, which plants itself and moves in both the conceptual and material realms of life, I hope I have offered a helpful path through the already-ongoing conversations about peoples' attachments to sites, legacies, and emergent phenomena visible on the landscape.

Second, how might architecture and analyses of architectural form change what we know about the relationship between religion and space? Are all pieces of the built environment either religious or secular? Even when present as supporting evidence, architectural analysis is notably absent as an analytical tool in "materialist" and even specifically spatial theories around religion in the Americas.[140] More material considerations of built environments, "sites," "contact," and other spatial modes in which religious phenomena get discussed could help scholars better understand the relation between visible and invisible elements of the structures of belief and community they work with. Particularly in the context of transactions—whether interpersonal

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[139] Some useful texts to begin with include Jeanne Hargren Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002); Richard Kiekhefer, *Theology in Stone: Church Architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley* (London: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Knott, *The Location of Religion*.

[140] See Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Tweed, ed. *Retelling U.S. Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); and Manuel A. Vasquez, *More Than Belief: Toward a Materialist Theory of Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 2011). A notable exception is Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

exchanges of money or large-scale contracts—the items exchanged, whether they take the form of money or objects, bear pluralities of sentiments and ideas as well as values.[141]

Finally, and most broadly, what is the relationship between the technical project of building and all its material dimensions (or more broadly, creating a thing) and the humanistic project of excavating the meaning and power of those objects? Elizabeth Grosz's most recent book, *The Incorporeal* (2017), offers to bridge the mounting conceptual divide between "new materialist" and "idealist" perspectives: to focus on beliefs, the people (mostly the men) who hold them, and the meaning of those beliefs in light of (and sometimes quite apart from) the material conditions in which a subject of study was immersed. Grosz asserts rather straightforwardly that to consider embodiment and materiality is by definition to consider ideas and other immaterial forces that bind human perception and communication inextricably. The material and immaterial do not represent a real binary and thus cannot be thought independently of the other.[142] Louis Sullivan's story is not merely the story of an Idea, as some celebratory texts would suggest and as he himself would have us believe. It is the story of forms—integrated, if shifting, pieces of concept and material aggregated to create monoliths and to charge them with power. These monoliths—buildings—carried ideas, sentiments, prophetic predictions, and even enthusiasms indelibly connected to the setting apart—and then selling in parts—the American landscape.

If we give due credit to Sullivan's influence over architecture and its past and future students, we must continue to engage architecture's propensity to bring ideas and materials

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[141] An example of the former can be found in Webb Keane, "Money Is No Object: Materiality, Desire, and Modernity in an Indonesian Society," in Fred R. Myers, ed., *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), 65-90.

[142] Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

together in ways powerful and long-lasting, yet bound by the forms its social and technological context provides. This means making sense of the hazy disciplinary boundaries we in the humanities cross when we endeavor to study the materiality of objects meant to stand on the street for indeterminate amounts of time. In the interest of being broad in my focus and of bringing what is most significant about Sullivan's work, legacy, and spiritual thought to bear on the ways humanists outside of art history departments might understand and work with architecture, I offer in closing a few reflections on the effects and affects that build up around buildings wherever they are erected, occupied, and transformed.

Architecture is art, and it is infrastructure. It has to be in order to be an "eloquent peroration"—literally, the concluding part of a well-formed speech—of modernity's "most forbidding conditions," as Sullivan argued in "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered." Wherever buildings have emerged, whether in the presence of ample capital and rigorous organization or in the impromptu, do-it-yourself fashion often found in informal settlements around the globe, their very existence on the landscape raises the question of the economic policies and prerogatives that put them there and what economic or political circumstances might endanger their future existence. At the historical juncture I have examined in this thesis, the turn of the twentieth century, architecture relied on materials and technologies borrowed from railroad and bridge design, and that shift generated meanings and idioms whose content was utterly subject to the needs and understandings of the meaning-makers. In Sullivan's case, an erotic, masculine idiom foregrounded his argument that buildings should be "all-around structures," designed as a unity whose form transparently expressed the intuitive minds and strong bodies of its architect. Technological advances allowing for majestic height also, for

Sullivan, allowed for an increased purity in the bringing to visibility of unseen forces locked within nature.

To discuss architecture's metaphysics is always to operate within the blurred boundaries of what would otherwise be conceived as distinct disciplines: art history, literary criticism, engineering, business history, science and technology studies. Occupying that liminal space is a massive corpus of theory-inflected architectural programs and architecture-inflected philosophical ones. Philosophers reach for architecture as a unique tool for understanding the relation of the physical world and metaphysical philosophy. In some cases, architecture serves to relieve philosophy of metaphysical burdens altogether in order to organize radical conceptions of space or of the future of human community.[143] Architects reach outside their field to think through the effect of built environments on the people making their way through them. Other humanistic or philosophical inquiries into "materiality" need also grapple with, and in some cases tear holes in, the disciplinary boundaries that can sometimes insulate scientific or technical projects—like architecture and infrastructure—from the broader field of social analysis.

