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The floating churches of Volgograd: River topologies and warped spatialities of faith

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This paper explores creative reuse as an alternative modality to upcycle the materiality and documentary capacities of things, beyond the linear entrapments of historical or functional redundancy. Drawing on an amphibious ethnography of Volgograd's riverscapes, we analyse the floating churches inaugurated after the collapse of the Soviet Union to support the revival of faith practices. Acting as mobile centres of religious activity, they morph various temporalities, functions and places into multidimensional operative domains that range from the embodied practices of sailing and engaging in religious rituals to the making of sacred space at a regional level. We conclude by suggesting that their operations and impact rely on topologies of fixed points and shifting spatialities, which provide a salient vehicle for broader geographical interrogations of memory, creativity and mobility.

KEYWORDS
archiving, creative reuse, floating churches, sacred space, topology, Volgograd

1 | INTRODUCTION

Every year in July the city of Volgograd hosts a little-known yet spectacular festival, where live music, poetry and dance performances mingle with religious practice in a unique manner. Organised in the Kirovsky district by the Volga River, the three-day festival celebrates the memory of Russian bard Vladimir Vysotsky, an iconic artist of the former Soviet Union (Lazarski, 1992). The event is curated by local entrepreneur Vladimir Koretsky and brings together a motley collection of performers in an experimental set-up. While attending the eleventh festival in 2013, we witnessed how creative and spiritual encounters are staged through a succession of ceremonial moments across various sites marked by Vysotsky's popularity. The opening took place at the yacht club *Parus*, built as a tribute to the bard's oeuvre. The venue housed a panoply of artworks, from murals depicting scenes of his artistic career to an impressive display of astrological and Orthodox-religious motifs. As part of an established tradition, the ceremony included a religious service held for blessing the participants, followed by a procession along the river quay to Vysotsky's memorial and the festival stage. The service culminated in a spectacular moment, when an aeroplane carrying sacred relics circled the area several times, marking the transition to the organiser's welcome speech and the live performances on stage.

In line with the eclectic performances and the event tempo, the festival setting also presented some distinctive features. While the audience was concentrated along the riverbank, the festival stage was floating on the Volga. Around twenty metres upstream, a quieter presence offered an almost surreal sight. A ship-like-no-other was moored perpendicular to the riverbank, as if it was there to protect the floating stage from the strong river currents. Marking the ship's main axis, three gilded domes emerged from what appeared as a chapel structure (Figure 1). Named *Saint Vladimir*, the ship was actually a floating church that travelled on the Volga to provide religious services to churchless communities. Fascinated by the look

FIGURE 1 Preparations: the *Saint Vladimir* (left) and the floating festival stage (right). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

and the function it performed, we enquired about its story and learned that, apart from its religious function, the floating church served as a mobile stage for charity concerts, as well as an open canvas for various artworks. Yet, we soon realised that the *Saint Vladimir* was not the only ship of its kind in the Volgograd oblast,[1] where there existed a legacy of what many described as the "flotilla for God".[2]

Inspired by some remarkable developments rooted in the historical mobilities of Russian Orthodoxy, the floating churches seemed an intriguing response to processes of place-making in Volgograd. Built after the collapse of the Soviet Union to support the revival of faith practices, they had an outstanding impact in patching-up a constellation of places devoid of religious infrastructure. With their journeys, the floating churches reanimated the sediments of a contested order, symptomatic to the oppressive campaigns previously directed against religious life, through alternative geographies of encounter and attunement. To investigate their workings, we conducted an ethnographic study scored across the amphibious interfaces of Volgograd's riverscapes including the collection of local stories, interviews, archive materials and on-site experiences. Accordingly, we thus proceeded from one of the striking features they all share, their rudimentary character. Jury-rigged hybrids made of salvaged ships and all sorts of other things, some more tangible than others, the floating churches emerge as expressions of creative reuse, seeping through various degrees of materiality and affect. Their voyages, we suggest, have weaved a whole range of absences and presences into topological arrangements that contract and expand with the shifting spatialities of religious rituals and the meanings attached to mooring sites.

In line with our previous intervention on topological thinking in geography (Barba Lata & Minca, 2016), in this paper we interrogate the active reworking of various proximities, which enabled the floating churches to warp their operative domains. We then contend that their operations rely on a particular enactment of Volgograd's riverscapes, whereby resulting instances of mobility and stillness reveal new topologies of fixed points and shifting spatialities. These, we claim, offer a salient conceptual vehicle to explore the varying functional and temporal contingencies mobilised by the floating churches, beyond the sole grip of spatial metaphors. Accordingly, we work through questions of materiality, mobility and affect to navigate the resulting narratives of belonging and spiritual encounter. The argument developed hereafter is threefold. First, through the recourse of archival practices in geography (Cresswell, 2012a; DeLyser, 2015; Dwyer & Davies, 2010), we dwell on creative reuse as an alternative modality to upcycle the materiality and documentary capacities of things, beyond the linear entrapments of historical or functional redundancy. Second, we suggest that aligning the discussion of creative reuse to ongoing conceptualisations of sacred spaces (Holloway, 2003; Raivo, 2002; Woods, 2013) contributes to a better appreciation of their various place-bound and transient incarnations. Third, we show how via creative reuse the floating churches of Volgograd enabled mobile cosmologies/theologies that rely on topological arrangements of fixed points and shifting spatialities. These spatialities render explicit a particular kind of temporal and scalar dynamics, which arguably provides a lucrative perspective on the enactment and experience of sacred spaces more broadly. We conclude by trying to connect such topological arrangements to scholarship on geographies of memory, creativity and mobility.

2 | GEOGRAPHIES OF CREATIVE REUSE

It was a geometry book, which he had to hang by strings on the balcony of his apartment in the rue Condamine; the wind had to go through the book, choose its own problems, turn and tear out the pages. Suzanne did a small

painting of it, "Marcel's Unhappy Readymade". That's all that's left, since the wind tore it up. It amused me to bring the idea of happy and unhappy into readymades, and then the rain, the wind, the pages flying… (Cabanne & Duchamp, 1987, p. 61)

Marcel Duchamp's provocative artworks putatively inhabit a realm informed by counter-narratives of creative reuse, which have targeted the aesthetical fundaments and elitist pretensions of conventional art. His distinctive signature, the readymades[3] are often evoked as expressions of functional and temporal displacement that "flow into a principle of universal metamorphosis" – "[u]ndermined in the process is the idea of art as communication, enhanced instead the idea of art as life" (Olsson, 2007, p. 162). In the citation above, Duchamp recalls the gift made to Jean Crotti upon marrying his sister Suzanne, a geometry book playfully described as an "unhappy readymade". Once suspended in the open, the book became a mere supplement to the vortical forces of the elements, consumed by its otherwise "negative space". Given the interest Duchamp has manifested in the mathematics of higher-dimensional spaces (Henderson, 2009), his reference to the geometry book as an "unhappy readymade" provides an intriguing key to tackle the making and unmaking of things. As Daniel Miller suggests, in moving beyond the taken-for-granted status of things, "it is only when the juxtaposition or material is distinctly odd that we are shocked into an awareness of the underlying technology" (2011, p. 23).

