The Cathedral
Explore
The Cathedral

The Cathedral

The reign of ideal spaces we want to present starts with the Gothic cathedral. We took the example of Reims, since it represents one of the most elaborated and acclaimed cathedrals. As an architectural type, the cathedral is more than just a church or any other sacred building serving as a place for the holy. This it is, too, but it is not confined to that dimension of meaning. It also has others, and therefore, by being a specific kind of an ideal space, it is the very base of all the other ideal spaces to come, in a symbolic and a historical dimension. The cathedral stands at the beginning since it reflects our general background tale to be narrated in our sequence of worlds, the one of a paradise regained, in an almost perfect, and first and foremost original way: it is the symbol for regaining paradise, in both a historical and symbolical dimension. Although it markedly differs from them, it can be seen as the archetype of all those other spaces to come. Since for our general topic inside the terms of which our general tale is to be told, that of an ideal space, it resembles the very aim of constructing such spaces: to overcome history 'as it is', in search for a better, and final one – the one of a paradise regained at the end of all days.

Provided that ideal spaces can be considered as relying on the idea of a utopia, literally, of a place for human beings that is an ou-topos, a non-place in terms of the now-existing real, then the very aim of creating such ideal spaces by construction is to generate exactly such a utopia, in the shape of a eu-topian, or "good" place: A place for humans being ideal in the double sense of a place being imagined (eidos, idea), and of one that is 'ideal' in the words' common meaning, denoting a perfect place to live; or a perfected one, respectively, namely one to be achieved by construction, by acts of deliberate planning and making. It shall be a space that is perfectly suited for an assumed (positive) human condition, and one that can be made: that is constructed, i.e. created, and not just pre-given. Opposed to the original paradise from which humans had departed, and opposed to the new Christian paradise at the end of all days, that is, at the end of a history that has been so far, after the human kind had left his original paradisiacal state –which, too, is a paradise pre-given, made by God, not by man.

If an ideal space stands for a world to be reached one day, for a utopia to come, then one of its deepest roots lies in the Christian conception of history as a progress: from an initial paradise where there was no history but just a unity between man and nature to a second paradise where history ends again. The paradise myth, so investigators of a Western utopia, belongs to our culture as does science and a belief in rationality. Such a Christian perspective became converted into its secularized forms over time, and into utopias. With the conception to overcome history as it went so far with the help of some "final", i.e. optimized construct as an 'optimal' place for humans to live, this Christian tradition is still alive.

The cathedral is a symbolic space, as are all the others we present. But here it also differs from the other spaces to come, and at the same time, it can be regarded as an embodiment of their very ancestor, their archetype because it is their mythological blueprint in the 'ideal' terms of imagination. As a symbolic space, it stands for the final ideal space of all ideal spaces, the one of a Heavenly Jerusalem at the end of all days. This is the ultimate good utopia humans can achieve, from a Christian perspective. The major difference of the cathedral as a symbolic space lies in its transcendental character. The other ideal spaces directly represent what they are: images of a future world to come, here on this earth. Opposed to them, the cathedral is a representation in a double sense: it symbolizes a space which cannot be reached in mere physical terms. As a concretely built space, the cathedral actually transcends its own physical existence, by standing for another kind of space, the really ideal one so to say: the space to come at the end of all human history, the one of final redemption, the Heaven symbolized in the form of a Godly architecture, the final city of all.

And the ideal space is a space of abstraction and construction. The second paradise is a constructed, not 'naturally' grown entity, as is Heavenly Jerusalem, the City of God. It might be of divine origin and great, but it is a construction; made by God, not by man, but still a construction. For this archetype already, as well as for its descendants, the ideal world, represented by its ideal spaces which reveal a part of it, is a world of construction, not of nature, after a primordial paradise has vanished forever, and the human kind was thrown into its own history.

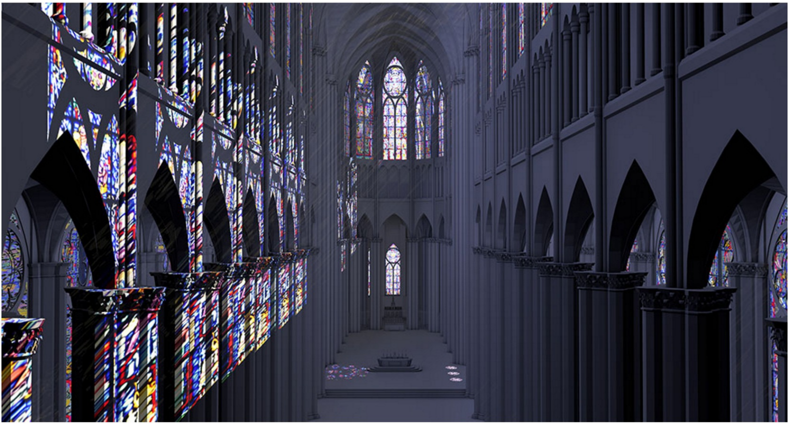
The Heavenly City

Following the paradise myth, we may admire nature, but it is not our space. Ours is the one of a second nature, to address another mythological figure. And in its ideal terms, it is achieved by means of rational construction, as an ideal world that has been built, not grown; neither by nature, nor by history, that other 'nature' of man.

