Sometimes an architect should conserve what other architects have done, promote an architecture from the past and seek to bring it back to life. To do that, he needs to have humility in regard to historic monuments, but an ego in regard to the cultural elites and architectural profession who will battle him. In the mid-1800s, Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, the great nineteenth-century restorer of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, was one such architect. It was his flèche, an original design brilliantly in keeping with the rest of the cathedral, that burned and crashed through the ceiling in April. And he has been both lauded and vilified, in his life and since, for making Gothic architecture live again.

The fire in Paris during holy week has caused us to rediscover this self-taught architect and early father of the preservation movement. He was a prodigious artist, a talented archeologist, a defender of tradition, and a promoter of Gothic art and architecture. He was the great champion of a living Medievalism, yet he was an anti-clerical monarchist—who spent most of his career restoring Catholic churches. Go figure.

Viollet, according to Martin Bressani in his brilliant biography *Architecture and the Historical Imagination*, needs to be seen as an architectural revolutionary who allied himself with the leaders of the Romantic movement to reform French culture. These included architects Henri Labrouste, Louis Duc, and the other V’s (Félix Vauban and Léon Vaudoyer), as well as the highly influential author, Prosper Mérimée, who gave him the career-making commission to restore Vézelay Abbey. Viollet was not particularly successful in designing contemporary buildings. We can be thankful that his anemic scheme for the Paris Opera lost to Charles Garnier’s.

There is much to laud about Viollet, especially his championing of and restoration of Gothic monuments in France. The French and all the world are in his debt for his careful if controversial restorations of Notre-Dame, Amiens, Vézelay, Saint-Denis, Mont Saint-Michel, and Sainte-Chapelle. There is still much to be learned from the quality and methodology of these restorations, even if one disagrees about the necessity of erecting a hundred stone monsters on the roof of a cathedral. He was a man of many ideas empirically tested, and I offer three for your consideration:

First, **buildings are not just a reflection of history, but are historical events in and of themselves.** This means that less advanced cultures sometimes built greater monuments than their advanced cousins (who may never have built greatly). Thus during the Middle Ages, people built the greatest monuments in history, the Gothic cathedrals, in spite of the superstitiousness and misguided religiosity of their time. Whereas the enlightened modern age had produced mediocre and slavish imitations of Greek and Roman architecture.

Second, **great buildings, especially the Gothic, need to be restored and appreciated anew.** The goal of the restorations is not to express our modern age. The goal is to express the Medievalism that created them. To do this well, the architect has to give himself the mind and affections of the Gothic masterbuilder. Only when the contemporary architect becomes a Medieval can he design legitimate fourteenth-century additions to a thirteenth-century cathedral, or design new Gothic altars and monstrances, or rebuild an abbey church’s vaults or a Gothic nave in an earlier style.

Third, **there are great practical challenges in reviving a lost style.** Viollet writes that there will be copies and even bad copies until architects relearn how to speak the architectural language as their own. Reviving a style such as the Gothic includes reviving the methods of the construction, the ways of decoration, and training artists who can sculpt or make stained glass as well as the Medieval. It includes challenging the consensus. Whereas the Classicists of his day believed in the permanence of tradition and the Romantics believed in continual progress, Viollet advocated a break with recent practice and a reconnection with the medieval past. Viollet was a pugilist. He fought for the revival of Gothic and against the academic Classicism of his time. In the realm of sacred architecture in France he was wildly successful, and the Gothicic revival spread around the world. His theories of history, structure, and style influenced succeeding generations up through the founding fathers of Modernism.

Viollet’s written and built work is so important that it deserves to be seriously analyzed—and criticized—but also lauded today. His breakthrough restorations at Notre-Dame and elsewhere are historical events which need to be appreciated and restored. And we should give Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, this champion of medieval restoration, respect for reviving a dead language, even if it meant some mistakes along the way.

Duncan G. Stroik
Notre Dame, Fall 2019
Sacred Architecture

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Contents

Articles

2 ❙ Instaurare aut non instaurare ................................................................. Duncan G. Stroik

News

5 ❙ Chronology of Notre-Dame de Paris .................................................. Compiled by SAJ
7 ❙ Timeline of the Fire ........................................................................... Compiled by SAJ

8 ❙ Father Fournier rescues the Blessed Sacrament ❙ Relics and artwork saved ❙ President Macron on rebuilding ❙ First Mass celebrated inside the cathedral ❙ New law passed about the renovation ❙

Documents

37 ❙ We Must Rebuild it as it was Before .............................................. His Eminence Robert Cardinal Sarah

Books

40 ❙ Plotting Gothic by Stephen Murray ................................................ Matthew Reeve

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**Chronology of Notre-Dame de Paris**

- **4th century**: The first church is built on the site of the present cathedral, over a former Roman temple
- **1160**: Bishop Maurice de Sully tears down the Basilica of Saint Étienne to build the new cathedral
- **1163**: The cornerstone is laid in the presence of Pope Alexander III
- **1177**: The choir is completed
- **1182**: The double ambulatory is completed and the high altar is consecrated by Cardinal Henri de Château-Marçay
- **1196**: The nave is completed
- **1220-1230**: The original spire is built
- **1225**: The western façade is completed
- **1225-1250**: The high gallery and both towers are finished, the nave side chapels are developed
- **1240s**: Jean de Chelle remodels transepts in Rayonnant style and adds a gabled portal and rose window to the north transept
- **1258**: Pierre de Montreuil adds a similar gable and rose window to the south transept
- **1318**: Jean Ravy begins the flying buttresses
- **1548**: Huguenots damage some of the statues
- **1699-1774**: Under King Louis XIV, an iron rood screen replaces the original, a marble choir and high altar with the Pietà are added, the organ is renovated, and stained-glass windows are replaced with clear glass
- **1786**: Spire is removed due to wind damage and disrepair
- **1789**: The French Revolution begins, leading to the destruction of statues and all but one of the bells. During the Revolution the building is nationalized, dedicated to the Cult of Reason, then to the Cult of the Supreme Being
- **July 1801**: A Concordat is signed with Napoleon to return the cathedral to the Church
- **1804**: Napoleon crowns himself inside the cathedral
- **1831**: Victor Hugo publishes his novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (now better known as *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*), bringing support for the dilapidated building
- **1844**: Eugène Viollet-le-Duc and Jean-Baptiste Lassus win a competition to renovate the cathedral to address issues from its aging, abuse in the Revolution, and remodels. This includes new sculptures and gargoyles, new windows, the Treasury, the Sacristy, overhauling the organ, and a new spire
- **1854**: Lassus’s death leaves Viollet-le-Duc in charge
- **1859**: The new iconic spire is completed
- **1864**: Viollet-le-Duc’s restoration is complete and the cathedral is rededicated by Archbishop Darboy
- **1871**: The cathedral is set on fire during the Commune of Paris and receives minor damage
- **1905**: A French law gives the Church exclusive rights to the cathedral, but it is owned and maintained by the government
- **1914**: The cathedral is damaged in World War I
- **1944**: The cathedral is damaged again in World War II
- **1963**: To celebrate 800 years, the cathedral exterior is cleaned to its original off-white color
- **1965**: Glassmaker James Le Chevallier replaces nineteenth-century stained glass with abstract windows
- **1990-1992**: Organ renovation and modernization
- **1991**: Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site
- **1991-2000**: A major cleaning and restoration project
- **April 2018**: A restoration project begins to clean the cathedral and repair the roof and spire
- **April 15, 2019**: The spire and roof catch on fire during restoration work and are lost
Hand carved 5' crucifix of San Gimignano
Byzantine styled crucifix with a full-round corpus.
The original painting is by Coppo di Marcovaldo (1225–1276).

GERMAN WOODCARVING STUDIO FOR SACRED ART
April 15, 2019: It was Monday of Holy Week, and a late afternoon daily Mass was taking place in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame.

At 6:18 p.m., the fire started in the attic. It quickly spread in the extensive and complicated set of oak beams known as the “Forest.” Many beams are hundreds of years old.

At 6:20 p.m., the first alarm went off. A guard went to investigate but went to the attic of the sacristy instead of the roof above the main church. The guard was then sent to climb the 300 steps to the attic and discovered the fire 20 minutes later. The fire department was called at 6:50, and firefighters were on the scene within 10 minutes. 400 firefighters would join in fighting the fire.

Shortly after 7:00 p.m., flames spread to the cathedral’s spire. Crowds were gathering outside to watch, pray, and keep vigil with the church, and people all over the world did the same through digital media.

At 7:50 p.m., the spire collapsed, bringing part of the vaulted stone ceiling at the crossing down with it.

Around 9:00 p.m., flames reached the north bell tower, but heroic efforts of the firefighters from within and between the towers kept them from collapsing. Meanwhile, the Blessed Sacrament, the Crown of Thorns, and other relics and artwork were carried out safely.

Just before 11:00 p.m., the fire chief announced that the structure of the cathedral, including the towers, had been saved. Archbishop of Paris Michel Aupetit called for the bells of all the churches in Paris to be rung. French President Emmanuel Macron, speaking in front of the cathedral, promised that it would be rebuilt.
Father Jean-Marc Fournier was the chaplain of the fire department on duty when the fire broke out. He knew that the Crown of Thorns and Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament must be saved. As he entered the cathedral, he said, “there was little smoke and almost no heat, but we had a vision of what hell may be: like waterfalls of fire pouring down from the openings in the roof.”

He and the firefighters rescued the Crown of Thorns. Father Fournier explains what he did then:

“Everybody understands that the Crown of Thorns is an absolutely unique and extraordinary relic, but the Blessed Sacrament is our Lord, really present in his body, soul, divinity, and humanity and you understand that it is hard to see someone you love perish in the blaze. As firefighters we often see casualties from fire and we know its effects, this is why I sought to preserve above all the real presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“The time when the fire attacked the northern bell tower and we started to fear losing it, was exactly the time when I rescued the Blessed Sacrament. And I did not want to simply leave with Jesus: I took the opportunity to perform a Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament.

“Here I am completely alone in the cathedral, in the middle of burning debris falling down from the ceiling. I call upon Jesus to help us save his home. It was probably both this and the excellent general maneuver of the firefighters that led to the stopping of the fire, the ultimate rescuing of the northern tower and subsequently of the other one.

“We started Lent by imposing ashes and saying ‘Remember you are dust,’ and truly this was a miniature Lent: the cathedral went to ashes, not to disappear, but to emerge stronger, as we Christians are, after the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The roof structure that burned in the fire was created in the early thirteenth century. Called the “Forest,” it was made up of oak beams, each from a different tree. Over it was a roof of 1326 pieces of 5 mm thick lead. The roofing weighed 210 tons.

“For Catholics, churches are not monuments but are the House of God, in which we really and truly encounter heaven,” said Raymond Cardinal Burke the day after the fire. “The way of beauty is a most important and irreplaceable means of announcing God to a culture fraught with secularism and materialism.” Seeing the fire’s destructiveness, “men and women of faith are led to consider the attacks upon the infinite beauty of the faith by the grievous sins and crimes of our day.”

The most important relic in the cathedral is the Crown of Thorns, brought to Paris in 1238 by King Saint Louis IX. Among the other relics is the tunic he wore as he brought back the Crown of Thorns from the Holy Land. Both were saved. The copper rooster from the tip of the spire was rescued, but the reliefs it contained were lost. These included reliefs of the city’s patron saints, Denis and Geneviève.

Among the most notable artworks preserved are the three rose windows (nave and transepts), created in the thirteenth century; the eighteenth-century sculptor Nicolas Coustou’s “Descent from the Cross”; Jean Jouvenet’s “Visitation”; and the “Mays,” thirteen large paintings given by the Corporation of Parisian Goldsmiths in the seventeenth century.

The cathedral’s bells survived, including the thirteen-ton “Emmanuel” in the south tower cast in 1681.

Before the fire, about thirteen million people a year, or 30,000 a day, visited the cathedral. Over 50,000 visited on the most popular holidays.
The Archbishop of Paris, Michel Aupetit, celebrated the first Mass since the fire on June 15th, chosen for the anniversary of the dedication of the cathedral on June 16th. He celebrated in the Notre-Dame des Sept Douleurs chapel. Only about thirty people were allowed to attend, and most wore hardhats, including the archbishop.

“The cathedral was born of the faith of our ancestors,” the archbishop said in his homily. “This cathedral was born of Christian hope, which looks far beyond our poor self-centered personal lives to enter into a magnificent project conceived in the service of all and extending far beyond a single generation.

“Notre-Dame was born also of charity, since it is open to all. It is the refuge of victims of poverty and exclusion, who have found there a source of protection. ...”

“This cathedral is indeed a place of worship: that is its one and only purpose. ... Need we say how happy we are to celebrate this mass, rendering unto God what is God’s and unto man his sublime vocation.”

