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**Article:**

Labonté, Hannah (2024) Richard Wittman, Rebuilding St. Paul's Outside the Walls: Architecture and the Catholic Revival in the 19th Century. *Aspectus* (6).

<https://doi.org/10.15124/yao-m07w-sf17>

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# Richard Wittman, *Rebuilding St. Paul's Outside the Walls: Architecture and the Catholic Revival in the 19th Century*

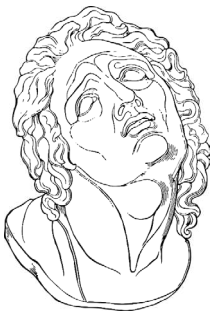
Hannah Labonté

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024.  
448 pp., 105 b & w illustrations, hardback  
£100  
ISBN: 978-1009414524

**Hannah Labonté** graduated from the University of York in 2024 with an MA in History of Art (Architectural History and Theory). Her dissertation concentrated on the pilgrimage experience, architectural imitations and their role in 7th/8th century Northumbrian churches. After writing and filming their research with Ripon Cathedral in late 2023, Hannah is continuing her independent research while also working at the University of Liverpool.

Richard Wittman, Author and Professor at the University of California Santa Barbara, has dedicated decades of research towards architectural history and historiography with a focus on seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Europe. As much of his previous writing centres around architectural theory in France, his most recent publication stands out in his work.<sup>1</sup> Wittman's *Rebuilding St. Paul's Outside the Walls: Architecture and the Catholic Revival in the 19th Century* explores themes of architectural planning, iconology, Papal power, and the emergence of modern architectural conservation and restoration pedagogy through the specific case of the mid-nineteenth-century restoration of Rome's Basilica of Saint Paul's Outside the Walls. The study of the restoration and reconstruction of buildings in the past has long been a point of intrigue for architectural historians. Wittman expands on the mournful feelings that come with the loss of an important building, the contrasting public opinions on a desired end result, financial pressures, and the reverberating consequences of a restoration in a social sense. Though analysed in a specific and historical context, these themes are very much still experienced by the public today, exemplified by the recent 2019 fire at Paris's Notre Dame; a parallel which Wittman himself has observed.<sup>2</sup> Wittman's *Rebuilding St. Paul's Outside the Walls* — while also an intriguing and fascinating retelling of the events of the reconstruction of Saint Paul's and the culture surrounding it — serves as a powerful resource for commenting on current debates on architectural reconstruction projects.

The first chapter provides the reader with a general and brief overview of the turbulence and ever-changing social attitudes and politics within Rome from the Renaissance to the 1824 fire at Saint Paul's. Wittman focuses much of his attention on the socio-political position of the Catholic Church and its relationship with the arts. The main argument of the chapter, that the rebuilding of the church was about more than physical construction but an opportunity to re-establish and communicate the power of the Roman Catholic Church, is well supported, albeit nonlinear. The strength of this first chapter lies with the author's ability to provide essential background knowledge on the wide range of topics and themes of the later chapters and it prepares engaged readers for the remainder of the book. Wittman chooses to segment his chapters by theme rather than in a chronological fashion which at times results in redundancy and repetition, but effectively allows readers to revisit periods of the restoration process in a new context. There is a strong dedication to establishing the context of the state of the Catholic Church and Rome leading up to the fire as well as the immediate aftermath prior to the basilica's rebuilding. Wittman does an excellent job at re-visiting his earlier discussions. For example, when discussing the wider perception of the damage in the immediate years following the fire, Wittman really emphasises a contemporary interpretation of a weakening Church along with the Pope (Pius VII) dying the following



Aspectus, Issue 6, Fall 2024  
DOI: 10.15124/yao-m07w-sf17  
ISSN: 2732-561X  
Pages 40-42  
University of York

year.<sup>3</sup> In his concluding chapter, Wittman offers a later contemporary interpretation — benefited by hindsight — that the fire was “an act of God...reuniting an alienated Catholic faithful and rechristianising a godless world.”<sup>4</sup> These call-backs invite readers to reflect on the changing interpretations of material loss and understandings of restoration projects on both a personal and general societal level. It is Wittman’s consistent employment of referencing this first chapter that highlights the strength of establishing the context of the reconstruction and stands out as an incredibly valuable first chapter that fuels the rest of the book’s accounts and arguments.

This text largely relies on the use of historical scholarship ranging from the mid-seventeenth century to the present to reinforce Wittman’s arguments that a revolutionary spirit jeopardised the historical integrity of early Christian buildings and explains the shift in society’s general understanding of what the past represents. Wittman describes this period of the early to mid-nineteenth century as having experienced “the memory crisis,” which resulted in a deliberate reassessment of historic buildings and a concentrated effort to conserve and restore with meaning.<sup>5</sup> While Wittman writes of this phenomenological transformation in architectural history generally, his detailed re-telling of the re-building of Saint Paul’s (at every stage) serves as excellent evidence of this time of change.

Emphasising the Catholic Church’s need to modernise itself through the case study of the reconstruction of Saint Paul’s is an interesting choice. The nineteenth-century architects’ desire to accurately reconstruct the ancient church—a symbol for early Christendom in Rome — can be understood as an attempt to re-legitimise the Catholic Church to its Constantinian relevance. Through the example of Saint Paul’s, the book directly links the newly developed desire for historical precision and preservation of the past in architecture with the need for continuity and perseverance of traditional Catholicism in a time of growing secularism — a trend which can be more broadly observed in the decades to follow, such as Victorian Gothic revival across Europe and the UK. Wittman’s connection of the two themes is by no means revolutionary, as the relationship between the status of the Church and architecture reflecting it has been explored by art and architectural historians since the very genesis of the field of study. What Wittman’s piece does rather well is link the historic state of piety to the original Saint Paul’s in its early Christian form. Through that connection, Wittman is then able to describe the changes and development of both the physical church (Saint Paul’s) and the Church as an institution throughout the mid-nineteenth century. Wittman interprets the reconstruction of Saint Paul’s as a prehistory of the modernisation of the book’s three main themes: Roman architecture, Roman Catholic understandings of history, and the Church as an institution, which would pave the way for an eventual Catholic Revival post-1850. This is not to say that it was re-building Saint Paul’s that directly led to the revitalisation of the Church, but that its reconstruction highlighted the multitude of institutional and social reformations the clergy still needed to do in order to re-invent the Church and secure its place in a modern Europe.

This book is a valuable contribution to the existing study of the history of architecture and the social history of the Catholic Church in Europe. The division and titling of the chapters by their theme especially promotes the interdisciplinary use of this source and makes the text navigable. The overall tone and language used are rather scholarly, perhaps suggesting an intended audience with a greater degree of literary sophistication. However, the numerous visual aids and in-depth elaboration do provide some support for those unfamiliar with the topic who wish to challenge themselves with this read.

## References

- 1 Richard Wittman, *Architecture, Print Culture and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).
- 2 Richard Wittman, "Churches and States," *Places Journal*, September 2019. <https://doi.org/10.22269/190917>.
- 3 Richard Wittman, *Rebuilding St. Paul's Outside the Walls: Architecture and the Catholic Revival in the 19th Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 49-56.
- 4 Ibid, 377.
- 5 Ibid, 13.
- 6 Ibid, 382-383.