The Cathedral of St. John the Divine

The Choir of Saint John the Divine: A Scenario
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The architects of the choir of the Saint John, George Heins and Christopher Grant Lafarge, did not consider themselves slaves to any fixed vision from the past, but felt free to combine forms from different times and places into a composition of an entirely new kind. A new relationship between vault canopies and supporting skeleton was rendered possible thanks to the light-weight tile (Guastavino) vault.

Heins and Lafarge were fascinated by the combination of a towering central lantern tower (like Ely Cathedral) with lower darker spaces in the choir, transept arms, and nave. Brilliantly illuminated by a lofty central column of light, the interior could be dim, with continuous surfaces covered with glistening mosaic. Vaulted surfaces would be domes, half-domes, barrel vaults and groin vaults. Italo-Byzantine forms would refer to the Mediterranean roots of the Church.

For the exterior forms of the choir the designers wanted to exploit the craggy eminence of Morningside Park that would lend to the architectural composition something of the power of Mont-Saint-Michel or Limburg-an-der-Lahn. Given the rigors of the New York climate they proposed a continuous exterior silhouette unbroken by flying buttresses. In this way the entire space of the aisle could be captured for the interior. In its "English Romanesque" style the exterior would reflect Episcopal roots.

What they had not fully anticipated was the force produced by the tension between exterior and interior forms. Under the continuing flow of critical comments the exterior language changed and eventually triumphed over the interior. The high vaults of the choir were constructed as rib vaults as opposed to the barrel vault originally envisaged. More important was the drive to introduce direct lighting into the upper choir. Eschewing the exterior scaffolding of flying buttresses the upper enclosed the entire upper space over the aisles into the interior of the church gaining an enormous amount of space but eliminating the possibility of direct lighting.

Under pressure to brighten the upper choir, at a date towards 1907, the architects introduced skylights into the continuous roof of the upper choir and began to pierce "clerestory windows." This scheme was covered with ridicule by an anonymous reviewer ("Candidus") in 1907. With the death of George Heins the original scheme was abandoned and a new architect, Ralph Adams Cram completed the cathedral in a dogmatic Gothic style.

Expressed in words the above scenario may seem complicated. Our model will allow the viewer to quickly grasp the spatial characteristics of the choir, sensing the tension between exterior and interior forms. We will provide the user the ability to go back to the original intentions of the founding architects; to see the choir as originally built; to understand the structure as it is; and to look forward to the scheme (partially completed) to "Gothicize" the upper choir.

There is a mystery in the existing building—the dim lighting of the upper choir. We will find a new way to elucidate the problem.