Apocalyptic Desire in the Modern Architectural Imagination

Connor Pitetti

This talk focuses on the “radiant city,” a popular modern vision of a utopian future in which the application of scientific rationality and industrial technologies to the design and construction of human dwellings has produced a paradise on earth. Looking at descriptions of such cities drawn from the work of the science fiction author Hugo Gernsback and the architect Le Corbusier, Pitetti argues that these literary cities are part of a futurist discourse that is best understood as apocalyptic. The talk highlights the specifically apocalyptic characteristics of the radiant city, showing that apocalyptic logics underwrite both temporal and material aspects of the vision. The apocalyptic idea of the future as the final product of historical change manifests spatially in the radiant city narrative as a desire for “absolute size,” a state of perfect interiority in which the city fills the entire world. This desire, Pitetti suggests, remains a potent force in contemporary discourses of the urban future and in the way urban spaces are designed today.

Connor Pitetti is a doctoral candidate in the English department, where he is writing a dissertation exploring connections between eschatological and ecological thinking in the work of twentieth-century writers and architects. His background is in contemporary American literatures, and his research interests include religion, the philosophy of history, literary theory, environmentalism, and science fiction. An article exploring evangelical responses to environmental discourse and the basis of those responses in scripture appeared in the Oxford Journal of Church and State last year.