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Pascale Bermon and Dominique Poirel, eds., *La cathédrale immortelle?* Turnhout: Brepols, 2022. 230 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. €40.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-503599663; €40.00 (eb). ISBN 978-2-503599724.

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Miraculously, five and a half years after the devastating fire of 15 April 2019, a re-opening Mass was celebrated in Notre-Dame, the cathedral of Paris, on 8 December 2024, the day of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. An army of workers from rope technicians and crane operators to carpenters, masons, and glaziers have cleaned, consolidated, and rebuilt the damaged fabric. Multidisciplinary teams of the *chantier scientifique de Notre-Dame de Paris* have taken advantage of access to all areas of the building and an array of technology to study construction methods in detail, their research reports appearing in *The Journal of Cultural Heritage*.[1] Fruits of their investigations reveal deeper levels of the cathedral's daring design and bring greater precision to its construction chronology. For example, the choir vaults are a mere 15-18 centimeters thick, the use of metal--iron chains, staples, and pins--proves to be more extensive than suspected, inviting a re-evaluation of its role in the performance of the structure, while dendrochronology attests to an evolving design of the roof framework assembled from trees felled between 1171 and ca. 1300. And serendipity played its part: excavations in the crossing for the footings of the scaffolding brought to light exquisite fragments of sculpture, vivid polychromy intact, from the demolished choir screen.[2]

Although these archaeological and architectural events are thrilling, they compose but one chapter of Notre-Dame's epic restoration story. The cathedral is an active place of worship, and the ultimate purpose of the ongoing work aims to recover an environment in which stone, glass, art, light, and sound unite as a setting for spiritual experience. Considerable time, artistic effort, and money have been devoted to a new shrine for the Crown of Thorns, a modernized suite of liturgical furniture, and rehabilitating the organ. The thirteen essays that compose *La cathédrale immortelle?* embrace the cathedral's multiple identities: architectural, sensorial, theological, and philosophical. The book also plots a chronological arc from the construction of the Gothic edifice in the twelfth century to today's restoration, which is placed against a background of other fires and projects including E. E. Viollet-le-Duc's work on Notre-Dame in the nineteenth century.

Dany Sandron's survey of the cathedral's architectural history from around 1160 to 1370 launches the first group of four essays through which we encounter Notre-Dame before the fire.

Modifications continually reshaped an initial design that married references to Roman Early Christian models with new technologies of construction such as ribbed groin vaults, flying buttresses, and bar tracery. Relics also played an important role in casting Notre-Dame as an *architecture parlante*. Crosses inscribed into the oculi of the elevation and sculpted on the keystones of the choir and transept refer to the fragment of the Holy Cross given by canon Anseau in 1108. A century later, the arrival in Paris of the Crown of Thorns and more of the True Cross, purchased by King Louis IX and sheltered in the Sainte-Chapelle, pushed the cathedral's architecture into a new formal gear. The transept façades, started in 1258 and followed by the chantry chapels added around the choir, aimed to keep pace with the royal chapel, their tiers of gables and screens of tracery transforming stone and glass into the likeness of a monumental shrine. Out of a protracted building history and the confluence of functional exigency, structural consolidation, competition, and stylistic change, Notre-Dame emerged in the late fourteenth century as a complex but unified whole, the choir emphatically presented as its most sacred space.