In late June, French prosecutors ruled that the fire had not been set deliberately. After interviewing hundreds of witnesses, they said that it may have started with a burning cigarette or electrical malfunction, perhaps from the workers restoring the cathedral or their equipment.

Archbishop Michel Aupetit celebrates Mass inside the cathedral on June 15, 2019.

On the other hand, French president Emmanuel Macron declared, “We will rebuild Notre-Dame even more beautifully.” He wanted it rebuilt in five years—Paris will be hosting the Olympics then—but most experts think that impossible. He and his party wanted to make a “contemporary architectural statement” by rebuilding the flèche in a modern style.

But others wanted the flèche and the rest of the Notre-Dame restored as it had been. Opinion polls found that most Frenchmen agreed. The Senate voted for a bill to do this, which the National Assembly (the lower house) rejected.

In mid-July, Parliament adopted a law governing the restoration. Dropped in the final version was a statement of the need to restore the building to its “last known visual state before the disaster.” It creates a new agency to oversee the work, but gives Macron control over the restoration.

The culture minister explained that the “aim is to give Notre-Dame a restoration appropriate for the place it has in the hearts of the French people and in the entire world.”

After the fire, the architect responsible for the cathedral’s restoration since 2013 said, “for me, not only must you redo the spire, but you must recreate it exactly.” Philippe Villeneuve continued, “the great strength of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc’s masterpiece is that you couldn’t tell its age. It blended in with a thirteenth-century medieval masterpiece. That’s what we have to aim for.”

He added that “we’re bound to the Venice Charter, which requires that we restore historic monuments in the last known state.” The charter is a 1964 treaty for the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites.

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Early in 2019 the spire of the Paris cathedral had disappeared under scaffolding as it was undergoing restoration. A fire started there for still unknown reasons at the end of the afternoon of Monday, April 15th. It quickly spread to the roof. The original thirteenth-century oak beams burned down to charred stumps and ashes, and the lead sheets they supported melted. The flames and black smoke rose higher than the spire and after nightfall the intense red glow of the furnace could be seen from miles away. Crowds rushed to the scene to stare in dismay.

The spire eventually collapsed, piercing the stone vault of the transept crossing. The firemen’s water hoses protected the stained-glass windows and the façade’s twin towers. Most of the masonry seemed to have been spared when the fire was finally put out the following day at dawn. The Crown of Thorns was saved by the firefighters’ chaplain and sent to the Louvre. All the statues on the spire had fortunately been removed for renovation shortly before the fire.

President Macron had come to the site after canceling a televised speech and solemnly vowed to rebuild Notre-Dame of Paris within five years. Fundraising began at once and was amazingly successful.

This proved that Notre-Dame meant more than was thought, not only for Catholics, but for all Parisians and French people, whatever their religion or lack of faith, and even for millions around the world. The cathedral was perceived as the lasting symbol of the historic national and European identity, based not on flags or institutions, but on the vitality of a common soul that inspires everyone, including the fiercest materialists.

Recent Prestige

As a matter of fact, the cathedral’s prestige is rather recent. The French kings were anointed in Reims, not Paris. When the pious Louis IX got hold of Christ’s Crown of Thorns, he erected the Holy Chapel to harbor it, not far from the cathedral which was then being built.

The precious relic was entrusted to Notre-Dame only after the Revolution by Bonaparte. He chose to crown himself there as Napoleon 1st, though the place had been abandoned and vandalized. Only hasty luxurious decorations, and nothing of the architecture, can be seen in pictures of the coronation like Jacques-Louis David’s monumental painting at the Louvre.

So far, only some official ceremonies (royal weddings and baptisms, funerals of glorious generals such as Turenne and Condé) had been celebrated at Notre-Dame. Also, King Louis XIII had consecrated himself, his dynasty and his kingdom to the Virgin Mary in 1638, and his vow was commemorated by the white marble Pietà erected at the bottom of the choir by his son Louis XIV, with the statues of both kings on either side. But few cared in the age of Enlightenment which led to the fall of the monarchy.

Attention focused on the cathedral...
again thanks to Victor Hugo’s 1831 novel, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, which described it as a Gothic labyrinth sheltering and nurturing wild passions. The cathedral’s reputation as a religious high place was established not by the Crown of Thorns, which did not attract crowds, but by the success of Father Henri Lacordaire’s annual Lenten lectures, launched in 1835.

When listening to him, Marie-Eugénie Milleret de Brou rediscovered faith and founded the female branch of the Assumption Order. She was beatified in 1975 and canonized in 2007. (Another famous convert at Notre-Dame was the poet Paul Claudel, on Christmas Day 1886.)

**Nineteenth-Century Gothic**

After Hugo and Lacordaire came Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, the architect who directed badly needed repairs under Napoleon III. Centuries of neglect had left the cathedral nearly crumbling.

The medieval spire was now rickety and had to be dismantled. Viollet-le-Duc designed a new, taller one, with his own statue as Saint Thomas admiring the work while the other apostles faced the city.

He certainly saved Notre-Dame (as well as many other churches in France), but he also refashioned it extensively in a style influenced by Hugo’s romantic vision of medieval art but too rigidly symmetrical and at the same time adding numerous arbitrary ornaments. (A good definition of the creative freedom of Gothic builders is given in John Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice.*)

Only a few of the original stained-glass windows remain. Many had been removed by the eighteenth-century clergy, who found the place too dark. A number of new, more modest ones were introduced under Viollet-le-Duc and more (some modern) were added later.

The “alliance between the throne and the altar” was wiped away first by the revolutionaries and then by growing anticlericalism in the nineteenth century, culminating in the separation of Church and State in 1905. The First World War, in which Catholics proved to be unconditional patriots, made reconciliation possible, but under the form of negotiated compromises and empirical solutions.

**A National Shrine**

Notre-Dame really became a national shrine only in the twentieth century, with a Te Deum celebrating the 1918 victory. The government, then dominated by atheists and freethinkers, abstained. Radical-socialist prime minister Georges Clemenceau forbade moderate but then constitutionally powerless President Raymond Poincaré to attend and only allowed the latter’s wife to represent him. But in 1940 all ministers, even the staunchest secularists, attended a mass to implore God’s help when it became obvious that there was nothing else to do as Hitler’s troops were steamrolling into France.

A few days after Paris was liberated in August 1944, Charles de Gaulle did not just walk down the Champs Élysées from the Napoleonic Arch of Triumph in the middle of a jubilant crowd. He strode past the presidential palace at the bottom of the avenue and went on for another two miles along the Seine.

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*The Coronation of Napoleon by Jacques-Louis David, 1808*
past the Louvre and up to Notre-Dame. Once there he led the singing in Latin of the Magnificat, Our Lady’s hymn of thanksgiving (Luke 1:46-55).

Because no more significant or appropriate venue could be thought of, national funerals have since been held in the cathedral: for him in 1970, and for his successors Georges Pompidou in 1974 and François Mitterrand in 1996. The only precedent had been President Marie François Sadi-Carnot, assassinated by an anarchist in 1894. He belonged to the “reasonable” left and had married religiously.

The cathedral is likely not to be available for funeral services for former Presidents Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (born in 1926) and Jacques Chirac (born in 1932). Their successors, Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande (born in the 1950s), have a better chance, not to mention Emmanuel Macron (born in 1977). When the time comes, however, the question might well be whether a mass is actually needed.

Secularized France

This is because secularization has indisputably gained dramatic ground in France since World War II. Church attendance on a regular Sunday is now approximately two percent of the population. Catholics themselves tend to acknowledge that they are but a minority and that faith is no longer part of the ambient cultural heritage, but a matter of individual choice.

This is not only because of the progress of godless worldviews corroding belief from outside. Most historians argue that the “revival” after Vatican II demanded more personal in-depth involvement and that reforms (especially liturgical ones) disoriented average people who could have stuck to minimal, formal, and occasional religious practice.

In the second half of the twentieth century, even before Vatican II, rank-and-file Catholics rediscovered the Bible, previously abandoned to Protestants. This in turn led to greater reliance on Scriptures and less on philosophy, dogma, and formal traditions in the fields of theology and rituals. It also gave way to a more positive approach to Judaism. Simultaneously, improved standards of living encouraged soul-searching, and personal religious experience became decisive under the name of “spirituality”—a word that had hardly been used so far.

All these advances disconcerted the masses who saw Catholicism as unchangeable, and churchgoers became a dwindling elite blaming “popular piety” for being superficial.

One consequence is that the basic doctrines of the faith are no longer fully transmitted to the younger generations. They struggle to understand cathedrals and more broadly the religious art that is predominant in churches, abbeys, and museums everywhere.

To make things worse, sex abuse scandals, like almost everywhere else in the West, have undermined confidence in the clergy. They have spread the notion that Christian ideals are too radical or unrealistic and fatally generate hypocrisy.

Notre-Dame’s Plight

With such a background, it is amazing that virtually no one dared declare being indifferent to Notre-Dame’s plight. But the situation is not so
How will it be rebuilt?

Concretely, the question is whether the cathedral will be rebuilt as much as possible as it was before the fire, or whether some visible sign of its twenty-first-century restoration will be added. For example, whether it will be given a new "contemporary" spire instead of Viollet-le-Duc’s (which had always been criticized). Or whether "abstract" art, or trees and plants (like Mario Botta’s Évry cathedral, the only one built in France in the twentieth century), or even a swimming pool will be put on the roof.

The government has already raised suspicions when announcing a competition for the design of a new spire, and that, in order to save time, decisions might be made without consulting competent experts as required by law. Msgr. Patrick Chauvet, the cathedral’s rector, Archbishop Michel Aupetit and the Archdiocese of Paris will obviously fight against any creation or addition that would be foreign to legible Christian symbolism.

Anyway, specialists don’t think Notre-Dame can be fully restored as quickly as President Macron promised, even if administrative hurdles are kicked aside. In the meantime, the funds are coming in very slowly, since big donors wait to see how their money will be used.

It is already significant that the huge but simple shining gold cross that Cardinal Lustiger had erected in 1994 above the Pietà commemorating Louis XIII’s vow should have been spared, as was a marvelous fourteenth-century statue of the Virgin carrying the child Jesus on the south-eastern pillar of the transept crossing. The two pictures were widely circulated, suggesting that Notre-Dame is seriously wounded but not dead, and still an emblem of living faith.

The practical questions

Several months after the disaster, many more practical questions remain unanswered. The origin of the fire remains a mystery. More importantly, will the roof be rebuilt with oak beams and lead sheets, or will more up-to-date lighter materials be used?

Will the bold modern altar installed by Cardinal Lustiger in 1989 be repaired and reinstated? It was not placed exactly in the middle of the transept crossing as is generally the case nowadays, but closer to the choir’s entry, leaving ample space for liturgical action on the elevated central stage. It was partly crushed by falling stones. It had both admirers and detractors.

A more fundamental problem remains to assess the harm done to the stone structure, not only by the flames and the fall of the spire and roof beams, but also by the tons of water poured all over by firemen to control the blaze. The water seeped between and even inside the stones. Not only was some of the old mortar washed away but also parts of the tender chalk of the stones are likely to have invisibly turned into lime.

It will take time to ascertain whether the architectural frame is still strong enough to stand up straight enough and sustain the weight of the new roof. Another difficulty is that the burning lead of the roof has produced toxic emanations everywhere inside and also all around on the ground, including the square in front of the cathedral where visitors used to queue up in long winding lines before they could enter.

Finally, removing the scaffoldings that surrounded the spire proves arduous: the metallic bars were twisted and welded together by the intense heat.

Is Notre-Dame different?

All this trouble is not unprecedented. This is not the first time a cathedral has burnt: it happened every now and then in the Middle Ages, and the list of latter-day fires is longing: in France only, Rouen in 1822, Chartres in 1836, Metz (then German) in 1877, Reims in 1914 (because of the war), Nantes in 1972. The vault of the Cologne Dom fell when the city was bombed at the end of World War II. York Minster in England burnt no fewer than five times over the last millennium, most recently in 1984.

They have all been rebuilt. There is no reason why Notre-Dame de Paris should not. The difference is not technical, but what this cathedral means and all the buried questions that its wounds unearth. The answers that will have to be given will bring useful clarifications.
After Notre-Dame burned, most non-specialists assumed that a monument of its importance would be restored to its former state. The architectural community argued for “innovative” designs intended to transform radically the physical form and the meaning of the cathedral. The different reactions reveal once again how far the contemporary architectural community has diverged from any possibility of cultural consensus, even with respect to one of the world’s greatest monuments.

Emblematic for the debate was the nineteenth-century spire (or flèche) that formerly rose above the crossing and collapsed in flames at the height of the fire. Should this “modern” element be reconstructed along with the medieval timber roof structure or be replaced by a new design...or by nothing?

