RESTORATIVE RESENTMENT:
FRENCH NINETEENTH-CENTURY IDEALISM AND THE CURRENT RESTORATION AT THE ABBEY CHURCH OF SAINT-DENIS

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Introduction

"From the necropolis of the Kings of France in Saint-Denis, I denounce the invasion of the Basilica by pro-illegal immigration organizations…"

On March 22, 2018, a French politician named Florian Philippot stood in front of the Basilica Cathedral of Saint-Denis and filmed a video denouncing a recent protest that had occurred inside the cathedral the prior Sunday, then posted it to Twitter with that caption.[1] It was only five days after the French Minister of Culture, Françoise Nyssen, walked those same stone floors to sign an agreement that permitted the association *Suivez la Fleche* to start the process of rebuilding the cathedral's long-disassembled North tower and spire. Philippot's post echoed a growing sentiment that France is being *invaded*: by multiculturalism, globalism, and otherness. French political and cultural identity, at the atomic level, is composed of the elements of universalism, proprietary language, national sovereignty, and centralization: substances that are undoubtedly threatened by globalization.[2] At the very least, this supposed 'cultural invasion' of France leads to insecurity; at the worst, it leads to fear.

The fear that the foundations of French identity are rotting is architectural and interconnected with national pride. "Love for homeland […] results in the use of old buildings as a mirror of the greatness of a nation."[3] Saint-Denis, in its historical positioning as a resting place

[1] Bérénice Gaussuin, "The Cathedral of Citizenship: Race and National Identity in Eugène Viollet-le-Duc's Work and Discourse," In *Forgoing Architectural Tradition: National Narratives, Monument Preservation and Architectural Work in the Nineteenth Century*. (Berghahn Books, 2022), 1.

[2] Sophie Meunier, "The French Exception," In *Foreign Affairs*, Jul. - Aug. 2000, (Council on Foreign Relations, 2000), 110.

[3] Bérénice Gaussuin, "The Cathedral of Citizenship: Race and National Identity in Eugène Viollet-le-Duc's Work and Discourse," 22.

for kings, is remnant of a France that no longer exists. *Suivez la Fleche* was founded in 2013 by Patrick Braouezec, Didier Paillard, and Erik Orsenna, with a resurrected mission to rebuild the no-longer existent tower and spire, a feat last attempted in 1987.[4] Its mission: to give back to this monument its majesty and its integrity, for a 'reconquest' of the city center. This *reconquest* extends past architecture and into culture.

I visited France for the first time in January 2023 for independent academic work. During my short stint there, I travelled north of Paris to visit Saint-Denis. I was surprised to see that the cathedral was now a construction site. I expected this work must be routine structural assessments or an archaeological dig; it was only when I interrupted a construction worker's break to ask what was happening that I learned work was underway to rebuild the long-lost North tower and spire. Word of *Suivez la Fleche* and their efforts had not reached stateside news sources, unlike the international outcry that followed Martin Filler's 2014 visit to Chartres Cathedral, where he observed that the once-weathered centuries-old cathedral was being repainted with bright whites and trompe l'oeil marble.[5] Reach aside, these restoration projects prove that something had shifted: no longer was the motive to conserve, but to rebuild. Nostalgia – of a time where these cathedrals were clean, colorful, and symmetrical – is the guiding force. These projects, though, are not limited to the historical or architectural world; they are massively expensive, inseparable from the economic and cultural sphere of France. Thus, I believe that this nostalgia is of a medieval France that was uniform in culture, language, and race, all of which is being challenged today.

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[4] Florence Evin, "La basilique de Saint-Denis devrait retrouver sa flèche," (Le Monde, July 1, 2016).

[5] Martin Filler, "A Scandalous Makeover at Chartres" (New York Review of Books, December 14, 2014).

'The Cathedral is France'

Following turn-of-century change brought on by the French Revolution, the early years of the nineteenth century saw massive cultural upheaval and national identity-searching. This was expressed in physical space: much of France's historical architecture had been damaged or fallen into a deep state of disrepair. The Restoration (1814-30) saw the return of the monarchy and an interest in healing these architectural wounds, but it was not until 1830 when the French romantic writer – and soon to be celebrity – Victor Hugo (1802-1885), published *Notre Dame de Paris* that attention turned towards the decrepit sites.[6] In Hugo's novel, the titular cathedral became a major character, itself an embodiment of the nation.[7] The book was a massive success, bringing celebrity not just to Hugo, but to Notre-Dame itself. The release coincided with the *Monarchie de Juillet* (1830-1848). Under the July Monarchy, France institutionalized the preservation of historical monuments.[8] Given this general state of disrepair – found both in culture and physical space – France needed an architecture other than castles and palaces, which were often considered symbols of the fallen aristocracy, to rebuild a unified national identity.[9]

Historic gothic architecture would be a potential candidate if it could find a way to rebound. In the early nineteenth century, it was as if the French gothic was dead: the cathedrals of France were not culturally prominent then like they are today. Archaeologists, architects,

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[6] Barry Bergdoll, *European Architecture 1750-1890*. (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 2000), 166.

[7] Bergdoll, 166.

[8] Bérénice Gaussuin, "The Cathedral of Citizenship: Race and National Identity in Eugène Viollet-le-Duc's Work and Discourse," (Berghahn Books, 2022), 23.

[9] Gaussuin, 31.

theorists, and writers like Quatremère de Quincy, and Raoul Rochette shared this sentiment.[10] Rochette named the Gothic as disorderly and no longer representative of present needs.[11] Henry Adams, in the following century, mused on this phenomenon in *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*: "Here is only the shell – the dead art – and silence."[12] *Notre-Dame de Paris* served as a literary defibrator to the dead pulse of the French gothic. Hugo argued that the cathedral was a work of civilization, rather than individual artists.[13] Dissolving the role of the individual allowed cathedrals like Notre-Dame to become heuristics for societal projection. In Wentworth Institute of Technology professor Ronald R. Bernier's 2018 essay "Church, Nation, and the Stones of France," the author describes the changing role of the cathedral within French society at large.