And what is the study of human experience—the psychological and somatic intake of sensory, cognitive, and affective data—without a study of the stone, concrete, glass and steel, terra cotta, and alloyed behemoths casting shadows over our every step? What is phenomenology, for example, without a sense of the shape and shadow of what we encounter? What is the study of city people, and their religious behavior, without a consideration of their

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[143] See Kipnis and Leeser, eds., *Choral Works*. In this text Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman team up to design a space based around Derrida's concept of *chora*, which the philosopher conceives as an irresolvable contradiction in Platonic cosmology. In the course of their conversation, Eisenman in particular appraises the value of *chora* as a disruptor of the entire apparatus of "Western metaphysics" and "the inherent anthropocentrism of architecture" (even to the point of reducing it as Derrida attempts to expound it). See also Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside*. Among her many insights, Grosz makes a much less reductive case than Eisenman for re-evaluating major points within the "Western philosophical tradition," arguing that claims on the present, whether in discourse or in physical space, should be thought relative to the potential futures they open up or foreclose.

abodes, their neighborhoods, their places—literally—of work? Those of us outside of architectural disciplines could learn so much about human experience, alone and in community, by paying more attention to the ways architecture and infrastructure funnel our movements, leaving the imprint of their reticulations in mind and muscle.

Infrastructures tell us much about the context and the epoch in which they are created and deployed—they thus take on a life of their own in socio-cultural imaginaries and "bring about a sensory apprehension of existence."[144] That apprehension foments a sense of what sort of place one has lived in. I have a hard time conceiving of life in the United States, or the phenomenon of capitalism, without skyscrapers, without ranch-style houses and apartment blocks and brownstones, without highways, beltways, toll-ways, railways, gridded urban avenues, or winding suburban streets. If there is a visual or ideological space outside the three-dimensional orders of that materiality and other famous structures around the country, that exterior would fundamentally trouble the familiar ways we understand our lives.

What I am saying is that inasmuch as art historians or architects are concerned with how a thing gets built and what kind of influence it might have, they also at the same time grapple with architecture's infrastructural qualities. I am saying as well, that a humanistic study of architecture need not shy away from structure and form as analytic categories or from infrastructure as a site for exploring the ways people like Sullivan and Frederick Law Olmsted and Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright and innumerable others have decided that we should all go to work, head for home, and come together.

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[144] Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure, " *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42(1) (2013): 329.

Fig. 1. Wainwright Building. Adler and Sullivan, St. Louis, 1892. Image taken by Isaiah Ellis.

Fig. 2. Hooley's New Theater, interior. Adler and Sullivan, Chicago, 1879. Print from Chicagology.com
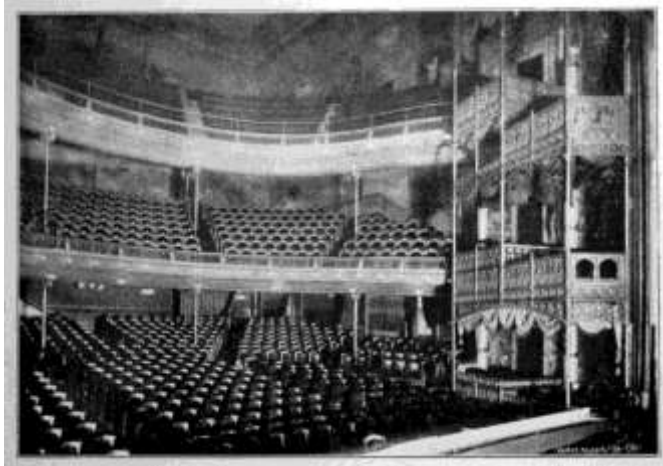

Fig. 3. "Primitive Man." Printed in Marc-Antoine Laugier, *Essay on Architecture*. Image from Primitivehuts.blogspot.com

