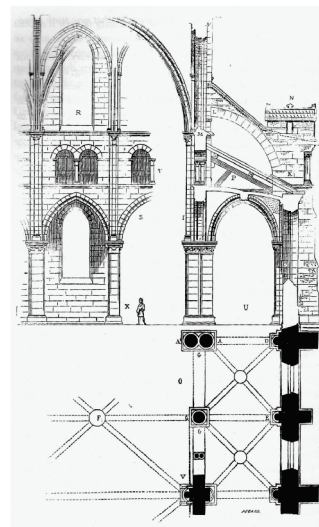


the ink-to-stone letters



# The Notre Dame Restoration



[www.stuartpeaslee.com](http://www.stuartpeaslee.com)

## **THE ARCHITECT MARKETING INSTITUTE Q&A SESSION 2019\_05**

Sienna Mae Heath, Stuart D. Peaslee, AIA

### **Set in Stone? Not Yet: How the Notre Dame Restoration Could Stand for Viollet-le-Duc's "Top-Down" Method**

*Reflecting on lessons learned in the past, let's consider how they can be implemented for the benefit of the cathedral's future. In this Q&A, we explore the philosophy of Eugene Viollet-le-Duc who restored the landmark after it was severely damaged in the French Revolution.*

#### **When the fire happened in April, how did you react to the news?**

Beyond shocked. For me, it was like watching the second plane hit the World Trade Center. I saw it happen on 9/11, first-hand, I was there and wanted to help, but without the necessary training, one could cause even more problems during a catastrophe. Similarly with Notre Dame, many feel the instinct to rectify, resurrect, or make it better than it was, faster. Looking ahead is exciting, yet we could learn a lot from Viollet-le-Duc who restored the cathedral in the 19th century. He said "To restore a building is not to preserve it, to repair or rebuild it, it is to reinstate it in a condition of completeness which could never have existed in at any given time."

#### **Many are asking how we can save it. Meanwhile Patrick Chauvet, the top administrative cleric at Notre Dame, stood in shock at the scene, and asked "Why?" As an architect, what deeper meaning do you find?**

"Why" is not ours to ask in the architecture community. The questions at hand for us are: What could we have done better? How can we do better in the future? Let's accept what is and make the most of what could become. As we adapt and learn with this adversity, the restoration process will take on its own unique process, naturally. Adversity is a universal condition of existence, whether it be a person or a building. With understanding and knowledge, in heart and mind, we can take on most anything, and become better, stronger than we imagined. This truth also applies to Notre Dame.

#### **Why is this both a tragedy and an opportunity for restoration?**

The tragedy is the loss of material representation in history. But that's gone forever, we simply have to accept restoration is not replication. Preservation is possible within photographic captures of the moment, or in words and stories, buildings are like water running in a river, they only happen once. Limestone will decay with atmospheric exposure. The 800 year old trees that produced the framing are gone. Today, the design problem is restore and respect the elegance of yesterday's traditional hard work as well improve for today and tomorrow.

#### **The French president, Emmanuel Macron is making, is making a big effort to ensure the restoration will be done in five years, by 2024's Summer Olympics, is it feasible?**

It took over ten years for the World Trade Center to be replaced, and that type of construction is a lot more prevalent than Notre Dame's. The trade skills for Notre Dame, are uncommon, the new design must accommodate traditional materials with new systems such as sprinklers and electric power, this will take extra time to integrate them well. It will take extra time most likely.

## **THE ARCHITECT MARKETING INSTITUTE Q&A SESSION 2019\_05**

Sienna Mae Heath, Stuart D. Peaslee, AIA

Unless proper considerations are made here, expectations could be unrealistic, and people may be disappointed, based on the 2024 deadline. However, I do see an opportunity for the benefits of educational and vocational training that come from the process of designing and building a cultural landmark of this magnitude and significance.

### **Millions of dollars are pouring in from UNESCO and other donors. What does this tell us about Notre Dames greater meaning?**

The intent is great, but I worry that funds may be squandered. Depending on how the processes are managed, sometimes efficiencies are compromised, and the best results usually are attained when there is clarity, and in this case, that will take time. Of course, anything is possible, or feasible.

My focus would be viability, which exceeds the feasibility expectations and goes beyond. This is a matter of preference, and I would place a higher priority on quality than an artificial deadline. The process could teach generations as much as the product.

### **From a more technical perspective, let's talk about fire safety. Why is it a challenge to protect historical buildings from fire?**

Fire protection systems take up space, simply can not be installed easily into an existing building whether its historic or not. Fire safety consists of sprinklers, alarms and means of egress that are recent developments because of technology and building uses. Applications in historical buildings while maintaining the aesthetic integrity of a landmark are efforts at odds with each other.

### **Notre Dame is widely referred to in the media as "built to burn." It's been reported that Gothic architecture is built so that if the timber roof burns, the fire won't spread and the walls will stand. Master builders from the Middle Ages believed stone vaults could prevent spreading. How accurate is this?**

Fire protection systems today include materials that are fire-resistant, and fire-retardant. It has not changed since then, but as is now and then, more thickness and resistance means higher costs. Viollet-le-Duc made a point that if you can accomplish the same thing with a thinner wall, then do it. There are always trade-offs and considerations to be made, it's a balancing act.

