

Dark Age: The Golden Age of Architecture & Planning

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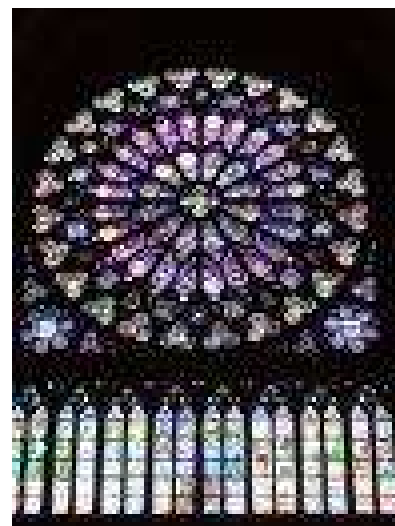


Between the collapse of the Roman Empire and the rise of powerful kings in Europe we see a period lasting about six centuries (approximately, 400 A.D. till 1000 A.D.), during which regional or local feudal lords ruled the different parts of Europe. There was much insecurity in particular in the no-man's lands, where marauders ruled. These centuries, collectively known as the medieval age, have been labeled by historians also as the Dark Age. The shining light was provided by the rise of Christianity in every corner of Europe. The interaction gave rise to the golden age of architecture and planning in the middle of the so-called Dark Age.

Cathedrals, better known as Gothic Cathedrals, were built in an amazing number in large and small towns. People put their total love and devotion and a very large share of their resources toward building them. The results were some of the finest examples of architecture ever produced by humanity. Few buildings in any age, preceding and succeeding these few centuries, anywhere in the world, can compare with these buildings in their uplifting spirit externally and internally, in their truthful expression of the ingenious and highly efficient structural system holding up the lofty and airy structures, in their frugal use of scarce building materials, and in their use of light and color for spiritual upliftment.



Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris

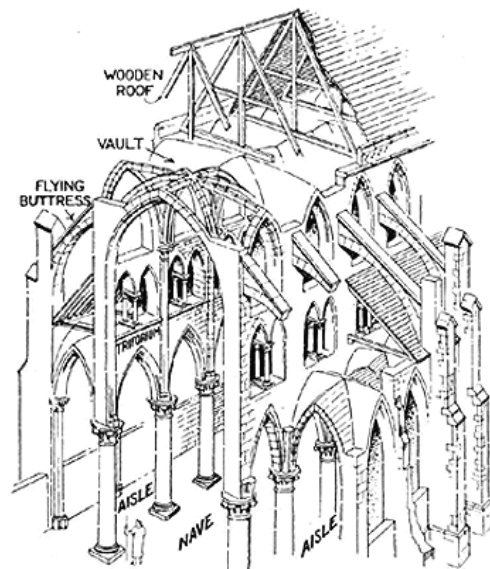


Gothic Cathedral Windows

It is rather difficult to describe this great achievement in a few short paragraphs. What follows therefore is a mere glimpse. The prime purpose of building the cathedrals was not to impress the people with their pomp, size and exuberant decorations, as was common in the preceding and following centuries, but to evoke a sense of oneness with the Almighty. The external and the internal profiles of the building echoed two slender hands meeting in prayer. Even though externally thin and open (flying) buttresses were added to support the central tall and slender structure, they remained exposed and gave the special character unique to the gothic cathedrals. Slenderness was pursued as a virtue in all external and internal structural and the few non-structural elements. This again was to express and evoke spirituality. Roof vaulting was made of pointed arches made of slender stone ribs and thin infill stone slabs. The minimalist form was almost the most efficient in bringing down the vertical and horizontal thrusts to the ground.



Left: Gothic Cathedral Interior



Right: Gothic Cathedral Construction

A most notable feature of these cathedrals was the use of huge stained glass windows, the circular ones sometimes measuring up to 60 feet in diameter, which while acting as an open Bible, provided light to the interior in profusion and expressed beautifully the mood of the day outside. Few decorative elements can evoke the glory of these colorful windows, built with readily evident love and care.

All this is in marked contrast to the many highly acclaimed buildings of today, which are often clad in forms, which are not truthful expressions of the buildings within. As a result whereas the gothic cathedrals have stood the test of time in every conceivable way, it is doubtful if many of today's buildings will be remembered as more than a passing fad.

The townships, which almost literally huddled around the cathedrals and the public squares in front of them, were perhaps the finest examples of human habitation ever built anywhere and in any age. They were mostly enclosed with a circular wall for not only the most efficient use of building materials but also to deny a potential invader any hidden corners. A surrounding and often-covered two-storey wall provided the dwellers a means to watch the surrounding countryside and safeguard the town. Access to the town was controlled by a limited number of gates, from which the main streets led into the town. All other streets were deliberately narrow, curved and progressively dead-ended so that outsiders (invaders) could not easily find their way. The houses were placed next to each other with common walls for efficient use of materials and space and to economize on energy use. Shops and other businesses were on the first floor. The houses also had small backyard gardens, which doubled as sources of light and air. The entire environment was intimate and user-friendly.



Left: Medieval Town Map, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Jewish National and University Library; Right: Medieval Town Street

These towns, with their centrally placed cathedrals and without any notable changes, exist even today, not only in Europe but elsewhere. A rather surprising example is Thanjavur township in India. To accommodate modern-day car traffic some have developed ingenious ways. During office hours no cars can enter the town and consequently the entire town with all its streets becomes pedestrian. Only in the early morning and in late evening cars and service vehicles are permitted inside. Large and efficient parking garages have been built on the periphery for all.



Thus the towns remain highly compact and pedestrian-friendly even today. The vibrance of life within, with carefree pedestrians, small mama-and-papa shops, shaded streets, music and variety shows in the squares and ever-changing street-vistas provide an experience which is completely missing in today's urban scenario, which is dominated by cars and vast asphalt spreads to serve them, cookie-cutter mega-mansions and totally separated mega shopping, office and other complexes. Also, the cost of building and maintaining a medieval town pales by comparison with that of building a sprawl for a given number of people. Is anyone listening???

All photos: courtesy: google images