



# SPIRITUAL Summit

Lakewood Church recasts the role of sacred architecture.

by Brian Lonsway

My tour guide for Lakewood Church asked me to meet her where the old ticket booth used to be.

An odd landmark for a religious institution, perhaps, but Lakewood identifies as much with its roots as a former basketball arena as with its reincarnation, completed in the summer of 2005 by Morris Architects. The ticket booth, the church's last unrenovated area, is but one reminder that the building was formerly The Summit (aka Compaq Center, from 1976, designed by Kenneth Bentsen Associates with Lloyd Jones Associates), home of the Houston Rockets basketball team. As with any Christian rebirth, one's former affiliations are not completely eliminated, but merely displaced.



COURTESY LAKEWOOD CHURCH

At Lakewood Church, a carefully nurtured nostalgia pervades one's experience. The arena has been born again, but strategically, because memories of The Summit rank high in the minds of Houstonians. The church's newest home reveals its mission as a media enterprise, using spatial media—including architecture, architectural memory, and broadcast technologies—to craft an engaging experience and to bolster attendance. Lakewood presents a popular, recognizable image of its sporting past to broaden its public appeal. Furthermore, it should come as no surprise that the building embraces the spatial logics of the film and themed-environment industries, as Pastor Joel Osteen has been immersed

in the televisual end of the ministry since his term spent at Oral Roberts University in 1981. Beginning in 1982, he developed and ran a television-based ministry for his father and the church's late founder, the Reverend John Osteen, driving Lakewood Church to become as intensely media-savvy as possible. The result is a hybrid church/stadium/broadcast studio that forms an important cultural contribution to religious architecture.

Attendees are often reminded in services, on broadcasts, via media productions and brochures of the popular, local roots of Lakewood's present home. Stories circulate about Pastor Osteen and his wife and

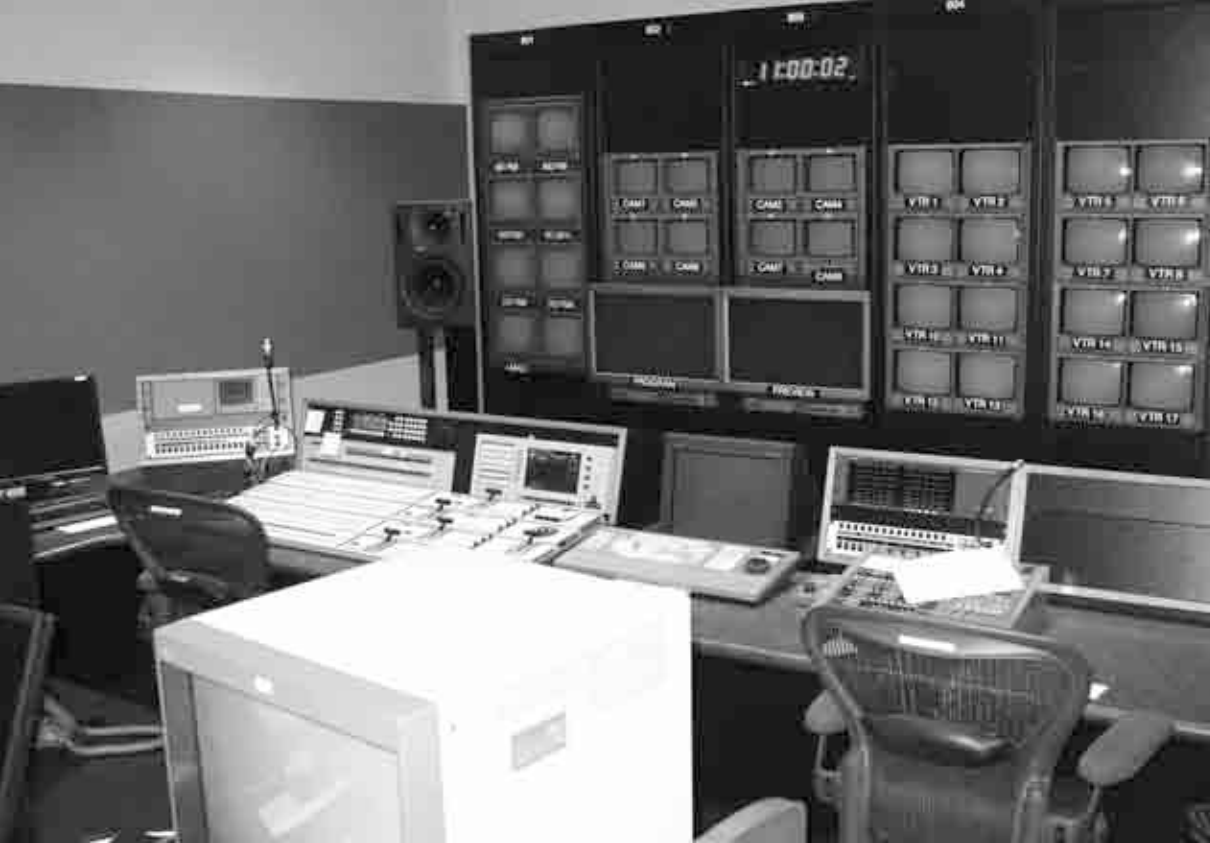
co-pastor Victoria's first date at The Summit to see a basketball game, about Joel's parents Dodie and John's decades-old conversation about holding church meetings there, and about the church's oft-repeated opening-day message: "Now the place where champions were crowned in the world of sports will crown champions in the arena of life." It is clear that the Osteens are embracing both a highly popular sports team and a well-known architectural landmark as tactics to advance the church's mission. Such a novel experience helps fulfill Lakewood's evangelical mission to attract as many "seekers" (as non-believers are called) as possible. The mnemonic experience of the building's secular and "unsaved" past contributes greatly to the popularity of the church, especially among a younger crowd that readily identifies with the center's history of sports and rock-and-roll. It is a novelty to attend church services on the floor where the Rockets once played. And if the association with basketball is not enough, Lakewood, like many other recently designed megachurches, has its own Christian rock club and internet café for teens, as well as a dance and assembly

