

2004

Gothic Architecture in America: Its Roots, Significance and Present-Day Standing

Frank Ward
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/ephemeris>



Part of the [Ancient Philosophy Commons](#), [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#), and the [History of Religions of Western Origin Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ward, Frank (2004) "Gothic Architecture in America: Its Roots, Significance and Present-Day Standing," *Ephemeris*: Vol. 5 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/ephemeris/vol5/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Classical Studies at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ephemeris by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

*Gothic Architecture in America: Its
Roots, Significance and Present-Day Standing*

By Frank Ward '04

Denison University

Close your eyes and open your mind. The land under your feet is part of the future country of France. Now you can open your eyes wide and take in the most enormous and imposing piece of architecture that you have ever seen. The year is 1140 AD, and you are just about to enter through the portal at the west façade of the site of Gothic architecture's founding. Now comfortably inside this holy realm known as St. Denis, you slowly move down the expansive center aisle. As you progress between the towering colonnades on each side of you, you move closer to the altar at the east end of the church. Looking above your head, you can little believe that stone is suspended that high. Taking in the tall arched windows with intricately designed circular windows above the altar, you are immersed in a sea of stone, slate, and glass. You have just received a satisfying taste of Gothic architecture.

There wasn't a revolt, a coup d'état, or a bloody holy war that brought about this distinct change in the architecture of Europe. There was, however, a change in the social conscious that spurred the transition from Romanesque to Gothic architecture. There are numerous scholars who acknowledge that Gothic architecture's birth was not a singular event, but was contingent upon other occurrences. In fact, it seems that the twelfth century was one of the most complex crossroads of the last two millennia. In essence, had it not been for Gothic architecture, many other societal changes would not have occurred. Likewise, Gothic architecture was not only influenced by, but borne out of, various other changes of the times. Erwin Panofsky cites

scholasticism as a major influence on Gothic architecture and its development. He says:

Early Scholasticism was born at the same moment and in the same environment in which Early Gothic architecture was born in Suger's Saint-Denis. For both the new style of thinking and the new style of building (*opus Francigenum*) – though brought about by 'many masters from different nations,' as Suger [the first abbot of Saint Denis] said of his artisans, and soon developing into truly international movements – spread from an area comprised within a circle drawn around Paris with a radius of less than a hundred miles. And they continued to be centered in this area for about one century and a half (Panofsky 4,5).

Robert Branner also explains the significance of Gothic architecture. While the views of Branner can coexist with Panofsky's viewpoint, they are different enough, that it would seem inaccurate and intellectually deficient not to compare them closely. Branner believes that the basis for Gothic architecture is rooted in the fact that:

The transcendental character of medieval religious architecture was given a special form in the Gothic church. Medieval man considered himself but an imperfect "refraction" of the Divine Light of God, whose temple on earth, according to the text of the

dedication ritual, stood for the Heavenly City of Jerusalem. The Gothic interpretation of this point of view was a monument that seems to dwarf the man who enters it, for space, light, structure, and plastic effects of masonry are organized to produce a visionary scale. There is no fixed set of proportions in the parts, such as can be developed from the diameter of a Greek column, and no standard relationship between solid and void. The result is a distortion: large as it may be in real size, the Gothic Church becomes prodigiously vast in appearance. Such a visionary character expressed not only the physical and spiritual needs of the Church, but also the general attitude of the people and the aspirations of the individual patron and architect (Branner 10).

It is crucial to the understanding of Gothic architecture to know and acknowledge that it began in the Church. As a result, this now ancient style was intended to be a form that was structured and respected, bold and powerful, and yet inviting and open. Gothic succeeded in these intentions because it was structured around a few simple design principles and involved only a few building materials. Two early and prime examples of this were the aforementioned cathedral at St. Denis and the younger Chartres Cathedral. St. Denis and Chartres are landmarks in a literal and metaphoric sense. They were truly the earliest and most significant examples of Gothic architecture, yet as a testament to the strength, durability, and even pride of Gothic style; both of these structures still stand today.