Philosophically, landmarks like this one are profound expressions, homages and symbols of their time and place. Vitruvius wrote, "Two things are found in general and in architecture, that which signifies, and that which is signified' or "proposed' and that which is "demonstrated." He believed it was necessary to combine one's studies with natural talents and building knowledge to achieve the "signified." Essentially, the previous architect of Notre Dame also believed that a true landmark balances classical education with experiential training; the mind-set I hope those in power will follow.

## **THE ARCHITECT MARKETING INSTITUTE Q&A SESSION 2019\_05**

Sienna Mae Heath, Stuart D. Peaslee, AIA

### **Now the architecture community is reflecting on the most recent restoration of Notre Dame as well as previous restorations. What lessons can be learned? How can they be implemented in this restoration?**

This brings us to Viollet-le-Duc's "Top-Down Method." The master builders traditions were derived from traditions of trial & error. Traditions themselves are still evolving with technique and materials. Construction, he realized, is similar to architecture in its own art & science and the human senses that grow with knowledge and experience, to become a "feeling." The Top-Down Method showed that formulas wouldn't have been enough to satisfy, but rather it's an instinct that fed from means and methods of working, that inform elevated sensibilities in judgment, skill and vision. Since then, the tasks of architecture and construction were separated in the latter half of the 19th century, when the Industrial Age, generated standardized and mechanical process that have hyper-evolved.

Moving forward in the 21st century, the current Notre Dame restoration presents an opportunity for builders, architects, and tradespeople to reunite on common ground with an elevated sense of restoring an "original" with its new identity. Perhaps with this traditional spirit we can pay respect to the past while we build into the future.

### **How faithful should architects be to the 19th-century version?**

The discussion we need to have is how the essence can be expressed in the new version – less about the materials, more about the unity of spirit as expressed in their freedom of use, in the materials and their inspiration. For the people of Paris, it still functions primarily as a church, it is a place of worship with an enduring presence in the city and country. For the international citizens and admirers, it is a phenomenon of culture and history and represents many symbols of resilience and beauty through time.

### **The cathedral has endured riots, wars, and revolutions. How does this event begin to contribute to its story?**

That's interesting...it survived the bombing of WWII but not a simple, accidental fire in April, 2019. Mankind's earliest efforts to produce permanent landmarks, or buildings continues across the ages and yet earlier versions and efforts seem to "signify" better results, such as Stonehenge, Pyramids, Gobekli Tepe, Macchu Pichu, Sanxingdui, Greece, Rome and so on, to those buildings of our era. It speaks about cultural values, I would say.

### **While the building may not be the same, how can it be just as meaningful?**

Hopefully, it will continue to inspire for many generations to come. First and foremost I believe it is best if it serves as a place of worship for the community as originally intended. And second, that it contributes significant value architecturally and historically. The relationship of design and its role in spirituality holds invaluable meanings across the spectrum of time.

# THE ARCHITECT MARKETING INSTITUTE Q&A SESSION 2019\_05

Sienna Mae Heath, Stuart D. Peaslee, AIA

## When people look back on this in 50 years, what perspective might they gain?

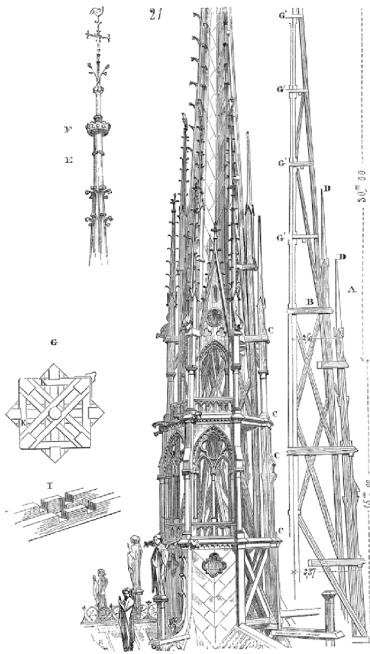
Building is a process. It evolves through challenges and comes out with different manifestations of those challenges. One example of this is NAB Studio's proposal to replace the roof with a green -house. While this may be appealing on one level, I think it lacks the spiritual depths of the spatial experience found in Naves of this scale. Thinking of all the thousands of people who worked in such building efforts, with their experience, knowledge and apprenticeships acquired over generations and borders, my hope is that the next generation will continue to honor that tradition, it's timeless.

## How can this spiritual space rise from the ashes once again?

The restoration rise in the form of education. Teaching people how to adapt and overcome is an important life lesson, and the lack of available technical skills may present the opportunities to teach young people the rewards found in getting their hands dirty.

## How does this theme of hope and education connect to your design philosophy?

Through my own designs, I find ways to honor the past, and design for the future. Growth is an ongoing challenge and yet within that daily task is an opportunity see the beauty in Nature. It's not what we get from our efforts, it's what we become through them, as John Ruskin said almost 200 years ago. Evolution is prominent in my work - it's Nature's way.



Drawing of fleche, or spire of Notre Dame by Viollet-le-Duc, via Wikipedia Commons.

[www.stuartpeaslee.com](http://www.stuartpeaslee.com)