> The Gothic cathedral became a talisman to be appropriated, one that even while engendering a deeply felt connection with the past, served as a projection of contemporary anxieties and fantasies.[14]

Otto von Simson wrote in his 1956 book *The Gothic Cathedral* that the French Gothic appears to modern viewers as the embodiment of medieval civilization.[15] Bernier argued that it also

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[10] R. Howard Bloch, "Viollet-le-Duc's 'Republic of Architectural Art': The Greco-Gothic Revival and the Building of Modern France," In *Perspecta,* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 14.

[11] Bloch, 14.

[12] Henry Adams, *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* (1904; repr., New York, NY: Penguin, 1986), 42.

[13] Barry Bergdoll, *European Architecture 1750-1890*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 167.

[14] Ronald R. Bernier, "Church Nation, and the 'Stones of France,'" in *The Idea of the Gothic Cathedral: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Meanings of the Medieval Edifice in the Modern Period* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 199.

[15] Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture & the Medieval Concept of Order*, (1956, repr., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 95.

embodied *the present* to artists and academics in the nineteenth century.[16] Bernier's essay investigates Auguste Rodin's *Les Cathédrales des France*, a 1914 collection of the artist's drawings, watercolors, and writing on these ancient monuments. Rodin, according to Bernier, believed that the French could recognize their nation's strengths and sorrows through encounters with Gothic cathedrals, architecture that channels the spirit of France itself.[17]

In 1830, the Minister of the Interior, François Guizot (1787-1874), appointed Ludovic Vitet (1802-1873) as inspector of historic monuments.[18] Vitet was part of a group of intellectuals who called themselves *doctrinaires*.[19] The doctrinaires practiced philosophy that centered on the history of the bourgeoisie. Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879), writer, theorist and perhaps the most significant French restorationist architect was influenced strongly by the doctrinaires. Viollet-le-Duc's uncle was part of the group, and as a child he met the doctrinaires, which proved to be influential for dictating how he approached his career and restoration practice.[20] Vitet's philosophies were incredibly formative. In 1831, Vitet defined what the French Gothic meant to Viollet:

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[16] Ronald R. Bernier, "Church Nation, and the 'Stones of France,'"(Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 199.

[17] Bernier, 207.

[18] Bérénice Gaussuin, "The Cathedral of Citizenship: Race and National Identity in Eugène Viollet-le-Duc's Work and Discourse," (Berghahn Books, 2022), 23.

[19] Gaussuin, 23.

[20] Gaussuin, 23.

> Its underlying principle is the emancipation of liberty, of the sense of association and community expressed in our indigenous and national feelings. It is bourgeois, and over and above this, it is French, English, Teutonic.[21]

Vitet attempted to secularize and deindividualize the gothic, removing associations that the architecture might have had with the aristocracy pre-revolution.[22] Vitet and his peers thus attempted to revolutionize the architecture so that it lined up with the values of a changed France. His definition identified a growing conception of gothic architecture as something that was uniquely French and thus something to pour pride into. A quote from 1854 proves that Viollet took these ideas and ran with them:

> We must not forget that French architecture was first established in the midst of the conquered people and in the face of its conquerors; it drew its inspiration from the bosom of this indigenous group, the largest group in the nation; immediately following its initial attempts to free itself, it fell into the hands of the laity; it was neither theocratic nor feudal.[23]

Rodin shared the same thoughts on the Gothic and its indigeneity: "Gothic art is the conscious, tangible soul of France; it is the religion of the French atmosphere! We are not unbelieving; we are only unfaithful." [24] French writer Charles Morice stated the new role of French gothic cathedrals best in his introduction to *Les Cathédrales*: "The Cathedral is France. The forms of the cathedral were engendered by the flora of the country, its method and its thought from the genius of the race."[25]

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[21] Georg Germann, *Gothic Revival in Europe and Britain: Sources, Influences and Ideas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1973), 79.

[22] Germann, 80.

[23] Germann, 80.

[24] Ronald R. Bernier, "Church Nation, and the 'Stones of France,'" (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 218.

[25] Bernier, "Church Nation, and the 'Stones of France,'" 219.

As a metaphor for the French state itself, the gothic cathedral took on major cultural power. It was both modern and medieval, massive and microscopic, elegant and approachable. This rising sentiment of deep cultural importance and immense national pride meant that these dead monuments could not sit any longer in their states of disrepair: like French national identity, they had to be built back stronger. Thus precipitated an era of aggressive restoration where these monuments were retouched, rebuilt, and renovated, becoming flawless icons of a nation that sought nothing less than perfect symmetry.

