

An Overview of Late Gothic Architectural Culture in the Holy Roman Empire – going beyond the canon

Pablo de la Riestra
Die Revolte der Gotik. Architektur der Spätgotik in Mitteleuropa.
 Lindenberg i. Allgäu, Kunstverlag
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Pablo de la Riestra's book *Die Revolte der Gotik* offers a valuable and stimulating perspective on the nature of late Gothic architecture as it developed in the Holy Roman Empire. The book's central thesis is that the development of German and Central European Gothic involved the emancipation of the builders from the conventions of French Gothic design. This general idea, of course, is not new in itself, but de la Riestra argues for and illustrates it in new and powerful ways, usefully complementing other recent studies of late Gothic architecture.

FORMER RESEARCH

The byplay between French and German contributions to Gothic design has long fascinated scholars in the field. In his influential 1773 essay *Von Deutscher Baukunst*, Goethe praised Erwin von Steinbach, the presumed designer of the Strasbourg Cathedral façade, as an exemplar of Germanic national genius, suggesting that the French had no such architecture. In the nineteenth century, similarly, German nationalism helped to fuel the completion of Cologne Cathedral. By 1900, however, it had become apparent that these great cathedrals had been strongly influenced by French Gothic traditions, and a new generation of scholars sought to identify the unique contribution of

German builders in later Gothic monuments. Kurt Gerstenberg (*Deutsche Sondergotik. Eine Untersuchung über das Wesen der deutschen Baukunst im späten Mittelalter*, Munich 1913), for example, in 1913 introduced the term "Deutsche Sondergotik," or "German special Gothic," to describe German hall churches whose open spatial flow differed from the more hierarchical basilica format typical of French Gothic churches.

In the immediately following decades scholars including Karl-Heinz Clasen (*Die gotische Baukunst*, Wildpark-Potsdam 1930) and Georg Dehio (*Das späte Mittelalter von Rudolf von Habsburg bis zu Maximilian I. Die Kunst der Gotik* [Geschichte der deutschen Kunst], Berlin 1930) offered their own complementary interpretations of how Germanic late Gothic differed from other varieties. In the aftermath of the Second World War, questions of national character quite understandably receded into the background, and if the advance of scholarship in recent decades has affirmed the innovative character of German late Gothic builders such as the members of the Parler family, it has also demonstrated the rootedness of their work in French and English traditions.