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hall for tweens. (A 2000 *Faith Communities Today* study showed a strong correlation between the use of electric instruments and increased church growth.) You can play basketball on the original Rockets floor, which Lakewood has reinstalled for use by the more sporting of the church's attendees. There is a kid-themed babysitting service for the staff's children that turns into a Sunday school and

day care for families during services. The provision of so-called youth ministries is one of Lakewood's important missions. If the church can provide an everyday environment for young people, it is believed that its membership will grow rapidly,

as kids are known to invite friends to share in their experiences. The intention is for these would-be seekers to eventually become transformed by their time at the *L7* (short for Life.Seven days a week) rock club and the internet café ministries or even the somewhat inexplicable slime showers that appear in the "Mission Control" area of *KidsLife*. Bruce Barry, founder of the Florida-based Wacky World design group, which themed these areas of Lakewood, states: "My objective is simple: to create fun, exciting environments that fire kids up to come to church and bring their unsaved friends and families." The kid-themed areas, while distributed throughout the building, command their own prominent entrance, encouraging one to partake of the church's play areas without entering the church itself. Lakewood also offers diverse ministries for adults, married couples, and singles, for the visual arts and music, and for consultation with GodsMoneyMan, a Financial Biblical Coach (FBC). Outreach missions like these seek to bring more people into the church and to "regularize" its function beyond weekly services.



While most descriptions of Lakewood Church highlight its massive size (600,000 square feet), its rapid growth (self-reporting about 9,000 new members each year between 2003 and 2006), its number of attendees (about 46,000 each week), and the cost of renovation (\$95 million), little attention is given to its sought-after “everydayness,” the church’s (somewhat ironic) desire to be seen as nothing out of the ordinary. This notion requires some crafting, especially for a place of such magnitude. Lakewood’s strategy is to focus on the everyday experience of its adherents, providing not only services but also a familiar architectural environment that doesn’t push religion. With hybridization comes the banal architecture comfortably equated with the airport and the shopping mall. One’s experience of Lakewood has all of the *je ne sais quoi* of the dropped-ceilinged, new-carpet-smelling, fluorescent-lit, corridor-dominated environment with which we are all too familiar. Gone are intimations of the biblical details of St. Peter’s or the imposing scale of Hagia Sophia. Present instead is the pedestrian bigness of the Mall of America. Significantly, the lead architect for the renovation of Lakewood’s home, Pete Ed Garrett (now a principal of Studio Red Architects of Houston), admits that mega-church architecture is not about pushing the envelope. But a traditional architectural critique, where the building is the object of study, is not the right frame of reference for Lakewood. The architecture of the building itself is less important than the architecture of the experience held within it.

