

The Monastic Challenge

**Professor Joel M. Upton
Amherst College
Fall 2011**

The Monastic Challenge

Reclaiming the spirituality of space through romanesque and gothic architecture



Notre-Dame, Chartres, France



Chicago Tribune Tower, Chicago
(J. M. Howells)



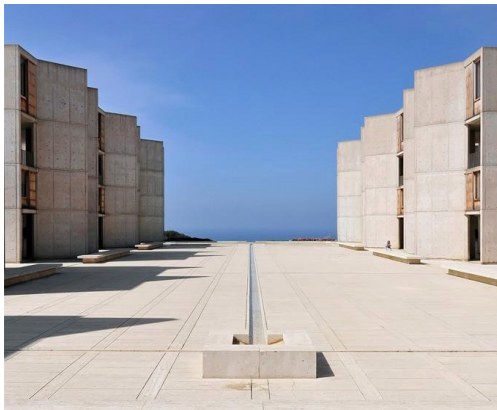
Mont St. Michel, France



Monticello, Charlottesville, Virginia (T. Jefferson)



Byōdo-in, Uji, Japan

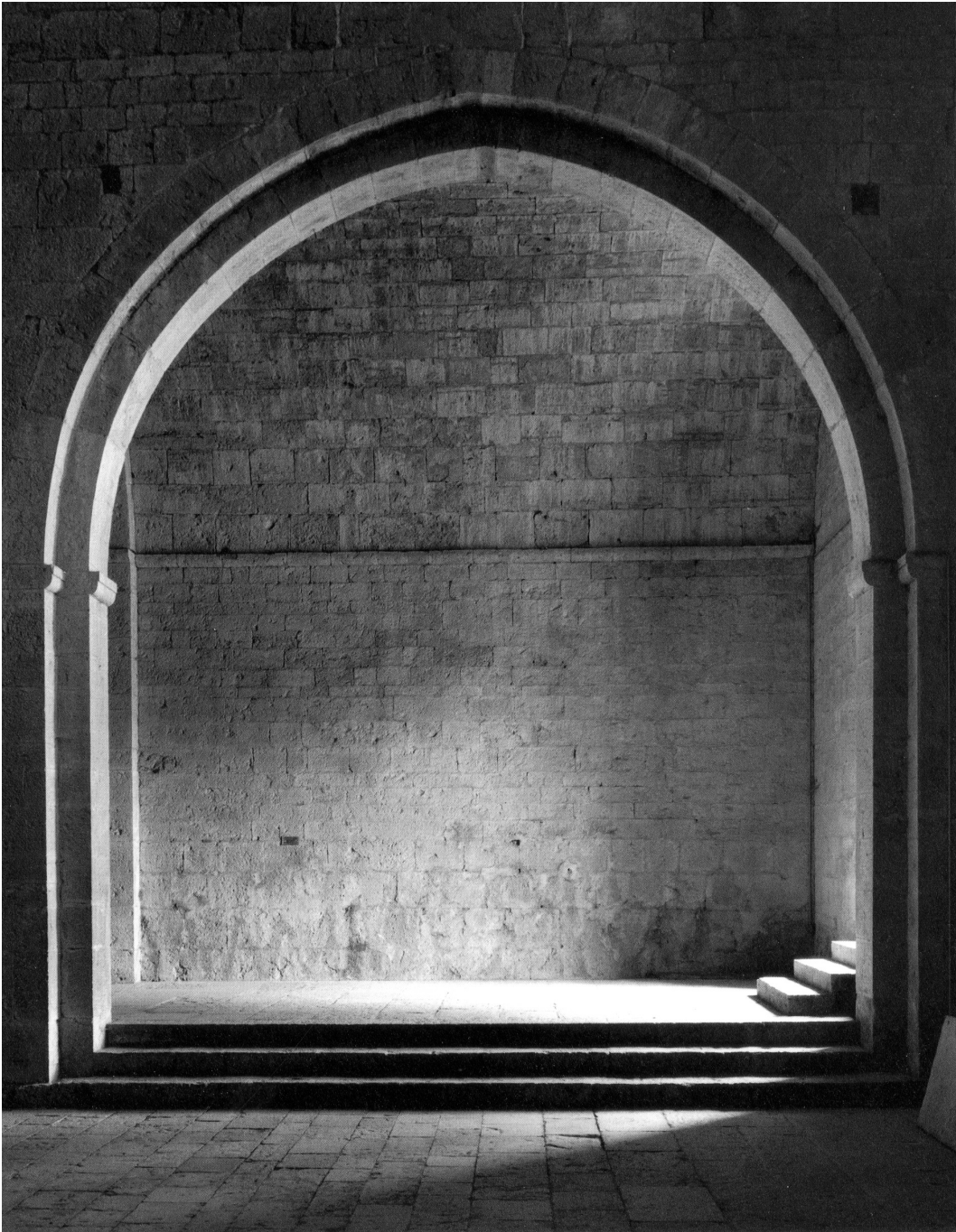


Salk Institute, La Jolla, California (L. Kahn)