2.1 | Alternative archives

Over the past decade, questions of matter and materiality have animated geographical debates around a broad range of material-affective imaginaries. These depict a world of mixtures and flows, of labile elements shifting between various states and predisposed to all sorts of affinities (Adey, 2015), attunements (Stewart, 2011) and turbulences (Cresswell & Martin, 2012). Extruded from such elemental mobilities, bodies mingle through complex processes of circulation which enable affective atmospheres and spatiotemporal conditions of various intensities, rhythms and momenta (Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2014; Merriman, 2016). Undoubtedly challenging, with the emphasis on a generous reading "as variously turbulent, interrogative, and excessive, materiality is perpetually beyond itself" (Anderson & Wylie, 2009, p. 332). However, along these lines, Ash and Simpson warn of the enthusiastic adherence to questions of matter and materiality, which risk turning into "no more than a generalized metaphor that ignores the objects that actually appear in a given moment" (2016, p. 62). Thus, in attending to the status of things while coupled to processes of varying dynamics, their material and affective incarnations emerge as key dimensions. In John Law's terms, "to enact objects is also to enact *spatial conditions of im/possibility*" and "these spatial im/possibilities are multiple" (2002, p. 92, original emphasis).

Mike Crang's article "The death of great ships" provides an intriguing account of shipbreaking in South Asia via the time-image of decommissioned ships as waste, "products at the end of their lives, dumped, discarded, and being dismantled (…) that stresses their undoing and unbecoming" (2010, p. 1086). The focus on *unbecoming* arguably strikes the nub of a largely underrated matter, i.e. the destructive dimension coiled into things at the intersections of their material and functional domains. In crude terms, unbecoming would equate death or, in a more nuanced manner, the phase unveiling the vulnerable condition of things while consumed within the ecologies that rendered them redundant. Hence, waste appears as a disruptive element, an "unhappy readymade" recast along dominant processes of accumulation, which enables emergent materialities to come into effect through its very displacement. Thus, it is often through instances of disposal or decay that things challenge "normative processes of spatial and material ordering" (Edensor, 2005, p. 314), divulging alternative conditions of possibility and their "broader social geographies of belonging and marginalization" (Lepawsky & McNabb, 2010, p. 190).

Discussing the case of shipbreaking vis-à-vis alternative material flows, Gregson et al. suggest that attending to conditions of dissolution "insists on seeing that things are assemblages, ontological conjunctures of stuff, materials, brought together and held together, but also coming apart and wrenched asunder", whereby "their value is not as a thing [anymore] but a function of their materialities and their ability to multiply and mutate" (2010, p. 853). Once acknowledged as such, disposed things exhibit complex afterlives, a fact signalled by Sarah Moore in conceptualising waste as a "parallax object" which, beyond altering "the smooth running of things", "escapes and exceeds any one perspective" (2012, p. 793). Accordingly, "practices of gathering, composition, alignment, and reuse" enable unconventional synergies that often trump normative assumptions on novelty or inventiveness (McFarlane, 2011, p. 649). Furthermore, these rely on temporal proximities that transcend a chronological reading of time, as in Serres' discussion of percolation "conveying wormholes of sheer acceleration, bottlenecks of stoppage or equilibrium, zones of stationary values" (Serres & Adkins, 2012, p. 377). Hence, one among manifold affordances of the temporal proximities evoked above concerns processes of *creative reuse* and their documentary sway over emergent materialities.

Things and affects could have "potent" afterlives (Thrift, 2008, p. 9) and, as Ash contends, "it is [often] the afterlives of affects that have the biggest impact on the beings exposed to them" (2015, p. 90). Creativity is redolent here of the "residual surplus" things drag along in their becoming and unbecoming. By partially overriding or even fracturing the functional status and materiality of things, processes of creative reuse enable hybrid formations often revealing alternative conditions of possibility. For instance, Barber and Hale explore the case of steampunks as retrospective futurists that "reshape and refine elements of prior temporalities into refurbished forms in a process known as upcycling" (2013, p. 166). As such, steampunks negotiate multiple temporalities through their costumes and contraptions, which "are animated by and embedded within narratives of alternative realities, counterfactual pasts filled with retrofuturistic fashion and steam-powered technologies" (2012, p. 167).

Echoing the early techniques of collage and assemblage developed by Apollinaire, Braque or Duchamp, found objects have scored as some of the most prolific (re)sources in modern art over the past century. In moving beyond the immediate affordances of things, found objects recast the absences which sustain taken-for-granted materialities, as with Duchamp's "unhappy readymade" caught in the swirl of the elements. The readymade thus occupies a space-in-between, since by being "relocated from one context to another, its identity becomes unfixed in the process" (Moore, 2011, p. 398). Along these lines, William Viney evokes Mark Dion's project the Tate Thames Dig – a large cabinet which gathers multiple objects made available by wind and tide that the artist recovered from the Thames riverbanks (2014, pp. 60–61). Through its unstable character, Dion's project challenges conventional archival and display practices, for

> objects in the cabinet are carried by complex, continuous and fluid process of cycling in and out of the times of use and waste, attended by and expressed through assembly and disassembly, preservation and dispersal, retrospective legibility and dust. (Viney, 2014, p. 179)

The messy and permeable character of archives is highlighted also by Tim Cresswell (2012a) through gleaning practices, which piece together all sorts of memorabilia and sites to enact alternative value regimes and histories of Maxwell Street in Chicago. Similarly, Dydia DeLyser addresses the potential of apparently residual materials gathered while doing research, to show how a personal collection of kitsch souvenirs impacted on "shaping social memory" for a "broader community" (2015, p. 209). According to these accounts, creative reuse thus qualifies as a modality of hacking into or even overhauling the materiality of things through the reinterpretation of their functional domains and documentary capacities.