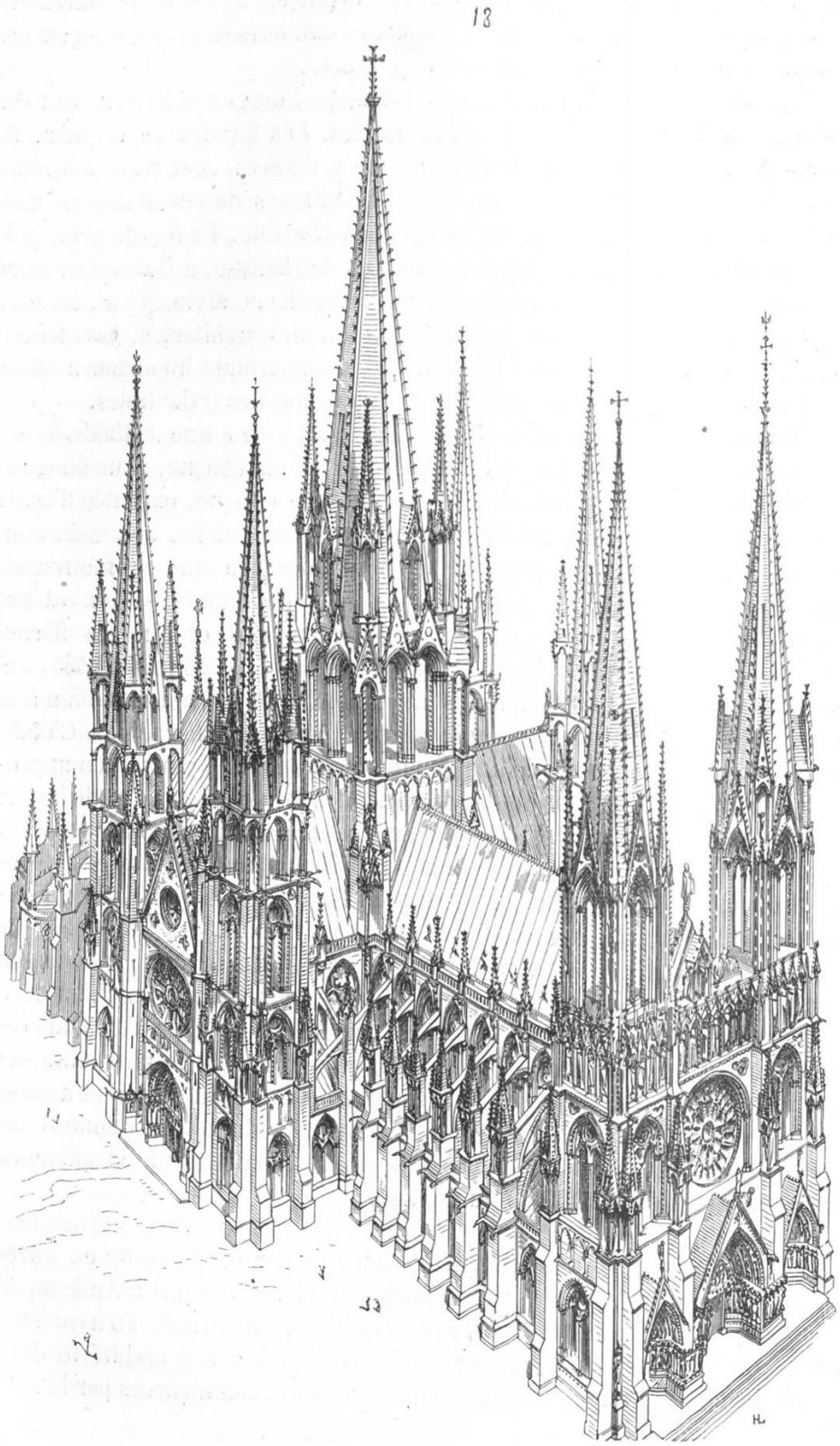

Figure 1: *Cathédrale idéale.*
Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, 1854.

Architectural truth & idealistic restoration

In volume two of Viollet-le-Duc's *Dictionnaire Raisonné de L'Architecture Française Du XI^e^ au XVI^e^ siècle,* he draws an isometric of a stylistically complete French Gothic cathedral (figure 1).[26] The cathedral is massive in both the horizontal and the vertical dimension. The long nave of its cruciform-shaped plan juts well past the transept, leaving room for extensive buttressing along the outer walls. At the entrance to the church, there are three large, sculptural portals with multiple jamb figures and detailed archivolts. The portals are syncopated – one large portal flanks two smaller ones – pointed arches encased in larger triangular arches. Viollet's drawing details exquisite ornamentation, found in the detailed bar tracery on the rose windows or the intricate triforium. At the top of each buttress, there are square-based spires; on the side, where these buttresses have flyers that connect with the main body of the building, there are smaller spires that mirror their outer counterparts. These spires embody their much larger counterparts that are found above each of the outer portals. They are multilayered with double-lanceted arches at their bases, next a blind arcade of three arches, then another layer of lanceted arches, and above that, a connected triforium that connects the two towers with the cathedral body and sits above the rose windows, then finally an open lancet. At the top, the towers morph from square to octagonal to accommodate the steep-angled spires they bear. The north, south, and west portals feature identical towers for a total of six identical towers. The crossing, however, sprouts a skyscraping tower that dwarfs the other spires in height and bulk, yet still adheres to architecture evident of the smallest spires found. Viollet's drawing depicts a cathedral that is built either of windows or vertical towers; everything is skyward and perfectly geometric.

[26] Eugène-Emmanuel, Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire Raisonné de L'Architecture Française du XI^e^ au XVI^e^ siècle,* Vol. 2, (Paris, FR: Bonaventure and Ducessois, 1854), 324.

These individual architectural elements are found in gothic cathedrals throughout France. Yet Viollet's 'ideal cathedral' does not exist on anything other than paper. With this isometric, Viollet accumulated dispersed gothic motifs into one united form. In its infinite intricacy it is impossible. To build a cathedral like this would be an endless task, one that must be taken on through time, asymptotically approaching this ideal.[27] This is a platonic ideal of the gothic form: something that is perfect, complete, and eternal.

It was tempting in the nineteenth century to believe in a platonic ideal of France as detailed as Viollet's cathedral, one in which the bourgeoisie finally found unity, power, and justice. Viollet's theory was rooted in his upbringing, where he consistently engaged with the doctrinaires and developed a deep understanding of the history of the bourgeoisie.[28] In his restorative practice, he sought to create spaces that could unite the bourgeoisie, and his architectural tactic of unifying – or finishing – forms brought strength to flimsy ruins. With the gothic's newfound status as *the* official French architecture (or, perhaps more fittingly, architecture that is France), Viollet's aggressive practice flourished.

Viollet's belief in platonically ideal architecture was grounded in a search for truth in architecture. *What was the true, intended gothic form?* Or, applied to culture: *What is France?* His architectural theory attempted to answer the former. Throughout the years 1854-1868 Viollet

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[27] The closest attempt to actually build the cathedral exists within the video game *Minecraft*, oddly enough. https://www.planetminecraft.com/project/viollet-le-duc-ideal-cathedral/.