Church of the Light, Osaka, Japan (T. Ando)

**The Monastic Challenge:
Entering the Threshold**



Entrance to the south aisle, Le Thoronet, France (photograph, D. Heald, 1986)

ARHA 250
Fall 2011
MW 12:30+
Fayerweather 117

Professor Joel M. Upton
Office Hours: Friday 1-3
or by appointment
(jmupton@amherst.edu)

THE MONASTIC CHALLENGE

Reclaiming the spirituality of space through romanesque and gothic architecture

I. Buildings/Sites

Abbey of St. Gall, St. Gall, Switzerland

Abbey of Fontenay, Burgundy, France

Abbey of Mont St. Michel, Normandy, France

St. Foi, Conques, France

St. Lazare, Autun, France

La Madeleine, Vézelay, France

Notre Dame, Laôn, France

Notre Dame, Paris, France

Notre Dame, Amiens, France

Notre Dame, Reims, France

Notre Dame, Chartres, France

II. Sources

Internet

<http://library.artstor.org/library/welcome.html>
B. Kamin, [http://www.chicagotribune.com/cityscapes
~jmupton/images/ARHA250](http://www.chicagotribune.com/cityscapes/~jmupton/images/ARHA250) (for course images)

Books

Available at Amherst Books, 8 Main Street (required)

The Song of Roland (12th century; trans. D. Sayers, 1957)
The Romance of Tristan and Iseult (13th century; compiled by J. Bedier, 1945)
The Letters of Abélard and Eloise, (12th century; trans. B. Radice,1974)
Heidegger, M., *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (1971)

Frost Library Reserve (optional; required reading in **bold**)

Adams, H., *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*, (1904)
The Bible
Bony, J., *French Gothic Architecture of the 12th and 13th Centuries*, (1983)
Branner, R., *Gothic Architecture*, (1967)
Braunfels, W., *Monasteries of Western Europe*, (1972)
Camille, M., *Gothic Art*,(1996)
Carver, R., *Cathedral: Stories, “Cathedral,”* (1989)
Deuchler, F., *Gothic Art*, (1973)
Duby, G., *The Age of the Cathedrals: Art and Society, 980-1420*, (1981)
Dupont, J., and C. Gnudi, *Gothic Painting*,(1979)
Evans, J., *Life in Medieval France*, (1957)
Focillon, H., *The Art of the West*, pt. I, romanesque ; pt. II, gothic (1963)
Frankl, P. *Gothic Architecture*, (1962)
Frisch, T., *Gothic Art, 1140- c.1450* , (1971)
Gilson, E., *Eloise and Abélard*, (1960)
Jantzen, H., *High Gothic*, (1962)
Kamin, B. *Tribune Tower: American Landmark*, 2nd edition, 2009
Mâle, E., *The Gothic Image*, (1913)
Panofsky, E., *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, (1951)
Petzold, A., *Romanesque Art*, (1995)
Simpson, O., *The Gothic Cathedral*, (1956)
Snyder, J., *Medieval Art,,* (1989)
Stoddard, W., *Art and Architecture in Medieval France*, (1972)

III. Semester Assignments:

Exercises and term essays: See below, section IV, for descriptions and due dates

“Cathedral Builder”: (see attachment # 2)

Final essay: See below, section IV, p.11, for description and due date

IV. Class Schedule:

Introduction: Defining ‘spirituality’

“We are not human beings on spiritual journey. We are spiritual beings on a human journey.”

Teilhard de Chardin

September 7: Program of Study

“CB”: Begin “Practice World;” Complete by Monday, September 19

September 12: What is a ‘cathedral’? (see attachment # 6)

September 14: What is a ‘mending wall’?

Reading:

Robert Frost, *Mending Wall* (see attachment # 3)

September 19: The Chartres cat: constructing space as ‘spiritual’ aspiration

“CB”: Complete “Practice World”

Reading:

Robin Herbst, *For a Lost Child* (see attachment # 4)

The Song of Roland.

Begin reading, slowly and thoughtfully. Keep track of the individual events that form the story while looking for the general structure of the whole narrative. Please complete this reading by Wednesday, October 5.

Essay # 1:

Write an essay of three to five pages describing the narrative structure of *The Song of Roland* and comparing it specifically to the actuality of romanesque architectural structure examined in class. Try to discover the narrative space of the text and, conversely, the spatial narrative of the architecture. Characterize the ‘spirituality’ of space in each by identifying their particular spatial gesture or ‘artistic’ drama. Where, precisely, in each case do you find the most intense realization of ‘spiritual’ aspiration?