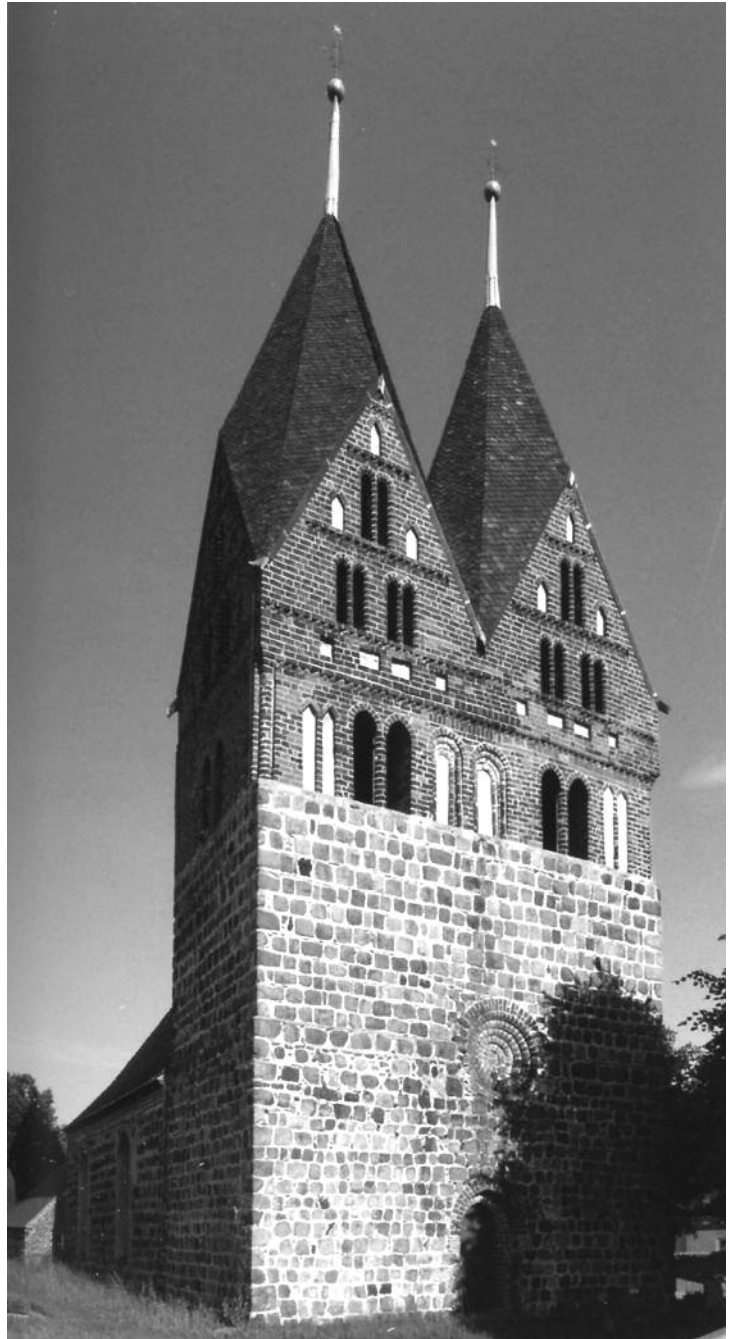
PROJECT BACKGROUND: EMANCIPATION FROM FRENCH SACRED ARCHITECTURE

De la Riestra clearly recognizes the crucial French contributions to the early history of Gothic design, but he has worked throughout his career to promote a more pluralistic view of medieval architectural culture. As a native of Argentina who has studied in both Germany and Latin America, he has a cosmopolitan perspective on the history of architecture. He has published extensively on the relationship between Iberian and Germanic Gothic traditions, as well as on the architecture of his adoptive home city of Nuremberg. Importantly, too,

Fig. 1 Lugau, Church, 13th century
(De la Riestra 2018, p. 107, photo
189)

he continues to work not only as an author and teacher, but also as an architectural photographer and draftsman. These activities have given him a broad knowledge of medieval architecture in general, and a keen appreciation for German late Gothic design in particular.

In 1998, de la Riestra contributed a chapter on Germanic building to a widely read survey of Gothic art, arguing that “in many cases German Gothic architects began where French architects left off” (Gothic Architecture of the “German Lands,” in: *Gothic: Architecture, Sculpture, Painting*, ed. Rolf Toman, Cologne 1999, 190–235, here 191). That chapter can be seen as a direct precursor of his new book in several respects. First, it demonstrates his understanding of Germanic Gothic in its rich regional and typological variety. Second, it expresses his particular enthusiasm for buildings whose clean and streamlined outlines contrast most strikingly with the complexity and convolution typical of the French Gothic tradition, including many brick structures from Bavaria and the Baltic coast. Finally, it incorporates his own photographs, which are beautiful works of art in their own right. In the two decades since this chapter appeared, its author has worked to expand its arguments to book length, and the results are exciting.