[28] Bérénice Gaussuin, "The Cathedral of Citizenship: Race and National Identity in Eugène Viollet-le-Duc's Work and Discourse," (Berghahn Books, 2022), 24.

published his *Dictionnaire Raisonné de L'Architecture Francaise Du XI^e^ au XVI^e^ siècle*, a compendium of architectural history, drawing, dissection, and theory that attempted to break down French architecture at the microscopic level. These are meticulous books, works that demand the same type of dogged spirit to read them that it took to write them. Massive chapters are dedicated to arches, spires, coats of arms, construction, etc., and each tirelessly unpacks these elements. In peeling back these many layers of architecture, though, it is evident that Viollet sought to reveal the underlying logical systems that guided physical design. By boiling down architecture to rational science, Viollet could hypothesize what is true and what is not. According to Columbia scholar Barry Bergdoll, he sought professional recognition not from the Académie des Beaux-Arts, but rather from the Académie des Sciences.[29] He was devoted to this rational and scientific uncovering of architectural truth at a time when romantics were more focused on evocative forms. Their differences were foundational, but they both looked for truth. In volume eight of *Dictionnaire*, Viollet defines restoration.

> RESTORATION, s.f. Both the word and the thing are modern. To restore an edifice means neither to maintain it nor to repair it, nor to rebuild it; it means to reestablish it in a finished state, which may in fact never have actually existed at any given time.[30]

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[29] Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, *The Foundations of Architecture: Selections from the Dictionnaire Raisonné*, (1854; Intr. by Barry Bergdoll, trans. by Kenneth D. Whitehead, New York, NY: George Braziller, 1990), 25.

[30] Viollet-le-Duc, *The Foundations of Architecture: Selections from the Dictionnaire Raisonné*, (1854; by Kenneth D. Whitehead, New York, NY: George Braziller, 1990), 195.

The truth Viollet believes in, thus, is found in the "finished state" he describes. For others, it was found in ruins. Victor Hugo believed that the weathering that came with time was a gift unto Notre-Dame, as he described in his novel:

> Time has perhaps given the church more than it has taken away, as it is time that has spread over the façade that dark color of the centuries that makes the old age of the monuments the age of their beauty.[31]

Hugo's phrasing suggests that the matter that accumulates on monuments – lichen, ash, dust, the like – is time and history incarnate. As formally defined in 1902 by Alois Riegl in "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origins," importance placed in the natural decay of structures can be known as *age value.*[32] Harvard scholar Gloria Ferrari takes Riegl's age value further to emphasize the importance of ruins in her 2002 essay "The Ancient Temple on the Acropolis at Athens." In this work, she describes how incomplete ruins contain potent strains of memory. The existence of an object throughout existence endows it with eternal life. Ferrari writes, "[in] the case of the olive tree burned down by the Persian, the point is that the life of the city resides in its ancient trunk, even down to the stump."[33] Modern scholars have come to recognize age value and the uninterrupted presence of matter throughout time as something to preserve.

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[31] David Spurr, Architecture *and Modern Literature*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 156.

[32] Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origins," 1902, In *Oppositions*, (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1982), 31.

[33] Gloria Ferrari, "The Ancient Temple on the Acropolis at Athens," 2002, In *American Journal of Archaeology*, (Archaeological Institute of America, 2002), 30.

John Ruskin (1819-1900), philosopher, art critic, writer – put shortly, polymath – was often regarded as an English counterpart to Viollet.[34] Ruskin, like Hugo, believed in age value: "It is in the golden stain of time, that we are to look for the real light, and color, and preciousness of architecture."[35] Ruskin offered a distinct – and very English – approach to dealing with ruins, one that favored suggestion and evocation, not unlike the olive tree that Ferrari mentions. Moreover, Ruskin believed that historic monuments do not belong to modern people.

> We have no right to touch them. They are not ours. They belong partly to those who built them, and partly to the generations of mankind who are to follow us. The dead still have their right in them.[36]

What Ruskin describes is not unlike a grave. Viollet had similar thoughts on ruins, in that he viewed them as tombs: things "we do not live in." [37] Their fundamental difference can be excavated here, in that Ruskin viewed ruins as areas to pay respect, whereas Viollet sought to metaphorically renovate tombs to suit modern needs. Ruskin referred to Viollet's quest for architectural truth as impossible, and argued that if you take care of monuments, you do not need to restore them.[38] It was not England, though, that was full of ruins. The French lived among

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[34] David Spurr, Architecture *and Modern Literature*, 147.

[35] Spurr, 156.

[36] David Spurr, Architecture *and Modern Literature*, 157.

[37] R. Howard Bloch, "Viollet-le-Duc's 'Republic of Architectural Art': The Greco-Gothic Revival and the Building of Modern France," 15.

[38] Helena Kalčić, "Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc and monument protection: A case study," 2014, In *Urbani Izziv*, (Urbanistični inštitut Republike Slovenije, 2014), 132.

them, and it was not appetizing to build a modern nation with the stones of the past. Memory was no substitute for life itself.

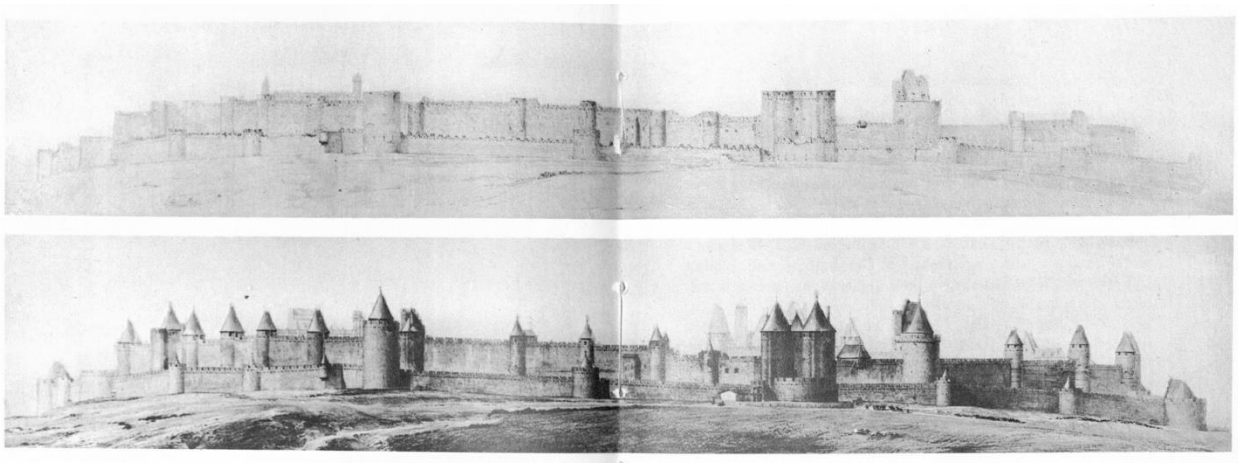

Figure 2: *Sketch of the walls of Carcassonne before restoration (above), and proposed restorations (below).* Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, 1854.