Classical Heritage

While windows are not at the center of Gothic's achievements, they are certainly a key component. The windows at St. Denis are noted for their form, but the stained glass of Chartres is known around the world. One of the biggest reasons that the stained glass of Chartres and of other cathedrals across Europe is so richly storied is the fact that first stained glass was prominent in churches of Gothic design. As a result, the stained glass of several of Chartres' main windows is appreciated the wide world over. The reason for this fame results from what is contained within those stained glass pieces: a shade of blue that no one has been able to reproduce in the eight centuries since its creation. Appropriately named, "Chartres Blue," this deep hued, rich fluid blue might not have been seen by its millions of viewers had it been built into another, less fortified, non-Gothic structure.

Combined with this emphasis on symmetry was a Christian-influenced church design known as the cruciform. While this cross-shaped design had been featured prominently in many of the Romanesque Pilgrimage route churches for several centuries, the advent of Gothic style allowed the cruciform to be seen in a new light. One of the first Gothic cruciform churches was at Chartres. With its stained glass windows, surreal size in a gigantic cross form, harmonious symmetry of columns, arches ambulatories, windows and virtually everything else imaginable, this church must have seemed quite a remarkable place for the worshiper of the twelfth century, because even today, it leaves millions of annual visitors from around the world in utter awe.

"Gothic architecture evolved at a time of profound social and economic change in Western Europe." In additions, "Politically, the twelfth century was also the time of expansion and consolidations of the

State” (Branner 11). Gothic was the confluence of a change in philosophical thought, societal advancement, new thoughts on religion, and a transition in spoken and written language. The last change, a shift in the spoken and written word, was significant. The translation of Greek and Arabic into Latin was a sign of change. The intellectual movement underway brought about “a new literature, both lyric and epic” (Branner 11). This movement had a unifying effect that rid Europe of its former isolationistic feudal ways and ushered in a new cosmopolitan world. Gothic architecture not only contributed to these changes, but was also influenced by them.

Combined with this overhaul in the European world was the fact that, “Gothic was not dark, massive, and contained, like the older Romanesque style, but light, open, and aerial, and its appearance in all parts of Europe had an enduring effect on the outlook of succeeding generations” (Branner 12). This reason sheds light on the decision to move towards Gothic. It was not only aesthetically more pleasing; there were practical purposes, as well.

This new style brought in more light, which would have had the effect of increasing daylight inside the church, thus extending working and worshiping hours. In its being a more “open” style, it would have created a more inviting atmosphere, which would be important for any church. Also, there was a principle behind building a more “aerial” structure. This, of course, had appeal to Christians and for two reasons specifically. First of all, they knew that the higher they could build, the more their church would be seen. Secondly, the higher they could build, the greater chance they had to create a sense of awe and splendor within their communities. While this was by no means the most notable of reasons as to why Gothic became popular, it

acts to explain much of the allure of this architectural style.

The power and influence that Gothic holds is vast. In the twelfth century, and for several hundred years following, there seemed numerous reasons that Gothic should be kind the world of European architecture. It required just a few building materials, all of which were natural resources of the surrounding lands, or could be made from nearby resources. It was also the sturdiest, best-made, longest lasting structure that had been developed in the Old World. The first Gothic cathedrals of France or England's great institutions of higher learning—Oxford and Cambridge—are a testament not only to the physical and spiritual strength of Gothic, but of its timelessness as an architectural style.

Gothic was already bigger and better than its predecessors and nothing as formidable or glorious seemed to be on the road ahead. For that "Gothic" thought process to continue into the eighteenth, nineteenth, and unbelievably enough, the twentieth century in America, is quite astonishing, especially considering how many new styles of architecture there were that could have been used. Yet, while some styles were certainly more practical at this point, Gothic's charm didn't seem to be diminishing.