In *Die Revolte der Gotik*, de la Riestra has succeeded in presenting his vision of German Late Gothic in truly impressive fashion. The first thing a reader notices about the book is its format: it has 435 large square pages presenting 850 spectacular color photographs. With this rich visual documentation, the book acquaints the reader not only with overall views of famous monuments, but with their subtle

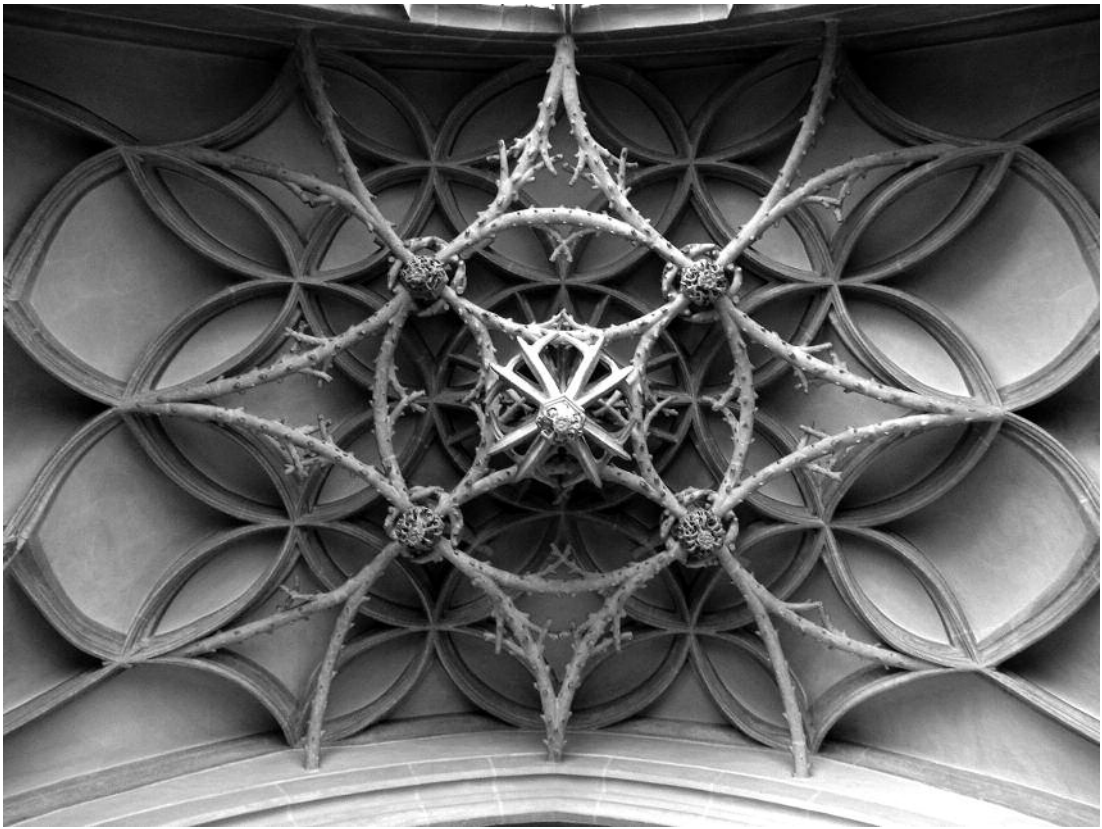


Fig. 2 Ingolstadt, Liebfrauenkirche, Vault of Saint Jacob's Chapel, 1510–20 (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1a/Ingolstadt_Liebfrauenmuenster_Jakobskapelle_Gewoelbe.jpg)

details, and with many lesser-known buildings, as well. It quickly becomes clear that the photos are not arranged into a chronological flow, or into geographical categories. Rather, they are arranged so as to illustrate and dramatize a text that has been organized thematically and subdivided into no less than 40 short chapters, separated rather surprisingly by blank page spreads. This structure invites the reader to enjoy small samples, as one might while dining at a tapas bar, rather than plowing through the book in a relentless push from start to finish, as one might in a more typical academic study. The text-image relationships are always very close, and in stylistic terms the text seems easily digestible, with an engaging tone and a refreshing lack of jargon. This rather informal presentation might lead some readers to underestimate the intellectual seriousness of the author's enterprise, but careful consideration of his book reveals both his vast knowledge of Gothic architecture, and his desire to push beyond assumptions and prejudices that have distorted scholarly approaches to the field.

