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The past & future of Notre-Dame

by Peter Pennoyer

On the preservation and reconstruction of the cathedral of Notre-Dame.

The fire that consumed the roof and spire of the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris on April 15 was a spectacle witnessed by a vast audience across the world in real time. In New York, a class at the Columbia University Historic Preservation program watched the roof burn, and some students cried; in Prague, the Apple Store live-streamed the inferno on every screen, and customers fell to their knees. The event transfixed a broad swath of people across the globe. The Notre-Dame fire reached a public battered and wearied by periodic reports of terrorism and civil disorder across France. The Charlie Hebdo massacre, the Thalys train attack, the Bataclan siege, and the riots by Yellow Vests stand out against a background of vandalism visited on churches almost weekly.

Unlike those horrors, the Notre-Dame fire has been accepted as an accident, and it caused no loss of life. Isolated from the fraught issues of immigration and terrorism and without the personal stories of individual victims, this event has focused our collective attention on the building itself. Now, the future of Notre-Dame stands as a test for the French government and, to the extent that the public can exert meaningful influence, a challenge for the people of France. How this future looks will depend on and reflect today's understanding of the history and meaning of the cathedral—in both its secular and religious dimensions. What the rebuilt Notre-Dame looks like will be, for better or worse, a statement about the values of the French people today.

On April 16, 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." The announcements about the rebuilding, while the embers were still hot, were welcome steps in marshalling the resources that this project demands. Even though the damage was not as extensive as originally feared, the cathedral requires at least a new roof, partial replacement of the stone ribbed vaults, and a new spire at the intersection of the nave and the transept to replace the 1844 spire designed by Eugène-Viollet-Le-Duc, which spectacularly burned and fell in the inferno. Other, long overdue restorations were already in progress, and the destabilizing effects of the

damage and its aftermath will likely expand the scope of that work.

From the swift commitment of more than a billion Euros from various major donors, to the pledges of assistance from the craftsmen of Les Compagnons du Devoir, it is clear that France will make Notre-Dame whole again. An open competition for the new design, however, unleashes a process that sets this cultural artifact on a perilous, uncharted course. Macron's "more beautiful" indicates that something new and different will be built. The competition will be a popular exercise freed of the encumbrances of the inherently less colorful approach of replicating what was lost, an undertaking that would have been led by scholars and preservationists. That the government has exposed Notre-Dame to such a wholesale reimagining is particularly surprising given the uproar around the recent restorations at Chartres Cathedral, which have been criticized for ignoring the building's history in favor of attempting to return to the structure to its original thirteenth-century state.

Since the announcement, designers, artists, and architects have responded with a range of proposals that make for striking Instagram posts, from Norman Foster's glass roof and spire—which recalls Santiago Calatrava's absurd 1980s proposal for a biodome roof on New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine—to Clément Willemin's flat-roofed "High Line"–style walking deck. No concept seems to be off limits: the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye, whose Northern European Gothic-style laser-cut stainless steel works include concrete mixers and dump trucks, says he is in the game. These designers invoke buzzwords like sustainable, humane, inclusive, recycled, biodiverse, and transparent. By comparison, the careful study of the physical and archival evidence and the submission of the designer's ego to the genius of the original fabric does not earn many clicks. Internationally famous architects have the resources to create compelling imagery which will bolster their cases. But the participation of these designers, with no discernible qualifications for this project, will give this contest the gravitas of a reality television show.

Macron may be launching an architectural project to stand, in part, as an emblem of his presidential vision. Ever since Georges Pompidou and François Mitterrand's "Grands Projets," building for legacy has been almost part of the French presidential job description. As Macron stands accused of imposing austerity on the people, he could hardly propose a new building, but restoring Notre-Dame is a public good that also offers him an opportunity to appear forward-thinking.

