

INVESTIGATING AND WRITING ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY: SUBJECTS, METHODOLOGIES AND FRONTIERS
Papers from the Third EAHN International Meeting
Edited by Michela Rosso

## INVESTIGATING AND WRITING ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY: SUBJECTS, METHODOLOGIES AND FRONTIERS

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### **C**ontents

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INVESTIGATING AND WRITING ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY: SUBJECTS, METHODOLOGIES AND FRONTIERS

# **6.1 Afterlife of Byzantine Architecture in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century**

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The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed a continuous, controversial and unexpectedly complex revival of Byzantine architecture. This process left its mark in Europe, USA and beyond, where a significant number of buildings associated with the Byzantine style altered the appearance of many urban landscapes, including Sainte-Marie-Majeure in Marseilles (1852-93), San Spiridione in Trieste (1858-69), Westminster Cathedral in London (1893-1903), Notre Dame d'Afrique in Algiers (1858-1872), the National Shrine in Washington (1919-61), the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow (1883, 2000), Saint-Espirit in Paris (1828-35) and the Australian War Memorial in Canberra (1927-41). Yet there is no clear overview of this rich tradition of neo-Byzantine architecture, which remains marginal and largely incomprehensible due to rigid national or regional patterns of interpretation, scholarly disinterest and historiographical reluctance.

This session considers the discrepancy between the plenitude, diversity and importance of re-imagined and re-used Byzantine architecture and its persistently peripheral status in historiography. This paradox is especially apparent in the context of Byzantine and neo-Byzantine architecture, frequently perceived as both a model for, and a precursor of, architectural modernism. A link between Byzantine and modern architecture, based on the ideas of structural rationalism, tectonics, truthfulness and anti-naturalism, as represented in neo-Byzantine architecture and elaborated by various historians and theoreticians - from John Ruskin and Henri Labrouste to Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, Roger Fry and Clement Greenberg – seems to be, however, only part of an unexplored kaleidoscopic picture. The question of the origins, importance and roles of architecture associated with the Byzantine style in different contexts throughout the nineteenth and

twentieth century remains obscure and elusive. Nevertheless, this architectural tradition has been developed under different social, ideological and political circumstances associated with concepts as diverse as nationalism and modern imperialism; clericalism and religious messianism; authoritarianism, monarchism and conservatism; spiritual regeneration and the reinterpretation of classical antiquity.

This session invites participants to investigate the complex and still largely unacknowledged architectural and ideological legacy of neo-Byzantine architecture, which has appeared across the globe in a dizzying array of building types: from Roman Catholic cathedrals to Protestant churches; from congregational temples for the Eastern Orthodox Christians to synagogues; from war memorials to exhibition pavilions and other secular buildings.

### 6.1.1 Suburban Byzantine: Tradition and Modernity in the British Catholic Church

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The predominant style of church design for Roman Catholic churches in Britain from around 1920 until 1960 was a simplified Romanesque or Byzantine revival based loosely on north Italian models. Many of the architects who favoured this style remain little known, as regional architects specialising in a mode of architecture deliberately opposed to the development of modernism. F. X. Velarde in Liverpool; Reynolds & Scott in Manchester and E. Bower Norris in the Midlands; H. S. Goodhart-Rendel and Adrian Gilbert Scott, and many others, favoured variants on the style. Few needed to explain their motivations, since they were always in demand by the clergy, who were aware that the Church explicitly required 'traditional' forms. Those who attempted an explanation articulated a defence of a Catholic tradition of church building. It was a tradition, however, that only began in the early twentieth century with the completion of J. F. Bentley's Roman Catholic Cathedral at Westminster, and was actualised by architects who derived their designs from this model, from books on Italian Romanesque and Byzantine architecture, from their travels and from each other. At the same time many architects proposed that their tradition was also modern, often embracing new materials and techniques and incorporating aspects of modern styles. In some extraordinary cases, church buildings in a fully understood modernist style accommodated historicising elements to express a development of this supposed Catholic tradition. This paper will consider the ways in which such church architecture could be conceived of as simultaneously adhering to 'tradition' and to the 'modern'. Bringing both terms into tension, neo-Romanesque and Byzantine church architecture of this period can be considered less as the retrograde rejection of modernism by an "other" branch of architectural practice than as highly symptomatic of twentieth-century anxieties and contexts.

### **KEYWORDS**

Church, architecture, modernity, tradition, neo-byzantine