Essay # 1 due: Monday, October 17

All other readings may be done at your own discretion, noting due dates listed below.

Buildings/Sites

“All the natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception. Grace fills empty spaces, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void.”

Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

(see attachment # 1)

The Monastic Cloister

September 21: St. Gall

“CB”: Begin “Romanesque World;” Complete by Monday, October 24

Reading: Frost reserve

The Bible, Matthew, Mark, Luke or John (review the main events of Christ’s life); the Revelation of St. John, chapters 1,4,20,22

Exercise 1:

Review the course image of the St. Gall plan (~jmupton/images/ARHA50) and define its formal character. Compare the St. Gall plan to the plan of the Abbey of Fontenay (course images). How are these two spaces differently imagined? How are they essentially alike? What is their spatial ‘gesture’ or ‘drama?’ Their ‘spirituality’ (as specifically as possible)? **Due: Monday, September 26**

Please note: subsequent exercises 2-9 are due on the day they are listed.

September 26: Abbey of Fontenay - plan and structure (**Exercise # 1**)

September 28: Abbey of Fontenay - the cloister

October 3: Mont St. Michel

The ‘Romanesque Church

October 5: St. Foi in Conques - the facade

Exercise 2:

Review the course image of the facade of the church of St. Foi in Conques and characterize its composition. What two and three-dimensional ratios do you see? Lines? Repetitions? Accents? Shapes? Forms? Spaces? Do you see anything resembling poetic rhyme? Rhythm? Narrative? Do you sense anticipation, resolution - linear or spatial? Is this facade tall? Short? Restful? Animated? Is it chaotic, clear, dominating, focused, ‘flat’? Is it formally and therefore spatially complete? Do you like it? Why? **Due : Wednesday, October 5**

Mid-Semester Break (October 8-11)

October 12: St. Foi in Conques - romanesque structure, romanesque space

October 17: *Song of Roland I* - narrative

Essay # 1 due: Monday, October 17

October 19: *Song of Roland II* - structure; the 'spirituality' of romanesque space

October 24: Mont St. Michel and St. Lazare in Autun – security, judgment and romanesque refuge

“CB”: Complete “Romanesque World”

Exercise 3:

Review the course images of Mont St. Michel and the tympanum at St. Lazare in Autun. Characterize several common spatial principles at work in these two structures?

Due: Monday, October, 24

October 26: Gislebertus - humility and delight; an undercurrent of conflict, change, anticipation, *erôs*; rediscovering the Chartres cat and the human condition

“CB”: Begin “Gothic World;” Complete by Monday, December 5

Reading:

Tristan and Iseult. Begin reading, first for the pure pleasure of the story and then to discover the inherent tensions that create its utterly unresolvable drama and sublime beauty. Although *Tristan and Iseult* should be completed before Wednesday, December 8, a first reading prior to classes concerning 'gothic' space and 'spirituality' (October 31 - December 5) will be most helpful in responding to the following essay topic.

Essay # 2:

How might the story of Tristan and Iseult be related both formally and thematically to the particular spatial drama or gesture of 'gothic' architecture? Be sure to characterize specifically the 'spirituality' of each. Compare this particular 'spirituality' to 'romanesque spirituality.' Do you sense a fundamental difference between 'gothic' and 'romanesque' aspiration? An essential similarity? Which do you prefer? Find more comforting; accessible; achievable; comprehensible; enduring? Using 'spiritual' aspiration as a measure of beauty, which do you find to be more beautiful? **Essay #2 Due: Wednesday, December 7**

The 'Gothic' Choir

October 31: La Madeleine in Vézelay - structure

Exercise 4:

Review the course images of the interior of the church of La Madeleine in Vézelay and describe the fundamental structural difference between this nave and those of St. Foi in Conques and St. Lazare in Autun. Recognizing this essential **structural** difference, name some of its implications for the definition and construction of both space and light. How might this difference alter our perception of 'romanesque' space and 'spirituality?' **Due: Monday, October 31**

November 2: La Madeleine in Vézelay - the choir

The 'Gothic' Cathedral

November 7: Notre-Dame of Laôn - incarnation

Exercise 5:

Review the course images of the naves of St. Foi in Conques and St. Lazare in Autun the cathedral of Notre Dame in Laon (compare also St. Etienne in Sens and Notre Dame in Noyon). What, by 'romanesque' standards, is the aesthetic, structural, or visual **anomaly** in the three so-called early 'gothic' buildings in Sens, Noyon and Laon? What new architectural issues or conceptual tensions seem to emerge in the relationship between the vault and the wall elevation? How might you characterize this new spatial drama? Do you see the nave of Laon as confusing or exciting in this regard? **Due: Monday, November 7**

