

The Interchurch World Movement and the Scientific Survey of American Religious Architecture, 1919-1924

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The failures and shortcomings of the Interchurch World Movement of North America (IWM) of 1919-1920 are well documented, and historians Eldon Ernst, Charles Harvey, and Albert Schenkel have done much to reevaluate its legacy and to explore John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s (JDR Jr.) guiding role in this ambitious experiment into interdenominational cooperative action. However, there is one positive and lasting contribution of the IWM which has generally escaped notice: the special architectural work conducted within the IWM's American Religious Education Survey Department (ARESD). In 1919, the ARESD devised detailed architectural standards for American Protestant churches and Sunday schools in connection with its survey activities, and these were published by the Interchurch Press in 1920 as *Standards for City Church Plants*. This was the first set of interdenominational church-building standards ever produced, and a unique accompanying score card permitted the survey and rating of the effectiveness of existing church facilities. The ARESD's standards and related applied surveys had an immediate impact upon Protestant church architecture and had a sustained influence upon its development over the next four decades.

The director of the ARESD was Walter Scott Athearn (1872-1934), founding Dean of Boston University's School of Religious Education and Social Service and a notable proponent

of Sunday-school reform. Athearn had outlined many of his ideas for modern religious education in his influential 1910 book *The Church School*. Preferring to use the term “church school” rather than “Sunday school,” Athearn argued that existing denominational and sectarian influence over the church school was very detrimental. He urged instead the creation of independent, non-denominational religious-education systems within communities, akin to those for secular education, and the construction of more modern, efficient, and centralized facilities to house these church schools. In the IWM Athearn sought to work towards these goals and set out initially to scientifically survey the present state of church and church-school facilities in order to highlight their deficiencies and their hindrance to modern church work.

The first step of the ARES D’s national survey project involved developing a comprehensive set of building standards. Athearn assembled a panel of religious and secular-education experts, architects, and theology students to study the issues and to devise the standards. The resulting standards were quite technical and included basics such as modern service systems, fire safety, and floor-space requirements. The panel also placed significant programmatic emphasis upon specialized classrooms and community-rooms which they considered essential for the progressive educational and social work of the modern church. The standards even extended to the aesthetics of the church sanctuary, which seems surprising considering the central educational focus of the ARES D and the expertise of those involved.

Although the new ARES D church and church-school standards were innovative and groundbreaking, they were closely related to a standards system for public school buildings that had recently been developed by Teachers College (TC) professors George D. Strayer and Nickolaus L. Engelhardt for the purpose of modernizing school buildings and bringing them into conformity with current pedagogy. Key to the Strayer-Engelhardt system was the use of a score

card for surveying and rating existing buildings against the standards. Each specified item was physically inspected, measured against the standard, and scientifically graded with points on the score card. Using a 1000-point scale, the summary total indicated whether a building was satisfactory as it was, whether it needed renovation to bring it up to standard, or whether it needed to be replaced entirely. Engelhardt served on Athearn's panel, and he was joined by fellow TC professor Edward S. Evenden and TC graduate student Frank W. Hart to help adapt the public school building standards and score card for church-school purposes.

Once the ARES church-building standards were established, Athearn set out to use them in a series of surveys which would illuminate the deficiencies in Protestant religious education throughout the country, help set long-term religious-education goals for the IWM, and aid in the IWM's immediate fundraising efforts. Athearn began with a single-city survey in late 1919. He led his TC contingent and a team of trained investigators to survey the seventeen Protestant churches of Malden, Massachusetts. The results were published by the IWM in 1920 as *The Malden Survey: A Report on the Church Plants of a Typical City*. The survey provided a frank assessment of the physical condition of churches in so many American communities, and its analysis was supported with charts, graphs, and plenty of photographic evidence. Only one of Malden's churches was considered suitable, and the majority received rankings low enough to merit rebuilding. The authors asserted that "false pride and denominational rivalry have caused the erection of pretentious structures, with little or no serious thought for the many types of service to be rendered by the building other than as the meeting place for the congregation on Sunday." Major criticism was leveled at outdated arrangements, with circular seating in the church sanctuary and classroom space opening directly onto it. A number of the churches were simply deemed unsafe or uninhabitable.