BOOK STRUCTURE: THE VARIETY OF GERMAN GOTHIC

The unconventional chapter structure of *Die Revolte der Gotik* reflects de la Riestra's fascination with innovative formal motifs. Most of the chapters are dedicated to specific design elements, while several others that consider broader themes are arranged into rough chronological order. The introduction, which is the book's longest single section, presents the Gothic design mode as an alternative to Greco-Roman classicism, and suggests that Germanic late Gothic builders realized the full potential of this mode by revolting not only against classicism, but also against the strict conventions of French High Gothic cathedral design. The next four short chapters go on to describe the nature of the Holy Roman Empire in the Middle Ages, the characteristics of the High Gothic style, the broad contrasts between High and late Gothic in general, and the contrast between typical French and German approaches to church design, in particular. Two more short chapters

consider the transformation of French Rayonnant prototypes in the Rhineland around 1300, and the next after that contrasts the architectural cultures of southern and northern Germany, noting the crucial importance of brick construction in the latter region.

The next three chapters consider the towers of religious structures (*fig. 1*), the openwork spires that sometimes crown them, and the onion domes that emerged as an alternative tower termination type. De la Riestra then offers a chapter on the Parlers and their followers, and another on the relationship of designers and builders, before going on with chapters on three characteristic late Gothic formal motifs: innovative building volumes; sharp geometries; and complex vaults (*fig. 2*). Then, after discussing the contributions of Saxony and Bohemia, he considers the mannered disjunctions and fictive cracks that some builders included in their work as a kind of witty late medieval “deconstructivism” (*fig. 3*). The following chapters explore a whole series of formal motifs and building elements: spatialized articulation patterns; real and fictive torsion; staircases; branchwork; ogee arches; roof structures; gable formats; intersections of linear pattern; round arches as references to the Romanesque past; centralizing tendencies in building design; and the subdivided window format that de la Riestra compares to the “thermal windows” of Roman bath complexes (*fig. 4*).

After these narrowly focused discussions, the perspective widens a bit in the following chapters, which consider architectural polychromy, secular buildings, city halls, and half-timber construction; the latter theme, in particular, has received comparatively little attention in a scholarly discourse that emphasizes ecclesiastical building projects. The next three chapters discuss patterns of urban development, architectural models, and arcaded courtyards. Then comes a longer chapter on several of the most remarkable late Gothic buildings: Saint Mary in Stralsund, Saint Martin in Landshut, Our Lady in Munich, Saint Severi in Erfurt, the Albrechtsburg in Meissen, and Saint Barbara in Kutna Hora. The final architectural chapters consider the relationship between late



Fig. 3 Görlitz, Frauenkirche, Detail of the Western Portal, 1486 (De la Riestra 2018, p. 199, photo 373)

Gothic and Renaissance traditions, which de la Riestra views as strongly contrasting, and the persistence of a Gothic or at least “post-Gothic” mode into the centuries after 1500, which were otherwise dominated by derivatives of the Renaissance manner (cf. Monique Chatenet [Ed.], *Le Gothique de la Renaissance. Actes des quatrième Rencontres d’architecture européenne*, Paris, 12–16 juin 2007, Paris 2011). The very last chapter discusses German fifteenth-century sculpture, which he sees as expressing a revolutionary development no less profound than that seen in Flemish panel painting, or in the Late Gothic architecture of the period.

Within this complex and almost kaleidoscopic framework, de la Riestra emphasizes several main themes that are not explicitly advertised in the chapter titles. Most crucially, perhaps, he insists upon the importance of looking at a broad spectrum of monuments, both secular and religious. In a related vein, he often criticizes scholars who

concentrate narrowly on canonical buildings, and who thus fail to appreciate the diversity of late medieval architectural production. This idea relates, of course, to his more overt celebration of Germanic Gothic as an alternative to the French tradition of cathedral construction. Although de la Riestra devotes no chapters wholly to iconography and symbolism, he considers these themes repeatedly in his text. For instance, he invokes the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem as an important prototype both for centralized Gothic churches and for bulbous tower terminations. Moreover, while his chapter titles include no proper names except that of the Parler family, his text overflows with the names of individual designers, patrons, historic authors, and modern scholars. For this very reason, one wishes that the book had included an index with personal names rather than just city names.