2.2 | Creative reuse and shifting spatialities of faith

Taking the above questions into the realm of faith practices may provide a range of productive potentialities to tackle the enactment and experience of sacred spaces. There are two interrelated points we would like to address in light of the case discussed in the next section. The first concerns the scholarly dispositions connected to ongoing conceptualisations of sacred space. The second, somewhat underrated yet equally important, pertains to notions of temporality and the rhythmic qualities of sacred time. As suggested in the treatment of alternative archives, a processual reading attentive to the varying dynamics of particular functional and temporal contingencies could reveal alternative venues also for geographical interrogations of the sacred. Here, creative reuse distinguishes as a modality to upcycle the materiality and the documentary capacities of things beyond established norms and practices, whether they are regarded as secular or religious manifestations. The latter are perhaps most obvious when turning to how conceptualisations of sacred space have developed over the past couple of decades.

With the broader shift toward a postmodern ethos, much of the work on religious geographies has focused ever since on problematising the interplay between the poetics and politics of sacred space (Chidester & Linenthal, 1995; Kong, 2001). As such, geographers" renewed interest in the study of religion pivoted on questions ranging from

> the construction of identity or the meaning of bodily practices at a personal level, to unpicking the complex relationships and politics of institutional space and place at a regional or national level. (Brace, Bailey, & Harvey, 2006, p. 29)

This move was based most importantly on a critical and, one could argue, creative reinterpretation of the religious/secular dichotomy, which departed from Mircea Eliade's structuralist narrative of sacred space as "self-bounded entity" and "ontological given", considered to stand in sharp contrast to profane space (Della Dora, 2011b, p. 168). Resulting

appreciations of sacred space have thus challenged previous assumptions on the status of faith practices by exposing their political and performative dimensions well beyond formal sites of worship and even traditional denominations (Della Dora, 2015; see also Cloke & Beaumont, 2012; Woods, 2012).

Thinking through the creative reuse imaginary, ongoing geographical explorations of religion cover an unprecedented host of sacred spaces, spanning place-bound and transient incarnations, varied scales and temporalities. These instances extend from the political dispositions cultivated by questions of identity (Ehrkamp & Nagel, 2012; Luz, 2008; Raivo, 2002), material culture and everyday life (Brace et al., 2006; Dwyer, Gilbert, & Shah, 2013; Woods, 2013), to the poetics of religious experience, understood through its affective and embodied dimensions (Finlayson, 2012; Holloway, 2003; Scriven, 2014). Petri Raivo's (2002) discussion of Finland's post-war landscapes reveals a particularly interesting instance of creative reuse, whereby the Orthodox Church rebuilt its religious infrastructure after the Karelian Borderlands were conceded to the Soviet Union. Raivo's analysis highlights a whole range of temporal and functional displacements (including the reuse of ordinary farms) that enabled a sense of continuity and communal identity within the Orthodox tradition, where sacred space is bound to particular ontological and material qualities. On a different note, Orlando Woods (2013) explores the spatial and functional dynamism of Sri Lanka's house-church movement through a networked understanding of sacred space. Woods dwells on the politics of converting domestic space into sacred space, to saliently capture the emergence of informal, transient and mobile centres of religious activity for evangelical Christian groups. Delving into the poetics of sacred space, Julian Holloway offers yet another interesting account of spiritual encounters within the New Age movement, revealing how through embodied performance "seemingly everyday objects are patterned into a relational topology of senses, movements, rhythms, and affective action" to generate a "field of emergent sacralisation" (2003, pp. 1967–1968).

The instances presented above illustrate three different ways of approaching the making and experience of sacred space. In moving beyond denominational specificities, one of their common features concerns the (still poorly acknowledged) role of "religious creativity" (Dwyer et al., 2013, p. 416) in sustaining the affective dimensions of sacred space. Articulated by a logic of aspiration and differentiation, these views on the transcendent also share a commitment to functional and temporal contingencies which seem to escape the sole grip of spatial metaphors. As pointed out by Woods in discussing sacred networks, ongoing attempts "to inject a sense of spatial dynamism into the geographies of religion" should also be complemented by a more careful consideration of the temporal and scalar dynamism of faith practices (2013, p. 1072). To revisit Duchamp's readymades, things often mediate processes of varying dynamics, which transcend a linear appreciation of temporality. Thus in what follows, we focus on the shifting spatialities and temporalities enacted by the floating churches of Volgograd, through an exploration involving also a reflective return to the shared etymological foundation of "*templum* and *tempus*" (Eliade, 1959, p. 75), i.e. the inseparable character of sacred space and sacred time.

3 | THE FLOATING CHURCHES OF VOLGOGRAD

The story of the "flotilla for God" cuts across a complex constellation of contested landscapes and narratives of belonging, recast through Volgograd's amphibious interfaces. Even at a first glance, the floating churches intrigue through their mobile and makeshift character. However, what makes them really stand out is the capacity to warp their operative domains in compensating for absent religious edifices. They emerge as an expression of the potent afterlives of things (Thrift, 2008, p. 9), by morphing various imaginaries and residual materialities into mobile cosmologies/theologies to reanimate the void redolent of the oppressive campaigns previously directed against religious life. Inaugurated rather recently, the floating churches also retain the patina of prior developments, which enabled them to prompt active points of anchorage within different practices, across and beyond Volgograd's riverscapes, as well as to bridge tradition and novelty in ingenious ways. In other words, they piece together multiple temporalities and affects to enact faith practices, the Cossacks' lore or the everyday life by the rivers, beyond dominant historical narratives of the Soviet period. Most importantly, the floating churches exhibit intriguing dynamics in the enactment and experience of sacred space, through transient instances of mobility and stillness that mirror the intricate topologies of the rivers they navigate. Tackling these meandering pathways in "seeking to document challenging labile environments of [land], water and air" (Dwyer & Davies, 2010, p. 89) requires a journey upstream, a mapping of confluences and tributaries toward the source(s), as Michel Serres would have it (1997, p. 17). To pin down the creative reuse interventions that inspired the floating churches of Volgograd, we thus start from the convoluted story of a ship that was subject to multiple functional and temporal displacements, including its becoming and unbecoming as a place of spiritual encounter.

3.1 | The Pirate's metamorphosis

The floating churches' inception can be traced to the particularities of 19th-century Russia, spanning the major shifts in political and religious life brought by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Among these, the mobilities informed by church missions, but also by military campaigns through the use of "movable, field churches" and "temporary worship houses", were of prime importance (Sidorov, 2000, p. 215). Another relevant aspect evoked in travel accounts and conveyance reports concerned the inconvenience of land transportation, pointing to Russia's extensive network of waterways as a viable alternative (Moberly, 1862). The first documentary evidence of a floating church dates back to the turn of the 20th century. In 1903, the Astrakhan-based merchant N.E. Yankov proposed the local diocese to build a mobile church for the communities and fishing cooperatives of the lower Volga (Usov, 1993). Travelogues of the period refer to the sheer size and importance of these communities for the local economy. Nicholas Rowe's report "A journey on the Volga" provides such an account of the local fishing villages called "utschiugi, from the Tartar word utschiug, a fish-dam", where in the fishing seasons "about 20,000 strangers [used to] assemble, in addition to the regular population engaged in the trade" (1870, p. 24).

Yankov's persistence induced the diocese to appoint a special committee to handle the task. Financially constrained, the committee opted for the conversion of an existing ship, technically-suited to accommodate the church function. With the patronage of Astrakhan diocese and local officials, the committee collected donations and examined around 30 ships between 1908 and 1910. In January 1910, they identified the tug-passenger steamer *Kriushi*, which had already been in service on the Volga for roughly half a century (Usov, 1993). Initially owned by the Volga Steam Navigation Company, it was part of an order (commissioned in 1858 to London-based shipbuilders Ravenhill, Salkeld & Co. and Samuda Brothers) for four shallow-draft steamers to operate frequent passenger trips between Kazan and Astrakhan (Talygin, 2011). After being sold to the Astrakhan merchant P.M. Minin in 1908, and renamed *Pirate*, it mainly covered the lower Volga and the shallow Caspian Bay. Its size made it an ideal candidate for the committee in search of a reliable vessel, capable of reaching the communities often located by the backwaters and narrow branches of the Volga.

The *Pirate*'s metamorphosis into a floating church took only three months. The project was entrusted to the diocese architect Karyagin, who remodelled the ship for its religious function, while also including a refectory, a sickbay and the crew cabins. The steamer's straight bow allowed him to ingeniously accommodate the church space at the front end, by placing the narthex, nave and sanctuary underneath the main deck. Above deck, following the narthex perimeter, Karyagin imagined a superstructure with five gilded towers, including the choirs and the main dome. In-between the paddle boxes, on the upper deck, was a belfry chapel with an imposing gilded tower that provided an impressive sight (Figure 2). The refectory and sickbay were placed at the stern, while the crew cabins were spread all across the ship. On 11 April 1910,
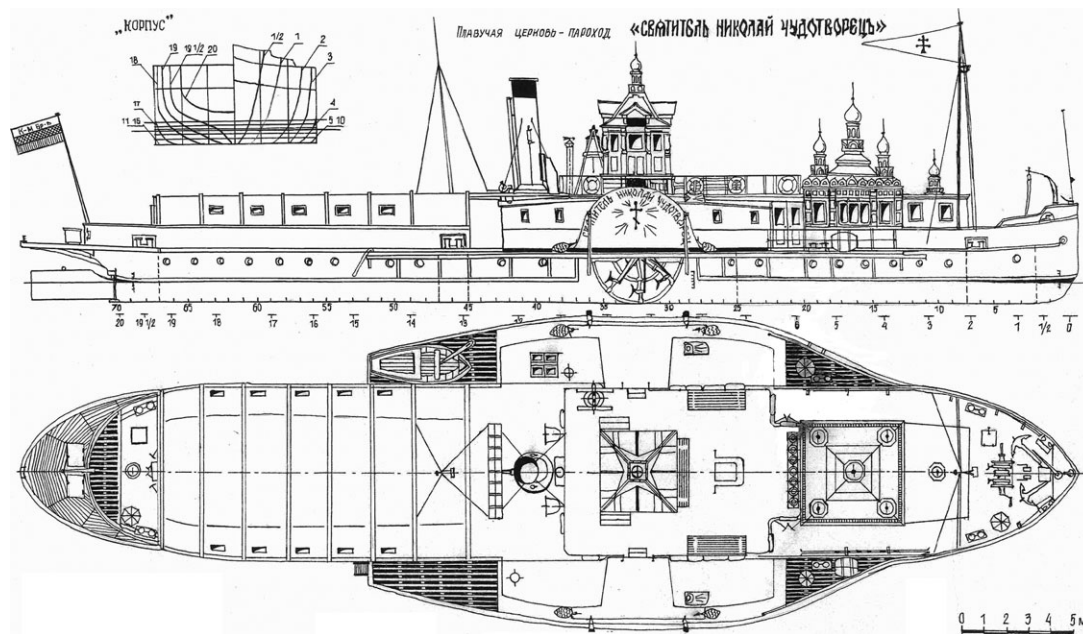
FIGURE 2 Starboard elevation and plan view of the *Saint Nicholas*
Source: Reproduced with kind permission of Nikolaeva Oksana

the *Saint Nicholas* was consecrated during a major ceremony by the Bezzubikova pier in Astrakhan (Usov, 1993). Shortly after, it took its maiden voyage from Astrakhan to the Caspian Bay, where the priest performed the Divine Liturgy for sailors, merchants and fishermen celebrating Easter away from home.

During the first year in service, the floating church travelled about 4,000 miles, visiting villages and fishing cooperatives scattered across the lower Volga (Usov, 1993). Apart from providing religious services, the crew offered free meals and medical assistance to those in need, making the *Saint Nicholas* very popular well beyond the Orthodox denomination. This had apparently impressed even Tsar Nicholas II, who donated in 1912 the yacht *Marevo* to a temperance society from Saint Petersburg, to inaugurate a second floating church on the Neva River (Ivanov & Suprun, 2006). However, despite its positive impact, in 1916 the *Saint Nicholas* ceased to perform regular voyages and was put on sale by the diocese. The decision provoked lots of resistance in the province, and people initially mobilised to keep the church operational. In response to these reactions, the diocese presented a report that emphasised the poor technical condition of the vessel and the high costs of its activities. Nonetheless, once decommissioned from religious service and sold, the steamer was still used as a freight carrier on the Volga until 1918, and was later dispatched as a rescue ship in Baku after Lenin's decree to nationalise the fleet.[4]