Contemporary writing, singing, and preaching offer additional paths for understanding the vision (*"l'imaginaire")* of the church that was presented to medieval audiences. Here, the emphasis moves away from architectural specifics to frame the individual edifice, including Notre-Dame, in universal terms. Andrea Pistoia highlights the *Speculum Ecclesiae*, written at about the same time that Pope Alexander III placed Notre-Dame's first stone in 1163.[3] The text reveals the significance of the construction of a new church as a material building "into which the objectives, indeed the dreams of all, the builders, the clergy, the nobility, the people, are projected" (p. 45). Symbolically, lithic towers, doorways and columns transform into an image of the living church that anticipates the celestial City of God. Innovative polyphony created a sound landscape of words and melody as the voice of the Church rising toward God. Sylvain Dieudonné likens the new musical repertory that integrated measure and time into an organized yet ornate structure, to the image of Maurice de Sully's cathedral, composed of multiple levels in which changing patterns of openings, like notes, were regulated by a staff of columns and moldings. In a different key, Jean Longère introduces bishop Maurice, the motor behind the vast Gothic project. In a sermon for the dedication of a church, he offers his vision of the church as a place of worship as well as the embodiment of a moral and spiritual edifice. Anticipating the later sculptural program of the central portal of the west façade, Maurice presents the church as an image of the Christian soul "cleansed of sin and ornamented with the virtues" prepared to "become, with the angels, a companion and participant in eternal devotion" (p. 77). The bishop's words on the "visible church" stand in stark contrast to the views of his contemporary, Peter the Chanter, who, without mentioning Notre-Dame by name, condemned such monumental projects as "curious," "perverted," and "wrong." Likening them to the Tower of Babel, he saw great church architecture as a wasteful product of competitive pride.[4]

Part II widens the lens to consider the historical, literary, and philosophical resonances of the cathedral. Dominique Iogna-Prat asks why there is such a deep emotional attachment to the stones of Notre-Dame, a subject that he broached in an article that appeared in *Le Monde* shortly after the fire.[5] Echoing Victor Hugo's words--"Dieu, cela n'est pas, tant que ce n'est pas en pierre. Il faut une maison pour mettre la prière" (p.83)--he charts the significance of the physical church building over the two millennia of Christianity and the slow accumulation in Notre-Dame's stones of the destiny of the city, the diocese, the kingdom, the nation of France, and the

global community. Does the decision to rebuild the damaged cathedral *à l'identique*, then threaten to arrest history, stopping time with the Notre-Dame fashioned by the restorers of the nineteenth century? Perhaps. However, there has always been another Notre-Dame, one explored by Laurent Avezou. Witness, messenger, object, the Notre-Dame of literature transcends the inertia of the "pathetic materiality" of stone and wood (p. 98). Whether dismissed as devoid of mystery by J.K. Huysmans, seen as the face of nostalgia by Henry James, or experienced as the site of conversion by Paul Claudel, it is the Notre-Dame of words and paper, which carries on a metadiscourse as the vessel of the Holy Scripture, that is eternal. On the other hand, philosopher Maud Pouradier emphasizes the "value of the real" that became terrifyingly apparent as the very existence of the cathedral was imperiled by the conflagration (p. 112). Broadcast live, a global audience that lived through the drama confronted the apocalyptic possibility of a world in which Notre-Dame would survive only in words, images, or thought as a disembodied ideal. For Pouradier, the fire forced a sharper focus on the stone, wood, and glass reality of the cathedral that, together, operates along vectors that are simultaneously functional, structural, aesthetic, and semiotic.