In 1999, economists Joseph Pine and James Gilmore published *The Experience Economy* to promote what they claimed would be the next big profit-making economic trend: making everyday consumer interactions “experiential.” Joel Osteen

BRIAN LONSWAY; DRAWING COURTESY MORRIS ARCHITECTS

**Client:**  
Lakewood Church

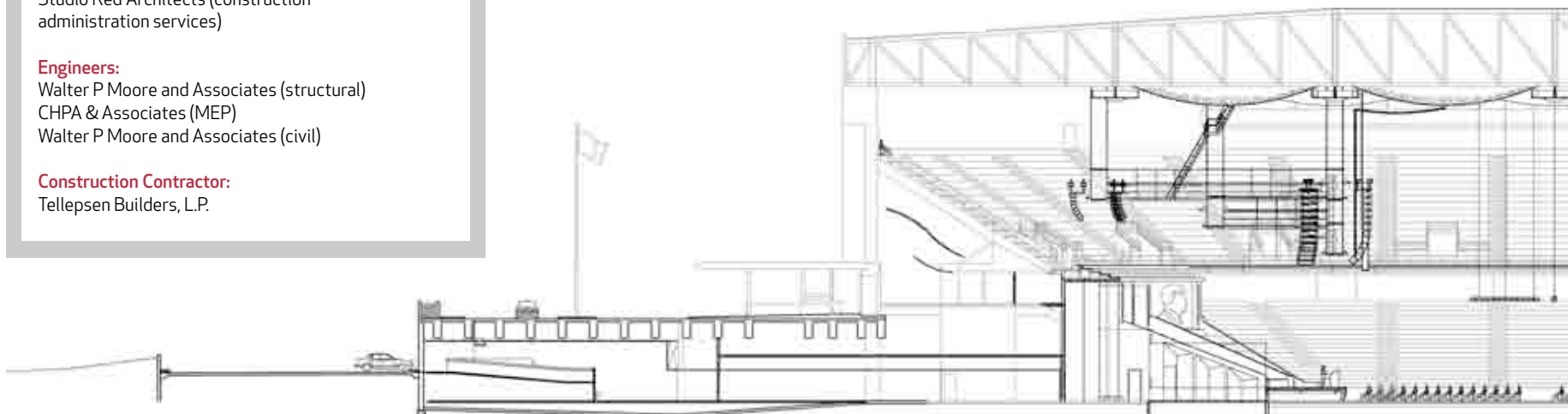
**Project Manager:**  
Irvine Team

**Architects:**  
Morris Architects (designer and architect of record)  
Clarence Shaw Architect (associate architect)  
Studio Red Architects (construction administration services)

**Engineers:**  
Walter P Moore and Associates (structural)  
CHPA & Associates (MEP)  
Walter P Moore and Associates (civil)

**Construction Contractor:**  
Tellepsen Builders, L.P.

## LAKWOOD CHURCH SECTION





Compaq Center, formerly The Summit, 1976, Kenneth Bentsen Associates with Lloyd Jones Associates.



Lakewood Church, 2005, Morris Architects.