Life was found in Viollet's idealism. Viollet did not see history as the defining element in architecture and instead saw ideal unities, what could be vs. what is.[39] Rather than honor history, he knowingly abstracted it. The ideal cathedral (figure 1) is not something we can find in the past; it is instead free of the burdens of time and infinite in its symbological depth. Restoration too was timeless. It represented progress and work towards an architectural and cultural France that was talked about about yet still nonexistent. Restoration was revolution. It was, and still is, exciting: Viollet's extensive restorative work on Carcassonne (figure 2) has an "improbable fantasy-quality [that] makes it difficult to suppress an irreverent feeling that it might have been commissioned by a William Randolph Hearst."[40] To connote irreverence with national

[39] David Spurr, Architecture *and Modern Literature*, 157.

[40] William Randolph Hearst (1863-1951) was a businessman best known for his massive 'Hearst Castle' in Beverly Hills. The comparison between his estate and Viollet-le-Duc's work at Carcassonne is brutal. Michael Barker, "An Appraisal of Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879) and his Influence," 1992, In *the Journal of the Decorative Arts Society 1850 – the Present*, (The Decorative Arts Society 1850 to the Present, 1992), 5.

monuments would be to build national pride. Viollet's sketch of the walls of Carcassonne before and after his proposed restoration demonstrate the same philosophy found in the ideal cathedral. Weathered, faded walls are refinished and topped with perfect cones and defined merlons. Gazing upon a French landscape that featured castles of old as intricate and beautiful as this one suggests a French history where these structures did not fall into ruin. There is a newfound sense of continuity with medieval times.

Viollet's architectural idealism is grounded in medieval nostalgia. Similar to his ideal cathedral, there is a conceived 'ideal' medieval era in the eyes of the French. This is epitomized by Rodin's thoughts in *Les Cathédrales*, in which he implies that the decline of medieval architecture was caused by the decline of French society:

> The factory does not blacken the sky. But in the foreground, the breath of industry overwhelms the viewer with an impenetrable, heavy fog that develops perspectives and saddens our outlook.[41]

The painter Camille Pissarro (1830-1903) voiced a similar sentiment in 1892 in a letter to his son Lucien, inciting that the rapid transformations brought on by industrialization were altering the beauty of old Paris.[42] The medieval monuments, these artists believed, contained the beauty of the city, and thus their decline would diminish the beauty of Paris significantly. Moreover, Viollet's logic-based analysis of these monuments in his *Dictionnaire* established them as a "perfect architectural expression of a perfect structural logic."[43] He praised the practicality and

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[41] Ronald R. Bernier, "Church Nation, and the 'Stones of France,'" in *The Idea of the Gothic Cathedral: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Meanings of the Medieval Edifice in the Modern Period* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 221.

[42] Bernier, 222.

[43] Chris Brooks, *The Gothic Revival*, (London, GB: Phaidon Press Limited, 1999), 348.

high intelligence of the stonemasons who built the cathedrals.[44] It follows that if these monuments were glorious, then they hailed from a glorious time. There was not much room for further innovation, because perfection had already been achieved.[45]

Glory was found in this ideal vision of the medieval age. Modern times were scandalous in their pollution, dishonesty, and disunity. Viollet's tactics of establishing a 'finished state,' became popular, because in doing so, he could restage the medieval times. This effort – of bringing things back to the way they were, or the way they should be – was contrarian in nature, inseparable from a shared aura of oppositionality to change. Until recently, this era of restorative idealism and medieval nostalgia was associated with the nineteenth century in France. In the twenty-first century, we witness a similar restoration trend, now responding to multiculturalism and globalization: elements that disagree with a constructed ideal France.

[44] David Spurr, Architecture *and Modern Literature*, 149.

[45] Brooks, 348.