Part III sets current events against a backdrop of historical fires, construction and repair, and the birth of restoration practice. The 2019 Paris fire echoed past disasters, surveyed by Patrick Demouy, not least because the survival of relics--the rescue of the tunic of the Virgin in the 1194 blaze at Chartres, the Crown of Thorns heroically evacuated from Notre-Dame--spurred wide-ranging fund-raising efforts for restoration. Quests on behalf of Laon Cathedral in the wake of an 1112 fire stretched out over 242 days and 3100 kilometers; multimedia campaigns and public events have raised a reported $891,000,000 for Notre Dame.[6] And if building the gigantic Third Abbey Church of Cluny imaged the cosmos within the church itself while St. Francis acted out his objective to engage directly with the world by repairing churches, what is the meaning of the spectacle of Notre-Dame in the twenty-first century that has played to a global audience? Arnaud Montoux suggests that response to the fire reveals the Christian mission of unity and universal salvation. However, on an earthly and practical plane, the work of the last five years marks but the latest chapter in the evolving theory and practice of restoration. Jean-Michael Leniaud takes us back to the nineteenth century and the formulation of a code of ethics to regulate the handling of historical monuments. In this, Notre-Dame represented a turning point. Had Lassus and Viollet-le-Duc followed through on their initial 1843 proposal for the restitution of the cathedral, we would marvel at a very different Notre-Dame in 2025.[7] In it, they declared, "In principle, one must not restore…. We have rejected completely all modifications." (pp.159, 161). Instead, conservation of an edifice in its existing state, defects, additions, and all, must take priority, an approach circulated by the Commission des monuments historiques under the title *L'Instruction pour la conservation, l'entretien, et la restauration des cathédrales* in February 1849. But by the late 1850s, Notre-Dame bore witness to a different attitude, one in which the "artist-restorer" assumed the right to create, in Viollet-le-Duc's famous words, "to reestablish (an edifice) in a complete state that may never have existed at a given moment."[8] These two decades of work created the cathedral, enshrined by the 1964 Venice Charter and part of the UNESCO Banks of the Seine world heritage site, that has been restored today. But it is not a Notre-Dame that ever existed in the Middle Ages, its interior a hybrid of four-story twelfth- and three-story thirteenth-century elevations, the south transept rose rotated 15 degrees, a resurrected populace of statuary, new gables and pinnacles, and a crossing spire invented by Viollet-le-Duc's fantasy of the ideal cathedral.

Part IV brings us into the post-fire arena of thought and activity, one that will continue until the end of the 2020s. Marie-Hélène Didier details the urgent issues in the immediate aftermath of the blaze, such as the stabilization of the damaged structure and assessment of the damage to the stone walls from heat and water, as well as early stages of work and study, while Cécile Coulangeon considers the knotty issues of restoration in her view to other projects, including Beauvais, Cluny, Chartres, Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and Vézelay. She reminds us that restoration is seldom straightforward. It frequently involves destruction, suppression, or prioritizing: in the Vézelay crypt a mix of twelfth-,thirteenth-, and nineteenth-century strata were preserved; Saint-Germain's recent intervention emphasized nineteenth-century décor over the original twelfth-century design. A complementary sensibility informs P. Gilles Drouin's consideration of Notre-Dame's multiple layers of liturgical history that exposes a pace of change very different than that documented in the architecture. Citing the words of Pope Francis, "tradition is the safeguard of the future…" (p. 201), Drouin makes the case that Maurice de Sully's original vision remains legible in the Notre-Dame we visit today. Yet, against the seeming permanence of the architecture, the fresh interior arrangements address the cathedral's vitality by announcing its roles in today's Christian life. Contemporary liturgical furnishings--baptismal font, high altar, cross--and devotional nodes mark a transcendental axis from west to east. Interior space has been orchestrated to map a "route of initiation" from Incarnation in the north nave chapels to the Holy Sacrament materialized in the reliquary of the Crown of Thorns displayed in the axial chapel of the ambulatory to the Resurrection presented along the south choir aisles, the Virgin at the crossing, and concluding with a "corridor of the saints" proposed for the south nave chapels.

The realization of this theological itinerary involves the replacement of the grisaille windows, designed by Viollet-le-Duc, in the south nave chapels. Although Marie-Hélène Didier judges the nineteenth-century glass "a perfect fit for the architecture" (p. 189), a figurative program centered on the theme of the Pentecost, designed by the painter Claire Tabouret and supported by the archbishop of Paris and the Président de la République, is scheduled for installation in 2026.[9] This is but the latest controversy surrounding the restoration beginning with the 2019 competition, promoted by Emmanuel Macron, for a twenty-first-century spire and extending to the re-landscaping of the cathedral's environs proposed by the Belgian architect, Bas Smets. [10] In general, the essays of *La cathédrale immortelle?* sound a tone of concord as they steer away from explicit engagement in the aesthetic, environmental, political, and technical debates stirred by each phase of the restoration. Nevertheless, themes around authenticity and time continually resurface to invite reflection on the relation of a living building like Notre-Dame to the world of which it is at once product and reflection. The room allowed to varied voices--conservator, historian, philosopher, theologian--gracefully avoids prescriptive rigidity to fittingly capture the protean character of the cathedral of Paris, an edifice that embodies permanence and change, stone and spirit. In the twenty-first century, as in the fourteenth, "… this church offers such a subject of admiration to those who regard it attentively that the soul will never tire in its contemplation."[11]