The charm encapsulates a great deal more than a mere style of architecture; it included a unique way of thinking and thus encourages a different type of lifestyle. This "attitude" and approach to life was present at institutions of higher learning in modern-day America. At Yale, this unique approach to life was experienced first-hand by an undergraduate named Henry Seidel Canby. His life and observations there lend a large bit of credence to the influence of Gothic architecture. In New Haven, Canby observed the society of his 1890s college days. He acknowledged that simplistic living and

Classical Heritage

modesty was exercised by virtually everyone and those with money were sometimes the consummate examples of this approach to living. This lifestyle could be compared to the monastic life of the twelfth century.

In his book, *Alma Mater: The Gothic Age of the American College*, Canby writes:

Relative poverty was regarded as a virtue, doing without was a pride. One walked not rode, went to concerts rather than to the theatre, danced to a piano and a cornet, gave books not jewelry, sat down four at a table not eight, kept married instead of toying with expensive ideas about lovers and divorce (Canby 16).

At this point in time the significance of the Gothic style was realized. It was more than an architectural style; it was a way of life. From Canby's description of Yale and New Haven, it can be gathered that much like the focus placed on structure, knowledge, and simplicity at the dawn of the Gothic era, this focus had not deteriorated or been altered much in over seven hundred years. In the fibers of this focus lies another point of substance from Canby. "It is impossible to think of the college of that day without its encircling town" (Canby 17). This point is well taken, as it cannot be lost on us that one of the most essential purposes of Gothic architecture was that of harboring a community, initially with a focus on religion and later with a focus on education.

In Canby's words, Yale College and the surrounding New Haven community was,

Classical Heritage

Cleaner, neater, than other towns, with green spaces somewhere toward the center, and white spires or Gothic towers or windowed dormitories half hid by trees, they were little capitals of the academic states. As trading or industrial centers their life might be indistinguishable from towns or cities of a like size, but in their social consciousness there was always some recognition of peculiarity. For the heart of the community was a college. Its subtle influences were as pervasive if less noticeable than the quite unstable symbols of college life—playing fields, cafes, and collegiate clothing (Canby 3, 4).

Established in 1701 in the once quiet, quaint, pious, and eventually industrial city of New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University has had a personal relationship with its hometown for over three hundred years. While there are always certain ideological and societal conflicts between a town and its university, Yale has done well for New Haven, just as New Haven has played its own important role in influencing the Yale that people know today. This dual commitment has helped to keep these two distinct places united as one greater community.

A college, most notably one in a small city, town, or village, has a commitment to the community, much like the community has a commitment to the college that is a center of educational, cultural, and sometimes even religious advancement for it. As Larson and Palmer note:

Classical Heritage

When serious thought is given to the combined problem of social and physical relationship of the college as a whole and its relation to the community, and when that problem is intercepted by good architecture and beautiful landscaping, the college has done much to raise the standard of community living in America (Larson/Palmer 30).

This focus on community can be taken a step further and applied to the quadrangle design borne from the earliest British universities.

The quadrangular type of campus with buildings closely grouped, as at Oxford and Cambridge, may be successfully developed for the American college. On a campus which is limited in area, such an arrangement commends itself by virtue of its economy of space, while on a campus of extensive size such concentration of the buildings makes for great ease of communication (Larson/Palmer 69).

This quadrangular design is seen at various American colleges across the country, yet, where Gothic architecture is involved, the quadrangle is a central feature of every campus. See most dramatically at Yale, Duke, and Rhodes College, Gothic architecture and the quadrangle are still thriving in the present day. Intriguingly, two of these schools—Duke and Rhodes—have Gothic campuses that were designed and constructed during the 1920s. This fact speaks volumes about Gothic architecture and shows that it has an

Classical Heritage

association attached to it that today speaks as strongly as the large stone pillars that have kept Gothic structures standing for so many centuries.

When people envision Gothic architecture, they don't just think of a mighty stone structure, towering high and airy. They think about where Gothic architecture has been put into place: in churches, cathedrals, chapels, academic buildings, museums, libraries, residences, and administrative buildings. What results from this is a feeling of respect, importance, dignity, civility, beauty, glory, enlightenment, and quiet pomp. In conveying this feeling of what Gothic is and what it means, Canby says:

From these campuses, which even in my day had begun to go Gothic in their architecture, came many, if not most, of the two generations of Americans who now are in executive charge of the country, and the greater part of the codes, ideals, manners, and ideals of living which dominate us. Here was the conditioning laboratory for the most promising of our impressionable youth. These were the Utopias from which they emerged to tackle with extraordinary confidence, only recently shaken, a country which was becoming a social and economic problem while they fought for the prizes of their little college world (Canby xii, xiii).