The outcomes of the Grands Projets competitions, which also were imbued with half-baked political notions, are not encouraging: the Grande Arche de La Défense, designed by Johan Otto von Spreckelsen, is a reflective, empty, less-than-perfect cube, set among dismal office towers. Continuing the historic axis from the Place de la Concorde to the Arc de Triomphe, the Défense arch was intended to celebrate humanity and humanitarian ideals as opposed to triumph in wars. The Centre Pompidou (Beaubourg), designed by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano, with its recently rebuilt collection of exposed pipes, columns, and an escalator, was posited as an anti-establishment antidote to elitism. The Opéra Bastille, designed by Carlos Ott (the jury mistakenly thought they

were selecting a Richard Meier design), was fashioned as Mitterrand's Opera of the People and is now widely regarded as a design failure with expensive seats. Unfortunately, the popularity of some of these projects—the Beaubourg, for instance—suggests that disruptive designs can also generate ticket sales.

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To imagine a Notre-Dame more beautiful than before, however, is more than disruptive. Macron is rejecting the spire designed by Viollet-le-Duc, erasing the design of this 170-year-old fixture of the Parisian skyline—a masterpiece of the Gothic Revival and an essential part of an architectural whole. The history of Notre-Dame makes clear that restoration is the better course. Distinct building campaigns, desecrations, and restorations reflect the history of the French church and state and are embedded in the walls of Notre-Dame. Despite these physical developments, the animating Gothic spirit of the building has remained. The fire should not be seen as a license for the new rebuilders to inject their own ahistorical styles into a building so committed to a single governing principle.

After the principal construction of Notre-Dame (1160–1260), 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 wholesale desecration followed. The heads of the kings of Israel and Judah were lopped 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 Revolution took away more than architecture, inflicting widespread butchery and effacing faith; every cemetery was to bear a sign proclaiming "Death is an Endless Sleep." But heritage was more durable than revolutionary fervor, and after 1830 the government sought, in a typically centralized and rigorous manner, to document its great cultural treasures and begin the process of preserving historic monuments. A new interest in the Middle Ages took hold, colored by Romantic ideals. Destruction of older buildings was condemned. In 1825, Victor Hugo published a pamphlet called "War on the Demolishers!," and his 1831 *Notre-Dame de Paris* (*The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*) was a huge success. It made the long-neglected cathedral a beloved treasure.

In 1844, Viollet-le-Duc, at age thirty already an accomplished artist, illustrator, and architect, along with his partner Jean-Baptiste Lassus, won the competition to restore Notre-Dame. The drawings and documents they produced to win this commission form a dazzlingly complete and

perceptive record of every part of the building—entire elevations drawn to the last stone. The partners' proposal included some new elements but was generally respectful of the existing fabric. The restoration, which lasted until 1864, was a magisterial accomplishment that included the new spire to replace the original that had fallen into disrepair and was removed in 1786. The Viollet-le-Duc spire is the one whose design, though completely documented, is likely to be ignored in the forthcoming rebuilding.

The reason Viollet-le-Duc's approach to preservation later came to be condemned sheds light on why today's France may consider his work at Notre-Dame to be expendable. As one of the founding theorists and practitioners of preservation, his philosophy, for which he has been unjustifiably pigeonholed, was as deeply controversial in his time as it is in ours. Among his thousands of pages of writing, he recorded a definition in his *Dictionary of French Architecture* that bedeviled his career:

> Restoration: Both the word and the thing are modern. To restore a building is not to maintain it, to repair it or redo it; it is to restore it to a complete state that may never have existed at any given moment.

A narrow reading of his text suggests that he was unconcerned with authenticity, but in practice he cared deeply about the many monuments he restored and adapted his approach to each building and even each stone, exercising judgment rather than restricting himself with abstract rules. As he later observed, "absolute principles lead to absurdities."

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 burnishing 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 sequiturs, 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.

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 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.

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:

> In the society of cities, art becomes, in the midst of a very imperfect political state—one will excuse the expression—a type of freedom of the press, an outlet for intellects always ready to react against the abuses of the feudal society . . . if one studies secular sculpture of the thirteenth century, what one sees is a pronounced democratic sentiment . . . . A loathing of oppression is apparent throughout. 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?

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.

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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).

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