Scholarship and Design

The spire was designed by Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879) as part of the twenty-five-year-long restoration project he and Jean-Baptiste Lassus began in 1844 to repair the extensive damage suffered by the cathedral and its sculptural decoration following the French Revolution and decades of neglect. An earlier spire had been removed in 1786. Viollet-le-Duc’s design for the new spire was, in part, based on a meticulous study of this and other cathedrals from the same time in the Île de France and, in part, a pure product of his skills as a designer.

This dual character of the design is important. While his reputation has waxed and waned over the years, Viollet-le-Duc was unquestionably the principal authority on French Gothic architecture in the nineteenth century and a skilled designer and restorer. Historical scholarship and new design were inseparable aspects of his métier.

In his extensive writings, he describes how restoration and design ideally form a continuity in which the restorer must enter the mind of the original designer-builder in order to create whatever new work is needed, as if that original designer had simply returned centuries later to finish the job. This is no esoteric “channeling” of an ancient spirit, but the fruit of years of patient study and hands-on experience, working with the same materials and methods as the original builders.

It is a way of designing “from the inside” rather than as a detached, and presumably culturally remote, observer. This, more than any other difference, separates Viollet-le-Duc’s approach from his present-day peers.

The Restorers

Viewing the damage, many people assumed what we have been told for many decades by modernist architects: that there are no craftsmen capable of restoring such a structure, the technical and artistic know-how to direct such a project no longer exists, and that the materials required are no longer obtainable. But perhaps the only silver lining in this tragedy is that it happened in France, a country with some of the most capable conservation specialists in the world.

While critics have rightly criticized the national and local governments’ deferred maintenance of Notre-Dame and other monuments throughout France, the French program of training and cultivation of traditional building skills is second to none. (It was that criticism that finally prompted the major maintenance and preservation work that was in progress when the fire broke out.)

Among the resources available is the Compagnons du Devoir, the present-day descendant of the medieval guilds that promotes excellence in the building trades and whose member...
Articles

would be able to support the load of the soil and trees, or how these would be irrigated.

The search for new and bizarre shapes: Contemporary architecture is the first in human history to promote the search for intentionally meaningless forms. In contrast with the spires of the Gothic or Viollet-le-Duc, the replacement towers so far suggested are abstract shapes without reference to any previous architecture, or anything else.

Whatever the aesthetic merit of these proposals, the practical difficulties soon became obvious. In most of the schemes the designers gave no indication of the potential visual impact of the elevators, emergency stairs, rest rooms, and mechanical services that would be required to serve a vast public space hundreds of feet above street level, not to mention the cafés and gift shops that are de rigueur at historic sites today. Like much contemporary design, these renderings are essentially still-shots from an architectural video game in which such banal factors as building codes, human needs, or even gravity are far from the designer’s mind.

In response, a steady stream of architects’ proposals appeared, from established names like Sir Norman Foster to dozens of young designers hoping to catch the eye of the decision-makers, almost entirely politicians. (The cathedral, like almost all Church-related sites in France, is property of the state.) These design concepts fell into familiar categories reflecting current fashions in architecture:

Glass-clad structures assumed to be transparent (but are so only at night) and seen as metaphors of “transparency” and “openness.” Some schemes seemed to suggest that the glass roof would bring daylight into the cathedral’s interior, but this would only happen if the vaulted ceiling were removed or the gaping holes created by the falling spire were to remain unrestored.

Gossamer-thin engineered structural systems, usually depicted in renderings that greatly underestimate the bulk of the members needed to resist horizontal as well as vertical loads.

“Green” building taken literally: the glass structures become greenhouses in which plants—including mature trees—will be cultivated, rainwater collected, and carbon extracted from the air. One scheme promised “carbon net-zero” performance and energy independence. There are no indications of how the medieval walls and vaulting would be able to support the load of the soil and trees, or how these would be irrigated.

Fashionable Proposals

The true challenge for the future of Notre-Dame is not technical, but cultural, and concerns not how to restore it but why. While a faithful restoration of the previous state is surely what most non-specialists want to see, a substantial segment of the political-cultural elite have argued against restoration and in favor of innovation. The French Prime Minister, in announcing a design competition, called for a Notre-Dame “even more beautiful than before.”

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A repeated argument against reconstruction centered on the issue of authenticity: rebuilding the roof and spire would only produce a copy or, indeed, a fake. This line of thought has a history.

In 1902, the campanile of San Marco in Venice suddenly collapsed into a pile of rubble and was subsequently reconstructed *dov’era com’era* (where it was, as it was). In 1963, the Italian theorist Cesare Brandi complained in his book *Theory of Restoration* that the tower should not have been reconstructed but should have been replaced by an abstract “vertical element” that would have maintained the role of marker between the Piazza and the Piazzetta while having no resemblance to the previous tower.

Brandi was among those in the conservation field who from the 1930s onward insisted on a sharp difference between historic and new construction for the sake of correct “historical consciousness.” Any new construction or restoration in the style of a previous period was seen as a “falsification of history.” Generations of glass buildings juxtaposed with historic masonry structures have flowed from Brandi’s slender book.

Most of the proposals for Notre-Dame followed this idea. The proposed “vertical elements” range from the roughly pyramidal spike suggested by Foster, to needles emerging seamlessly from the slopes of the roof, to the more “parametric” designs for shapes vaguely resembling shards or flames.

At an urban scale, the modernist proposals promote the further de-contextualization of the monument, a process begun in the nineteenth century, when the historic context around this and many other cathedrals was changed so that the monument would stand alone in a vast open space, cleared of the much lower and more modest buildings that originally crowded around it. The medieval builders intentionally kept the open space around the cathedrals limited and intimate, shortening and narrowing the possible views, thereby emphasizing the vertical lines as opposed to the more “panoramic” vistas so prized today.

This change is the physical correlative of the transformation of the cathedral from a place of devotion to one of artistic contemplation and, later, tourism. The sight of a glass roof and spire would complete this process, changing the appearance of the cathedral itself and juxtaposing the medieval and the contemporary in ways that will inevitably be to the detriment of the historic meaning of the cathedral.

Some will claim that international conservation norms prohibit reconstruction of the previous spire and require construction of modern elements in place of those destroyed. They will quote the 1964 Charter of Venice, drawn up by conservation professionals to guide the restoration of historic buildings, and still taken by many as authoritative. It says “any extra work which is indispensable must be distinct from the architectural composition and bear a contemporary stamp.”

But this does not mean the new spire must be a shard of glass. It is a requirement that anything that must be added to a restoration be identifiable as added and be datable by knowledgeable observers. For example, if the original timber roof framing were to be reconstructed, it would have to be marked to identify it as a twenty-first-century addition, but there is no requirement in the Charter for contrasting style or materials within the restoration itself. (This is clearer in the original French text which, presumably, the French architects are reading.)

The same article of the Venice Charter says “restoration must stop where conjecture begins,” but at Notre-Dame, no conjecture is needed. Indeed, few monuments in the world are as extensively documented as Notre-Dame. Nineteenth-century drawings show Viollet-le-Duc’s work in detail, recent digital 3-D scanning is the most precise form of recording yet devised, and the...
sculptures from the base of the spire that had been removed before the fire can be returned to their places. All this allows complete restoration without guesswork.

Those of us with a professional interest in conservation of cultural heritage have expressed the need to consider Notre-Dame a damaged house in need of repair, not a marketing opportunity for the would-be architects of the New Notre-Dame or for the commercial interests who, like President Macron, want the cathedral reborn in time for the Paris Olympics in 2024. (Viollet-le-Duc spent twenty-five years restoring the cathedral. The current situation might require ten or more to do the job right.)

The former director of the UNESCO World Heritage Center, Francesco Bandarin, noted the “outstanding universal value” of the cathedral, including its nineteenth-century restorations, and called for the monument to be restored precisely to its pre-fire appearance. Organizations like UNESCO, the World Heritage commission, and Europa Nostra have clearly stated their support for a thorough restoration program, a position supported by over a thousand conservation experts in an open letter to President Macron. Other thoughtful responses on the American side of the Atlantic were offered by Mark Allan Hewitt in Common Edge and Peter Pennoyer in The New Criterion.

A Restored Culture

Will these arguments persuade those in whose hands the cathedral’s fate rests? The track record of the political leadership, both in Paris and in France, gives one pause. The mayor of Paris has said that Paris must be “reinvented” if it is to compete with other world cities. The government has approved new skyscrapers within the périphérique (the central city) and highly contrasting modernist buildings in the heart of the historic center, including the new Welcome Center for the Prefecture de Police a stone’s throw from Notre-Dame. The city is removing traditional kiosks and public drinking fountains that are smaller-scale emblems of the city.

If any city in the world did not need reinventing, it is Paris. Even less does Notre-Dame have to be reinvented. Cathedral and city alike need only the loving care that will ensure their health and beauty into the distant future. The decision of the French Senate to restore the cathedral to its previous condition may have settled the question in this direction.

One design proposal presented by three recent graduates of the University of Notre Dame School of Architecture presents an inspiring vision of a future Notre-Dame. This is the only design proposal seen so far that calls for both complete restoration of the cathedral and a systematic training program at the site to promote the traditional crafts and skills that can ensure long-term survival of our historic cities and buildings.

It looks beyond the monument itself to the building culture as a whole, in which the skill of the restorer and the art of the craftsman are once again widely diffused. Such an architectural proposal is, ultimately, a cultural project to overturn the presumptions of the international cultural elites and architectural establishment.

As we patiently await further news from the brave investigators who are now assessing the damage to the cathedral’s structure and the means necessary for its stabilization, we can hope that imagination and faith will prevail over commercial and political interests. At its best, the restoration of Notre-Dame can be a laboratory and school for a restored building culture, a place where the architectural embodiment of transcendent ideas is once again conceivable.

Steven W. Semes is Professor of Architecture at the University of Notre Dame and author of The Future of the Past: A Conservation Ethic for Architecture, Urbanism, and Historic Preservation (W. W. Norton & Co., 2009).
An Art Worthy of its Name

Peter Pennoyer

T he catastrophic fire that damaged Notre-Dame in April was not the first event that afflicted the great cathedral. The building was neglected during the Renaissance, vandalized by the Huguenots, classicized under Louis XIV, and subjected to countless modifications. After the Revolution, the radicals attempted to de-Christianize France, and the wholesale desecration of Notre-Dame followed.

The heads of the kings of Israel and Judah were lobbed off (these were found in 1977 when excavators uncovered them among foundation rubble), and the nave was stripped of statuary and ornaments. The cathedral was then renamed the Temple of Reason, until it was dubbed the Temple of the Supreme Being by Robespierre’s cult. The statue of the Virgin Mary was replaced by the Goddess of Liberty. The cathedral then fell into disrepair, but was spared the fate of such structures as Cluny Abbey, which were pulled down, stone by stone, as a source of building materials for new, non-religious projects.

The day after the fire, President Emmanuel Macron proclaimed that Notre-Dame would be rebuilt and be “even more beautiful than before.” The next day, Prime Minister Édouard Philippe announced an international competition to design a new spire “suited to the techniques and challenges of our time.” He unleashed a popular exercise freed of the encumbrances of the inherently less colorful approach of replicating what was lost.

Designers, artists, and architects responded with a range of proposals that made for striking Instagram posts, from Norman Foster’s glass roof and spire to Clément Willemin’s flat-roofed “High Line”-style walking deck. These designers invoke buzzwords like sustainable, “would be remarkable but would not be Notre-Dame de Paris.” But his design for the central spire, though clearly his creation, was supported by its inclusion in the original cathedral structure, as recorded in a painting by Jean-François Garneray.

Where he did design new elements—including the details of his spire—he started with documentary and physical evidence. Where no direct evidence was available, he drew on his deep knowledge and extensive collection of drawings of relevant, contemporary monuments. His exceptional artistic talent allowed him to translate his grasp of precedent into new designs.

Viollet-le-Duc’s drawings are vivid, alive, and compelling compared to the more formalized ones favored by his contemporaries at the École des Beaux-Arts. Behind his knowledge of precedent was his passion for underlying structures, materials, and methods. For example, before preparing a drawing of a fig leaf for an architectural ornament, he explored the structure of the leaf and noted how its fibers cause it to curve, then considered how the artist can interpret these curves, and lastly studied

Underlying Methods

He only designed missing elements without the benefit of documentary evidence as a last resort. Typically, he preferred to respect existing fabric—even when an element he restored was a non-original intervention in an otherwise consistent building. Bringing each element of a building to its highest form, his furnishing of certain parts inherently obviated the possibility of a simple, linear history.