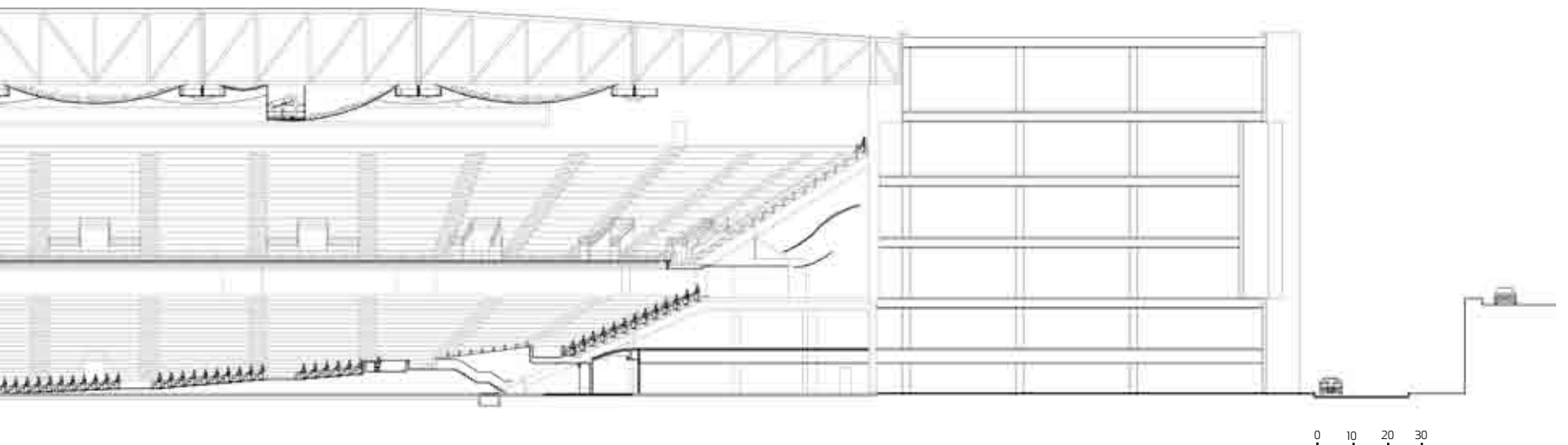
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may never have read their book but his architectural venture parallels its propositions. The authors' theories are grounded in the cinematic, performative, and thematic design models prototyped by Disney in

its theme parks. Although they don't explicitly address the context of religion, Pine and Gilmore set out to show how staging, performance, and commercial theatrics can bolster an organization's long-term profits by creating strong brand identifications. Such mantras as "The customer is the product," and "You are a performer. Your work is theatre. Now act accordingly," pepper the book. They argue that producing experience can transform the customer into a loyal adherent to the mission of the

company. As the mega-church moves further from the symbolism, language, and structures of traditional Christianity, it must embrace some alternate means to compel attendance, broaden its appeal, and reach out to new demographic markets. The experience of Lakewood is meant to be as everyday as it can be, both in the sense of evoking an everyday familiarity and in becoming a part of everyday life. It accomplishes this by carefully crafting its popular media image as the inheritor of a Houston landmark, both on television and within the architecture of the church. Continuing what might appear to be a secularization of the faith, Pastor Osteen subscribes to the position, increasingly common among mega-church leaders, that people will come to his services only if they are made to feel at ease and embraced by positive messages in an atmosphere free of talk about sin, repentance, and damnation. Lakewood is meant to be free from the classic

COURTESY LAKEWOOD CHURCH



“threats” of evangelical, pentecostal, and fundamentalist Christianity, including those performed by imposing architecture. So much for the sublime. And with the strength of a media-savvy pastor—whose production suites are on par with any national cable syndicate—and his 210-person full-time staff, the mission to craft an intimate and quotidian experience for the country’s largest church is, well, a slam dunk.

it

is useful to examine another great church of the media age: Philip Johnson and John Burgee’s 1978 Crystal Cathedral for the Reverend Robert H. Schuller in Garden Grove, California. In many respects, the rise of the mega-church and Schuller’s kind of televangelism occurred simultaneously, but often in tension. This

was likely due to the conflicting tendencies of broadcast media and the structures of a defined geographic location. The very basis of televangelism was to extend a ministry beyond the architectural confines of a church building.

But this conflict has always remained present and is importantly marked by Johnson and Burgee’s church. A significant precedent for Lakewood, the Crystal Cathedral

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attempted to lend permanence and grandeur to Schuller’s “Hour of Power” broadcast. It did so with some success, contributing to the rebranding of Schuller’s ministry as the Crystal Cathedral Ministries and serving as a model for its various graphic productions. But the building did little to transform the role of Schuller’s ministry in its local or global communities. These transformations occurred primarily via the televisual function of the church. The building, although quite secularized, maintained the cultural function of a traditional church, even being formalized with a subsequent steeple and carillon tower by Johnson to clarify the building’s program. The structure was simply too stuck in its own monumentality to dissipate into a culture-seeking everyday religion. A different form of architecture, less rooted in the symbolic history of church iconography, is required to effect the kinds of everyday spiritual transformations *in situ* that TV apparently does much more easily.

