

## A New Chapter in the History of Notre-Dame de Paris

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At 7:12 pm on April 15, I received a text message containing a short video and the caption “*Notre-Dame est en flamme.*” The video showed smoke billowing out over Parisian rooftops and, in the distance, glowing red flames consuming the base of the spire of Notre-Dame de Paris.

The message came from one of my classmates at the Conservatoire national des arts et métiers, where I am currently studying to become a nationally-certified tour guide. Normally, our group chat on WhatsApp is used to share research resources and news of upcoming events pertinent to our careers in cultural mediation. On this night, however, the thread became a communal space for us to express our disbelief and mourn the loss of a building that plays such a central role in the work we do. Notre-Dame welcomes more than twelve million visitors a year, many of whom look to tour guides to learn more about the building’s long and complex construction history and the place of the cathedral within the religious, social, and political landscapes of the city. What would we do, we wondered, if this building were to disappear? (In the first hours of the fire, it was not entirely clear whether the church would survive the night.)

In addition to the more immediate professional implications of the fire, the flames that raced through the centuries-old “forest” in the cathedral’s attic impacted me in another way. I am a specialist in the Gothic architectural sculpture of thirteenth-century France. Over the last decade, I have spent innumerable hours standing in front of Gothic façades like those of Notre-Dame de Paris, contemplating the ways that architecture, sculpture, and ritual performance worked together to shape understandings of sacred and secular power for medieval audiences. As I sat on my couch in the Parisian suburbs watching the 850-year-old *combles* of the cathedral burn on national television, I felt like I was losing an old, dear friend – one that I had come to know and love over years of visits and time spent poring over its stones.

While the media focused on the loss of the leaden roof and wooden “forest” and hoped for the preservation of the bell towers on the western façade, I couldn’t help but think about all of the other things inside the church that couldn’t be easily moved and risked being lost: the 13<sup>th</sup>-century stained glass windows, the 14<sup>th</sup>-century choir screen, the ever-so-elegant Virgin of Paris, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century reliquary chasse of St. Genevieve kept in the north transept arm, the sweet little diorama recreating the 13<sup>th</sup>-century worksite displayed in one of the radiating chapels of the apse, the perfect acoustics of the cathedral’s vaulted interior... All of those seemingly minor details are what brought the cathedral to life for me; without them, the space would feel incomplete.

Fortunately, the Gothic structure did exactly what it was designed to do, despite the losses of the *charpente* and the spire. The pointed ribbed groin vaults and flying buttresses functioned as the church’s exoskeleton and kept the building standing, while the webbing between the ribs kept the fire localized to the upper parts of the church as long as it could, allowing for minimal damage when sections of the webs and all of the crossing vault finally did collapse onto the floor of the nave below.

Fire was a constant threat to churches in the Middle Ages and beyond. We have accounts of fires that ravaged many cathedrals in the medieval period, like those at Chartres in 1194 and Reims in 1210, both of which led to the reconstruction of the cathedrals in the Gothic style. An account of a fire at Rouen cathedral in 1514, translated by Costanza Beltrami in her recent book on the church's 16<sup>th</sup>-century crossing tower, details events that are eerily similar to what occurred in Paris last week: flames originating in a construction site at the base of the spire set the entirety of the wooden *charpente* ablaze; within an hour, the spire had collapsed into the church; and crowds said prayers, sang songs, and began relic processions as they helplessly stood by watching the cathedral burn.

Earlier this week, David Garrioch (Monash University) circulated a list of fire regulations that the chapter of Notre-Dame de Paris drew up in 1754. These regulations limited the presence of open flames in the upper parts of the cathedral, mandated that water storage tanks and buckets be kept between the west front towers, and even advocated for the purchase of a hand pump to bring water up to the roof if necessary.

All of these records demonstrate that people in the medieval and early modern world were acutely aware of the dangers that fire posed to these buildings. Medieval churches were designed, at least in part, to burn without putting the entirety of the structures at risk.

Footage taken inside the cathedral the day after the Notre-Dame fire showed that the Virgin of Paris was unscathed and that all three rose windows remained intact. Despite the fact that the perfect acoustics of the high vaults that made Gregorian chant concerts and high feast day masses otherworldly experiences [may never be replicated](#), many of the elements that make Notre-Dame, Notre-Dame survived the blaze.

Nevertheless, like many art and architectural historians, I've found declarations made by the media, firefighters, and even President Macron that the building has been saved "in its entirety" to be a bit premature. Though the fire is out, there is still much that could go wrong as the building adapts to its new roofless state, as [this overview from Le Figaro](#) highlights well. Of primary concern are the gables – the stone walls that capped the roof at the west, south, and north ends of the building. These walls, which have been pushing inward against the forces of the roof for the last several hundred years, no longer have the weight of the heavy lead structure pushing out against them. Coupled with the fact that the stone was badly damaged by the fire and has become quite friable and prone to crumbling in places, the gables now threaten to collapse into the building and to damage the vaults below them.

In the days since the fire, I've found myself on "cathedral watch," making it part of my daily routine to walk around the Ile de la Cité to try to catch glimpses of the preservation work that is currently underway. Over the last several days, workers have put supports in place to stabilize the fragile north and west gables. They have also begun the work of covering the fragile high vaults of the nave with protective tarps to prevent impending inclement weather from causing further damage to the now-exposed ribs and webs.

Moving forward, restorations will need to be undertaken slowly and with great care. Several academic organizations, including the newly-established [Scientifiques de Notre-Dame](#), are

petitioning the French President directly to give historians and experts the time necessary to diagnose the state of the building before jumping into restorations that could jeopardize the stability and longevity of the cathedral.

Those charged with the task of rebuilding what has been lost will also need to carefully consider exactly *what* Notre-Dame they hope to restore. Many groups have called for restoration “à *l’identique*” – that is, exactly what existed before the fire occurred. Such a restoration, however, would not appropriately take into account the character of the cathedral or its long history. Notre-Dame de Paris has never been a static monument. As I remind my students and my clients when we visit the cathedral, the current building is a 12<sup>th</sup>-century foundation with 13<sup>th</sup>-, 14<sup>th</sup>-, 16<sup>th</sup>-, 18<sup>th</sup>-, 19<sup>th</sup>-, and 20<sup>th</sup>-century interventions. Many of the parts of the cathedral that have become central to discussions about rebuilding in the days since the fire were, as medieval art and architectural historians know well, Neo-Gothic fantasies (albeit ones founded in the medieval past) invented by Viollet-le-Duc and Lassus during their 19<sup>th</sup>-century restoration campaigns. The question moving forward should be: how can our 21<sup>st</sup>-century interventions accord with the medieval past while clearly signaling that something new has been added (as the [Venice Charter](#) mandates)?

Even as we mourn the loss of the building that we as modern visitors have always known, we can begin thinking about what the next chapter in the cathedral’s long history will hold. I, for one, am optimistic about how this new round of restorations and additions might bring the cathedral to life and help visitors to better understand the cathedral as a living and ever-changing part of the Parisian landscape, not a monolithic structure frozen in the medieval past.