With these qualities instilled in peoples' minds, Gothic architecture transcends the boundaries of time. It is not just the quality craftsmanship or strong building materials that have seen Gothic through to this point in

history—almost nine hundred years after its birth—it is the idea and conception of what Gothic is and what it means that has helped it to only survive, but to thrive into the twenty-first century.

Another sign of endorsement of Gothic is seen in peoples' willingness to go to great cost and expense to move a place and then create a Gothic form out of it. Rhodes College is a primary example of this. In 1925, Memphis citizens spent over a million dollars to have the college moved from a more rural location outside of the city, so that they would have a fine liberal arts college in their great Southern city on the Mississippi. There was an obvious interest in having a small liberal arts school with a focus on religion and scholasticism in Memphis, yet the efforts put forth to build a Gothic home for this college require much time, energy, and expense. With its various quadrangular forms, the local stone, well-tempered stained glass, thick, carved wooden doors, smooth slate roofs, irrigated green grass, symmetrical walkways, and other Gothic features Rhodes College is as well known today for its academic offerings as it is for its masterful architecture.

Erwin Panofsky helps to further the argument for Gothic architecture as a part of more than just an architecture movement, and also argues that Gothic helped to inspire and was inspired by other events of the Middle Ages. Panofsky's insight into Gothic architecture's relation to scholasticism is riveting. He asserts that there are valid reasons why the two subjects would have collided, and says:

...setting aside for the moment all intrinsic analogies, there exists between Gothic architecture and Scholasticism a palpable and hardly accidental concurrence in the purely factual

domain of time and place—a concurrence so inescapable that the historians of medieval philosophy, uninfluenced by ulterior considerations, have been led to periodize their material in precisely the same way as do the art historians theirs (Panofsky 2, 3).

Understanding the connection between the two helps scholars understand why it is such that Gothic still lives. Gothic is true to its roots. When this style was the “new and hip thing,” it still had practical purposes. While Gothic isn’t impractical today, its substantial expense and exhausting attention to detail would seem to render it too much trouble; however the observations made by Panofsky, Branner, and others help us to understand the reasons why Gothic is still prominent:

The Gothic style cannot be called native to America in the sense that the Early American, the Georgian, the Classic, and the Spanish are native. Yet, since our colleges and universities derive from the universities of Europe, many of which date from the medieval era, it is admittedly traditional for college use. Naturally, then, the Gothic has been and is today an important type in college architecture (Branner 24).

That Gothic is “traditional,” has much to do with its success. People love traditions, and in this ever-changing world, society considers it a luxury to be to cling to something as old and revered as Gothic architecture. Gothic’s associations with religion, scholasticism, and thus respect, structure, and order,

make it a pillar of strength in a world of impermanence and instability.

Character also proves to be a staple in architecture, especially college architecture. Larson and Palmer write:

Character in college architecture is attained not merely by a blind following of a certain period or style, but rather by the faithful interpolation of the specific needs of the individual college. These needs can be ascertained only through a thorough analysis and a careful appraisal of the particular problems involved. This dual process should take into account a number of factors, such as the traditional background of the college, the appropriate style of architecture, the available materials suitable to collegiate uses, the environment, both social and physical, in which it is to function and the general development program (Larson/Palmer 19).

These scholars provide some sound reasoning in their argument for the necessity of taking the various needs of a college into consideration before creating a design. While this may apply to most architectural styles, Gothic seems to transcend this aforementioned statement, as in the last seventy-five years a major Gothic architectural project took place at Duke University. A new quadrangle known as the West campus was constructed with a focus on Gothic design. Where the East campus was built in the a Classic Revival style, with buildings such as Baldwin Auditorium resembling the University

of Virginia's emblematic library of Jeffersonian design, the Gothic direction was quite different and thus seems a very intriguing move.

