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Reconsidering Late Medieval Architecture: Modernity, Reception and the Boundaries of the Gothic World

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Review of Alice Isabella Sullivan and Kyle G. Sweeney, eds., *Lateness and Modernity in Medieval Architecture*, Leiden: Brill, 504 pages. ISBN 978-9004538436. This edited volume explores how medieval architecture from the thirteenth through seventeenth centuries has been described as both "late" in terms of the Gothic style and "modern" in its opposition to classical forms of the nascent Renaissance. Drawing from a wide array of architectural types as well as diverse examples from places ranging from Cyprus to the Dominican Republic, this volume provides a useful, insightful analysis of Gothic architecture that challenges traditional narratives and encourages a global perspective.

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Edward Said opens "Thoughts on Late Style" by noting that "both in art and in our general ideas about the passage of human life there is assumed to be a general abiding *timeliness*" (2006: 5). He argues "lateness" is tied to past and present, resisting each one while dwelling in both. While Said centres upon lateness as a stylistic descriptor, it can also be a fruitful lens for thinking about another time-oriented concept: modernity. Modernity implies progress and future-oriented thinking while lateness summons a sense of decline and clinging onto past ideas. Both terms are associated with works of Gothic architecture from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries, a time period which crosses between traditional divisions of the late medieval and early modern eras.

Alice I. Sullivan and Kyle Sweeney's edited volume takes issue with restrictive stylistic narratives of change by interrogating the seemingly paradoxical terms of lateness and modernity to describe what is called 'late Gothic' architecture. The late Gothic was considered modern because it sought to avoid the antique forms associated with the Italian Renaissance, but by the fourteenth century, it was nevertheless understood as an outdated style, confused and overwrought in comparison with the style characteristic of the heyday of Gothic cathedral building. Their study of lateness and modernity not only takes up questions of periodization and the strictures of the Gothic canon but also considers how Gothic architecture was received by multiple audiences. This focus on reception, while not an entirely innovative methodology, provides a thread that helps tie the contributions together. While each of the twelve studies takes an architectural monument or motif as its subject, the authors do not limit themselves entirely to structure but also explore changing circumstances of construction, shifts in patronage, and the transfer of knowledge during the late Middle Ages. In covering a robust variety of Gothic building types — religious and secular — the volume also underscores the complexity of this
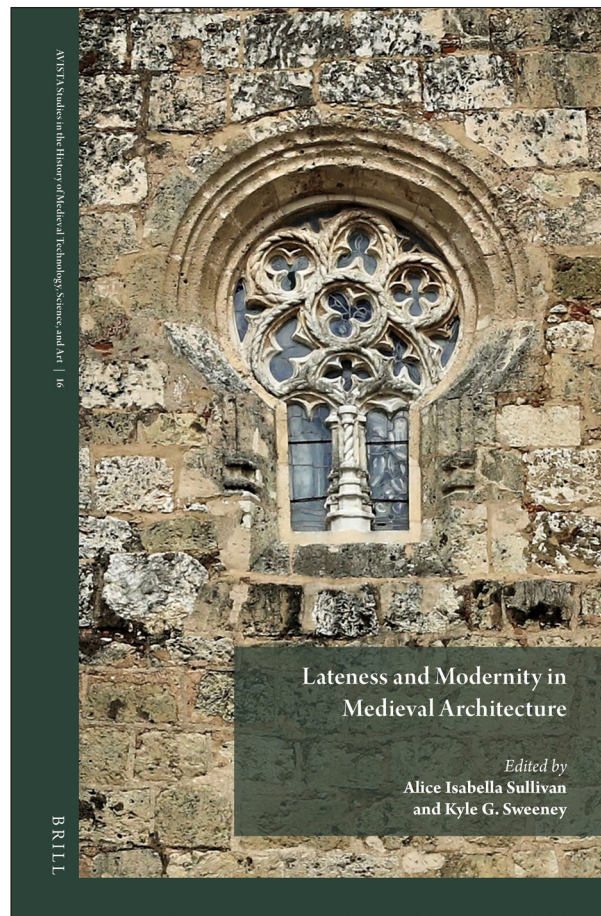
architecture and advocates looking closer at these understudied buildings. The result is an impressive book that not only considers complex examples beyond the usual regional centres of Western Europe, extending from Cyprus to the Americas, but also re-situates the historiographical narratives underpinning more traditional approaches to these buildings.