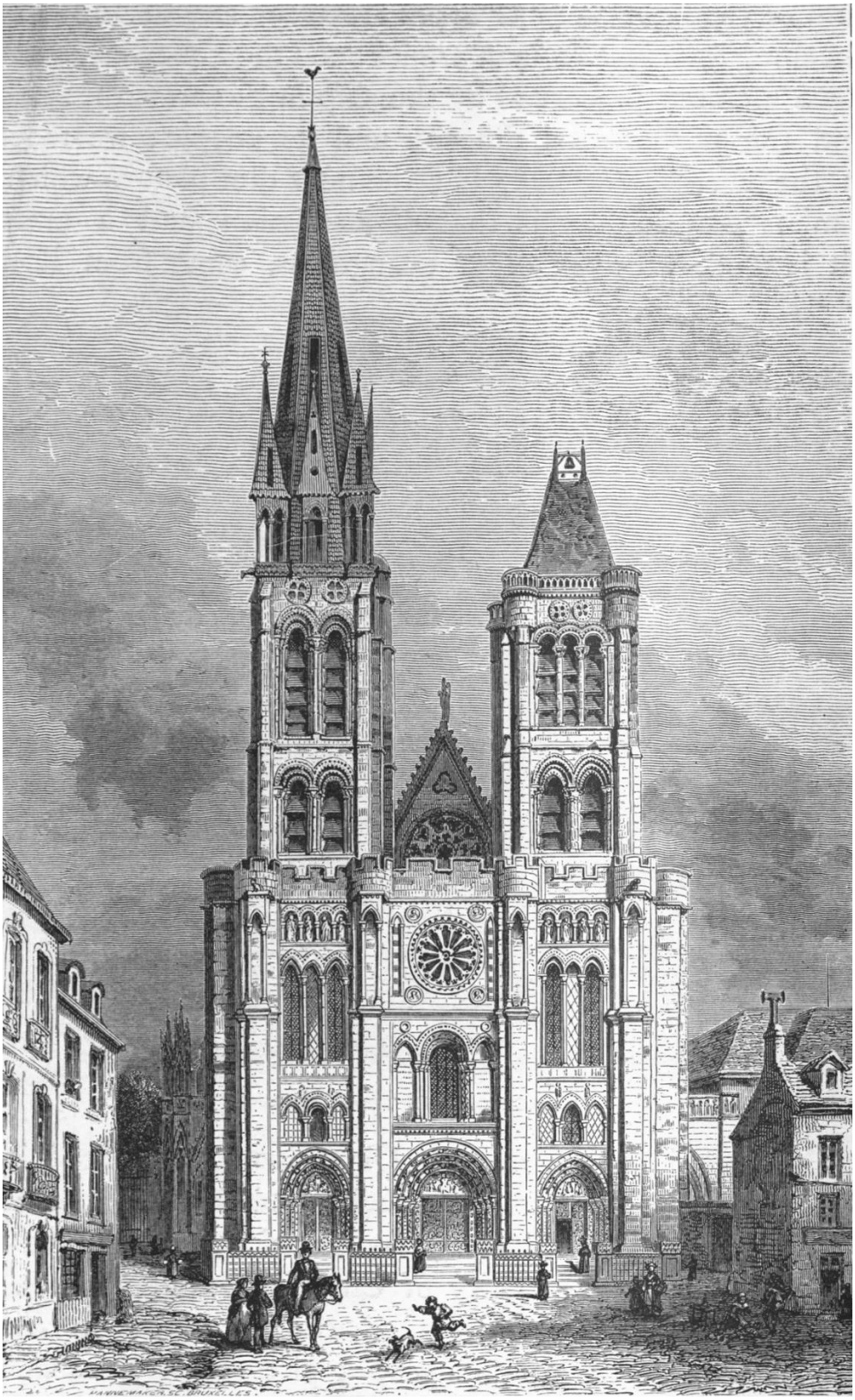

Figure 3: *Cathedral of St. Denis; With North Tower Before its Demolition*.
Rev. Samuel G. Green, 1878.

Figure 4: *View of west facade at Cathedral Basilica of Saint Denis in the late 1900s.* Saskia, Undated.

A new restoration effort at Saint-Denis: repeating history?

The Abbey Church of Saint-Denis, constructed in the years 1130-1144, emerged as one of the earliest – if not the very first – examples of a coherent Gothic style (figure 3).[46] It was commissioned by Abbot Suger (1081-1151), the chief advisor to Louis VI (1081-1137) and Louis VII (1120-1180) and served a crucial role in uniting his monastery with the French monarchy.[47] Foundationally political, the conception of Saint-Denis was inseparable from strategic feudalist motives. Suger emphasized that the cathedral, with its detailed architectural majesty, could serve as a spiritual defender of the conceived French State.[48] Its function was intrinsic to its symbolic role: Saint-Denis would serve as the burial place for the kings of France and the holders of regalia used in coronation services. To afford such a massive project, Suger travelled across the land to request donations, from nobility and common folk alike, and often sent around church relics to stir interest in the project.[49] Pride, fandom, and brotherhood were essential to the church's construction, with confraternities formed to raise consistent funding. This effort rallied people around a shared cause, allowing for the conception of unity and state pride to flourish in a feudal time. Thus, Saint-Denis became a symbol for a growing royalty, as well as union among the people who supported its development, sowing the seeds of collective identity.

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[46] Louis Grodecki, *Gothic Architecture* (New York: Henry N. Abrams, 1977), 36.

[47] Grodecki, 43.

[48] Robert Branner, *Gothic Architecture* (New York: George Braziller, 1991), 14.

[49] Branner, 16.

In later centuries Saint-Denis fell into disrepair. The cathedral experienced a barrage of damage during the span of the French Revolution (1789-1799).[50] Because of its proximity to the French monarchy, it was a prime target for vandalism. In 1792, the church was decommissioned. It was not until 1805 when it was used officially again, when Napoleon declared it as the site of his dynasty's tomb. He commanded its restoration in 1806, and in 1813, the architect François Debret was selected as the chief architect, but given Debret's lack of technical knowledge of medieval architecture, his work created structural issues in the church. Debret's job was made much more difficult when a lightning bolt struck the north spire on June 9th, 1837, and his replacement for the tower collapsed under its own weight in 1845.[51] Debret was chastised by the rising vanguard of the nineteenth century neo-Gothic, and was replaced by Viollet-le-Duc in 1845, who oversaw the project until his death in 1879. His first order was to dismantle the north tower completely. He planned to completely replace the west façade, towers included, but the project lacked necessary funding, so it was never executed.[52] Since it was dismantled, the north spire and tower have been absent from the cathedral, leaving France's necropolis of kings with an uneven, asymmetrical profile (figure 4).

[50] Philippe Plagnieux, *La basilique cathédrale de Saint-Denis* (Paris, Centres des Monuments Nationaux, 1998), 16.

[51] Plagnieux, 20.

[52] Plagnieux, 20.

Figure 5: *Construction at Saint-Denis Cathedral*.
Author's own, January 2023.

On January 18, 2023, I visited Saint-Denis, now a construction site. Workers were excavating the area under and surrounding the north tower to analyze the structural integrity of the cathedral. This work, a construction worker confirmed, was taking place in order to 'reassemble' the lost tower, with a scheduled finish year of 2028. She identified the organization responsible, *Suivez la Flèche*. For such a massive project on such a significant, historic cathedral, there has been little published in non-local, non-French publications, so I took it upon myself to construct a timeline of this work following my visit.

