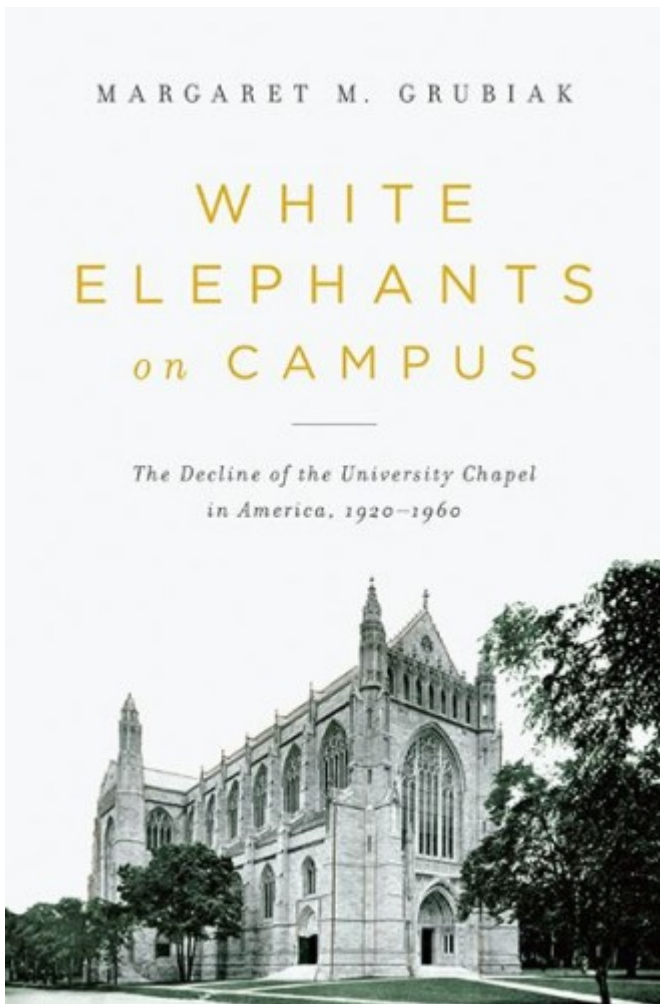


White Elephants on Campus, by Margaret M. Grubiak

reviewed by [Alison L. Boden](#) in the [October 1, 2014](#) issue

In Review



White Elephants on Campus

By Margaret M. Grubiak

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The University of Chicago—a Baptist institution—began construction of its enormous Gothic cathedral of a chapel in 1926, ensuring that it could hold the entire student body for religious services, but in the midst of the multiyear construction project, the

university stopped requiring chapel attendance. Princeton University—Presbyterian—began construction of its own massive chapel in 1925 during a decline of interest in mandatory chapel and a crisis of faith prompted largely by the heartbreaking losses of the Great War. Meanwhile, Congregationalist Yale opted not to replace its smaller, Victorian Battell Chapel with a triumphalist Gothic structure but rather to build that ecclesiastical and architectural musculature into its new Sterling Memorial Library, hence creating a “new cathedral” responsible for the “reshaping of religion.” Unitarian Harvard, in the meantime, replaced a 19th-century chapel that had geographically faced off with, and lost to, the Widener Library with the hopefully more impressive and architecturally aggressive neocolonial Memorial Church.

In *White Elephants on Campus*, architectural historian Margaret M. Grubiak examines the changing role of religion within certain elite American universities and colleges and concludes that because these institutions’ core missions and identities are no longer religious, their magnificent chapels and other religiously informed structures have become white elephants. They were built to ensure that religion would remain central to the university’s mission, and the project failed. The buildings are now irrelevant, financially burdensome, and outdated in design and purpose. Harvard’s Memorial Church, for instance, can “be conceived as a desiccated symbol.”

Today when university presidents are asked about the mission of their institutions, many say something to the effect of “producing knowledge” and “creating public servants,” both of which are wonderful but seem to have little to do with gorgeous, monumental, architecturally significant university chapels, libraries, and classroom buildings. But even if training ministers is no longer an institutional priority of historically Protestant universities, can’t the schools continue to use ecclesiastical architecture to inspire faith and convey that learning is a holy endeavor? Of course they can.

Large chapels and similarly designed buildings continually incur enormous maintenance costs. The white elephant chapels with which I’m familiar were provided with endowments at the time of their construction to ensure that the buildings would never cost their parent institutions a dime. In one case a university reinterpreted a chapel endowment to mean that significant portions of its annual payout should go to other departments that support the building, like facilities, grounds, and public safety. That chapel is not a white elephant but a cash cow.

And then there is the question of these buildings' interface with the public. Regular self-audits by universities show that chapels are a top campus destination for visitors. Second only to campus stadiums, the magnificent chapels and the other astounding learning spaces on which this book focuses are major draws for worshipers, tourists, scholars, bibliophiles, and music and art lovers. This is what the structures' builders had hoped for all along, and why they built them to be destinations.

None of the universities Grubiak studies continues to require chapel attendance, but that doesn't make the buildings useless. The time of mandatory chapel was never a golden age: she notes the bad behavior of forced worshipers. Rather, today's chapels are inhabited by people who truly want to be there. Religious interest and participation have been rising on campuses since the early 1990s after a 20-year dip and have yet to crest. The chapels now host the rituals of a number of religious communities. Hindus celebrate Diwali, Muslims hold Jumma prayer, Buddhists meditate, and Catholics consecrate side chapels, all in addition to the historic Protestant campus ministries' presence.

The great religious spaces have continued to flourish because they have been kept relevant to their institutions' changing religious demographics. Rather than covering the icons in their stained glass windows with velvet curtains, these white elephants have decided not to deny their Protestant heritage but to embrace it. The goal is not to eliminate the school's religious roots but to acknowledge them as the historical starting point of a place of welcome and engagement with equals.

As Grubiak notes, the massive chapels built during the fat 1920s represented university administrators' attempts to reinforce the notion that religion was a positive and eternal force even as religion's place in society and the academy was in transition. The Princeton University chapel inhabits this dialogue. Its north balcony window depicts Job at the depths of his suffering, sitting on a dung heap and scraping his boils with potsherds. The south window depicts him after his gracious restoration. The message to the first viewers of the windows was crystal clear: although you have lost beloved classmates, brothers, and sons in the war, although you will never truly recover their presence or your old faith, although mustard gas and slaughter tell you that there can't be a god, keep coming here—keep coming back to this space, because restoration from the deepest of pits is possible through God and God alone.

The white elephants still speak to us. They call us back. They don't let us go. They are packed with life that their builders both desperately hoped for and never imagined. They actually are not white elephants but vibrant, elegant, and cherished portals of mystery, intellect, beauty, and yes—faith.