November 9: Notre-Dame of Paris - contradiction

Exercise 6:

Review the course images of the facades of Notre-Dame of Laôn and Paris. Describe the compositional (two and three-dimensional) differences you see. Given their overall similarity, what do you think has been achieved by the facade of Notre-Dame of Paris? At what cost? **Due: Wednesday, November 9**

November 14: Notre-Dame of Paris - Peter Abelard and Eloise; erôs and insight

Reading: *The Letters of Abélard and Heloise*

November 16: Notre-Dame of Amiens - celebration

Thanksgiving Break (November 19-27)

November 28: Notre-Dame of Reims - coronation

Exercise 7:

Review the reserve slides of Notre-Dame of Amiens and Reims. Given their **names**, can you imagine and describe a 'female personality' for each as embodied in their structure (e.g., How old are they?)? Which do prefer and why? Does this gender vantage point offer any hints of the 'spirituality' embodied by 'gothic' space? Conversely, what might such a corporeal analogy obscure?

Due: Monday, November 28

November 30: Notre-Dame of Chartres - pilgrimage

December 5: Notre-Dame of Chartres - return

“CB”: Complete “Gothic World

Exercise 8:

Review the course images of the Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres. List as many specific structural attainments or aspirations to architectural reconciliation, exterior and interior, as you can. What might you describe as the overarching or unifying spatial gesture of this building and where is it most palpably present? How might the Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres be seen as an explicit response to the paradox of Robert Frost's *Mending Wall*? What (who?) is the Chartres equivalent of the poet's "spring mischief?"

Due: Monday, December 5

December 7: *Tristan and Iseult* - narrative (see attachment # 5)

Essay #2 due: Wednesday, December 7

December 12: *Tristan and Iseult* - structure

“CB”: Begin “Cathedral World” Complete by Wednesday, December 21

Reading: Raymond Carver, “Cathedral”

Conclusion

“And this more human love (that will fulfill itself, considerate and gentle, and kind and clear in binding and releasing) will resemble that which we are preparing with struggle and toil, the love that consists in this, that two solitudes protect and border and salute each other.”

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

December 14: ‘cathedral’- What is the spirituality of space?

Reading:

M. Heidegger, “ Building Dwelling Thinking,” and “...Poetically Dwells Man...,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 141-159; 209-227

December 19: What is love? **Final Essay: Due 5:00 P.M., 208 Fayerweather Hall**

Review: R. Herbst, *For a Lost Child* (attachment # 4) and
The Letters of Abélard and Heloise

Part I: Awakening “to a higher life than we fell asleep from” (Thoreau, *Walden*, see attachment # 1)

The Monastic Challenge began with a question concerning the definition of ‘spirituality.’ We have sought to respond by imagining a fundamentally human sense of ‘spirituality’ drawing on certain implications of individual self-awareness, including notions of separation and longing that give meaning to the word mortality. We have tried to ‘enter’ several specific spaces constructed as deliberate though varied accommodations to this universal reality. Standing, as it were, within the threshold of this course (i.e. beholding with architectural spaces built during the 12th and 13th centuries in France as explicit instances of ‘spiritual’ engineering), assess the efforts of Connie Umberger (attachment #4) on the one hand and Martin Heidegger on the other to imagine their best human ‘cathedral.’ How does each of these individual people seek to realize their ‘spiritual’ being? What does each seem to value most among our shared capacities for spiritual transformation? Please name the conceptual and psychological tension that separates these human journeys. What fills the gap? The longing?

Part II: What is the monastic challenge?

Imagine that ‘art’ results from the deliberate effort required of ‘spiritual’ aspiration to accept - as Robert Frost clearly did - the paradox of our human being and to embrace inevitable failure in the endless attempt to reconcile fully the contradictory realities such awakened existence entails. How might the exquisitely sad story of Heloise and Peter Abélard illuminate this hard truth concerning ‘art?’ Can their lives illuminate an understanding of our shared human condition that will reveal the essential impoverishment of the historical opposition we may have come to take for granted: that the medieval world of ‘spirituality’ gave way in our modern era to rational secularism? In short, by listening carefully to Heloise and Peter can you hear the whispered monastic challenge then and now to us all? What, precisely, was that challenge in the 12th century and what is it today? Will you envision a ‘cathedral’?

December 21: “My Cathedral”

“CB”: Complete “Cathedral World”

Attachments: 1-6

attachment # 1:

attachment # 2:

attachment # 3:

attachment # 4:

attachment # 5:

attachment # 6: