The City is My Church: Presence and Identity for the Small Urban Congregation

Andrew Scalisi

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Abstract

The phenomenon of church renting has grown out of necessity for small urban congregations. Churches are holding worship services in public and private places with greater regularity than some might think. It is not uncommon today to see portable church signs outside unconventional places of worship on Sundays. In Manhattan in particular, there is a greater need for rentable space as many congregations are struggling to find a permanent home due to density, finances, availability and politics.

A 2007 national survey of newly established Protestant churches found that 12% met in public schools.¹ This percentage increases when considering space rented in private buildings including, but not limited to, restaurants, night clubs and boxing gyms. Typically, congregations rent until they can attain a permanent facility or develop a congregation large enough to support one.² However, exercising this option comes at the expense of challenges such as community backlash, political resistance, adaptability difficulties and identity disempowerment. Additionally, what would be a realistic method of attaining such a permanent home in the face of Manhattan’s diverse range of building challenges?

There is a programmatic and architectural tension when renting from non-conventional spaces for worship. When trying to adapt to an establishment’s

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¹ According to a 2007 national survey of newly established Protestant churches,
² According to a 2007 national survey of newly established Protestant churches
programmatic provisions, it automatically produces disadvantages for the church spatially and functionally. This produces a conformance to the programmatic and spatial limitations of the rented space, rather than allowing the church to define a space based on its own congregational needs and architectural desires.

This thesis will attempt to operate between the confinements of church renting and the near impossibilities of ground up building for the transient urban congregation. In identifying a method of doing so, the project will look to generate a place of worship that becomes iconic in its own right. The sacred has become more so associated with the private realm of interiority and intimacy within its own self-contained community, often divorced from the inclusion of the city. In the case of church renting, an architectural identity is sacrificed for the pragmatics of available, yet not entirely functional, space. In the case of ground up building, architecture is primarily boundless in terms of identity, yet remains an unrealistic option for the less financially equipped congregation. So the question remains, is there a middle zone that operates between these two realms? Can a place of worship at the same time utilize existing space, create a functional house of worship catered to the congregations needs and contribute to the architectural iconicity of Manhattan?
The first part of the project will deal with a series of questions regarding the method of location and place making: What happens when a transient congregation is able to become a permanent one? Where does a permanent place of worship take root in a city riddled with issues of density and availability? How does the small urban congregation build a permanent home without enduring the financial impossibilities of ground-up church construction? While church renting creates an exclusive plug-in condition for the congregation, there is something to be said about considering this method in tandem with the notion of a plug-on relationship to an existing, underused building. In utilizing an existing building for its location, vacant space and zoning opportunities, the urban church can simultaneously blend into the existing fabric of the city as well as take advantage of an existing building for its established resources.

The second part is interested in utilizing the space on top of a building to create an addition that is both iconic and functional. The urban rooftop is a location where density can increase in the form of extensions and new structures. Rather than adding more stories to an existing building, the assembly of new structures on a roof notes a new trend in dealing with urban density.
The rooftop provides space for a newly constructed structure to create its own architectural identity and provides all of the necessary infrastructure required to be a functional space. Perched above the city, yet still part of it, a rooftop addition can create a dialogue with others of the same type in the same area. It can also be distinct, giving its function and users an architectural identity and prominence. While many architects look to exploit elevated spaces through an investigation of getting around the law and zoning issues with the goal of building new housing units, this project will attempt to do the same, but with the goal of developing an alternative, sacred building type. In finding potential gaps, unobstructed surfaces, zoning allowances and vacant space, the transient urban congregation can find a permanent home in a city that doesn’t seemingly present many options.

Thus, I contend that small urban congregations must utilize existing space in ways greater than the current method of conformance to existing occupied spaces. Through a method of identifying and exploiting vacant space and unused building surfaces, the small urban congregation can achieve permanence in the community, identity as a typology, and tailored functionality for programmatic needs.
Fig. 1 Christ Crucified Fellowship in Washington Heights, Manhattan.
Churches are holding worship services in public and private places with greater regularity than some might think. It is not uncommon today to see portable church signs outside public buildings and schools on Sundays.

Considering the steady rise of church renting in the United States, in particularly New York City, churches often rent non-traditional spaces until they can build a permanent facility or develop a congregation large enough to support one.

Among the many building types utilized, some of the more common ones include public schools, restaurants, boxing gyms and night clubs.

A 2007 national survey of newly established Protestant churches found that 12% met in schools. Christian churches are the primary clients because Muslims and Jews worship on Fridays and Saturdays, when school spaces usually are being used for student activities.
Public Schools

Restaurants

Boxing Gyms

Night Clubs
What denominational majority is renting in Manhattan?

The four main religions in Manhattan are defined by their congregation size and adherents. There is no official tally of how many churches, synagogues or mosques utilize non conventional places of worship, but patterns reveal answers.

Through a statistical and factual analysis of each congregation, the results show that the Protestant denomination is the primary, if not exclusive, group of congregants renting non conventional spaces for their worship services.
The Catholic Diocese provides churches/parishes for all of its congregations, as well as owns each building. The set governmental structure and liturgy of the denomination proves it does not rent.

Muslims partake in congregational prayer services Friday nights, making renting highly unlikely. There are a number of congregations that don’t meet in mosques, but rather meet in apartments, out of

Besides the fact that the statistics between the number of synagogues and congregations match up almost identically, Jews typically conduct Sabbath services on Friday nights and Saturday mornings.

*All statistics are approximated, as multiple sources were referenced for the same information. Despite this, the number between congregation and building quantity for Catholicism, Judaism and Islam shows a minor gap, meaning most of those congregations are housed in a conventional place of worship. 6

The Protestant denomination can be found renting in Manhattan more than any other religion, and maybe even exclusively. While many protestant churches do own buildings of their own, many congregations constitute a small number people and tend to utilize public/private spaces until they can
Political, Social and Architectural Challenges

In utilizing existing facilities for their space and resources, congregations are certainly faced with difficulty issues. This section highlights three common, ranging from political disputes over the separation of church and state to a church eviction from a restaurant in the Flatiron District.
Congregations renting from school buildings has been a hot topic in NYC politics for the past 20 years. Many city officials pushed in opposition to it in the name of the first amendment, but many others still promoted the practice. Throughout a long-standing legal battle, injunctions were continuously granted to allow churches to continue using public schools, with no legislative solution. Although recently the court ruled in favor of school renting, churches will always be faced with this tension, knowing many political figures don’t want them to be there.

“You know, the Constitution seems to me to be pretty clear...I’ve always thought that one of the great things about America is that we keep a separation [between church and state]...”

Michael Bloomberg, New York City mayor
Social issues have also arisen in the midst of church renting, particularly in response to an establishment that contributes to a neighborhood’s identity. One such example is the case of The Gallery Church vs. The Hill Country BBQ restaurant. The restaurant agreed to an initial trial arrangement with the church. But after learning about a particular sermon topic, the neighborhood got restless, urging the restaurant to cancel the rent agreement. The church had been paying $25,000 per year to use the space Sundays before it opened, and was then forced to rent elsewhere, finding a place that cost $15,000 more.

“Our intention was to provide the church with a place to congregate, which we thought we could do without implying a religious affiliation between our two organizations.... Over the following weeks, based on an unanticipated community response, it became clear that this would not be possible.”

Marc Glosserman, CEO Hill Country BBQ
The third issue is the obvious programmatic and architectural concerns of renting from non-traditional spaces for worship. When trying to adapt to an establishment’s programmatic limitations, it automatically produces spatial and architectural disadvantages for the church. The biggest disadvantage is conforming to the programmatic and spatial limitations of the rented space, rather than defining the space based on the congregations needs. Architecturally and denominationally, this doesn’t provide an empowering identity for the church, possibly causing it to lose influence in the community.
Church Renting
Church renting perpetuates transience, limits growth, stifles programmatic needs and eliminates architectural identity.
This thesis will attempt to operate between the confinements of church renting and the near impossibilities of ground up building.