Although short-lived in a sequence of multiple functional displacements, the *Saint Nicholas* emerged as an expression of *creative reuse*, which enabled it to act as a shifting centre of religious activity on the lower Volga. As with Duchamp's readymades, the metamorphosis of the passenger/church/freighter/rescue ship was actualised through the recalibration of its operative topologies to a socially and historically contingent "*meshwork* of movement; of ties and knots forging places, times and experiences" (Anim-Addo, Hasty, & Peters, 2014, p. 341, original emphasis). Thus, attaining to these various instances calls for a closer examination of the "different histories *and* geographies" assembled through the ship's voyages (Della Dora, 2010, p. 469, original emphasis). What distinguished the floating church from other actualisations though was the capacity to dislocate an entire range of political dispositions, including landed conceptions of sacred space and ways of performing religious rituals within the Orthodox tradition. By assembling different histories and geographies of the Volga, the *Saint Nicholas* roused alternative narratives of belonging and spiritual encounter. While dismissed shortly after entering service, the making of this sacred space as a mobile intersection of heterogeneous temporalities, functions and places holds the key to unpack the more recent inauguration of the "flotilla for God". The resulting "residual surplus", as an inherent condition of the "not-yet become" (Anderson, 2006, p. 695), would in fact manifest almost a century later in Volgograd through the afterlife-affects of the *Saint Nicholas*. For Thrift,

> as practices lose their place in a historical form of life, they may leave abandoned wreckage behind them which can then take on new life, generating new hybrids or simply leavings which still have resonance. (2008, p. 8)

Concerning our analysis, the dismissal of the floating church in Astrakhan during the gales of the Bolshevik Revolution is particularly important.

3.2 | Mirroring (hi)stories and new beginnings

> *This is the last of you, old world – soon we'll smash you to bits. (Alexander Blok, The Twelve 1918, in Chandler, Mashinski, & Dralyuk, 2015)*

In Astrakhan's neighbouring provinces, Rostov and Tsaritsyn, for over three centuries a fief of the Don Cossacks, the Bolshevik Revolution and the following Civil War brought additional measures to the mass terror campaign conducted across the country to reinforce state authority. The Cossacks' allegiance to the monarchy, and their support of the Whites in the Civil War, had turned them into a target ethnic group for the Soviet regime. Legitimised by the state of war, countermeasures to acts of rebellion had blurred "the line between actual and potential resistance" as "a constant feature of Soviet terror" (Netz, 2010, p. 162). Among these repressive policies, the decossackisation campaign initiated in 1919 sought "to eliminate the Cossacks as a distinct group" together with their strongholds (Olson, 2004, p. 161). Drawing a parallel between decossackisation and dekulakisation, which took place a decade later with Stalin's collectivisation reform, Holquist suggests that:

> [T]he administrative partition of the Don Territory had less to do with geographic reorganization than with population management. For much of 1919, the Soviet state planned to append portions of Tsaritsyn province and the Donets Basin, along with their populations, to the Don Territory. The explicit goal was "to dilute"

the Don's Cossack presence through the introduction of a more reliable worker "element". By 1919, seeing and acting upon "elements" in the population had become endemic. (1997, p. 131)

Mass arrests, deportations and executions accompanied the systematic destruction of many Cossack settlements around the Don and Kuban provinces (Skinner, 1994). Due to its strategic location, Tsaritsyn – later to become Stalingrad – was a main hotspot of the Civil War. Part of the Don Cossacks *voisko* dissolved as an administrative unit in 1920, the settlements located westward of Tsaritsyn were primarily targeted by the regime. The attack against the Cossacks was also directed at religious life, an essential component of their identity. The destruction of churches aimed to uproot their traditions, tightly interwoven with Orthodox rituals, as well as to eradicate any documentary proofs and historical manuscripts (Olson, 2004; Skinner, 1994). Seeking to eliminate by all means the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Soviets resorted to an entire host of repressive interventions, from the endorsement of atheist organisations (Froese, 2004) and even of a Renovationist schism (Knox, 2004; Meerson, 1992), to large-scale property transfers including "demolitions, closures, recycling, and juridical reallocations" (Sidorov, 2000, p. 219; see also Dickinson, 2000). Sidorov (2000, p. 222) describes several waves of church closures between the Bolshevik Revolution and the Second World War, but also points to Khrushchev's mandate (1958–66), when around 40% of the remaining churches were destroyed. Along the broader forced secularisation agenda, these actions had a dramatic impact on most Cossack communities. The Volgograd oblast (formerly Stalingrad) represented a particular case where, according to the local diocese, from over 600 churches registered before the Revolution, only 32 survived by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Following the Perestroika reforms of the mid-1980s and the end of the Soviet Union, the attempts to restore religious life gained some momentum (Davis, 2003). This was also the case in Volgograd, where after the inauguration of the local diocese in 1991, the few remaining churches were reopened. Nevertheless, left with roughly 5% of the previous religious infrastructure, the diocese faced a rather grim perspective. While providing religious services to the faithful living in cities was still possible, most churchless villages were scattered across the oblast and seemed far out of reach. In an interview from the mid-1990s, one villager from the Cossack settlement of Kachalinskaya clearly evoked the central role previously held by the church in their community:

The steppe and the desert that are here have not only physical but also a moral and spiritual significance, that is the desolation following the power of the communists, the communist regime. There is a complete spiritual desert here (...) Why is this so? Because there is no God here; the people were deprived of faith.[5]

Attempting to restore faith in the oblast, clergy members assisted by a group of outdoor enthusiasts started organising missionary trips along the Don and the Volga rivers. These teams pioneered the revival of Orthodox faith in rural Volgograd by travelling around in canoes with icons and sacred relics. In an interesting twist, the once central role of the church was now being reworked in the margins, through encounters marked by ad-hoc mixtures of religious services, bard music performances and storytelling. The early missions reached also the Don River areas known for their remaining Cossack settlements. Here, as in many other parts of Russia during the early 1990s, the revival of religious practices was spurred by the reaffirmation of the Cossacks' lore and identity (Olson, 2004). Although these trips proved successful, they could only cover a limited part of the oblast. However, the situation would soon change.