The Malden Survey was followed by a more ambitious state survey of religious education in Indiana. Originally the ARES D planned for surveys of six states assessing different regional conditions, but as the IWM's initial momentum stalled and its demise appeared imminent the sole Indiana Survey came to represent a typical state. From mid-April until late-June of 1920, when IWM operations ceased, Athearn and his team collected their data on religious-education administration, practices, and facilities in Indiana. All that remained to complete the survey was coding, tabulating, and interpreting data. However, the extended period of the IWM-dissolution process cast great uncertainty over finishing the project. For one year, Athearn personally lobbied several national organizations to accept the survey material and to fund its completion. The IWM Business Men's Committee eventually permitted the transfer of all ARES D survey work to the interdenominational International Sunday School Council of Religious Education for safekeeping. After extensive study and with JDR Jr.'s assent, the Committee on Social and Religious Surveys, a group charged with deciding what to do with uncompleted surveys, [later renamed the Institute of Social and Religious Research (ISRR), 1921-1934], agreed in June 1921 to fund its completion and publication. The resulting study was finally published in 1923-1924 in three volumes, and was titled *The Indiana Survey of Religious Education*.

The Indiana Survey was immediately recognized as a seminal work in the field, and Athearn used Indiana to draw broader conclusions about the state of religious education throughout the country. Professor Evenden authored the substantial chapter on architecture and assessed a sample of Indiana church facilities applying the ARES D's building standards and score card. As with *The Malden Survey*, the results were pitiful and Evenden concluded that three out of every five churches in Indiana should be rebuilt or extensively remodeled. He urged that Indiana congregations be directed to information on approved standards and that these be

studied as they develop replacement designs. He further suggested that cities conduct their own city-wide facilities surveys in order to develop intelligent church-building programs and that they consider federated church work. Although *The Indiana Survey* marked a formal end to the ARES D's innovative work into architectural standardization, the standards and score-card system was fast becoming recognized by individual denominations as an effective method for addressing their own national building programs.

My research at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) concentrated on examining the surviving IWM and ISRR documentation related to the work of Walter Athearn and the ARES D. I focused particularly on each organization's oversight and assessment of the architectural survey projects. I also explored JDR Jr.'s personal papers with the interest of learning the extent of his own knowledge and awareness of Athearn's work and its possible connection with JDR Jr.'s other church architectural pursuits of the 1910s and 1920s. Could the IWM church-building standards and surveys have been part of a larger Rockefeller program of church architectural reform, promoting a national standardization of a Protestant church-building type suitable for progressive church work?

Throughout this period, JDR Jr.'s ideas about the role and function of religion in modern society were evolving and maturing, as were his ideas on church architecture. He was actively engaged with a number of significant building projects, including Park Avenue Baptist Church, Riverside Church, the Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago, the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, and the restoration of Reims Cathedral in France. Balanced against this high-style patronage was the General Education Board's (GEB) support for the American Baptist Home Mission Society's efforts to improve church architecture throughout the Northern Baptist Convention. In 1920 the GEB provided a grant of \$20,000 to fund the first year of a newly

created Department of Architecture. Additionally, JDR Jr.'s wife, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, was very actively engaged in 1918-1919 with issues of building standardization. In her position on the Housing Committee of the YWCA's War Worker's Council, she was instrumental in developing standardized housing units for women war workers with family-favored architect Duncan Candler.

The answer to the question of whether the ARES standards and surveys were part of a concerted Rockefeller church architectural agenda appears to be "no." Early on, JDR Jr. was apprised of, and seemed to take interest in, the possibilities of IWM work in architectural standardization. In a May 1920 report submitted to him by S. Earl Taylor detailing the progress of the IWM, for instance, JDR Jr. noted, with his characteristic marginal markings, the section detailing projects for "the development of cooperative plans for effective types of architecture for church and institutional purposes at home and abroad." The result of any discussion on this point is unknown. Furthermore, with the strains of IWM campaign promotion at this time, increasing reports of mismanagement, and a growing general backlash against the IWM, JDR Jr. understandably was more fully occupied with other matters. Later during the IWM-dissolution period he seems to have relied even more upon his advisors to assess and filter for him the work of the costly surveys and reports, and the central architectural aspects of the religious-education surveys were no longer emphasized.

Surviving documentation indicates that some of JDR Jr.'s advisors did not see the full potential or value of Athearn's architectural surveys and consequently questioned the funding of their completion. One naysayer was Abraham Flexner of the GEB, an expert on medical education. Starr J. Murphy solicited Flexner's opinion on *The Malden Survey* in late 1920 and relayed it to JDR Jr. Flexner concluded that the survey was "too technical to be of much general

use, and that the elaborate and detailed scoring and the graphs based upon this was hardly worthwhile.” Flexner’s criticisms were overly harsh and were in sharp contrast to the many positive reviews that *The Malden Survey* subsequently received in the religious press. Flexner failed to recognize that the survey’s scoring and related graphic analysis illustrated the pressing need to reform American church buildings in very clear terms. These innovative features were precisely what made the survey useful and accessible to its intended audience of pastors and building committees.