Ground Up Building becomes much too costly, and the availability of buildable land in Manhattan is rare.
1. Buildings can offer rentable space to congregations
2. A congregation often takes advantage of the space
3. The space may be sufficient, but not tailored to congregations needs
4. The church must conform/adapt to the limitations of the space
5. The congregation is still able to tap into the building’s resources
1. Inverting the congregation/building relationship from interior to exterior.....
2. Operating on the rooftop allows for a new architectural identity.....
3. .....as well as provides space for growth.....
4. .....while still being able to access the building’s sustaining resources
Las Palmas Parasite
Rotterdam, Amsterdam
Korteknie & Stuhlmacher Arch.

The Parasite Foundation, an initiative that tries to develop parasitic buildings for the brightening up of dilapidated host buildings or locations in the urban realm, saw a design come to fruition by way of the Las Palmas Parasite. Sitting on top of the elevator shaft of the former warehouse building in 2001 as a widely visible, three dimensional logo for its host building, the Las Palmas parasite utilizes the existing infrastructure of the building.

The parasite acts as a prototypical house aiming to combine the advantages of prefabricated technology and the unique qualities of tailor-made design. The limitations imposed by the size of the elevator shaft and the strength of its walls demanded a compact plan and volume. Eventually, the factory became repurposed as a mixed use building, owing its new life to the potential found in the parasite.¹⁰
Fig. 5 Las Palmas Parasite, perched
The existing elevator shaft is used to provide a perch for the parasite to rest upon. The limitations imposed by the size of the elevator shaft and the strength of its walls demanded a compact plan and volume.

The elevator shaft is utilized for its circulation value and structural stability.

Services like water supply, sewage and the electric installation are linked to the existing systems within the building, running through the main shaft.
Because of the structural integrity of the factory, the parasite does not need to rely on a significant amount of new structure. A simple beam framework is used for extra support at the base.

The main shell of the parasite is painted chartreuse green in hopes of giving the building a new identity.

The main circulation of the building is narrow and continuously connects the parasite to the elevator.
Thick laminated glued timber was used for the construction of all walls. At the same time it provides insulation, support and enclosure all in one system.

A deck allows users to view the skyline of the surrounding city, as well as giving access to an incorporated garden in the roof tray of the shaft.

The final construct becomes a symbol of ectoparasitic architecture in a dying context.
Fig. 15 Las Palmas Parasite, relocated
Fig. 16 Cape Cod style dwelling
Fig. 17  Full fledged rooftop cabin

3rd & 13th Street
Fig. 19  DVB Headquarters, from Highline
Fig. 20: Unknown rooftop structure

77th & Broadway
Fig. 23  Rendered Proposal

13th & Washington
In looking at today’s thriving real estate market of New York City, it is hard to believe that just over thirty years ago it faced a surge of disinvestments and housing abandonment beginning around 1963. Between the years of 1970 and 1978, housing inventory within the city fell by almost 320,000 units, mostly due to substantial increases in heating and oil prices. As a result, the overall operating costs of apartment buildings were pushed beyond the possible rent revenue in many areas of the city, creating a culture of abandonment. Many building owners neglected building maintenance and serves due to cost, which led to a physical and financial decline, and in some cases, an inability to pay property taxes.¹¹

Today, many remnants of vacant lots and buildings remain throughout Manhattan. While there are plans to reclaim these properties for the use of additional housing units, as per the No Vacancy initiative, this thesis hopes to utilize vacant, unmaximized space as a place of
General Building Types