During the mid-1990s, the curator of Volgograd's festival of bard songs took a memorial journey to Toronto, as homage to Vysotsky's oeuvre. Vysotsky had previously performed there and was expected for another concert. However, his sudden death in 1980 (aged 42) prevented him from keeping the promise. Being a major admirer and performer of Vysotsky's repertoire, Vladimir Koretsky planned a tribute concert where the bard never got the chance to return and meet his fans. Thus, in 1996 Koretsky and his son embarked on a temerarious cruise to Toronto, in a tiny yacht which seemed anything but a vessel fitted to sail from the Azov Sea to the East Coast of America. After a three-month adventure at sea, with their lives often at stake, they reached Toronto and organised the tribute concert. Apparently, a key moment of their journey was the passage between Gibraltar and Madeira, when a massive storm almost wrecked their yacht. According to Koretsky, while tied to the boat and struggling to stay alive, he had a revelation and promised his son to build a floating church if they would make it safely back home.

Upon arrival in Volgograd, Koretsky kept his promise and, mirroring the story of Yankov, asked the local diocese to support the construction of a floating church for the rural areas in the oblast. While the initiative was praised by the Metropolitan, the diocese lacked the means to finance such a project. However, less than a year later, a Dutch Orthodox priest representing the Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) foundation visited Volgograd and the yacht club *Parus*, where he learned about Koretsky's plan. Enthralled by the idea, he embraced the cause and quickly managed to secure some

donations for the project. Around the same time, in Novosibirsk, a new initiative was becoming increasingly popular. Established with the concourse of priests, social workers and artists, the charity ship *Andrei Pervozvannyi* travelled along the Ob River to serve all communities within reach (Ivanov & Suprun, 2006). Inspired by the *Saint Nicholas* and the charity mission in Novosibirsk, the team assembled for the realisation of Volgograd's first floating church.

In the previous section, we have emphasised the idiosyncratic character of the *Saint Nicholas* in assembling different histories and geographies of the Volga, but also in dislocating landed conceptions of sacred space, thus enabling it to act as a mobile archive in rousing alternative narratives of belonging and spiritual encounter. Similarly, the early missionary voyages along the Don and the Volga reanimated the "negative space" of a landscape devoid of religious infrastructure, by challenging dominant historical narratives of the Soviet period. Echoed by Blok's lyrics cited above, the siege against religious life initiated during the Russian Revolution aligned to a broader ethos of creative destruction, whereby the recycling of churches became redolent with a new socio-political order. By contrast, the early missions in canoes and the reaffirmation of Cossack traditions, emerged as an expression of precariousness and upcycling, thus aimed at re-establishing the spiritual connection to the daily routines of struggle for recognition and a better-yet-to-come. As highlighted in our earlier discussion of alternative archives, practices of creative reuse routinely move beyond the linear entrapments of historical or functional redundancy to challenge the immediate affordances of novelty or inventiveness (McFarlane, 2011). And while the resulting material assemblages are often clearly evocative, the nub actually lies in their dynamics of attunement (Barber & Hale, 2013; Miller, 2011). Accordingly, these dynamics were also reflected in the form of religious rituals and in the way the floating churches of Volgograd were built. In line with Peter Brook's account on theatrical performance and religious ritual, here it was "the ceremony in all its meanings" that "dictated the shape of the place" (1996, p. 45).

3.3 | The Saint Nicholas's return

With limited resources available, the team focused on the viability of different options to build the church and on its operative area. The Cossack villages along the Don were rather isolated, yet easily reachable by water; it was thus decided that the church would travel to those parts of the oblast. Surprisingly, the search for an affordable ship was relatively brief. With support from the management of a shipyard in Volgograd, the team obtained an old repair vessel used to provide technical assistance to ships transiting the oblast. Despite its poor condition, the vessel had some reasonably-sized cabins, a kitchen unit and, most importantly, as comically emphasised by one priest, "it was still floating" (interview). Compared to the elaborated conversion of the Astrakhan steamer, the Volgograd floating church had a fairly simple design and no engine, so a tugboat had to tow it around:

> It was quite primitive. The main role was … to have a church, it will visit the villages, celebrate the Liturgy, baptise people, there will be marriages, sometimes funerals and that's it, because the ship will be there only for two or three days (…) And then it will move to another village… (Interview)

During the conversion, two of the larger cabins were merged to create church space, while the remaining ones accommodated the small crew. In addition to the hull restoration and painting works, the vessel received a basic iconostasis and a central drum with an onion dome, which brought it closer to the appearance of a regular church (Figures 3 and 4). Moreover, icons and even sacred relics were donated by parishes around the country to support the making of the *Saint Innocent* floating church, named after the saint celebrated in Eastern Orthodoxy for his missionary work. On 22 May 1998, the floating church received the blessing of Metropolitan German by the central river promenade in Volgograd, a few weeks later setting course to the Volga-Don canal and the Don River for its maiden voyage.

Accounts provided by the crew reveal that initial reactions to the floating church were rather humorous. In Nariman, one of the first villages reached by the *Saint Innocent*, people were very surprised to see the church tower moving above the reeds and, hearing its bells, some thought they were hallucinating. According to the diocese spokesperson, at first many people found the floating church strange and assumed it belonged to a sect. However, the *Saint Innocent* soon became a familiar sight in the western steppes of Volgograd, mooring nearby each village for about three days. By the end of its inaugural season, it grew extremely popular and the faithful started identifying it as their own church. During the first year, it "visited 28 villages, where 446 people were baptised, 1,500 believers received communion, 2,700 took part in corporate prayers" (Ivanov & Suprun, 2006, p. 142). Despite travelling around for roughly four months per year, it covered a significant area, from the Volga-Don canal to Logovskiy and up to Ust'-Khoperskaya, near the border with Rostov (Figure 5). For the remaining time it was stationed in Pyatimorsk, so that people from the nearby villages could still attend religious services. The first voyages of the *Saint Innocent* are suggestive for how the materiality of the floating church became

FIGURE 3 The *Saint Innocent* at a mooring site. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
Source: Reproduced with kind permission of Sergey Ivanov

**FIGURE 4** The *Saint Innocent*'s iconostasis and nave. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

entwined with the social and religious life aboard ship and around mooring sites (Della Dora, 2010; Peters, 2012). From the regular interactions with other ships to the staging of religious rituals, its mobility enhanced the "experience of travel and learning" (Della Dora, 2010, p. 484). As indicated by the crew, serving on the *Saint Innocent* proved very demanding. The priests were confronted with totally different dynamics compared to regular orthodox parishes, having to cope with the changing conditions and shifting spatialities of Volgograd's riverscapes:

> *An ordinary church is fixed in one place and you get used to a certain order of things, while on the floating church you don't know when the other ship will tie-up to you. You don't know how people will react to the presence of the floating church and you have to explain to them how things are done on the floating church. It's a kind of extreme experience. (Interview)*

