

# TRANSATLANTIC IDENTITIES



## 3. AIMING AT ETERNITY

October 4, 2023

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"ARCHITECTURE HAS ITS POLITICAL USE; *public Buildings being the Ornament of a Country; it establishes a Nation, draws People and Commerce; makes the People love their native Country, which Passion is the Original of all great Actions in a Commonwealth. Architecture aims at Eternity.*" So wrote Sir Christopher Wren. He was talking, of course, of the great public buildings of government or the church, which together project an image of how a country wants its citizens to see it. This was obviously a major concern in post-revolution America. It also became one in Britain after the Houses of Parliament burned down in 1834.

For the most part, 19th-century architecture recycled old styles, with a fierce battle between Classical and Gothic. But there were exceptions from mid-century on, when new purposes or new materials demanded their own solutions. And by separating style from content, those battles had an unexpected consequence: follies and fancies in both countries where style itself was the subject, to be pursued with exuberance and even wit. *rb.*

NOTE: Dates of buildings show the year of *commencement*.

### A. BUILDING A NATION

We look at the seats of government in the two countries: **Capitol Hill** in Washington DC and **Westminster** in London. What influences have gone into their principal buildings and how, if at all, does this relate to a comprehensive plan for the area?

#### **COMPARISON: Capitol and Houses of Parliament**

**L'Enfant:** 1791 plan and other plans for Washington

**Aston Webb:** The Royal Mall and associated buildings

♪ **TV clip:** Coronation procession of Charles III

#### **COMPARISON: Washington and Victoria monuments**

♪ **Thomas Brock:** *Victoria Memorial* (with Elgar march)

## B. BATTLE OF THE STYLES

When it came to rebuilding the Houses of Parliament, a controversy broke out whether this should be done in the noble **Classical** style or a **Gothic** that would speak to Britain's heritage. The outcome, surprisingly, was something of a compromise. There were no such doubts in the United States, where most federal architecture was determinedly Classical. But tastes changed in both countries over the course of the century, and applied differently to secular and sacred buildings.

**Joseph Gandy:** *Design for New Senate Houses* (1835)

**Kent:** Design for the Houses of Parliament, London (1739)

**Barry:** Royal Manchester Institution and Trentham Hall

**Pugin and Barry:** detail on the Houses of Parliament

**COMPARISON: Pugin: plate from *Contrasts* (1836)**

**Pugin:** *Contrasts*: churches in London and Bristol

**Pugin:** St Giles Roman Catholic Church, Cheadle (1841)

**Latrobe:** Baltimore Basilica and **Renwick:** St. Patrick's Cathedral

**COMPARISON: City Halls in Manchester (1868) and Albany (1880)**

♪ **Richardson:** Albany City Hall (1880–83), video

## C. THE TRIUMPH OF THE NEW

Framed by the 1851 **Great Exhibition** in London and the 1893 **World's Columbian Exhibition** in Chicago, we look at the use of new materials—iron and glass—in later 19th-century construction, and their effect in buildings dedicated to the particular concerns of the age: commerce and the diffusion of culture.

**COMPARISON: Exhibitions in London and Chicago**

**Paxton:** Conservatory at Chatsworth (1836) and *Crystal Palace*

♪ **TV clip:** *Victoria* s6e8, opening of the Great Exhibition

**Bridges** at Coalbrookdale (1777) and the Firth of Forth (1882)

**Brunel:** Paddington Station (1854)

♪ **Frith:** *The Railway Station* (1862)

**Fowke and Scott:** Royal Albert Hall (1867)

**Fowke and Waterhouse:** Natural History Museum (1864)

**Natural History Museum,** New York, stages of development

**Adler & Sullivan:** Auditorium Building, Chicago (1886)

**Burnham & Root:** Monadnock Building, Chicago (1891)

♪ **Video:** *World's Columbian Exhibition* (1893), introduction

## D. STYLE SET FREE

In contrast to the previous, we consider buildings which have *no* official purpose, and where architects felt free to indulge their stylistic whims.

**COMPARISON: "Castles" from the 1850s**

**Crossness Pumping Station,** London (1859)

**Kent and others:** Follies at Stowe Park

**Capability Brown and Beckford:** Towers (1794 and 1830s)

**Beckford:** *Fonthill Abbey* (1796–1814)

**Nash:** *Cronkhill* (1802) and *Blaise Hamlet* (1809)

**Nash:** *Royal Pavilion*, Brighton (1815)

**Morris** wallpapers

**Philip Webb:** *The Red House*, built for William Morris (1859)

**Plantation houses:** Nottoway and Longwood (1859)

**Fantasy buildings:** *Lucy the Elephant* (NJ, 1881) and *Teapot Dome Service Station* (WA, 1920)

♪ **Video:** *American Gothic* montage (with Charles Ives music)

This list includes only artists mentioned more than once in class: Charles **Barry** (1795–1860, *English architect*), William **Beckford** (1760–1844, *English writer*), Isambard Kingdom **Brunel** (1806–59, *English engineer*), William **Butterfield** (1814–1900, *English architect*), Francis **Fowke** (1823–65, *English architect*), William Powell **Frith** (1819–1909, *English painter*), Charles **Ives** (1874–1954, *American composer*), William **Kent** (1685–1748, *English architect*), Pierre Charles **L'Enfant** (1754–1825, *French engineer*), Benjamin **Latrobe** (1764–1820, *Anglo-American architect*), William **Morris** (1834–96, *English designer and poet*), John **Nash** (1752–1835, *English architect*), Joseph **Paxton** (1803–69, *English architect and gardener*), Augustus Welby **Pugin** (1812–52, *English architect*), James **Renwick** (1818–95, *American architect*), Henry Hobson **Richardson** (1838–86, *American architect*), Louis **Sullivan** (1856–1924, *American architect*), William **Thornton** (1759–1828, *American architect*), Alfred **Waterhouse** (1830–1905, *English architect*), Aston **Webb** (1849–1930, *English architect*), Philip **Webb** (1831–1915, *English architect*)