The cathedral's symbolic construction is already revealed by its general orientation: the choir and its apsis are oriented towards the East, the direction where the first paradise was, the Garden of Eden. A cathedral's Western side, the side where the main façade with its large entrance portals is located, indicates the end of man as a worldly being. West or Occident is the region of death and the end of history, that very last day in history where Final Judgement takes place. Therefore the cathedrals, also Reims, are oriented towards an East – West axis.

Moreover, the entire outer part of a cathedral is constructed to appear as an entity that seems to grow layer by layer like a gigantic world mountain growing upwards. The higher parts 'stand behind' the lower ones, as if they would grow out, both from the ground (not to be seen but imaginable) and out of those lower parts. It is a totally different appearance compared to a modern building where one storey comes exactly upon the other, like in a flat line.

On the other hand, the cathedral is also a modern building, irrespective of its 'medieval' appearance: it is constructed as a system space, as a systemic unity following the rules of a geometry of modularization and seriality. It becomes most apparent in the interior of the cathedral. Opposed to the Romanesque era preceding it, the Gothic cathedral has to be understood not as the sum of individual parts but as a structural whole, an equilibrium of forces and counter-forces that can be understood as a kind of organism, like a system of loops in later cybernetics. Clearly visible in its interior, the cathedral appears as a dynamic whole, assisted by the pillars with their richly leaved capitals and unfolding vaults looking like trees growing to light. At the same time, there is pure functionality: of the systems of ribbed vaults and pillars in the naves, of the travée system developed from Chartres to Reims to Amiens. A spatial unit made up by a structure of combined vaults, arches and pillars where a vault from the middle or central nave built a unity with those of the neighbouring two side naves.



God is Light. Brought into architecture on earth, it was the cathedral's effect to embody a diaphane space, of a space that seemed not to exist as a space made up by solid walls but that was transcendent, and translucent; in particular in the cathedral's central or middle nave that looked as if it was enclosed by light. Assisted by the fact that a medieval cathedral had no rows of benches, light could pour into the entire interior of a cathedral and spread out. What we tried to catch with our reconstruction: the medieval light was not the pure white and sober light of modernity, it was coloured – completely coloured. Of particular importance were the windows with their glass paintings and modular structure, allowing for a colourful light as a means of both architectural shaping and symbolic importance. The construction allowed for a stream of light pouring into the interior of the cathedral that was dampened and intensified at the same time.

From its very atmosphere, the cathedral must have generated a space which was more real than reality ever could be. There is the splendour of the vertical lines, accompanied by an intensification of sensuality and feeling – light and shadow are more intense than in a 'real' outside, and a visitor must have felt like already being part of the Heavenly Jerusalem. At the same time, the cathedral was a quite earthly place; there were traders, prostitutes and all kind of people in its interior; the division into holy and profane – held up in modernity – did not exist as a clear-cut separation in the sense that some spaces were totally forbidden for earthly belongings.

As a symbolic space, the cathedral expresses a totality of world view. The cathedral, an investigator states, is the prototype of a closed cosmic order and, as such, a model of society. Although it was a model and a society which became also modern, at the same time. The term modern came up in the 12th century, the time when the Gothic cathedrals evolved. History was understood in such a way that the works of the Old were admired but at the same time, they were a base to be surmounted by achievements of the present. Also, the idea of progress seems to have appeared in the 11th century already. Distraction, innovation, renovation, melioration appeared in the vocabulary from the 11th century onwards, and in the 12th and 13th centuries, the cities in the "homeland" of the Gothic cathedrals, the region of the Ile de France, inside a radius of approx. 150 km around Paris, competed with each other to erect the most magnificent, unique and biggest cathedral.

Reims was founded 1211 and replaced another church that was 800 years old at that time. In Reims, the vertical axis becomes highly pronounced. It had major phases of construction which lasted from 1211 to 1311, in its original Gothic appearance. With an overall length of 149 meters, an overall height of the middle nave of 38, and of the towers at the West façade of 83 meters it is one of the largest Gothic cathedrals. It served as the place of coronation for the French kings until the French Revolution, and its book of gospels used in the ceremony dates back to the 9th century.

Reims had been called the queen of cathedrals, and we wanted to present her in her original interior illumination, to capture the atmosphere and symbolic appeal of Gothic cathedrals. The cathedral is unique among ideal spaces but, nevertheless, the ancestor of those others to follow.

Although in another respect: what started with the construction of the Gothic cathedral is a design practice mainly dependent on the construction and function of the tools available, and on the dynamical use of them. Both effects liberate the possible constructions, but at the same time they capture the constructor inside of their own theoretical models and the tools made for realizing the building itself. The other (albeit related) aspect is that with this kind of construction and its inherent properties – which, too, become systemic properties since they are embedded in the method itself, in the very procedure of how to construct at all – an effect comes in that could be called "liberation by formatization": by using always the same formats, as a constructor, I might be able to create a rich variety of forms; but this variety is only a seeming one since based upon always the same; I may generate diversity by this, but nothing really new and really unique. The variety achieved is that of the format, it is nothing really individual.

What begun in the system space of the cathedral was prolonged, for creating ideal spaces, also in social terms that had to follow predefined functionalities, and geometries. The leading idea became to create an ideal space more geometrico, as an abstraction, and that such an abstraction should provide the real place for real human beings to live: as a real place for a real, and new humanity to unfold.