The volume is bookended by a useful prolegomenon on the question of late Gothic by Robert Bork as well as an insightful afterword on the 'unruly' nature of Gothic by Jacqueline Jung. These contributions both provide the historical and historiographical context needed to approach this subject and enrich the volume by discussing lateness as a category that is at once relational and, especially in terms of architecture, spatial. They also supply a narrative that gives coherence to loosely connected case studies (so often a feature of edited volumes) and demonstrate a renewed appreciation of architecture that might seem fragmentary and confused but that, as Jung argues, allows for room to play.

The volume's chapters are organized in three parts highlighting the geographical reach of late Gothic architecture both within and beyond Europe. The chapters in 'Space and Reception: Western Perspectives' largely focus on English and French examples; however, rather than highlighting cathedral building (as often the case with this region) they examine late Gothic architecture through the lens of manuscript illumination, parish church decoration and historiography. These studies are refreshing because they question assumptions about the viewers of late medieval architecture. For example, Maile S. Hutterer considers the complex nature of visual literacy and the compression of time in representation of real and fictive Gothic architecture in Jean Fouquet's late medieval *Les grandes chroniques de France.* To open a study on architecture with manuscript illuminations of imagined structures is both unusual and clever, for many of the works that the contributors analyse are about memory and representation as much as they are about physical architecture. Zachary Stewart's analysis of the coded language used to describe the change from decorated to perpendicular styles pairs particularly well with Bork's documentation of the biases ingrained within the writing of art and architectural history.

The second part, entitled 'Experimentation and Innovation in Central Europe', considers the mechanisms of creative exchange and invention in the kingdoms of Bohemia and Poland. This section of the volume is perhaps the most tightly connected and provides only a glimpse into Central European Gothic architecture that so often goes overlooked or dismissed. Although Prague Cathedral (St Vitus) and its chief architect Peter Parler are well represented in the canon of Gothic architecture, the architecture from these regions is often studied within its own cultural milieux

rather than in the wider context of the late Gothic. While the contributions in this section do devote attention to the specific cultural context of Central European Gothic architecture, they also explore issues like patronage and the use of certain terminology that raise questions as to why architects in these regions may have chosen to embrace the Gothic style. For example, Jakub Adamski asks whether using descriptors such as 'modern' and 'avant-garde' are methodologically appropriate when describing Central European Gothic architecture, a question that could be posed of architecture in other regions. This section is also where the theme of patronage is brought to the fore. In her study of the south transept façade of Prague Cathedral, Jana Gajdošová documents the relationship between the architect and his royal patron, Emperor Charles IV and makes a convincing argument regarding the essential dynamics between visual messages of 'modern' architecture and allusions to antiquity.

'Global Gothic,' the final section, consists of an eclectic mix of case studies of understudied regions of Central-East Europe, Cyprus and the Dominican Republic. While this inclusion of research on Gothic architecture beyond the borders of mainland Europe is commendable, these chapters do not fit together as nicely as the those in the preceding parts. Despite this unevenness, however, this part features among the most interesting contributions to the volume in their underscoring of just how limited traditional notions of late medieval architecture have been. Michalis Olympios' argument that the Gothic style created a sense of history for and evoked nostalgia in potential audiences of pilgrims visiting Cyprus that Venetian classicising motifs could not have done is a good example of how this book questions the idea of modernity and demonstrates its flexible interpretation. Costanza Beltrami's article examining the complex fusion of style and time in the Toledan convent of San Juan de los Reyes (1477) perhaps best encapsulates several of the threads that bind this volume together, not only the themes of lateness and modernity but also issues related to historiography, reception, patronage and memory. A new interpretation of what is generally called the *mudéjar* that is particularly intriguing emerges from her deep dive into the interrelationships between royal patrons and architect and Gothic and Islamic-inspired forms. The final chapter in this volume shifts once more to Latin America, where Paul Niell uses the framework of coloniality to challenge concepts of late medieval architecture, devoting special attention to the contributions of the Taíno and West African laborers to the construction of so-called 'modern' and Spanish buildings. Memory, power and hybridity all feature in Niell's analysis, which documents distinct Indigenous meanings for European forms.

While the volume's ostensible focus is lateness and modernity, it is also in large part a study of architectural memory. The topic of architectural memory is an important thread demonstrating how the progress of modernity is viewed through the lens of the

past, so much so that it might have made more sense to include a reference to it in the title. The use of the word 'medieval' architecture in the title also speaks to how difficult it is to avoid periodization and categorization. The images are ample and (at least in the e-book) are presented in full colour; however, some details are hard to discern and others are placed too far away from the text that references them. While of clear interest to architectural historians of this period, the volume's attention to collective memories (both real and fictive) not only in architecture itself but also in ornamentation, historiography, and terminology (namely, what and where is 'Gothic'?) will also make it appealing to art historians.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Reference

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