In Notre-Dame, he only edited out as necessary, removing the classicizing elements that were introduced under Louis XIV. These barely integrated non-sequitors, such as the white glass in the nave windows, were an ill-conceived concoction of a period that was immune to the spirit of the Gothic.

In executing the restoration, Viollet-le-Duc stepped back from the proposals for more radical changes that had been part of his and Lassus’s successful bid. For example, in his first rendering, the team had proposed spires atop the bell towers on the western façade. He decided against these, saying they “would be remarkable but would not be Notre-Dame de Paris.” But his design for the central spire, though clearly his creation, was supported by its inclusion in the original cathedral structure, as recorded in a painting by Jean-François Garneray.

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how the stonemason abstracts these lines and simplifies the textures to make a representation of a leaf that could be read at the scale of a cathedral ornament.

Unnerved Critics

Though Viollet-le-Duc has been accused of creating design fictions, it is more likely that his successful channeling of the spirit and practice of medieval architecture and artisanship unnerved and confused his critics. He resuscitated long-dead designs; once infused with life, they were treated as ghostly visions by his disapproving colleagues.

Perhaps unaware of the nature of Viollet-le-Duc’s practice, Macron now perpetuates this misunderstanding of the architect’s work, effectively dismissing the lost spire as a fictive addition. But Viollet-le-Duc’s spire was a work of transcendent beauty, a soaring burst of Gothic plasticity that combined the organic, fluid structure that he understood so well with appropriate decoration and sculpture, drawing together the creative and spiritual strands of this cathedral. The loss of the spire voids an essential emblem of the Gothic.

While his approach to preservation is now thought to have produced a false sense of historical development, Viollet-le-Duc’s real commitment was to historical truth as much as to memory. His reflections on artistic expression in the thirteenth century reveal an understanding that is essential to his success as a designer, and notably absent today.

Then, he wrote, art was “a type of freedom of the press, an outlet for intellects always ready to react against the abuses of the feudal society.” Its secular sculpture revealed “a pronounced democratic sentiment” and a “loathing of oppression.”

He explained: “What is most noble, what makes it an art worthy of its name is the liberation of the intellect from the theocratic and feudal swathes. Consider the heads of the figures decorating Notre-Dame’s portals. What do you see? The stamp of intelligence and moral strength in all its forms. . . . Several heads animated with unadulterated faith have illuminated features, but how many others express doubt, ask a question and mediate?”

Valid Embodiment

A restored Notre-Dame with a perfect replica of the spire would be a valid embodiment of history. A newfangled version risks reducing the monument to a secular theme park exhibit. The new design will likely interrupt the mysterious glory of Notre-Dame with elements as glossy as the pyramid at the Louvre.

Given our relentlessly solipsistic design culture, it is unlikely that an inspired architect will find truth in the Gothic language and abstract its essential transcendent qualities. Without the requisite knowledge and spiritual attachment, a contemporary designer is likely to indulge in the all-too-common brand of illiterate abstraction.

The threat will be greater if new designs touch more of the cathedral. A scheme for the roofscape and spire may spread to new ideas for damaged portions of the nave. A secular France may no longer provide the constituency with the power and confidence to protect Notre-Dame.

The revolutionary zeal that stripped the cathedral of its statuary and ecclesiastical furnishings and chiseled “To Philosophy” over the portal is not entirely dead. As Patricio del Real, a professor of art and architecture at Harvard, observed: “The building was so full of meaning that the fire seemed an act of liberation.” A design competition for a “more beautiful” Notre-Dame is the sort of “liberation” that conceals the same destructive impulse of the Revolution.

Peter Pennoyer is an architect, historian, and teacher, and the author, with Anne Walker, of Harrie T. Lindeberg and the American Country House (The Monacelli Press). This article is a shortened version of “The Past and Future of Notre Dame,” which appeared in the June 2019 issue of The New Criterion.
Reconstruction according to a divine masterplan is the key to life. Without it there can be no life: a cessation of reconstruction means death. A dead body ceases to reconstruct. Death of an individual means that its organic matter and organization is entering a cycle of irreversible transformation. Instead the essence and soul of an individual building, contrary to the sanctity of a living being, lies not in its original materiality but in the originality of its design.

Contrarian Debates

The contrarian debate about possible futures of the roof and flèche of Notre-Dame focused worldwide attention on the meaning of reconstruction. It has culminated in the opposition of the French parliament to the expressed will of the president of France. It has thematized the smouldering contradictions between a modernist establishment and civil society in general.

The many reconstruction projects around Germany, in Dresden, Berlin, Potsdam, and Frankfurt, for example, were without exception undertaken by civic initiatives and international support against staunch oppositions by the modernist architects, administrators, and politicians.

In France, it is useful to remember, the wide oppositions against the non-sensical transformations for the Grand Louvre were bulldozed by President Mitterand against the then-director of the Louvre, André Chabaud, against articulate public opinion, and not least against the architecte en chef des Monuments Historiques, Jean-Claude Rochette. In 1984, when the commission Rochette presided over was scheduled to debate the matter, a special envoy of the Elysée Palace forbade the matter to even be discussed one hour later.

In the aftermath of the Notre-Dame fire, the French government’s rash reaction to open an international architectural competition for “inventing a better future” for Notre-Dame was the monumental mistake not to commit. The graphic discharges by famous architectural offices which hit the screens unrequested and unrequited in the following days demonstrated the absurdity of ever trusting modernist professionals with a task clearly beyond their horizon.

The Ile de la Cité

The decision by the French Parliament to reconstruct the roof and flèche dov’era e com’era (where it was and how it was) opens the debate to a wider field, namely to the future of the Ile de la Cité. Over the past twenty centuries the island evolved from the scale of a provincial capital to that of an administrative center for an imperial metropolis.

Haussmann’s monumentalization of the Ile de la Cité’s physical fabric obliterated the monumentality of Sainte-Chapelle and Cathedrale de Notre-Dame, demeaning their spiritual and physical pre-eminence. The drastic depopulation that ensued drained the economic and social vitality of the island.

Occupying roughly two-thirds of its surface, the recent transfers of the institutional mastodons and the vacated Palais de Justice, Prefecture de Police, Tribunal de Commerce and Hôtel-Dieu Hospital, confront the venerable island with a weighty historic change. A global reflection on a possible future for the epi-central real estate was pressing.

In 2016 a presidential “Ordre de Mission” correctly diagnosed the Ile de la Cité to be in an unsatisfactory state with a diminutive resident population. Alarmingly, the architect Dominique Perrault was appointed by President François Hollande and Mayor Anne Hidalgo to “reflect” on the future shape and use of the Ile de la Cité, the heart of Paris.

The presidential declaration of intent could be interpreted as a wish of returning the Ile to a more civic future. The choice of architect assured the exact opposite result.

Perrault is also the architect for the 2024 Olympic Village. He publicly affirmed that the completion of Notre-
Dame for that date would only be possible by using new building materials and construction techniques.

The Uber-Scale Architect

The acceleration of the Ile de la Cité project by President Macron following the Notre-Dame fire, the promise to have it all done in five years, and the colossal gifts by French plutocrats draw attention to the economic involvement in the operation of multi-national companies. The published project, called “Mission Ile de la Cité,” transforms the whole island into a glittering tourist mall.

Monsieur Perrault is not only the architect of the TGB (Très Grande Bibliothèque), but the sans-pariel of XXL-sized mono-use mega-structures. He is, so to speak, the Proconsul of Uber-scale, of machine-scale and spirit. I witnessed him on a shared round-table solemnly proclaiming that his was a “Mission Nationale.” No less.

Perrault is expert at exalting mechanical repetition to a degree of otherworldly sublimity, cold, alien, maybe exciting as anti-contextual abstractions, but always deadly for the geographic or human context into which they are, with violence, unloaded. His experience with traditional urban fabric and architecture is non-existent.

The scandalous choice is a reminder that nothing has changed in French cultural shock-politics. Despite the ster-ile Grands Travaux, the still-born La Défense, and the notorious failures of remodeling the Grands Ensembles, the “fear of backwardness,” methodically injected into the body politic by Mitterrand and his cultural inquisitors, still permits no deviation.

The last two mayors of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë and Anne Hidalgo, compulsively declare the need for Paris to be reinvented. Disregarding the numerous referenda that massively decided against high-rises, Hidalgo perforce propagates, permits, and now erects scale and character-breaking buildings within central Paris.

Since the powerful Commission du Vieux Paris was emasculated by Mayor Delanoë, citizen consultations and protests have become, if not a farce, a futile struggle, their small wins regularly overturned by the Conseil d’Etat. Even a state-minister is powerless against the calamitous trend. In 2012 Minister of Justice Christiane Taubira attempted to stop the construction of the 160-meter-high Palais de Justice mammoth on the péripherique, merely achieving a short delay in its delivery.

Ruinous Projects

Once contracted, ruinous projects can neither be stopped nor shorted like toxic investments. Links between giants of development, construction, finance, politics and administration are no secret. The astronomical cost-overruns at the Philharmonie de Paris, the Ciudad de la Cultura de Galicia, the Centro Congressi in Rome and the hysterical expressions of the monumental follies stand as symbols of ethical and aesthetic corruption.

The Assemblée Nationale’s decision of July 2019, which overturns the presidential order in this architectural cause célèbre, signifies a long overdue paradigm shift. It is to be hoped that the resurrection of France’s most iconic building will also lead to an integral re-conception of the Ile de la Cité in its pre-imperial urban and architectural splendor.

Leon Krier is considered the godfather of the New Urbanism movement. He has served as a visiting professor at Yale School of Architecture and has created masterplans for several communities, including the Prince of Wales’ New Town of Poundbury. He received the inaugural Richard H. Driehaus Architecture Prize in 2003, given by the University of Notre Dame to the architect whose work embodies the highest ideals of traditional and Classical architecture in contemporary society.

The proposed “Mission Ile de la Cité” project by architect Dominique Perrault
**A Return to the Source: Gothic Material and Meaning**

Daniel P. DeGreve

“The fashions have in fact done more mischief than revolutions. They have cut into the quick; they have attacked the osseous system of the art; they have hacked, heen, mangled, murdered the building, in the form as well as in the symbol, in its logic not less than in its beauty. And, then they have renewed—a presumption from which at least time and revolutions have been exempt.”

—Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, 1831

Set against the evening sky, the fiery plume of the copper rooster that had crowned the lead-enframed flèche of Notre-Dame de Paris seemed to herald a dreadful twilight for the cathedral church, which for centuries has endured weathering, cataclysm, violence, and caprice.

Numerous government leaders, architects, academics, and critics seized upon the tragic conflagration of the medieval roof and nineteenth-century spire as an opportunity to tout the Catholic sacred building with secular signification. Prompting the consequent volley of revisionist notions were intentions neither remote from the materialist motivations of the Revolutionary despoilers nor dissimilar to the vogue attitudes of the Baroque kings and clergy who preceded them.

### The Controversy

The present crisis posed by the decapitated Cathedral of Paris resembles more acutely the predicament of the church’s dilapidated state in the first half of the nineteenth century when a thirty-year-old architect named Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc and his friend Jean-Baptiste Lassus won a competition to restore its west front. While the prevailing taste of the time favored Classical models, Viollet-le-Duc championed the rationale of medieval French architecture as a basis for modern French invention.

His talents and energies as a practicing architect were sympathetic to the depredations voiced by Hugo, and his understanding of Gothic architecture profound. Yet, while Viollet-le-Duc went on to replace many of the missing or damaged details of Notre-Dame, his intention was not to return its appearance to a particular point in its history.

Instead, as he explained in his 1854 work, *Dictionnaire Raisonné de l’Architecture Francaise du XI au XVIe Siecle*, he wanted to correctly “re-establish it in a complete state which may have never existed at any given moment” using a practical methodology founded on archaeological accuracy, structural efficiency, reasonable adjustment, and historical integrity.

Following the collapse of Viollet-le-Duc’s controversially handsome spire, the ensuing debate focused on the appropriateness of rebuilding those parts which were turned to ash on April 15, 2019, versus replacing them with something expressive of a twenty-first century l’esprit nouveau. Proposals to alter essential components and experiential properties of Notre-Dame with modernist interpretations deny the actual historical continuity of custom and craft in favor of a historicist narrative of epochs.

The architectural historian Vincent Scully asserted in his *Architecture: The Natural and the Manmade* that “the fundamental reason for being of Gothic architecture, as of any architecture, is not technical or structural, or even functional in a restricted physical sense. It is symbolic; its builders want it to mean something.”

Like Viollet-le-Duc, we should seek to understand the meat and marrow of Notre-Dame as well as the building tradition from which the medieval church came to be so that we may work along its grain—and not against it—in the endeavor to make the edifice whole once more.