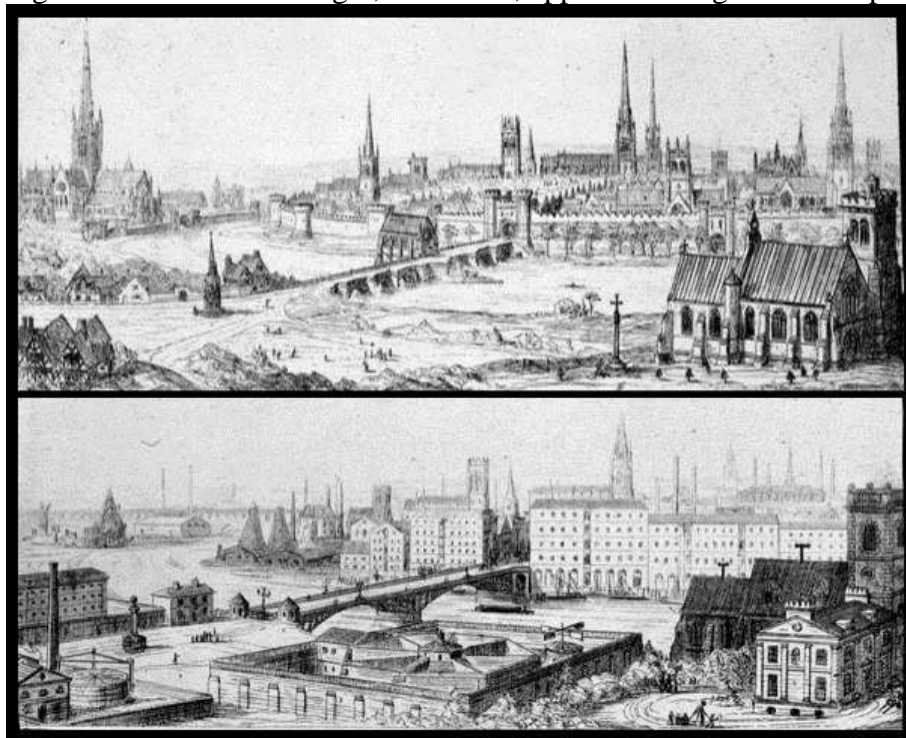Fig. 4. From A. W. N. Pugin, *Contrasts*, appendix. Image from Utopiaordystopia.com

Fig. 5. Guaranty Building, Adler and Sullivan. Buffalo, NY, 1896. Image from hodgsonruss.com

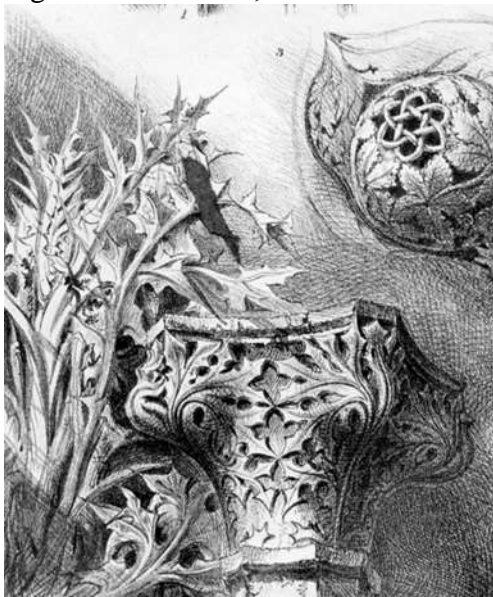Fig. 6. John Ruskin, "Ornament from St. Lo." detail, 1885. Image from archdaily.com

Fig. 7. Wainwright Building, detail. Image from arch329.com

Fig. 8. Frank Furness, Ornamental detail, Adler & Sullivan, Pilgrim Baptist Church, Chicago, 1888-1890. Image from shadysidelantern.com

Fig. 9. Plan of Central Park, Frederick Law Olmsted, 1860.

Fig. 10. Wainwright building, base detail. Image taken by Isaiah Ellis.
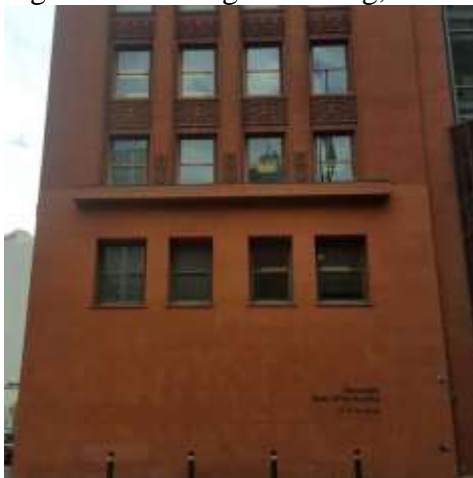

Fig. 11. Wainwright building, façade. Image taken by Isaiah Ellis.

Fig. 12. Wainwright building, capital detail. Image from wttw.com.

Fig. 13. Guaranty, detail. Image from wttw.com

Fig. 14. Condict Building. Adler and Sullivan. New York, NY. 1889. Detail. Image from newyorkarchitecture.com

Fig. 15. Carson, Pirie, Scott Store (formerly Schlesinger and Mayer store). Louis Sullivan. Chicago, 1901-4. Image from BlueprintChicago.com

Fig. 16. Jeweler's Building. Adler and Sullivan. Chicago, 1881. Notice the bare brick face on the extreme left of the frame. Image from the Art Institute of Chicago online.

Fig. 17. Guaranty Building. Context. Image from emporis.com

Fig. 18. Auditorium Building. Adler and Sullivan. Chicago, 1889. Image from bluffton.edu

Fig. 19. Marshall Field Wholesale Store. Henry Hobson Richardson. Chicago, 1885-7. Image from Encyclopedia Brittanica online.

Fig. 20. Walker Warehouse. Adler and Sullivan. Chicago, 1889. Image from archinform.com.

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