Work for the project started in idea form long before 2023, when in 1987 the French communist politician and mayor of Saint-Denis Marcelin Berthelot (1927-1997) founded a commission to rebuild the tower, an investigation of feasibility followed. In 1992, the project was estimated to cost 60 million Francs, and was consequently put on indefinite hold. In 2013, Didier Paillard, Patrick Braouezec, and Erik Orsenna relaunched the commission. Another feasibility study was conducted in July 2016; in the following December chief architect of *Monuments Historiques*, Jacques Moulin, submitted a report that proved the project was technically and financially feasible.[53] In March 2018, French minister Françoise Nyssen came to Saint-Denis to sign an agreement with Braouezec, now president of *Suivez la Flèche*, and Philippe Belaval, president of *Centre des Monuments Nationaux*, that set guidelines for the reconstruction of the tower and outlined

[53] The *monument historique* (MH) designation is given to monuments of national-level significance by the French Ministry of Culture. The first classifications were declared in the 19th century by the French writer Prosper Mérimée (1803-1870), the inspector-general of historical monuments.

how funding goals should be met.[54] It was decided that funding would be reached through on-site tourism. In December 2020, seven French departments, (Seine-et-Marne, Yvelines, Essonne, Hauts-de-Seine, Seine-Saint-Denis, Val-de-Marne, and Val-d'Oise), announced 20 million euros in funding for the project, half of the estimated budget for the project. This funding was originally secured in donations for the Notre-Dame restoration effort. In April 2021, the nation announced 5 million euros of project funding, formalizing the start date of project work to begin in October; in May the interdepartmental solidarity and investment fund (FS2I) approved 20 million euros over the next five years to fund the project (excluding the April money), and estimated the construction budget to be 27 million euros. In 2022, excavation began, with an updated construction start date of fall 2023. The project is estimated to be completed by 2028 (figure 6).

[54] The *Centre des Monuments Nationaux* (CMN) is a public administrative branch of the Ministry of Culture that is in charge of the management and preservation of sites classified as *monuments historiques* (MH). It was founded in 2000 to replace the *Caisse nationale des monuments historiques et préhistoriques*,

Figure 6: *Render of Saint-Denis Restoration.*
Suivez la Flèche, 2021.

Putting together this sequence indicated that work on Saint-Denis was happening, and it was happening fast. What was fascinating to me was that *Suivez la Fleche* and their momentum solidified a trend: Saint-Denis is not the first French cathedral to undergo a massive restoration project in recent years. The most popular example is undoubtedly the restoration of Notre-Dame des Chartres, the massive cathedral located about an hour's train ride outside of Paris. In a 2014 opinions piece for the New York Review of Books entitled "A Scandalous Makeover at Chartres," architecture critic Martin Filler pointed out that in recent years the ancient cathedral's nave had been painted beige with much of the interior paneled in tromp l'oeil blue and yellow marbling.[55] The work he witnessed was a $18.5 million renovation commissioned by *Monuments Historiques*. Filler points out that there is little known about the church's original appearance – and thus not enough evidence to create such drastic changes change. Filler argues against this restoration as he considers it to be untrue:

> The belief that a heavy-duty reworking can allow us to see the cathedral as its makers did is not only magical thinking but also a foolhardy concept that makes authentic artifacts look fake.[56]

He also considers the work at Chartres be out of line with the 1964 Venice Charter, an agreement outlining monument conservation practices that France once signed on to. In 2014, Chartres was a premonition of further ambitious restoration projects to come, and it was done under the guise of architect Frédéric Didier, whose resume includes controversial restoration work at both the Paray-le-Monial (questionable repainting) and the Palace of Versailles (damagingly sandblasting stone). The reassembly of Saint-Denis' tower, though, is by far the costliest and most ambitious

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[55] Martin Filler, "A Scandalous Makeover at Chartres" (New York Review of Books, December 14, 2014).

[56] Filler.

project yet, therefore confirming that that Didier's work is no fluke: idealistic restoration is now the preeminent preservation tactic in twenty-first century France.

The Viollet-le-Duc-ian restoration projects of the nineteenth century were guided by national insecurity and instability, as well as a shared recognition that the monuments that represented France were in ruins. Industrialization, among other factors, challenged French identity in a way which prompted the reprioritization and subsequent redevelopment of gothic monuments. Moreover, restoration was a defense against foreign cultural influence, as evident in an 1845 quote from the French art historian Adolphe Napoléon Didron (1806-1867).

> The struggle in which we have engaged against foreign art and in the interests of our national art, against pagan art and in favor of Christian art, against death and for life, this struggle is still entirely fresh and still extremely vital.[57]

As Didron said himself, this reactionary struggle is *still* extremely vital to France. The urge to reaffirm the beauty and prominence of national art stems from the fear of it being challenged.

In the twenty-first century, the traditional conception of French national identity has been challenged by globalization and multiculturalism. Francophone scholar Michael F. Leruth argues that certain cultural events sparked this fear in his 1998 article "The Neorepublican Discourse on French National Identity."[58] The first event is the celebration of the bicentennial of the revolution in 1989, in which the designer Jean-Paul Goude hosted a 'festival of the world's tribes,' which was generally well received, but intellectuals claimed was ahistorical, apolitical, and commercial in intention. The next is the first *Affaire du foulard*, a protest in which Muslim students refuse to remove their headscarves, which also took place in 1989. This was met by

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[57] Georg Germann, *Gothic Revival in Europe and Britain: Sources, Influences and Ideas*, 150.

[58] Michael F. Leruth, "The Neorepublican Discourse on French National Identity," In *French Politics and Society,* Fall 1998, (Berghahn Books, 1998), 47.

similar backlash as the bicentennial, as left leaning philosophers urged the government to take a tougher stance against the headscarves. The third event is the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, which established the European Union in 1993. The treaty led to massive cultural anxiety and social unrest, exacerbated by prime minister Alain Juppé's proposal for reforms for national health insurance, retirement benefits, and state-run railroads. Similar to the other two events, intellectuals such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Tournier, and Régis Debray voiced discontentment, and initiated a petition opposing the reforms. The petition, entitled 'Appel des intellectuels en soutien aux grévisters,' defended a republican model of public services. Additionally, Leruth investigates "the need to reaffirm the French nation's commitment to indivisibility, reason, and universalism."[59] The unity of French culture is a primary worry of neorepublicanism.