### An Organic Building Tradition

The Gothic cathedral churches of the Ile-de-France are remote descendants of the early Christian basilicas of Rome. The Roman basilicas themselves were subjected to a series of earthquakes and fires during the Middle Ages, but they were successively rebuilt over the course of a millennium according to the same structural paradigm and material palette of stucco-faced clay brick walls, marble columns, and internally exposed timber roofs. Brilliant figural decoration spanning a basilica entrance façade was a foretaste of its dazzling, column-lined interior that filtered light from windows of translucent alabaster.

Paradigm shifts did occur over time, however, especially north of Rome, as a response to liturgical enrichment, monasticism, local craft, and sporadic contact with the Byzantine East.

 Whereas the early basilica encompassed a series of parallel wall planes braced by the roofs that they supported, builders of later basilicas proliferated the use of transverse arches for spanning between these walls in order to improve their stability. The resultant compartmentalization isolated the damage to nave walls caused by disasters while poetically enhancing the procession rhythm and numerical symbolism of the church interior.

The compartments—or bays—between the transverse arches eventually made feasible for medieval builders the construction of masonry vaulted ceilings in primitive emulation of Roman Antiquity, which significantly altered the basilica church model.

The otherworldly grandeur of a continuous interior masonry shell, boldly painted and fire-resistant, discouraged a conservative rebuilding of the more barn-like and fire-prone basilicas throughout France.

In order to bear the weight of a masonry vaulted ceiling, walls were thickened. Windows became smaller and less frequent, but the contemporaneous development of stained glass made them gleam like inset gems. The increased heft was often accompanied by a continuous circuit of vaulted aisles and galleries that helped to counteract the compressive thrust of the round-arched nave and choir vaults.

Experimentation with the pointed arch—a triangulated form generated by the symmetrical intersection of two circles and related to the mystical vesica pisces—liberated bay geometry and vertical proportions, ultimately leading to its pervasive employment.

Builders subtracted mass from the walls wherever dead loads could be reduced with blind arcades and triforia. Through the concentration of bulk at the base of the building into which...
loads from the structural elements above were channeled, an equilibrium of forces and an economy of construction were progressively honed.

**Opus Francigenum — French Work**

This inventive momentum occurred in varying degrees throughout medieval western Europe producing outcomes that were regionally distinctive. Nevertheless, it was in the heart of northern France—the curbed and clumsy demesne of the French kings hitherto unremarkable for architectural advancement—where twelfth-century synthesis in several abbeys and cathedral towns near Paris fomented a marvelously cogent vision of the Christian temple.

Neither as an invalidation of older models nor as a ruptured departure from the preceding architectural convention did the *opus Francigenum* originate, but rather as an ongoing condensation aimed at reconciling the muscular monumentality of the cellular vaulted bay with the numinous luminosity and airiness of the planar basilica.

The language that historians call “Gothic” architecture was, both in its structural logic and symbolic meaning, the refinement of a grammar used to describe with anagogical radiance and augmented durability the image of the *domus Dei* as *civitas Dei*.

Unlike contemporary practitioners of *zeitgeist* who deliberately innovate within a self-referential conceit of modernity to achieve originality, medieval architects and builders intuitively innovated within a vibrant tradition of forms, materials, and meaning in order to represent the New Jerusalem—and achieved originality in the process.

**Materials Substantiating the Immaterial**

The Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris is a critical example of early French Gothic architecture, having been begun in 1163—some twenty years after the pivotal additions to the nearby royal Abbey of Saint-Denis—and completed a century later.

Unlike its slightly older peers in Noyon and Laon or the somewhat younger ones in Chartres and Reims, the new cathedral church of Paris was not warranted by the fiery destruction of an earlier structure, but by the gran-
diose vision of the bishop, Maurice de Sully.

The transcendent drama of dim polychromatic light and reverberant acoustics in Notre-Dame is grounded in an assortment of terrestrial materials that include limestone, sand, lead, iron, and wood.

Foremost among these is limestone, a sedimentary rock made up of calcite from the remains of marine organisms such as coral and mollusks. Relatively easy to quarry and soft to cut with the proper tools, it is also durable, making limestone a very suitable building material for dressing ashlar blocks and carving ornaments.

Derivative products include hydraulic lime mortar that sets wet as a soft and porous bonding agent, non-hydraulic lime putties, lime plaster, and air-setting hydrated lime.

Limestone ashlars joined with hydraulic lime mortar make up the faces of the walls and external buttress piers while their cores are filled with rubble and hydrated lime, which chemically reacted with the air to bond to the ashlars.

The cylindrical piers that bear the weight of the walls are built of solid stone. Lime-based cement coats the attic-side of each stone masonry ribbed vault to protect the construction while lime putty seals the lead-plated wrought iron pins that join the thin pieces of stone window tracery.

Sand and a variety of metallic oxide powders were combined to produce the stained-glass windows which illuminate the five-vessel church interior in neither a glaring nor even light, but rather punctuate it with a subdued glow of jewel-like reds and blues. Pliant lead cames clinch the individual pieces of glass while supple wrought iron rods embedded in the stone jambs and tracery hold fast the panes.

A thousand oak timbers dating from four separate construction campaigns once spanned the nave, choir, apse, transepts, and crossing to carry seamed lead sheets which sheltered the limestone vaulting.

Likely harvested from less than ten acres of local forest, most of the oaks used at Notre-Dame were ten to twelve inches in diameter with an average age of sixty years. The larger old-growth oak, accounting for only three percent of the structure, measured about twenty inches across and was used for the horizontal tie-beams girding the topmost portions of the walls.

Each felled oak comprised a single structural member. The wood was not dried, but still green when hewn by axe and incorporated into the equilateral trussed lattices. Squaring by axe, rather than saw, preserved the natural curvature of the wood and maximized the amount of usable heartwood. Joined with pegs, the many pieces of timber framing and sheathing essentially functioned as a single unit with a consistent rate of shrinkage and movement.

The resultant structure was sturdy, yet relatively flexible in resisting the lateral wind loads enacted on its steep pitch.

Also framed in wood and clad in lead sheets was Viollet-le-Duc’s crossing spire. While he advocated a straightforward use of iron in theoretical designs for new construction, he embraced a traditional material palette for building a taller and more wind-resistant flèche.

Theory Without Practice

“Ars sine scientia nihil est.” These words were uttered by a frustrated French architect working in fourteenth century Milan, but the gist of his retort—art is nothing without the science to underpin it—well applies to proposals for re-roofing Notre-Dame with steel and glass shells or preserving the holes in the weakened ceiling vaults.

Limestone and wood are superbly compatible. Both consist of organic material and are inherently exempt from significant movement caused by normative thermal cycles or loading conditions. Neither material is excessively rigid so that the minimal movement naturally occurring in one can be absorbed by the other without damage.

Steel, in contrast to wood, is heavier, stiffer, and less stable. Its rate of thermally induced dimensional fluctuation is considerably greater, in fact, and the stress produced by its exertion on a limestone bearing structure can lead to cracking. While steel does not burn, it does lose its strength when exposed to the high heat of fire and can melt, exacerbating the resultant damage to a
stone building, Timbers, however, will sustain surface charring before succumbing to combustion.

Durable limestone becomes susceptible to fissure when protractedly exposed to the heat of fire as demonstrated by the process of deriving quicklime. The quenching effect of water exacerbates the threat of material failure due to the leaching of salts deep in the stone, which can weaken masonry joints.

After careful monitoring over the course of years, the stability of the vaults will require mending with stones locked in compression. Any roof loads eventually placed on the limestone fabric of Notre-Dame will need to be carefully weighted to prevent further trauma.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the cathedrals of Chartres, Reims, and Cologne were retrofitted with innovative roof assemblies made of cast and wrought iron, precast concrete, and steel respectively. Although research has not revealed problems associated with these installations, they are relatively new and untested compared to the former “Forest” of Notre-Dame.

A new wood-framed roof and spire for Paris will harmonize with the material properties of the building. Sources of comparable oak are available and specially trained carpenters with the Compagnons du Devoir are eager to ply the skills of their traditional craft.

A variety of intumescent coatings can enhance the fire resistance of wood while fire barrier compartments can contain the ravages of Vulcan without causing detriment to the building armature.

Dead Artifact or Living Symbol

In an exchange of letters published in Viollet-le-Duc’s 1846 manifesto, Du style gothique au dix-neuvième siècle, Désiré Raoul Rochette, Perpetual Secretary of the Académie des Beaux-Artes, opined that, “Monuments, which belong to a whole system of belief, civilization and art that has provided its career and accomplished its destiny, must remain what they are, the expression of a destroyed society, an object of study and of respect, according to their own merit or national interest, and not as an object of servile imitation and impotent counterfeiting.” Rochette, unlike Viollet-le-Duc, did not find Gothic architecture suitable for building modern churches.

Today, some architects and literati question whether it is even suitable to rebuild medieval Gothic churches in the Gothic style. Perhaps this quandary stems from an idolization of built patrimony as mere historical artifact from a “destroyed society;” nay a headstone memorializing, preferably without anachronistic creep, a defunct epoch that nobody living remembers — yet some would like to forget.

In his reply to Rochette, Viollet-le-Duc wrote, “To form a new art, we need a new civilization, and we are not in this case. Architecture is of all the arts the one that proceeds the most by transition, and that is very simple; but when the architect has corrupted the types, and let them loose, he must go back, return to his source.”

In the eyes of the new secular civilization trying to be born, the Christian message intrinsically signaled by the bones of Notre-Dame is an inconvenient memento from the old civilization being eclipsed. For the rest of us, we need to return to our source.

Indeed, we should endeavor to make Notre-Dame more beautiful—not as has been duplicitously promised, but as Viollet-le-Duc devotedly accomplished. Perhaps the time is come for remaking the sanctuary jubé to frame Holy Mass at the proper high altar.

With integrity, clarity, and consonance, natural elements and flora were selected, shaped, and incorporated into Notre-Dame. In her emergent shadow abided Saint Thomas Aquinas and Pérotin, witnessing the chivalrous construction being raised on the almond-shaped Île de la Cité upon the Seine to the glory of God, the honor of the Queen of Heaven, and as crystalized conductus for the generations.

†

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Endnotes

1. Épaud, Frédéric, The Framework of Notre-Dame: Putting an End to Stereotypes, CNRS News, National Center for Scientific Research, Paris, June 27, 2019

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Pictured above: Restored Sanctuary of St. Stanislaus Catholic Church - Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Christopher Wren’s bell tower was added to the Christ Church gatehouse at Oxford in 1681.

In 1681, the great Christopher Wren was called upon to add a bell tower (today known as Tom Tower) to the unfinished gatehouse of the Great Quadrangle of Christ Church in Oxford. The college had been built by Cardinal Thomas Wolsey 150 years earlier in the castellated Late Gothic style that was then popular. By 1681, such architecture was definitely out of fashion and Wren, who was Britain’s leading architect and an active proponent of Renaissance classicism, might have been expected to add a classical tower to Christ Church. Instead, he chose to fit in rather than stand out. As he succinctly explained, the tower “ought to be Gothick to agree with the Founder’s worke.”

I was reminded of Wren during the events that followed the calamitous four-hour fire that destroyed the roof and spire of Notre-Dame de Paris this April. A few days after the fire, the government of Emmanuel Macron announced that it intended to hold an international architectural competition to rebuild the cathedral.

The Prime Minister, Édouard Philippe, emphasized that the spire should be restored in a manner “suited to the techniques and challenges of our time.” President Macron himself promised that Notre-Dame would be rebuilt within five years (in time for the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris), and that it would be an “inventive reconstruction,” a “contemporary architectural gesture” that would leave the cathedral “more beautiful than before.”

The architectural community, reading between the lines, saw an opportunity. Soon, dozens of proposals flooded the internet. Many unknown architects—and a few well-known figures such as Norman Foster—had a go. Since glass is the material du jour, many of the ambulance-chasers proposed putting a glass roof over the nave. Maybe it would be a greenhouse, maybe a viewing platform, whatever. Predictably, the replacement spires tended to be glass shards or steel spikes, although a pair of Italian architects proposed a Baccarat crystal.

The rest of the world looked on in growing disbelief—and concern. The official architect of the cathedral, who had been supervising a painstaking renovation over the past six years, pointed out that a five-year schedule was unrealistic. Le Figaro published a protest letter calling for a more measured response, not an “architectural gesture.” The more than one thousand signatories included a former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the two chief curators of the Louvre, and a number of prominent French preservationists.

On May 28, the French Senate, the country’s prime legislative body, passed a resolution stipulating that any rebuilding must abide by existing planning, environmental, and heritage regulations—in other words, no rush. Moreover, the result should be faithful to Notre-Dame’s “last known visual state”—no steel spikes. Before it became law, the resolution had to be approved by the National Assembly.

The debate there was lively, much of it centering on the difference between rebuilding and restoring. “I don’t want it to be more beautiful than before,” proclaimed one deputy, “I want it to be identical!” Finally, on July 16, after the Senate and the National Assembly failed to reach agreement on a common text, the National Assembly, where Macron’s centrist party has a majority, passed a reconstruction bill. The legislation does not address the actual architectural form of the rebuilding, one way or the other.
A Peculiar Art

A few days after the fire, Slate posted a rather silly article titled “Let’s Not Rebuild Notre-Dame.” The gist of the article was that any reconstruction of the medieval building would be inauthentic, so it would be best to leave it alone. “Just like we visit ruined castles, let’s visit Notre-Dame and be conscious that with it, a part of our civilization has gone up in smoke,” wrote the author, a Parisian translator named Bérengère Viennot, “that we must accept it, with its scars and its losses, because that’s what’s left.”

Viennot’s article reflects the common view that great buildings are like inviolable works of art; if an arm breaks off the Venus de Milo you don’t stick on a new one. But architecture is a peculiar art. As soon as a building is finished, it begins to change. Practical considerations intrude, people move things around. Unlike paintings, buildings are left out in the rain (as Frank Lloyd Wright used to say), they weather, things break or wear out and are repaired or replaced. And it’s not just the users and the elements—buildings are subject to natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, and fires, as well as manmade destruction such as military bombardment, vandalism, and insensitive alteration. The last is hardly the least dangerous. An owner’s desire to remain up-to-date, no less hardy than a fire, is always a potential threat to an old building.

Buildings last for centuries, and are routinely altered to accommodate changing functions. The Great Mosque of Córdoba, for example, was enlarged three times between 784 and 987 to accommodate the growing population of the city. There was no master plan, but over two centuries successive generations of builders and craftsmen copied what was there, even as they rebuilt the minaret and introduced domes and lanterns. The result, like so many great buildings, is a palimpsest; layers of history—including lots of reused Roman columns—and all the more compelling for it.

The corner stone of Notre-Dame de Paris was laid in 1163. As was common practice, construction began with the choir and proceeded westward—that way mass could be said in the unfinished church. The construction, which proceeded in several bouts, took a hundred years. When the nave was complete the clerics concluded that the altar area was too dark and a transept was added. In the mid-thirteenth century the transept was enlarged and remodeled with lacier stonework and dazzling rose windows. By then the towers of the west façade were complete. They are not identical, although not as different as those of Chartres Cathedral, one of which is Romanesque, the other Gothic.

Over the years, Notre-Dame has suffered many slings and arrows: Huguenot rioters sacked the church in the sixteenth century; in the seventeenth, Louis XIV rebuilt the rood screen, opened up the choir, added a new high altar, and replaced many of the stained-glass windows with clear glass; during the French Revolution the church was looted and its west front was damaged—the sans-culottes decapitated the statues of the Kings of Judah believing them to represent French monarchs. Napoleon had himself crowned in the cathedral, reinstating the building as a national symbol, although he didn’t repair it, just slapped on a coat of whitewash.

The old church was not in great shape, and in the mid-nineteenth century it underwent a major rehabilitation. The work was overseen by the architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, in many ways the inventor of the modern practice of historic preservation. He removed the neoclassical features added in the seventeenth century, restored much of the stained glass (that work was only completed in the 1960s), and replaced looted statuary. He also built a 300-foot flèche, or spire, over the crossing, the original having been removed in 1786 and never replaced. “To restore a building is not to preserve it, to repair, or rebuild it,” he once famously wrote, “it is to reinstate it in a condition of completeness which could never have existed at any given time.”

This somewhat cryptic statement underlines the paradox of restoration, which is that “completeness” is not a natural condition of architecture, and that a restored building represents something new as well as something old. Viollet-le-Duc’s work on Notre-Dame was sometimes creative, such as the famous roof gargoyles that were not a part of the original medieval fabric. But whatever he did was carried out in the Gothic spirit; “What would a medieval master builder have done?” was his ruling principle.

Why a Question?

So why is there even a question of how Notre-Dame should be rebuilt? To understand, one has to go back to the early 1900s and the emergence of architectural modernism, one of whose founding principles was that every age requires its own unique architecture. As the field of historic preservation developed it adopted the same doctrine: When old buildings were added to,
or substantially altered, the new work should be distinct from the old—"of its time" was the phrase often used. That is what Macron meant by "inventive reconstruction."

The idea that an old building becomes inauthentic if it is seamlessly restored is a credo that has been repeated so often it's easy to forget that this was not the way that buildings were repaired in the past. It was the custom among the ancient Chinese, when an important building was damaged or destroyed by earthquake or fire, to simply rebuild as if nothing had happened. For example, the largest building in Beijing’s Forbidden City, the Hall of Supreme Harmony, was originally built in 1406. Over the years it was destroyed by fire (usually caused by lightning strikes) no fewer than seven times. Each time it was faithfully rebuilt, the most recent reconstruction dating from the end of the seventeenth century. Thus the building that is there today is slightly more than 300 years old, although the design is 300 years older than that. No one has ever called it a fake.

Europeans, while not as dogmatically wedded to tradition as the ancient Chinese, were similarly conservative. When the Doge’s Palace in Venice suffered a major fire in 1577, the architect Andrea Palladio proposed a major makeover. Why not replace the old-fashioned façade, built in the fifteenth century, with something new, according to their original design, a project that took forty years. The modern-day visitor would be forgiven for believing that the immense Cloth Hall with its tall central belfry is a survivor of the fourteenth century, and in a way it is—even though it was built in the twentieth.

Modern warfare, with its artillery bombardment and aerial bombing, has been the scourge of architecture. During the First World War, Ypres in Belgium was the site of five separate battles and suffered inestimable damage—by the end of the war the entire city was reduced to rubble. The old market square included a thirteenth-century cathedral and the medieval Cloth Hall, one of the largest secular Gothic buildings in Europe—both now lay in ruins. Both buildings were subsequently meticulously rebuilt according to their original design, a project that took forty years. The modern-day visitor would be forgiven for believing that the immense Cloth Hall with its tall central belfry is a survivor of the fourteenth century, and in a way it is—even though it was built in the twentieth.

In the past, when a beloved old building suffered misfortune, the common practice was to rebuild what was there before. This is what the citizens of Ypres did in their town center, just as after the Second World War Poles would rebuild the medieval Old Town in Warsaw, Germans would rebuild the historical center of Dresden, and the British would restore the bomb-damaged House of Commons in London. Nostalgia was certainly involved, but also a spirit of defiance: history is not destiny, it can be reversed, things can be put right.

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The Best Way to Rebuild

The best way to rebuild Notre-Dame de Paris would be to restore what was there, as if the fire never happened; there is no need to commemorate a senseless accident. The structural damage will have to be repaired first. Gothic cathedrals were built with belt-and-suspenders: the nave was spanned by a ribbed stone vault, but the actual weight of the roof with its heavy lead covering was carried on an independent wooden structure of rafters,
The Notre-Dame fire, which started in the attic of the north transept, totally destroyed this structure.

A recent report in the *New York Times* suggested that had the fire not been prevented from spreading to the wooden structure that supports the eight giant bells of the north tower, the damage might have been much, much worse. But it was bad enough. The roof is gone, the spire is gone, and three large portions of the thin stone vault collapsed under the weight of the falling 750-ton spire. Establishing the integrity of the surviving vault is the most pressing question. The twenty-one flying buttresses of the choir have been temporarily reinforced and work is currently underway to ascertain what damage the heat of the fire—and the massive quantities of water—may have caused to the stone. Replacing and repairing the vault will be a challenging task.

Whether it is necessary to replicate the heavy oak framing of the roof itself is debatable. Wouldn’t a fireproofed steel structure—lighter and more fire-resistant—be a better option? The lead roofing of the nave and the spire could be replaced by something environmentally safer (the melted lead roofing has caused serious levels of toxic contamination in the area surrounding the cathedral). The design of a new *flèche* will undoubtedly be the subject of much debate. Viollet-le-Duc built a distinctive and beautiful two-story wooden spire that was taller and more ornate than the medieval original. This has led some to describe it as superfluous. But the nineteenth-century spire, like Viollet-le-Duc himself, has become a part of the history of the cathedral, no less than the iconic gargoyles, and it deserves to be replaced. And whatever its exact design, it ought to be Gothic.

Efforts to “improve” Notre-Dame should be resisted. There is a place for steel spikes and Baccarat crystal, just not here.
Imagine a re-enacted processional route to escort Jesus’s crown of thorns from Sainte-Chappelle, commissioned by Saint Louis IX King of France, to its new home in Paris’s Catholic cathedral a few blocks away. Accompanied by bishops and priests and a congregation of faithful, the crown is taken out into the street corridors.

The procession follows behind in a trail of incense and chant, ultimately breaking into the openness of Place Jean Paul II, before the commanding presence of the familiar and iconic façade of Notre-Dame Cathedral. They see the façade with its harmonious geometrical frame, housing a rich tapestry of sculpted iconography. Each element plays its part: the triumphal entry arches, a band of niched royal kings of Judah, a rose window.

This whole ensemble is book-ended and capped on both sides by the ascent of two robust towers. Just beyond the towers and between them, a glimpse of the flèche is a foretaste of the interior. All amounts to a triumphal building, hinting ever inward and upward.

**Triumphal Entry**

As the procession gets closer to the church they see the striking details of the triumphal entry portals. On the north and south portals, exquisitely carved reliefs of Marian imagery. The central portal, like the others, has a community of figures funneled our gaze toward the center doors. There, a statue of Christ welcomes each member of the procession while supporting the tympanum arch with scenes from the Last Judgment culminating in Christ enthroned.

Once inside, the verticals force our gaze upward, while the repetition of bay openings and ethereal light emanating from the brilliant stained-glass windows keeps us moving forward through the crossing transepts with their splendid glowing rose windows and ultimately past the bishop’s exquisitely carved wooden throne, through the choir and to the high altar in the apse. There sits Our Lady at the foot of the cross, where the crown of Christ is brought for veneration and a celebration of the Eucharist.

This description only scratches the surface of the people’s sacred experience, the experience they would actually encounter through the other senses: smelling the incense, hearing the organ and choir, and feeling the stone. All present are blessed to partake, with awe and reverence, in the magnificence
of the cathedral.

Place of Primacy

The depiction of this extraordinary liturgical event illustrates the place of primacy the cathedral holds within the Catholic community in Paris and beyond, first and foremost as a house of God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines a cathedral as “the official church of the bishop of a diocese. The Greek word cathedra means chair or throne; the bishop’s ‘chair’ symbolizes his teaching and governing authority, and is located in the principal church or ‘cathedral’ of the local diocese of which he is the chief pastor.”

We saw Christ enthroned on the façade at the entry of the cathedral in the central portal tympanum. The same furnishing, a throne, is re-presented for the bishop within the cathedral, alluding to Christ in carrying on his mission as leader and shepherd of the Church.

Further, Sacrosanctum Concilium, the Second Vatican Council’s constitution on the sacred liturgy, provides a qualitative description of what is expected from the cathedral. “The bishop is to be considered as the high priest of his flock, from whom the life in Christ of his faithful is in some way derived and dependent,” it says.

“Therefore, all should hold in great esteem the liturgical life of the diocese centered around the bishop, especially in his cathedral church; they must be convinced that the pre-eminent manifestation of the Church consists in the full active participation of all God’s holy people in these liturgical celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in a single prayer, at one altar, at which there presides the bishop surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers.”

The cathedral’s purpose, by these definitions, is to be an authority and a shepherd, meant to set an example for the faithful to follow and be a part of, as a community in procession. The cathedral building itself has a critical role to play as well. It is very much an act of community from its construction to its liturgy, an inclusive endeavour and an achievement of communal pride.

Pope Benedict described this quality in a general audience. “Another merit of Gothic cathedrals is that the whole Christian and civil community participated in their building and decoration in harmonious and complementary ways. The lowly and the powerful, the illiterate and the learned; all participated because in this common house all believers were instructed in the faith.”

Evident Splendor

These definitions of a cathedral, however, cannot capture and justify the evident splendor of Notre-Dame. It is not accidental that the cathedral appears as it does. The sensate experience that occurs in encountering the cathedral is theologically intentional. Its purpose goes well beyond functional aspects of accommodating particularly large and elaborate liturgical celebrations, and providing a place of prominence for the cathedra.

The cathedral rises much further with theological purpose, in being
intrinsically responsive to the purpose and spirit of the liturgy. It is the liturgy in stone, not just its container. With this calling, the cathedral provides a distinct place that nourishes the mind, elevates prayer, reveres the liturgy and sacraments, and transcends the mundane on an exemplary level. In sum, it provides a worthy intercessor between heaven and earth, God and man, and points toward truth, goodness, and beauty.