According to Larson and Palmer, Collegiate Gothic is the most expensive architectural style, yet is vital to the present and, more importantly, to the future. Built to not only withstand the elements and the test of time, the Gothic style is a rare achievement amongst other styles in that it is based on a model of simplicity.

The irony of Gothic is that the few building materials involved come together to form structures that are anything but models of simplicity. These structures—large in size and scope—inspire awe amongst their observers and set off the imagination of individuals with their intricate design and complex looking details. This series of statements could no doubt be applied to the late 20s and early 30s building project at Duke. Costing a mind-boggling total of \$21, 254, 833.69, as the Depression was ensuing in the early 30s, the project did not come without extreme expense and years of work, but to see the present-day splendor of that place seems to justify all of the cost and tireless labor.

The project at Duke seems to be a total anomaly. Designers chose to build their new and central campus in a form of architecture that had been created over six hundred years before our nation's founding, understanding that their already existing campus was not Gothic in its form. They appointed Julian F. Abele—a young and prominent architect based in Philadelphia—to design the Gothic addition to the University. The mark left by Gothic design on Duke's campus is immeasurably large. To make the project happen they built a rail line through the construction site, so that they could transport rock from a local quarry. To go to that much trouble and expense is one more reflection of how much this Gothic campus meant to Duke at the time and

Classical Heritage

means to Duke today. The Chapel, academic buildings, residence halls, and other marks of Gothic on Duke's campus are a great source of pride for the University. Today, one of the University's bookstores is named for the architectural design that now graces much of the campus.

Gothic architecture is one of the oldest, best-respected, and thus most important architectural forms in the entire world. The style is bold, powerful, stoic, quietly beautiful, intimidating, magnificent, and virtually immovable; an architectural style so well known and loved that few question its importance and respectability. When noting yet another observation from the words of Branner, it is almost eerie to think how much modern-day society's conception of Gothic and its significance match up with this comment:

Gothic was the final expression of the medieval world, of the concepts of a mystical cosmos and a transcendental, universal religion. It marked the emergence of a cosmopolitan society in Western Europe, whose increasingly elegant taste it was continually able to satisfy. But the essence of Gothic was most fully embodied in its conquest of space and its creation of a prodigious, visionary scale...(Branner 48).

Gothic, like the stone of its earliest foundations, has stood the test of time, the elements, changing world views, and numerous adjustments to fashions and styles of the world over the nearly nine hundred years since its bold beginnings at St. Denis in 1140 AD. As technology continues to advance, world views and the global climate continue to shift and peoples' forever wavering

view of what's fashionable and what's *faux pas* continue, one constant that we should be able to count on is the continued life and success of Gothic, not just as an architectural form, but as a thought process and a feeling. As this extensive tour draws to a close, I can say with much certainty that while this world may be a very different place nine hundred years from now, the Gothic cathedrals and chapels, museums, academic buildings and residences that are strewn across the world will continue to stand strong, proud, and beautiful.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Branner, Robert. Gothic Architecture. New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1961.
- Bucher, Francois. Architector: The Lodge Books and Sketchbooks of Medieval Architects. Volume 1. New York: Abaris Books, Inc., 1979.
- Canby, Henry Seidel. Alma Mater: The Gothic Age of the American College. New York: Farrar & Rinehart Incorporated, 1936.
- Klauder, Charles Z. and Herbert C. Wise. Collegiate Architecture in America: And Its Part in the Development of the Campus. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929.
- Larson, Jens Frederick and Archie MacInnes Palmer. Architectural Planning Of The American College. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1933.
- Lesser, George. Gothic Cathedrals and Sacred Geometry. Volume One. London: Alec Tiranti Ltd., 1957.
- Loth, Calder and Julius Trousdale Sadler, Jr. The Only Proper Style: Gothic Architecture

Classical Heritage

in America. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1975.

Panofsky, Erwin. Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism. New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1957.

Von Simson, Otto. The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988.