A messenger appointed by the diocese used to travel around the Don area to announce the arrival of the floating church. Apart from gathering to celebrate the Liturgy, people could schedule baptisms and marriages, or ask the priest to hold a rain prayer service during periods of drought. As a distinct feature of religious ritual, many baptisms were taking place in the Don's waters, revealing the deep connection between faith and everyday life by the river. These missionary journeys had an outstanding impact on the revival of religious practices on the Don. According to the Volgograd diocese, five years after the floating church entered service, half of the visited villages established their own parishes. Its mobile-shared
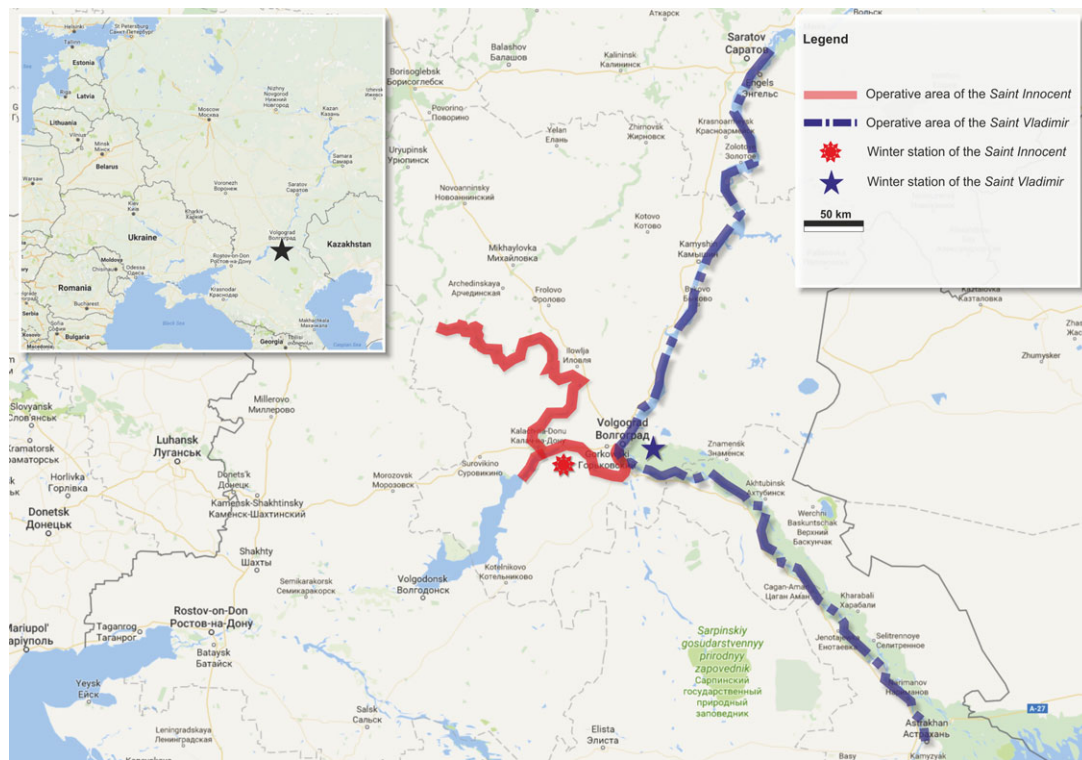
FIGURE 5 Map of the main operative areas of the *Saint Innocent* and the *Saint Vladimir*. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
Source: Google Maps, 2017

character has thus initially displaced the "absent" (previously destroyed) religious centres to the mooring sites nearby visited communities. As such, these emerged as transient centres of religious activity, enabling the rehearsal of new narratives of belonging and spiritual encounter. Appropriated as both singular and multiple in replacing the lost churches, the *Saint Innocent* warped the marginal condition of villages sharing its service, to later inform the establishment of new parishes in many of these places.

The above instance of creative reuse relates to a main feature of the Orthodox denomination, which "incorporates the Greek notion of *enkainia*, 'to remake as new'", meaning "that through their dedication, the churches and chapels change from mere human constructions to being sacred houses of God" (Raivo, 1997, p. 332, original emphasis). Interestingly, while still bound to the Orthodox norms, especially in reproducing the material characteristics of a church, the *Saint Innocent* stands out as a rather odd case in the enactment and experience of sacred space, even more than its Astrakhan predecessor. What the former arguably adds to the latter's activity is the drive to restore a previous order, thus using memory as a vehicle to introduce a sense of continuity and permanence in a landscape where the absence of religious infrastructure stands as proof of its traumatic past. Following Edensor's treatment of waste matter, it is often through conditions of dissolution that things call into question "normative processes of spatial and material ordering" (2005, p. 314). In this case, absence became a catalyst for potent counter-narratives of creative action to what otherwise appeared as forgotten practices and places. The reworking of this "negative space" proved critical in exposing the productive latencies of a seemingly established order, the spiritual desert evoked by the villager from Kachalinskaya. This was achieved thanks to the *Saint Innocent*'s capacity to warp its operative domain through temporal and, not least, scalar dynamics ranging from the embodied dimensions of serving on the floating church and engaging in religious rituals, to the making of sacred space at a regional level.

Due to its impact, ACN initiated the construction of a second floating church. Built on top of an old barge, the *Saint Nicholas* had a layout similar to most Orthodox churches. After the consecration ceremony, it was moored at the yacht club *Dinamo* in Volgograd, serving as a place of worship for locals and ship crews. A few years later, it was towed to Oktyabrsky village to be used by those living in the southern parts of the oblast. In the meanwhile, at the yacht club *Parus*, Koretsky was planning an even more ambitious project. After the enormous success of the two floating churches, he envisioned a more reliable self-propelled one capable of long-distance voyages, to serve all communities within reach from the Caspian Sea to Moscow. Endorsed by the Volgograd diocese, in 2002 Koretsky

FIGURE 6 The *Saint Vladimir* by its winter station. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

obtained a decommissioned landing craft from a shipyard near Saint Petersburg. The complex conversion took almost two years, yet the result was truly spectacular. A local artist worked closely with Koretsky to decorate the floating church with an impressive collection of icons, religious motifs, scenes from Vysotsky's career and even an illustrated narrative of the floating churches (Figure 6). The flagship of the "flotilla for God" received the name of *Saint Vladimir* and was consecrated in October 2004 by the Volga embankment, where the festival of bard songs is held each year. During its maiden voyage, it reached Saratov to the north and Astrakhan to the south, stopping by every village and town to provide religious services. While mooring in major cities, once the Liturgy was celebrated aboard, Koretsky would hold charity recitals, performing Vysotsky's repertoire. In an interesting twist, almost a century after the *Saint Nicholas* steamer took its first Volga journey, another floating church was visiting Astrakhan, carrying sacred relics and the lyrics belonging to one of Russia's most beloved bards.