The fulfillment and result of this relationship is, as it should be hierarchically speaking, an exceptionally beautiful church—a cathedral. Saint Thomas Aquinas, a contemporary with Notre-Dame’s Gothic culture, makes a case for the significance of beauty as something more profound than aesthetic taste.

He points out that we are of body and soul and as such have interior and exterior spiritual needs. God comes to us through the facility of our senses. Further, we have a tendency to treat things with decorum, in dressing up objects that are important. As corporeal beings, we build beautiful things for God, for our sake. As Giles Dimock, O.P., wrote in Sacred Architecture 3, Aquinas points out, “Through the virtue of fortitude we overcome obstacles like expense in order to produce magnificence.”

Image of Heaven

This is what we have at Notre-Dame: a human effort to exercise great fortitude in building an image of heaven. In speaking of the cathedral as an image of heaven, or house of God, it is even more necessary for the success of the cathedral to make its theological point.

Here again we can defer to the mind of Aquinas, who says that in order for something to be beautiful—a thing that gives the viewer knowledge of the inner logic of its being—three different elements need to be accommodated: wholeness, proportion and clarity. (Here I draw upon Denis R. McNamara’s Catholic Church Architecture and the Spirit of the Liturgy.) The cathedral largely meets these expectations through its exceptional provisions for comprehensive structure, including its verticality and directionality, iconographic content and crafted materials to enrich reading, cosmic unity through perfect geometries in emulating God the divine architect, and luminosity through stained glass that allows us to perceive the beauty.

For Notre-Dame, Gothic architecture plays no small part in helping to achieve this goal. Gothic architecture, as Abbot Suger’s liturgically inspired creation, has in its DNA the purpose of accomplishing beautiful religious architecture. This was primarily achieved in creating an architecture that saw a direct relationship between light and God. As the historian Otto Von Simson said in his The Gothic Cathedrals, “Light and luminous objects, no less than musical consonance, conveyed an insight into the perfection of the cosmos, and a divination of the Creator.”

Here at Notre-Dame, the manifestation of cathedral theology succeeds in meeting expectations of “cathedralness,” in creating a beautiful sacramental house of God for the city of Paris, intent on helping lead souls to eternal salvation. It then further transcends time and space as a universal icon capable of continuing to be a source of sacred sustenance and a model for emulation for all.

Conservation of Beauty

It is for these reasons that, in the aftermath of the most recent fire destroying the roof and flèche, the powers-that-be should consider the conservation of this cathedral’s inherent beauty as the top priority. Rebuilding the cathedral fully to its previous state, especially given the availability of thorough documentation, is the right thing to do. To restore with anything alien would be to undo its success as a unified beautiful composition.

The other alternative would be to participate in the continuum of the Gothic tradition by offering a design that dares to exceed what was once there, just as Viollet-le-Duc had done. Today, with the atrophy of traditional building and design culture, it is hard to imagine surpassing those that were steeped in it. Nevertheless, I offer here a conjectural design for a new Gothic flèche as a more prominent beacon of the cathedral in Paris. The charge here is that if a design is congruent with the criteria of beauty for this cathedral and its purpose, then it too could be successful in helping Our Mother to thrive and inspire again.

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S

een from the sky the contrast was striking: an immense plume of smoke rising to dizzying heights from the city’s glowing heart, while the metropolis was bathed in a soft evening light. The city seemed to continue its tranquil course while its spiritual heart was dying. The next day we could contemplate the spiritual heart of Paris burned to a cinder in the midst of a body—the city with its fine Haussmann buildings—that remained intact.

The event suddenly brought to light the spiritual reality of our civilization, which wants to be adult and autonomous: a body the soul has gradually deserted, or rather evaporated from. As we all know, without needing to read many books, our religious buildings have been quietly emptying for at least half a century. Our churches, especially in the provinces, are no more than remnants, the half-buried vestiges of a vanished civilization. Life has deserted these sacred buildings that we do not know what to do with.

The slow and continuous process does not attract attention, except that of disillusioned historians, powerless prophets, or frigid technocrats. The media holds forth at regular intervals about the spiritual reality of our civilization. Life has deserted these sacred buildings that we do not know what to do with.

And suddenly, the most iconic of the churches of the capital, and not only of the capital but of France and even of Europe—as the reaction showed—went up in smoke! Intense emotion was felt throughout the world. Immediately after the news broke I received grieving messages from Ireland, Spain, Italy, Germany, and England. You have seen the reactions of so many people: all are heartfelt. Faced with this worldwide emotion, I thought of the sack of Rome by the Vandals or the capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans.

But why this emotion coming from all sources—from those furthest from the Church, and from the grandest and most religious? Why this tremor in a country, a continent even, where nine out of ten Christians have deserted our worship? Why this sincere attachment to churches that one no longer frequents except for cultural purposes, to visit and listen to concerts?

Postmodern and Neo-pagan

If we observe, with a ruined cathedral in the middle of a prosperous city, our true spiritual character of a postmodern neo-pagan civilization, we also observe that this same postmodern society cannot manage without the tutelary presence of the church made of stones. This is how the Catholic Church in France seems to me to provide a public service of transcendence. It inscribes with its spires and its towers a verticality which questions while simultaneously reassuring the horizontality of the agitation of the cities and the torpor of the countryside.

People who do not pray have discovered that they need people beside them who do pray: The disappearance of Notre-Dame suddenly reveals a need. The world, though distant from the Church, needs the Church. It certainly sees there— with the critical detachment of which it is so proud—a mysterious power of intercession. And in a certain way, the world is not mistaken, because what do we do, throughout the whole Mass, if not pray for this world and those who compose it?

The emotion of people in the street, and perhaps also of those who claim to be the elite, is a clear sign that the Church must not be satisfied with being pushed back into the sphere of private life, and that, on the contrary, it has its proper place—sometimes like itching powder—in the sphere of the public life of nations.

And this sentiment, rooted in an indissoluble history of Christianity, also means that we cannot make a clean sweep of the past. So that although at Easter, as at Christmas, the Church is accustomed to taking criticism, there has been in recent days a rebalancing that has occurred, a compassion that has manifested itself. I would like to quote a few lines that one of my colleagues, Guillaume de Menthière (a canon of Notre-Dame who teaches theology at the École Cathédrale de Paris and the Collège des Bernardins), wrote on the night of the fire:

What unanimously magnificent words the media have persistently and uninterruptedly relayed! From tourists, onlookers, journalists, politicians, ecclesiastics, aesthetes, firemen… People of all ages, from all backgrounds, from all origins, and of all beliefs… A mysterious communion finally seemed to reign over this people of France, who in recent months have so sadly shown the world fragmentation and fractures.

This unity, which a presidential message, planned for the same evening, would probably not have succeeded in renewing. Our Lady, the Holy Virgin, managed it before our stunned eyes. And what if once again it was the supernatural intervention of the Mother of God that restored to our beloved and ancient country the surge of hope?

A Sign of Providence

The moment when this event occurred, at the beginning of Holy Week, is certainly a sign of Providence. We cannot remain with our sorrow—we are stimulated by holy hope.

We know, by faith, that Christ entered triumphantly into Jerusalem (and let us recall the 850th anniversary of Notre-Dame celebrated so ostentatiously not long ago), that he will be put to death before rising on the third day, and that he will come in his glory to lead us into the heavenly Jerusalem of which all our churches here below are but imperfect models, however sublime they may be.

In the same way we are hopeful that our cathedral, devastated by the flames, will be rebuilt and will resume its guard on the banks of the Seine near the tutelary statue of Sainte Geneviève, our patron.

But our hope must be more incisive. It is an entire people who must make the new Notre-Dame their home, and
no longer just live in the shadow of its towers. If for fifty years life has withdrawn from our churches, it is also the fault of pastors.

Canon de Menthière stressed this during his last Lenten conference, held the day before the fire. Commenting on the Gospel of Palm Sunday, he highlighted Jesus’s response to the Jews who blamed his disciples: “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out” (Luke 19:40). And he asked how many times in recent history “the stones—the stones of our churches—have shouted for him, in place of disciples who have become voiceless.”

Charred today, those stones call us to a profound conversion, because we now know how deeply our contemporaries are attached to them. It is up to us to reveal their meaning, to invite those people to enter our churches, and to follow the hundreds of catechumens who will be baptized there at the Easter Vigil. They have to take their place as “living stones” in the spiritual building that is the Church, the body of Christ. Yes—“Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:4-5).

By washing the feet of twelve of the faithful, I will today symbolically renew Christ’s gesture of humility, the sign of the greatest love. Ubi caritas, Deus ibi est: the revelation of the great mystery that is the fusion of the two commandments of the new and eternal covenant—the love of God and the love of neighbor.

This world, which seems so remote and hostile to us and sometimes so despicable, yet which has nevertheless shown evidence of closeness and compassion even if only for a moment, is waiting for this fraternal charity which leads to the furnace of divine charity.

This task is entrusted to us: it is up to us to fulfill it, with the grace of God, and assured of the highest protection of the Virgin Mary!

Abbé Eric Iborra is the vicaire of the parish church of Saint-Eugène Sainte-Cécile in the 9th Arrondissement of Paris. The church, erected in 1855, is known for its music and for its use of the traditional liturgies of the Church. This homily was translated from the French by a friend of the parish and appeared in First Things Online on April 30, 2019.
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The following is an abridged version of a conference given by Robert Cardinal Sarah at Église Saint François-Xavier in Paris, May 25, 2019, just hours after he visited the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris.

Just hours ago I was at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris. As I entered the gutted church, and contemplated its ruined vaults, I could not help but see in it a symbol of the situation of Western civilization and of the Church in Europe.

It is a sad fact: today the Church seems to be engulfed in flames on all sides. We see her ravaged by a conflagration much more destructive than the one that razed the cathedral of Notre-Dame. What is this fire? It is our loss of faith and the spirit of faith, a losing sight of the objectivity of faith and thus a loss of the knowledge of God.

Pointing at Heaven

The Cathedral of Notre-Dame had a spire that was like a finger stretching out toward heaven, pointing us toward God. In the heart of Paris, it spoke to every man about the ultimate meaning of human life. Indeed this spire symbolized the one and only reason for the Church’s existence: to lead us to God, to point us toward him.

A Church that is not pointed toward God is a Church collapsing, already in the throes of death. The spire of the cathedral of Paris has fallen, and this is no coincidence! Notre-Dame of Paris symbolizes the whole West, buckling and crumbling after turning away from God. It symbolizes the great temptation of Western Christians: no longer turned toward God, turning inward upon themselves, they are perishing.

The great cathedrals of the West could have been built only by men of great faith and great humility who were profoundly happy to know that they were sons of God. They are like a song of joy, a hymn to God’s glory sculpted in stone and painted in glass. They are the work of sons who love and adore their heavenly Father.

All were glad to carve into stone an expression of their faith and love for God, and not for the glory of their own name. Their art works were meant to glorify and praise God alone.

The Church should be like a cathedral. Everything in her should sing to the glory of God. She must unceasingly direct our gaze toward him, like the spire of Notre-Dame pointed toward heaven.

My dear friends, we must rebuild the cathedral. We must rebuild it exactly as it was before. We do not need to invent a new Church. We have to let ourselves be converted so that the Church can shine once more, so that the Church can be once more a cathedral that sings God’s glory and leads men to him. What is the first thing to do?

The Vaults: Adoration

We must get on our knees. A cathedral is first of all a place where men can kneel, a cathedral is where God is present in the Most Holy Sacrament. The most urgent task is to recover a sense of adoration. The loss of a sense of adoration of God is the source of all the fires and crises that are rocking the world and the Church.

Try to imitate the humility of God and let your heart, your will, your intelligence, your self-love and your whole interior being kneel. It is God’s exclusive domain. A man on his knees is more powerful than the world. He is an unshakable rampart against the atheism and folly of men. A man on his knees makes Satan tremble in all his pride. Your mission is great. It is to “prevent the world from destroying itself.”

I speak especially to you who are sick, weak of body or mind, you who suffer a handicap, whom society finds useless and wants to suppress: when you pray, when you adore, you are great. You have a particular dignity because you uniquely resemble Christ crucified.

A cathedral no longer makes sense if no one goes there to adore, to prostrate themselves before God’s face. A cathedral no longer makes sense if the liturgy we celebrate there is not entirely meant to orient us toward God, toward the cross. Therefore, our cathedral needs priests who will celebrate the Liturgy of the Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours in it.

If the people of God are to adore, then priests and bishops must be the first adorers. They are called to hold themselves constantly before God’s gaze. Their existence is meant to be an unending prayer, a permanent liturgy.