> Many neorepublican intellectuals view the private sphere with great suspicion, which extends in particular to groups in French society that American usage would designate as "cultural communities." The neorepublican position is that any group that becomes visible or organized enough to be considered a distinct community will surely not be content to limit itself to the private sphere indefinitely.[60]

Through the lens of neorepublicanism, multiculturalism challenges a unified French identity. Francophone scholar Hafid Gafaiti writes, in a 2003 essay "Nationalism, Colonialism, and Ethnic Discourse in the Construction of French Identity," that between the 1930s and the 1990s, the proportion of immigrants in French population did not change significantly, but the discourse about immigration has since.[61] Gafaiti claims that immigration from various countries,

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[59] Michael F. Leruth, "The Neorepublican Discourse on French National Identity," 49.

[60] Leruth, 50.

[61] Hafid Gafaiti, "Nationalism, Colonialism, and Ethnic Discourse in the Construction of French Identity," In *French Civilization and its Discontents: Nationalism, Colonialism, Race*. (Oxford: Lexington, 2003), 189.

specifically the former colonies of France, challenge French society at all levels, including economic, political, philosophical, cultural, social, and religious.[62] He states that the French produced a form of 'cultural racism,' one in which race is less important than a shared, glorious heritage.[63]

Architectural monuments are part of that glorious heritage. Architectural history scholar Bérénice Gaussuin correlates this view in her 2022 article, "The Cathedral of Citizenship: Race and National Identity in Eugène Viollet-le-Duc's Work and Discourse."

> Today's populist movements and political parties use architectural and cultural heritage to uphold European or national identity against what they consider to be an unprecedented migration crisis.[64]

Her article unpacks this notion and how it dictated Viollet's restoration efforts in the nineteenth century. Viollet was a strong believer in race as a creation of a unified national 'genius,' one that could be cast into stone with the construction of monuments.[65] Universalism, as opposed to globalization and multiculturalism, could give rise to genius. Thus, when considering Florian Phillippot's denouncement in 2018 of 'the invasion' taking place in Saint-Denis by 'pro-illegal' immigration organization, there is a semblance of Viollet-le-Duc and his reactionary, idealistic architectural unification.[66] The tower project at Saint-Denis, then, is revealed to be a reactionary architectural – and political – statement: *this is what ideal France looks like.*

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[62] Hafid Gafaiti, "Nationalism, Colonialism, and Ethnic Discourse in the Construction of French Identity," 210.

[63] Gafaiti, 195.

[64] Bérénice Gaussuin, "The Cathedral of Citizenship: Race and National Identity in Eugène Viollet-le-Duc's Work and Discourse," 21.

[65] Gaussuin, 30.

[66] See the quote that begins page 1.

An architecture of resentment

The restoration project at Saint-Denis is patriotic, idealistic, and full of cultural resentment. In 2016, Braouezec, president of *Suivez la Flèche*, claimed that his project was heritage incarnate, both for tourists and for French culture at large.[67] In addition, he emphasized that the project would also serve as a training project, in which the organization would educate people on the modes of construction and artistry of the medieval era. In a 2021 interview, Jacques Moulin, chief architect, expressed that his objective with the reassembly of the tower was for Saint-Denis to be designated the European Capital of Culture in 2028.[68] *Suivez* aims to use public events such as the Rugby World Cup in 2023 and the Olympic Games in 2024 to highlight the cathedral – which they describe as the first ever Gothic church built – as a vital world heritage site. Their goal of bringing international attention to the site indicates that this project was not sparked by historical interest, but public identity. As an old (but newly recognized) symbol, Saint-Denis could bring eyes back to France and its medieval roots, while at the same time diverting attention away from its current state of political and cultural turmoil.

French pride for the medieval era and resentment of the modern era are intertwined at the core of twenty-first century restoration. A common denominator of the main actors involved in *Suivez* and the Chartres restoration is identity: white, traditionally French, and academic. They claim a stake in Gaul heritage and a monocultural medieval times where France did not face immigration. Regardless of whether this effort is conscious or not, the insistence on a historic, rational, and unified France, one that can be recognized internationally as both a world power

[67] "Basilique de Saint-Denis. Vent favorable pour la flèche," (l'Humanité, July 12, 2016).

[68] Charles Henry, "La basilique Saint-Denis va retrouver sa flèche," (Citoyens, May 5, 2021)

and connoisseur of culture, admits deep insecurity and fear of this premonition: what is gloriously French will be destroyed and lost in time, just like the north tower at Saint-Denis.

Plates

Figure 1: Viollet-le-Duc, Eugène-Emmanuel. *Cathédrale idéale*. 1854. In *Dictionnaire Raisonné de L'Architecture Française du XI^e^ au XVI^e^ siècle*. Vol. 2., fig. 18, p. 324. Paris, FR: Bonaventure and Ducessois, 1854.

Figure 2: Viollet-le-Duc, Eugène-Emmanuel, *Sketch of the walls of Carcassonne before restoration, and proposed restorations.* 1853. In *Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc: Englishness and Frenchness in the Appreciation of Gothic Architecture*. Fig. 30-31, p. 40-41. Nikolaus Pevsner. Norwich, GB: Jarrold and Sons Limited, 1969.

Figure 3: Green, Rev. Samuel G. *Cathedral of St. Denis; With North Tower Before its Demolition.* In *French Pictures Drawn With Pen And Pencil*. p. 194. Piccadilly: The Religious Tract Society, 1878.

Figure 4: Saskia, *View of west facade at Cathedral Basilica of Saint Denis*. Undated (1900s).

Figure 5: Putnam, Reed *Construction at Saint-Denis Cathedral*, Unpublished. January 2023.

Figure 6: Suivez la Flèche, *Render of Saint-Denis Restoration*. From http://www.suivezlafleche.com/, 2021.

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