As much as Lakewood borrows from the Crystal Cathedral, it is influenced more by the latter’s Anaheim neighbor, Disneyland. Although not explicitly Disneyesque, Lakewood represents the contemporary hybridization of popular media and architecture that Disney introduced, and that the authors of *The Experience Economy* have formalized. Lakewood accomplishes what the Crystal Cathedral could not: the creation of a hybrid media-architecture that exists as much in the popular media consciousness as it does in physical form. For Lakewood does not exist as a building alone; it is as much former-home-of-the-Houston-Rockets, or where-I-saw-David-Bowie, or that-church-on-U.S. 59 as it is Lakewood Church. The experience of the place is only partially gained from being there physically. This is where Lakewood is most like Disneyland. Disney broke ground with its theme parks by honing an architectural mechanism for the controlled crafting of experience. Blatant theming is part of this strategy, but so are two other more important aspects: brand identification and making architecture videographic. Brand identification seeks to promote products through TV show tie-ins, public event sponsorships, and explicit engagements with everyday social environments (think Celebration, Florida). Imposing the technical requirements of video broadcasting on architecture introduces the geometric, textural, and environmental requirements of video camera technologies on traditional design logics. Disney succeeds by strategically using media culture to become an everyday brand and by reconfiguring architecture to more readily participate in it. In both regards, Disney and its successors have worked to establish a loyal customer base through fluid integration with people’s everyday lives, the same evangelical mission of the newest breed of mega-church pastors, including Joel Osteen.

Architect Pete Ed Garrett describes the design of Lakewood Church as embodying the kind of disciplinary convergences more typically found in Las Vegas or Los Angeles. In addition to Garrett and his staff, the design team consisted of Bill Klages, a lighting designer with experience working on the Grammy Awards show and the Republican



Entrance to the Lakewood sanctuary.

National Conventions; René Lagler, the Academy Awards' production designer; and David Reilly, graphic designer for the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Considering Garrett's experience designing myriad performance spaces (and even a Terminator ride film for Universal Studios in Florida), this group understood the complexities of simultaneously creating intimacy for 16,000 worshippers and providing a controlled media environment for the focused broadcast of Osteen's sermons. The teams "play with psychology," in Garrett's words, by manipulating visual and acoustic "sight-lines," crafting a stage with a depth that appears different on TV than in person, and masking the masses of worshippers from the video camera's frame by buffering the stage with variable-flow waterfalls—all techniques straight out of a Disney Imagineering handbook. This is where the behind-the-scenes experience of Lakewood is everything but everyday. The vast arrays of video servers, production and recording suites, lighting boards, video-safe materials, colors, and textures, and TV-conscious



Baptismal area.

geometries represent an impressive catalog of high-tech instruments to control a media image. This control is maintained in order to give a video editor the best, most flexible material to work with. In an attempt to make Joel Osteen's message resonate with today's television viewers, these advanced systems support the slickest, yet most straightforward, teleministry around. Here, high-tech architecture in support of a down-home message is able to compete aesthetically with the videography of television's *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* series. As

Disney has proven, and as authors Pine and Gilmore continually assert, it is only through a careful and critical approach to the production of experience that an organization broadens its appeal and transforms its customers. Remember: "The customer is the product."

Lakewood's religious experience does, in fact, seek to make its customer, or congregant, the product: a believer. And with broad appeals to the world's population through its mediatized architecture, it seeks an ever-increasing customer base that may one day exceed the physical limits of its current home. In an August 2005 *Texas Monthly* interview, Osteen boldly claimed: "I am convinced that in twenty years we'll look up and realize that the Compaq Center isn't big enough to hold everyone. Hopefully, someone will want to build another stadium by then and Reliant will be available." Reliant Stadium seats over 69,000, and conveniently comes with a convention center and indoor arena, not to mention the Astrodome next door. Anyone up for renovating an abandoned, 16,000-seat Christian multiplex? ☞



TOP: BRIAN LONSWAY; BOTTOM: COURTESY LAKEWOOD CHURCH