4 | RIVER TOPOLOGIES AND WARPED SPATIALITIES OF FAITH

At the outset, we introduced our case via the annual festival of bard songs. Partly floating and partly accommodated on the ground, with its experimental set-up and eclectic performances, the festival alludes in many regards to the creative interventions that inaugurated the floating churches of Volgograd. Their experimental character pivots on a multidimensional take on creative reuse, which transcends the linear entrapments of historical and functional redundancy, from the upcycling of old ships to emergent narratives of belonging and spiritual encounter, to the regional networks of sacred spaces enacted through their operative areas. Resulting from the cross-breeding of all sorts of things – be they abandoned ships, sacred relics or folk repertoires, each with their own temporality and role in "timing life" (Crang, 2012, p. 2121) – the floating churches acted in turn as alternative archives, piecing together forgotten places and practices to challenge dominant narratives of the Soviet period. Thus, it was their capacity to mobilise the residual surplus of a seemingly established order which endorsed them as an ingenious response along processes of place-making in Volgograd. In following Cresswell's call for more generous readings of archival practices, the floating churches underline "the utility of thinking of other kinds of collecting and other kinds of space as archival, including places themselves" (2012, p. 175). And yet, without incorporating their seemingly "negative space", i.e. a space of transit devoid of any religious meanings, the floating churches would resemble Duchamp's geometry book caught in the swirl of the elements.

Mirroring the intricate river topologies they navigate upon, their voyages became tributaries to new imaginative geographies that, beyond reworking the connections between past and present, also entertained the perspective of a better-yet-to-come. These liminal geographies, where worlds flow into each other, reveal alternative conditions of possibility, which suggest that "*absence* can instead be conceived of as a *presence*, with a *different* politics" (Steinberg & Peters, 2015, p. 260, original emphasis). In other words, through their operations across Volgograd's riverscapes, the floating churches enabled mobile cosmologies/theologies that reanimated the void redolent of the oppressive campaigns previously directed against

religious life. Along the strands of work on more-than-human geographies, they are also evocative of how ships mingle "with nature to create novel affects and relationalities which are not apparent when staying safely within the confines of terrestrial, earthly research" (Hasty & Peters, 2012, p. 670). Seemingly, Della Dora explores the movement of holy sites "through human and nonhuman bodies" to show that places travel "beyond their physical boundaries, through the intricate circuits of society and culture" (2011a, pp. 169–170). Added to the movement of holy sites through pilgrimages or circuits of religious memorabilia, the floating churches render explicit particular temporal and scalar dynamics, which escape the sole grip of spatial metaphors. Their *modus operandi* as mobile intersections of heterogeneous temporalities, functions and places opens up a potentially lucrative perspective to tackle broader geographies of mobility, memory and religion. It is through the displacement of landed conceptions of sacred space that the floating churches, while still bound to the norms and inherent materiality of the Orthodox tradition, simultaneously enfold the three main instances of creative reuse evoked in relation to the enactment and experience of sacred space. As noted above, these instances ranged from the embodied and affective dimensions of sacred space within the New Age movement (Holloway, 2003), to the emergence of sacred networks via the house-churches of evangelical Christian groups in Sri Lanka (Woods, 2013), to the reconstruction of an entire religious infrastructure, as was the case with the post-war Finnish Orthodox Church (Raivo, 2002).

In discussing sacred time and myths, Mircea Eliade dwells on the inseparable condition of sacred space and sacred time by evoking the "etymological kinship between *templum* and *tempus*" (1959, p. 75). This shared etymological foundation alludes to the rhythmic qualities of religious rituals in re-enacting a primordial sacred spacetime, an intersection set in motion through the very act of creation, which enables "the regeneration of multiple pasts, a temporal polyphony situated in the present here and now, and, at the same time, a thrusting forward into an eternal future" (Schnusenberg, 2010, p. 5). Acting as mobile intersections across Volgograd's riverscapes, the floating churches perform the simultaneous re-enactment of various temporalities, functions and places into multidimensional operative domains which, concerning the making and experience of sacred space, stretch far beyond the confined chapels aboard. Enhanced by transient instances of mobility and stillness (Cresswell, 2012b), the resulting operative domains exposed new river geographies and "mobile narratives" (Anim-Addo et al., 2014, p. 344) that contract and expand with the shifting spatialities of religious rituals and the meanings attached to mooring sites. In line with Crang and Travlou's topological interrogation of memory, "[p]laces of memory stand inserted simultaneously in a past order and the present" and, as such, "they offer cracks in the surface of the present where time [and things] can be otherwise" (2001, p. 175). We have seen this at work with the constellation of marginal communities connected by the floating churches and the establishment of new parishes. Accordingly, the resulting operative domains exhibit topological arrangements of fixed points and shifting spatialities, i.e. the transient and place-bound incarnations of the cosmologies/theologies that sustain their functional continuity as mobile-shared churches. Provided their logic of aspiration and differentiation, the above imaginaries are subject to rhythmic qualities which seem to escape the sole grip of spatial metaphors. Hence, the syntagm "topologies of fixed points and shifting spatialities" alludes to the varying temporal and functional contingencies that keep redefining narratives of belonging and spiritual encounter, as well as emergent repertoires of creative action. By animating these different imaginaries and views on the transcendent, the floating churches act like warp bubbles that stretch and bend the spatiotemporal continuum within their reach. However, this is not the kind of innovation normally celebrated in the powerhouses of creative destruction; rather it originates in the interstices of "the presumably religious and the secular modern" (Tse, 2014, p. 214), where multidimensional hybrids, as the ones we have just explored, surface through creative endeavours enthused by the "passionate imitation that derives from religious ritual and still partakes of its spirit" (Girard, 1990, p. 19).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ENDNOTES

[1] Administrative division in Russia.

[2] First referred to as such by Father Werenfried van Straaten, the founder of Aid to the Church in Need.

[3] Ordinary objects elevated to the status of art.

[4] L. Sevostyanova *History of the floating temple "St. Nicholas", 1910–1915*.

[5] Interview in the documentary *A Ship of God*.

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