

Let's Hope the Restoration of Notre-Dame in Gothic Style Prompts a Return to Traditional Architecture

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People walk in front of the Notre-Dame de Paris cathedral, ahead of its official reopening ceremony after more than five years of reconstruction work following the April 2019 fire, in Paris on Dec. 7, 2024. Ludovic Marin/Pool/AFP via Getty Images



By Michael Bonner

A A Print

Commentary

The cathedral church of Our Lady of Paris has been **rebuilt**. The church—commonly called Notre-Dame—caught fire in April of 2019 under mysterious circumstances. Despite the **plague** of deliberate church burnings and vandalism elsewhere in France, the Notre-Dame fire was probably **accidental**. But the restoration in the Gothic style was deliberate, and it was formally reopened on Dec. 7.



Inside view of the restored Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris on Nov. 29, 2024. Christophe Petit Tesson/Pool via AP

The triumph of the Gothic over the many ugly **modernist proposals** for the cathedral is a great relief. One wonders how many of those suggestions were genuine and not PR stunts, but some people were indeed pushing for something new and modern. Instead, the roof was rebuilt exactly as it was according to medieval building techniques, and the interior was cleaned and restored. The only flaws, if that is the right word, are the weird, semi-circular, modernist altar and other ugly **furniture**, and the very bright **LED lighting** reminiscent of a corporate waiting room or airport lavatory. We will have to wait for

tastes to change to see those problems corrected, but the restoration is otherwise a success.

I hope that the restoration also marks a turning point for the West. Too many contemporary architects are more interested in pleasing one another than they are in satisfying the public. Polls, [such as one conducted](#) in 2020 by the National Civic Art Society in America, show an overwhelming preference for traditional architecture. But contemporary architects prefer to give people what they think they should want rather than what they ask for. The result is a seemingly inexhaustible welter of glass-and-steel or concrete monstrosities throughout the West.

This has been a problem at least since the early 20th century, when architect Le Corbusier insisted on providing his clients awkward and ugly houses like the [Villa Savoye](#) in Poissy and those at [Cité Frugès](#) in Bordeaux. These developments were either rejected as uninhabitable or later redesigned and embellished in a more traditional style by their owners.

Contemporary “starchitects” like Peter Eisenman and Frank Gehry have the same attitude. They consistently win public contracts and prizes, and yet their work is consistently loathed by ordinary people. Consider, for instance, the negative reactions to Gehry’s [Guggenheim Museum](#) in Bilbao, or Eisenman’s hideous, and now abandoned, [City of Culture](#) in Galicia.

Eisenman’s architecture deliberately embodies a spirit of discomfort and awkwardness, whether you want it or not. In a now-infamous [debate in 1982](#), he asserted that “the role of art or architecture might be just to remind people that everything wasn’t all right.” Instead, he preferred anxiety, disharmony, and incongruity, and the architect’s role, as Eisenman saw it, was to impose correct taste on the public. Eisenman’s interlocutor, fellow architect Christopher Alexander, understandably rejected that approach, and emphasized a need for harmony and balance. Alexander notably held up the [Gothic cathedral at Chartres](#) outside Paris as a model of fine architecture.

Eisenman strongly disagreed: “I think it is a boring building. Chartres, for me, is one of the least interesting cathedrals. In fact, I have gone to Chartres a number of times to eat in the restaurant across the street — had a 1934 red Mersault wine, which was exquisite — I never went into the cathedral. The cathedral was done en passant. Once you’ve seen one Gothic cathedral, you have seen them all.”



The main entrance of Notre-Dame de Paris cathedral in Paris on Nov. 29, 2024. Stephane de Sakutin/Pool Photo via AP, File

With the restoration of Notre-Dame in the Gothic style, one hopes that we have finally faced down such philistinism, and perhaps the Western world is once again ready for beautiful public buildings.

Now, a revival of beautiful architecture does not mean a return to any particular style—though we could certainly do worse than another Gothic Revival. We should rather remind ourselves that architecture, more than any other art, is capable of making our lives better and fuller. Buildings not only protect us from the elements, but also facilitate and shape social interaction because we live or work, or conduct other business in them, and we are surrounded by them wherever we happen to live.

Architecture is the best means that we have for defining space and marking it out for some meaningful purpose. No less importantly, permanent structures represent continuity over time and mankind's rootedness in a place and in a community. The postmodernist idea that people must learn to accommodate themselves to jarring and uncomfortable buildings should be forgotten.

We must understand instead that buildings are put up to meet our needs—needs that were summed up nearly 2,000 years ago by the Roman architect Vitruvius who had such profound influence over the post-Roman West. A building, he said, had to embody beauty, stability, and usefulness. The so-called [Vitruvian Triad](#) is the spirit animating all good architecture, and we see it and feel it in a building like Notre-Dame.

The fact that Notre-Dame survived a fire and remained standing is a literal embodiment of stability. Its beauty ensured that it would be restored. But what of the third member of the Vitruvian triad? Its usefulness is perhaps easiest to overlook in a seemingly godless age. It is a church: a building designed for a specific liturgical purposes, representing in space a Christian vision of heaven and divine order.

If Notre-Dame represents an architectural turning point in the West, can we look forward to spiritual renewal also? Let us hope, and pray, that we can.

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