

In the Name of GOD, Rural Religious Institutions as Social Infrastructure

Instructor: Ziad Jamaledine (L.E.FT Architects), Teaching Assistant: Emily Wincy Po

"While the institutional 'separation of church and state' is written into the U.S. Constitution, [religion] shapes many aspects of American culture, ..., it is a vital part of American civil society—including a central role in social welfare provision"

Rhys H. Williams



Jacob Lawrence, The Migration Series, 1940-41

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Introduction: In the late 20th century, the world—including the United States—experienced a religious resurgence, frequently attributed to a breakdown of state power caused by neoliberal economic policies. Religious groups (tax-exempt under the US laws) are increasingly providing services such as healthcare, education, and welfare support, filling the void left by the modern state. Fundamentalist religious groups frequently establish parallel institutions (schools and universities), promoting separatism in order to keep their community of believers in check.

The studio will investigate the architecture and the social (educational) programmatic capacity of rural religious institutions in the mid-Hudson Valley region. The studio aim is twofold: 1) **To map** the physical (vernacular and modern) architectural and territorial emergence of rural religious institutions in the mid-Hudson Valley, and 2) **To physically intervene** (alter, transform, expand, move, etc.) on these building types and their territories, having critically unpacked their historical evolution, probed their relationship to their environment (natural, rural, post-industrial, infrastructural), and to the communities they include and/or exclude from their spaces of worship.

The Mid-Hudson Valley region's environmental and urban history provides a microcosm of the rise, spread, breakdown and resurgence of religious institutions in the Northeast region of the United States. Early Evangelical missionaries and churches occupied less dense agricultural areas and carried out a colonial mission of land control. This was followed by the arrival of Irish Catholic and German Jewish communities to the region's larger industrialized cities in the 19th century. In the early 20th century, an African American community was established, populated by citizens moving as a part of the Great Northward Migration—fleeing the Jim Crow South and seeking factory jobs. This population growth increased the construction and visibility of the Protestant 'black churches' in the cities of the region. In the late 20th century, revivalist (Evangelical) religious institutions (expressing nationalist sentiments) rose again, reacting to the increased social and ethnic diversity of the American population, and to the adverse effect of the national market economy on the rural agricultural economy.

The Newburgh region presents us with an architectural cross section of that history, housing an ethnically diverse religious community (47.9% Hispanic 30.2% African American, 38.4% White). Local religious communities and institutions include: the Protestant evangelical megachurch (Grace Community), whose 2,300 car parking lot devours the landscape in nearby Washingtonville; the dilapidated African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church nestled in the East End historic city of Newburgh; the conversion of an old, unused synagogue into a Pentecostal church (First Assembly of God) by the new Hispanic community; and the recently arrived Muslim community (post-911), who have fulfilled their spiritual and communal needs through the transformation of an old warehouse, located near Muchattoes Lake, into a mosque.