I want to repeat to you priests and religious who are hidden and forgotten, you whom society often despises, you who are faithful to the promises of your ordination, you make the powers of this world tremble. You remind them that nothing can resist the force present in the gift of your life for the truth. You remind them of the vital and indispensable presence of God for the future of humanity. Your presence is intolerable to the prince of lies. Without you, dear brother priests and consecrated people, humanity would be less great, less radiant, and less beautiful. Without you our cathedrals would be useless buildings without life.

The Pillars: Catholic Doctrine

And then, dear friends, what else does our cathedral need? It needs solid pillars to support the vaults. What
are these pillars? What foundation is needed to support the graceful slenderness of the Gothic rib-vaults? The Catholic doctrine we have received from the apostles is the only solid foundation we can find.

Our unity is forged around the truth of Catholic doctrine and the moral teaching of the Church. Do not fear. What greater gift is there for humanity than the truth of the Gospel? What more precious treasure than the light of the Gospel and the Wisdom of God, who is Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:24)?

Jesus himself told us: “You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.” What an honor, but also what a responsibility. To renounce being the salt of the earth is to condemn the world to remain bland and tasteless. To renounce being the light of the world is to condemn it to darkness and abandon it to the shadows of its rebellion against God. We must not let this happen.

Indeed let us turn toward the world: in order to bring it the only light that does not deceive. When the Church turns toward the world, this cannot entail that she hides the scandal of the cross, but only that she makes it accessible once again in its naked reality.

Dear friends, I was deeply moved spiritually by a photograph published the day after the fire at Notre-Dame de Paris. In the photo, the interior of the church is visible, heaped with debris and still smoking. But above these heaps of shattered stones, the luminous cross installed by Cardinal Lustiger is still standing. “Stat crux, dum volvit orbis—the cross stands while the world turns.” The world is turning and falling, only the cross remains stable and shows us the way to salvation. Only the truth of the cross remains, the truth of Catholic doctrine.

Faith is not a merchant’s booth where we choose the fruit and vegetables we like. When we receive it, it is God that we receive, whole and entire. I solemnly call upon Christians to love the dogmas and articles of faith, to cherish them. Love our catechism. If we accept it with our hearts and not only with our lips, then the formulas of faith let us enter into true communion with God.

Remember the clear and firm testimony of Peter: “there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved, than by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” (Acts 4:10-12). Let us think of all the Christians of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East who are butchered for the name of Jesus.

Our faith informs our love for God. To defend the faith is to defend the weakest and simplest, and permit them to love God in truth. Dear friends, we must burn with love for our faith. The day we no longer burn with love for our faith, the world will be cold, deprived of its most precious good. It is our task to defend and announce the faith.

The faith enlightens our family, professional and cultural life, not only our spiritual life. In the West, some call for tolerance or secularity, and impose a form of schizophrenia between private and public life. Faith has its place in public debate. We must speak of God, not to impose him but to reveal and propose him. God is an indispensable light to mankind.

The Stained Glass: Fellowship with the Saints

My dear friends, to finish our cathedral, we still need the stained glass. The windows let in the luminous presence, joyful and multi-colored, of the saints in heaven.

We need saints who dare to look at all things with the eyes of faith, who dare to be enlightened by the light
of God. My friends, will we be these saints the world awaits? You, Christians of today, will you be the saints and martyrs the nations groan for, will you lead a new evangelization? Your homelands are thirsting for Christ. Do not disappoint them. The Church entrusts this mission to you.

I think we are at a turning point in the history of the Church. The Church needs a profound, radical reform that must begin by a reform of the life of her priests. But all these means are at the service of sanctity. The Church is holy in herself. Our sins and our worldly concerns prevent her holiness from diffusing itself. It is time to put aside all these burdens and allow the Church to finally appear as God made her.

Some believe that the history of the Church is marked by structural reforms. I am sure that it is the saints who change history. The structures follow afterwards, and do nothing other than perpetuate what the saints brought about. When God calls, he demands something radical. He goes all the way, down to the root.

Dear friends, we are not called to be mediocre Christians. No, God is calling our whole being, asking for a total gift even to the martyrdom of our body and soul. He is calling us to sanctity: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev 19:2).

Today from the bottom of my heart as a pastor, I wish to invite all Christians to conversion. It is a very simple decision, both interior and concrete. It will change our life in its smallest details. It is not about going off to war. It is not about denouncing enemies. It is about staying firmly faithful to Jesus Christ, to his Gospel and to the mystery of the Church.

Though we cannot change the world, we can be changed ourselves. If each person would take this resolution humbly, then the system of lies would crumble of its own accord, because its only strength is the place we give to it in ourselves.

Build the Cathedral

My dear friends, the West has built awesome cathedrals. Today they are in danger of becoming museums without a soul. But the day when the cathedrals will have become mere carcasses of stone will be a sad day, and the world will lose all sense and purpose.

Let me conclude by citing Benedict XVI: “Man needs an appeal, addressed to his soul, that can carry and sustain him. He needs a place for his soul. That is what a cathedral symbolizes. But a building only becomes a cathedral thanks to men who construct this space for the soul, men who transform the stones into a cathedral and thus open for everyone a way to the infinite, an appeal without which man suffocates. Humanity needs ‘cathedral builders’ whose pure and disinterested life makes God credible.”

My dear friends, I invite you, for my part, to be these cathedral builders.

Robert Cardinal Sarah is prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. The full address, offered for the launch of his book The Day is Now Far Spent, can be found at Catholic World Report (June 21, 2019). The address was translated from the French by Zachary Thomas.
By any account, the Gothic period of sacred architecture is extraordinary in its scale and kinaesthetic impact on the viewer. It did not have a “big story” or “master narrative” to gloss and nuance its meanings, as did the “Renaissance” in the Lives of the Artists by Giorgio Vasari.

Instead, scholars of Gothic art, and particularly architecture, carefully analyze building accounts, vernacular and Latin treatises (when they exist), saints’ lives, poetry, and other texts for descriptions, rationalizations, theorizations, or simply reactions to the Gothic cathedral as a way to translate its awesome physical, aesthetic, and historical presence into intelligible stories.

This act of response and translation stands at the center of Stephen Murray’s Plotting Gothic. Murray, the Lisa and Bernard Selz Professor of Medieval Art History at Columbia University, has written ground-breaking monographs on the architecture of Troyes, Beauvais, and Amiens, and an account of the façade sculpture of Amiens in relation to the medieval sermon, A Gothic Sermon: Making a Contract with the Mother of God, Saint Mary of Amiens.

Building Through Words

Plotting Gothic explores the very practices of narration and storytelling of the Gothic through examination of the writings of its most famous and loquacious interlocutors. These include Gervase of Canterbury, a choir monk at Christ Church, Canterbury, who recounts the tragic fire at Canterbury and the rebuilding campaign by the French architect William of Sens and his successor William the Englishman. Another is Villard de Honnecourt, the Picard draughtsman whose “portfolio” or “sketchbook” records a range of Gothic buildings and works of art from France to Hungary. The third is Abbot Suger of Saint Denis, near Paris, who chronicled the building of the east and west extensions of Saint Denis, and whose text was famously read by Erwin Panofsky and others as a proto-humanistic account of high medieval aesthetics.

Plotting Gothic is premised upon a compelling analogy: the three-dimensional layout of the space of a great church—its plot—is not only constructed through a geometric schema charted by a series of ropes and stakes on the ground, but it is also textually and rhetorically constructed by its many interlocutors who describe, interpret and “build” the cathedral through words and images. “Plot” here has a range of meanings, each of which are at play in the book: it may refer to the act of setting out a building in space, it may allude to the invention of a narrative; or to a stratagem or collusion cooked up by its patrons or interlocutors.

Murray’s focus here is with the languages of description employed by interlocutors and the rhetorical commonplaces or topos in particular which translate Gothic architecture into language and images. For him, such textual constructions counter any kind of tyrannical “master narrative” of the Gothic. Inspired by the computer’s interactivity and synchronicity, the book is offered as a “spatial mechanism” capable of correlating the act of storytelling and the act of building within its covers.

The book is divided into three sections. In the first, Murray introduces us to the three interlocutors and offers a fresh and lively reading of their texts in the light of current and past scholarship. He explains, for example, how Gervase of Canterbury based his account of the rebuilding of Canterbury Cathedral after the fire on the very origins of the world in Genesis: it was built literally and textually on Biblical precedent.

In the second, “Staking out the Plot,” he seeks to correlate the evidence of the three interlocutors and to locate that evidence within the economic, masonic, and historiographic contexts of Gothic architecture. The core of this section is chapter five, “Material Contexts: The Means of Production.” In it we see Murray at his best, where he integrates his discussion of architectural description with the physical act of quarrying, designing, plotting, and building.

The third part, “Animating the Plot,” positions the great church as an “Object of Desire.” He looks at the church as the subject of complex and occasionally conflicting desires on the parts of its patrons, builders, and interlocutors.

Part of the Game of Description

There is much to praise in this remarkable book. Murray is himself one of the greatest interlocutors on the Gothic, and his command of the buildings and their literary sources and historiography is dazzling. Plotting Gothic offers the most compelling and accessible account of this vital material currently available between two covers, and it will offer much to specialist readers and to graduate students who will rightly encounter it on many university syllabi.
While it was not the author’s intention to write a history of response to the Gothic great church (something famously attempted by Paul Frankl), his focus on the three most famous and well-studied interlocutors deserves comment. On one hand, this might be seen as a re-imposition of the canonical narrative of medieval architecture by focusing on its most familiar protagonists, but this is not the case.

But the book as it is structured does point to the need for a fuller critical account employing the very contextualizing strategies Murray lays out to encompass a wider range of textual material. In Britain alone I am thinking of Henry of Avranches’ Metrical Life of Saint Hugh (noted by Murray), which offers a lengthy account of Lincoln Cathedral (in the context of hagiography), and the same author’s De Translatione Veteris Ecclesie Saresberiensis et Constructione Nove on the translation of Salisbury Cathedral, the rich history of description in Welsh bardic poetry, the English royal accounts, and other sources.

In all of this, the significance of antique topos is vital. The language of description employed in accounts of Gothic architecture was largely borrowed from the antique world of Horace, Ovid, Virgil, and Vitruvius. The process of viewing the building led to inspiration, and to an indexical search for appropriate rhetorical commonplaces from ancient authors and their application to the building in the space of the text.

The inherent but generative slippages that occur in this process between the building and its referent, which may be simply a linguistic tag such as maletiam superbat opus or may refer to ancient or Byzantine buildings such as Procopius’s account of Hagia Sophia, is very much part of the game of description, of the creation of the cathedral’s plot, so to speak. Mary Car ruthers’ The Experience of Beauty and Paul Binski’s Gothic Wonder explore these issues in depth, but because they were published almost simultaneously, they were unfortunately unavailable to the author at the time of publication.

Unity as Aesthetic Ideal

At the core of this book is a search to define the aesthetic and social phenomenon of church building in Northern Europe—and in France and England in particular—now known as Gothic. It insists on the Gothicness of Gothic, upon the unity of the Gothic as a high aesthetic ideal of later medieval culture, or perhaps even of culture generally.

Although radically different from the canonical books on the subject by Panofsky, Bony, Sedlmayr, and Frankl—a scholarly genealogy in which this book must be placed—or the pre-academic historiography on the Gothic by Walpole, Ruskin, Viollet-le-Duc, and Adams, this book shares a palpable emotional and aesthetic commitment to the Gothic. There is in these books a yearning to return to a complete pre-modern (pre-Revolution or pre-Reformation) condition of the Gothic, to a sense of a complete musical, artistic, and social environment, which the authors readily acknowledge is impossible.

This short-circuiting of the author’s desire, this acknowledgment that the author’s own quarry is desired but ultimately ungraspable, points toward two ghosts in the shell of Plotting Gothic, neither of which are referenced in the notes. Gaston Bachelard’s Poetics of Space, a deeply romantic account of architecture and memory prefaces Murray’s account of the cathedral as an assemblage of texts and their topos—a textual edifice—while Michael Ann Holly’s work on the process of mourning in art historical writing parallels Murray’s own.

Throughout Plotting Gothic Murray quietly but carefully pressures the status of disinterestedness as a language of art historical criticism in which an author cleaves their aesthetic appreciation of their subject from their writings on it, a stance that has ultimately extended the longevity of formalist approaches to the Gothic. The result is a powerful and perplexing book and one that will need to be visited and revisited by scholars and enthusiasts alike.
The most profound way we share in heavenly perfection is through the Mass, therefore the physical structure that houses Christ, the church, must strive to reflect all the goodness, truth & beauty of that which it represents.