- Res.: 527
- Comm.: 584
- Mix.: 612

Building Types
- Commercial & Office
- Industrial
- Transport & Utility
- Public Facilities
- 1 & 2 Family
- Multi-Family Walk-Up
- Multi-Family Elevator
- Mixed Res. & Commercial

Ownership Types
- Not Labeled
- City of New York
- Government Authority
- Private
- Non Profit

Vacant Lot/Building
COMMUNITY DISTRICTS

1. Civic Center, Tribeca & Wall Street
2. West/Greenwich/South Village, NoHo & SoHo
3. Lower East, Chinatown, Tompkins Sq. & E. Village
4. Clinton & Chelsea
5. Midtown, TSQ, Herald Sq. & Midtown South
6. East 50’s, Turtle Bay, Tudor City, Murray Hill, Gramercy, Stuy. Town & Kips Bay
7. Upper West Side, West Side & Lincoln Sq.
9. West Harlem, Morningside Heights, Manhattanville & Hamilton Heights
10. Central Harlem & The Polo Grounds
11. East Harlem
12. Washington Heights & Inwood
Vacant Properties in Manhattan

- Privately Owned Properties: 2,228 (50%)
- Vacant Res. Bldg’s Above 96th Street: 1,723 (74%)
Civic Center, Tribeca & Wall Street

Building Types: 2% Residential, 67% Commercial, 31% Mixed Use
West/Greenwich/South Village, NoHo & SoHo

Building Types: 10% Residential, 50% Commercial, 40% Mixed Use
Lower East, Chinatown, Tompkins Square & East Village

Building Types: 13% Residential, 40% Commercial, 47% Mixed Use
Clinton & Chelsea

Building Types: 15% Residential, 60% Commercial, 25% Mixed Use
Midtown, Times Square, Herald Square & Midtown South

Building Type Majority: 3% Commercial, 80% Commercial, 17% Mixed Use
East 50’s, Turtle Bay, Tudor City, Murray Hill, Gramercy, Stuy Town & Kips Bay

Building Type Majority: 10% Residential, 27% Commercial, 63% Mixed Use
West Side, Upper West Side & Lincoln Square

Building Type Majority: 50% Residential, 9% Commercial, 41% Mixed Use
Yorkville, Upper East Side, Lenox Hill & Roosevelt Island

Building Type Majority: 33% Residential, 25% Commercial, 42% Mixed Use
West Harlem, Morningside Heights, Manhattanville & Hamilton Heights

Building Types: 50% Residential, 24% Commercial, 26% Mixed Use
Central Harlem & The Polo Grounds

Building Type Majority: 4% Residential, 15% Commercial, 81% Mixed Use
East Harlem

Building Type Majority: 37% Residential, 26% Commercial, 37% Mixed Use
Washington Heights & Inwood

Building Type Majority: 43% Residential, 20% Commercial, 27% Mixed Use
The WCh District

The West Chelsea District located on Manhattan’s West Side developed into a wealthy residential and industrial area beginning in the 19th century. After decades of being characterized by light manufacturing, storage and auto-related uses, West Chelsea experienced growth in other building uses such as galleries, restaurants, bars and nightclubs in the 1990’s. Today, it is particularly noted for housing a large portion of the High Line, as well as its eclectic mix of building typologies.

Because of the proximity to the Highline, this district has special regulations that respond to its unique conditions. My sub area of interest is the M1 district, which is characterized by art galleries, converted warehouses, lofts and rooftop additions.12
DIANE VON FURSTENBERG STUDIO HEADQUARTERS
WorkAC, Completed 2007

Fig. 24  Aerial view, from Highline
METHOD: ADAPTIVE REUSE

The new headquarter’s for a fashion design company is an exercise in adaptize reuse and rooftop iconicism. It is located within the Gansevoort Market District, affectionately hailed as a “new model of adaptive reuse for the city.” Converting an old, six-story warehouse into a flagship headquarters for the Diane Von Furstenberg Studio, the project is conceived of as a dialogue between contemporary materials and building elements. The program is unified by a singular iconic rooftop gesture, a crystalline penthouse that brings light into the entire building.¹³
THE PORTER HOUSE
SHoP Architects, Completed 2003