NOTES

[1] For the *Journal of Cultural Heritage:* https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/journal-of-cultural-heritage/vol/65/; also reports from the Friends of Notre Dame https://www.friendsofnotredamedeparis.org/. A recent issue of the *Bulletin monumental* 182/4 (2024) was devoted to the vaults and roof of Notre-Dame.

[2] *Faire parler les pierres: Sculptures médiévales de Notre-Dame* (Paris: Faton, 2024). These sculptural finds were on exhibit at the Musée de Cluny-musée nationale du Moyen Âge, Paris, 19 November 2024-16 March 2025.

[3] Andrea Pistoia's essay is discussed in the introduction (10) under Part II, "L'idée de cathédrale" although it appears in Part 1 in the body of the book. I have chosen to respect the order of the essays of this section, which move from a consideration of Notre-Dame as a material edifice to a discussion of its symbolic and spiritual character.

[4] Peter's criticism of superfluity in building in his *Summa theologica* can be found in *Gothic Art 1140-c.1450*, ed. Teresa G. Frisch (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 32-33. Marcel Aubert, *Notre-Dame de Paris: sa place dans l'histoire de l'architecture du XIIe au XIVe siècle*, 2nd ed. (Paris: H. Laurens, 1929), pp. 28-29, 63-64, suggests that these remarks may reflect the words aimed at bishop Maurice over the Notre-Dame project and its financing.

[5] Dominique Iogna -Prat, "Pourquoi tant d'attachement aux pierres de Notre-Dame," *Le Monde* 13 June 2019.

[6] Reported in Global News and Headlines https://www.hngn.com/articles/263854/20241129/notre-dame-cathedral-restoration-how-much-did-it-cost.htm.

[7] Jean-Baptiste Lassus and Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, "Projet de restauration de Notre-Dame de Paris. Rapport adressé à M. le Ministre de la Justice et des cultes annexé au projet de restauration, remis le 31 janvier 1843" (Paris: Imprimerie de Mme. Lacombe, 1843).

[8] Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, "Restauration," *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle* (Paris: A. Morel, 1866), vol. 8, p. 14.

[9] Valdemar de Vaux, "Six nouveaux ensembles de vitraux vont orner en 2026 les chapelles du collatéral sud de Notre-Dame de Paris. Dessinés par la peintre Claire Tabouret et fabriqués par l'atelier Simon-Marq comme l'ont annoncé le diocèse de Paris et l'Élysée le 18 décembre. Mais à quoi vont-ils ressembler exactement?" *Aleteia*, December 26, 2024 https://fr.aleteia.org/2024/12/26/a-quoi-ressembleront-les-nouveaux-vitraux-de-notre-dame-de-paris. However, "A Petition has been launched to protect Viollet-le-Duc's Stained Glass Windows at Notre-Dame de Paris," *Art Dependence Magazine*, December 30, 2024 https://www.artdependence.com/articles/a-petition-has-been-launched-to-protect-viollet-le-ducs-stained-glass-windows-at-notre-dame-de-paris/.

[10] See Didier Rykner, *Notre-Dame: Une affaire d'État* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2023).

[11] Jean de Jandun's *Tractatus de laudibus Parisius* was published by Antoine Jean Victor Le Roux de Lincy and Lazare-Marie Tisserand, *Paris et ses historiens aux XIVe et XV siècles* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1867), 46-47.

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