Fortunately the Committee on Social and Religious Surveys (later named the ISRR) also took a different view from Flexner when considering the completion of Athearn’s *Indiana Survey*. In May 1921, after extensive review, board members Raymond B. Fosdick, Ernest DeWitt Burton, and John R. Mott voiced their support for it to JDR Jr. and extolled its “very great usefulness.” As with some other unfinished IWM surveys, the ISRR recognized that such a significant portion of the survey had already been funded and completed, it would be a waste to abandon it then. It also satisfied JDR Jr.’s requirement that any funded survey be “thoroughly scientific.” With JDR Jr.’s approval, nearly \$40,000 was expended on the completion and publication of *The Indiana Survey*, making it the second most expensive of thirty-one surveys that the ISRR funded during its first three years of operation.

Critical response to the three-volume *Indiana Survey* was very favorable, both in published reviews and in comments solicited by the ISRR from leading experts in the field. Except again, the substantial emphasis on church and Sunday-school facilities was not something explicitly recognized by either the ISRR or JDR Jr. himself. In what likely was the only direct communication ever from JDR Jr. to Walter Athearn, JDR Jr. politely thanked Athearn in an April 1925 letter for his work on the completed *Indiana Survey*. However, JDR Jr. commented

very generally upon religious education and wrote absolutely nothing about the key architectural implications of the survey. It is likely that JDR Jr. never examined the published volumes and was simply glad for the work of this IWM survey department to be finally concluded.

Despite receiving critical acclaim, *The Indiana Survey* did not have any lasting impact upon the movement to reform American Protestant church and Sunday-school buildings. Its large size, detailed analyses covering many aspects of religious education, and principal focus on one state obscured the larger architectural message. The ARES D's original *Standards for City Church Plants*, however, continued to gain exposure throughout the 1920s and was adopted in various forms by individual Protestant denominations for their national church-building programs. The Rockefeller-supported American Baptist Home Mission Society (ABHMS) was the first to adopt the standards within its new Department of Architecture for use within the Northern Baptist Convention. The ABHMS's architect-secretary George E. Merrill expanded the standards slightly and included them and the score card in the widely distributed 1921 church-building manual entitled *Planning Church Buildings; and Standards: Check List for Committees and Architects*, which he co-authored with Henry Edward Tralle.

The ABHMS Department of Architecture was a new type of denominational office established across mainline Protestant churches during the mid-1910s and 1920s, charged with improving and modernizing each denomination's architecture through professional guidance and controls. The ABHMS's adoption and promotion of the ARES D church-building standards provided Northern Baptists with an objective and scientific method for analyzing existing church conditions and reinforced the department's emphasis on a rational process of design for new church buildings. The standards also helped deflect criticism that widespread and intrusive

architectural reforms were being driven by the fancies and stylistic proclivities of a denominational elite.

Similarly, other denominational architectural offices in the 1920s developed their own standards and rating systems modeled after the ARES D's. The Disciples of Christ devised 1,000-point-standard surveys with score sheets to use in the assessment of its church buildings. The Methodist Episcopal Church developed a "Plant Efficiency Survey" for use in evaluating buildings considered for renovation. Additionally, the Southern Baptist Convention and the United Brethren in Christ each issued their own "Standard" of minimal programmatic requirements for church and Sunday-school buildings with a corresponding score card. These denominations all continued to use versions of their standards and score cards well into the 1950s and 1960s. They remained one of the most effective ways of communicating and assessing the architectural needs of the church and Sunday school.

The ARES D architectural standards were originally developed to establish normative criteria and expectations for modern Protestant church design. This effort was strongly interdenominational in spirit, seeking ultimately to create efficient facilities for more unified Protestant church work and action. Unfortunately, the realities of IWM mismanagement and the deep sectarianism still inherent in American Protestantism undercut this goal. Yet, the adoption by individual denominations of similar systems of architectural standards, modeled on the ARES D standards, proved in the end to yield enormous interdenominational results. Throughout the 1920s the professional architects and secretaries of the new denominational architectural offices regularly met with each other. They continued the larger discourse on what constitutes a proper church building, and they discussed their shared challenges in trying to effect improvement within their denominations. In the end, the offices came to closely resemble one

another in both method and product. The similarities were so strong that in 1934 the major Protestant architectural offices (with the exception of the Southern Baptist Convention) united their efforts and consolidated much of their work into a single Interdenominational Bureau of Architecture, under the aegis of the Home Missions Council. Eventually this body became the Department of Church Architecture of the National Council of Churches. Although JDR Jr. may not have been actively involved with the church architectural program of the IWM, his very support of the IWM, and particularly of the innovative work of Walter Athearn, helped to usher in a new era in religious architecture and architectural cooperation among American denominations.

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