Fig. 25 Street level view, South West side
METHOD:
AIR RIGHTS TRANSFER

The Porter House is a parasitic addition to an existing 19th century warehouse in the West Chelsea district. The architects purchased the air rights from the adjacent building lots, allowing them an eight-foot cantilever on its southside. This design move speaks volumes; not only does it add valuable square footage to the 15,000 s.f. addition, but it also helps define the new construction as an independent volume, visually distinctive through a zinc panel skin. Intermittent facade lightboxes further reinforce the addition’s iconicism, illuminating the facade at night.
06 | 408 West 15th Street

Proposed Testing Grounds

Fig. 26  Street level view, North side
408 WEST 15TH STREET

The vacant, five-story loft building sits down the street from the Porter House, and a block away from the DVB Headquarters. At 69 feet tall, the building has not maximized its FAR of 5.0, currently utilizing only 4.8. It is slated to house an eating/drinking establishment on floors 1-3, leaving floors 4 & 5, and the roof, vacant.

Originally built in the 1950’s, housing the Crisco Disco night club, the building has been unoccupied for 30 years, storing abandoned cars. The building sits within a zoning district that allows places of worship as-of-right, and awards community facility uses with a 6.5 maximum FAR. It also provides a largely unobstructed rooftop.
The building sits on a total lot size of 5,167 s.f.

The M1-5 zoning district allows for a maximum FAR of 5.0 for most building types. 408 West 15th has only utilized a total built area of 4.8 / 5.0, or 24,782 s.f. / 25,815 s.f.

Community facilities are allowed within the M1-5 district, and allow a maximum FAR of 6.5. Of these community facilities, places of worship are allowed to be built as of right.*

The increased FAR allows for an additional 8,777 s.f. to be built on the building, with a maximum height of 85 feet. This additional square footage provides rooftop opportunities.
**06 | 408 West 15th Street**

Currently, floors 1-3 are slated to house an eating / drinking establishment.

Floors 4-5 plus the rooftop provide buildable space for an urban church.
CONNECTED ICONICITY

408 West 15th Street can claim a stake in the area’s rooftop iconicism. It can begin to create a dialogue and tension between the other distinguishable architectural works in the area. It will provide another iconic piece to the roofscape, an alternative typology to an already eclectic mix, and a place of worship for the small urban
CELLAR EATING & DRINKING ESTABLISHMENT
US: 6A  OCC: F-4
MAXIMUM OCCUPANCY: 175

A CERTIFICATION OF OPERATION WILL BE REQUIRED PRIOR TO USE ON OCCUPANCY BY MORE THAN 74 PERSONS

THE CELLAR FLOOR IS FULLY SPRINKLERED UNDER APPLICATION #121363880

CELLAR EGRESS ANALYSIS PLAN
Fig. 27 Street level view, North West side
Architectural Model
Architectural Model
Site Model
Site Model
NOTES


4 Marta Serrats, Cloud 9: Rooftop Architecture (Barcelona, Spain: Loft Publications, 2010), pg. 7.


FIGURE CREDITS

Fig. 1, p. 8-9  https://scontent-a-lga.xx.fbcdn.net/hphotos-ash2/407178_316709508377319_1699480658_n.jpg (photo edit by author).

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Fig 16-22, p. 32-38 Photos taken and edited by author.


Fig 24, p. 59 http://www.archdaily.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/1496098061_image-130.jpg
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Fig 25, p. 63 Photo taken and edited by author

Fig 26, p. 67 http://www.agorafy.com/listing/2452/408-West-15th-Street-Office-for-Lease-4th-Floor#

Fig 27, p. 91 Photo taken and edited by author.
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