

S.O.S: SAVE OUR SPIRE

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The French people have a lot of experience in rebuilding churches. World War II, World War I, various nineteenth-century governments, the French revolution, the Huguenots and before that, the barbarian hordes, all took a toll on these heavenly palaces. Not to mention fires and damage due to the travails of time. This latest fire, watched by tens of millions on the internet, calls for the rebuilding of the roof, the spire, and part of the ceiling of Notre Dame in Paris. Other elements such as stonework, stained glass and the magnificent organ are likely to be restored.

What is turning out to be the most controversial aspect of the vaunted restoration is the spire. In 1793 the original spire of Notre Dame cathedral was mutilated and taken down by the revolutionary government. For sixty years artists recorded the grand old dame without it.

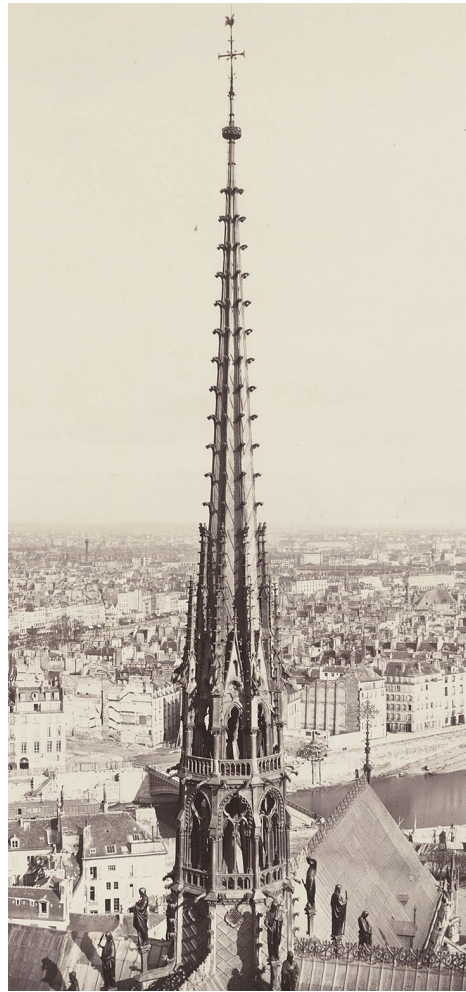
Then in the 1850s, it was redesigned and rebuilt as part of a major conservation and rebuilding of the cathedral by the influential gadfly Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc.

One hundred sixty years later the French government had erected scaffolding and was commencing to restore the spire when it perished in a horrific conflagration. There was a huge outpouring of sympathy and donations, up to \$1 billion, for the cathedral.

Why would people care about a cathedral in our modern secular age? It is clearly because Notre Dame is a beloved monument, a symbol of France and one of the best-known and most visited works of architecture in the world. But even more importantly, though perhaps not consciously felt by all, Notre Dame Cathedral is a sacred place.

Sometimes the goal is to rebuild the building similar to the way it was, and at other times the goal is to rebuild it bigger and better. In the case of the Notre Dame spire (or *flèche*) that burned, it was a nineteenth-century replacement. Designed by Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, the preeminent Gothic architect of the nineteenth century, the spire was larger and taller than its predecessor.

Viollet's spire was an octagonal flèche which rose 305 feet from the



Viollet-le-Duc's Gothic spire

ground and 146 feet above the roof. According to Viollet, the wood structure weighed 550 tons and the lead covering was 275 tons.

What did Viollet do? He enlarged the spire by adding a second level to the base and stretching the central conical roof. He enlarged the base and modified the interior structure so that it could better withstand the storms that are the enemies of towers. After one such storm, Viollet verified that the spire had only moved twenty centimeters.

Interestingly, the octagonal base of the spire was rotated so that four of its corners aligned with the roof ridges. This allowed Viollet to arrange larger-than-life copper statues of apostles and evangelists above where the roofs meet. These are the sixteen statues sculpted by Victor Geoffroy-Dechau-

me that had already been removed for restoration when the fire struck. The statues stepped up the roof toward the base of the octagon with its columnar buttresses.

Beyond the buttresses, eight gothic arches with tracery like the windows of the nave supported a first level. A second level with smaller arches supported gables with tracery and gargoyle downspouts. The corner buttresses held pinnacles which are like miniatures of the central spire.

This conical spire was beautifully ornamented with hundreds of *croqs* or crockets on its ridges which soared ninety-five feet up in the air. On top there was a large cross with a weather-vane rooster containing relics: a thorn from Christ's crown of thorns and relics of Saint Denis and Saint Genevieve, patron saints of Paris.

So why not replace Viollet's spire with something new and improved? If the purpose is to do something that contrasts with the cathedral, a modernist spire will succeed. If the purpose is to be taller or made out of modern materials, many architects would be only too happy to oblige.

But what if the requirement is to do something better than Viollet, something more beautiful than the iconic spire at the crossing of one of the most well-known churches in the world? Using the Gothic language, that would be difficult to achieve. Nothing Gothic on this scale has been done since the completion of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., in 1988, and there are few architects adept at its syntax.

If that were the goal, it would disqualify all of the designs heretofore proposed. Of course it is conceivable that someone could design a new spire more beautiful than Viollet's, but why should we even consider it?

The only criticism of Viollet's spire I have heard so far is that it wasn't original. Its youth, only 160 years old, is not a sin or a reason to replace it as if it were a nonfunctioning plumbing fixture. Unless someone can convince Parisians that Viollet's spire was not in keeping with the cathedral's architecture, had some functional structural flaw, or was ugly, then why not rebuild Viollet's spire in all its Gothic glory?

Photo: Charles Marville, ALA/AAF Collection, Library of Congress