RELATIONSHIP TO RECENT LITERATURE

Die Revolte der Gotik contributes significantly to the literature on late Gothic architecture by providing a richly detailed and beautifully illustrated overview of Germanic achievements in this period. It thus occupies a niche between broad surveys of Gothic architecture, on the one hand, and the more narrowly focused technical literature in the field, on the other hand. More specifically, de la Riestra's book offers a useful complement to several other studies in this important but sparsely populated niche. It provides a more extensive treatment of late Gothic developments, for example, than Norbert Nussbaum's classic and still-valuable survey of German Gothic church architecture (*Deutsche Kirchenbaukunst der Gotik. Entwicklung und Bauformen*, Cologne 1985), while simultaneously serving as a sequel of sorts to Marc Carel Schurr's study of Germanic Gothic from 1220 to 1340 (*Gotische Architektur im mittleren Europa 1220–1340. Von Metz bis Wien*, Munich 2007). De la Riestra, moreover, considers secular architecture at some length, while the books by Nussbaum and Schurr focus on church architecture, which they discuss in chronological rather than thematic fashion. All three of these authors consider the relationship between German Gothic and French

traditions, but de la Riestra incorporates more comparative material from Spain, Portugal, and the Low Countries. Curiously, however, he neglects to mention English buildings such as the cathedrals of Lincoln and Wells whose innovative vault patterns likely helped to inspire Peter Parler and other Germanic builders.

Because *Die Revolte der Gotik* focuses mainly on the Germanic world, it offers more depth in this area than the pan-European surveys of late Gothic architecture that Matt Kavalier (*Renaissance Gothic: Architecture and the Arts in Northern Europe, 1470–1540*, New Haven 2012) and I (Robert O. Bork, *Late Gothic Architecture: its Evolution, Extinction, and Reception*, Turnhout 2018) have published in recent years. In my own book, I adopted a chronological approach to this material, seeking to celebrate the achievements of the late Gothic tradition even as I explained the social and political forces that resulted in its displacement by Renaissance classicism. Like de la Riestra, I see the open-ended progressive quality of Gothic design as fundamentally different from Renaissance historicism, but I emphasize the continuity of the Gothic tradition rather than the disruptions within its development. Kavalier, for his part, concentrates on the period between 1470 and 1540, introducing the term "Renaissance Gothic" to describe this latest phase of the Gothic tradition, in which many designers were reacting self-consciously to the challenges and possibilities opened up by increasing awareness of the classical mode. Kavalier, like de la Riestra, adopts a thematic structure based largely on formal motifs, but he emphasizes buildings with elaborate ornament, devoting scant attention to the streamlined and simplified buildings that figure so prominently in *Die Revolte der Gotik*. These three recent studies thus offer complementary perspectives on late Gothic architectural culture.

In some respects, *Die Revolte der Gotik* resembles Roland Sanfaçon's book *L'architecture flamboyante en France* (Québec 1971), first written half a century ago, which is now being re-published. Sanfaçon, like de la Riestra, sought to capture the great diversity of what might broadly be called a

national tradition in late Gothic architecture, while celebrating its emancipation from the strict conventions of thirteenth-century French cathedral design. Both authors insist upon the importance of considering lesser-known works alongside canonical buildings, and both create texts whose arguments depend closely on the visual analysis of small but telling design details. There are, of course, significant distinctions between the two books, including their different geographical orientation, and the fact that de la Riestra's book is far larger and more richly illustrated than Sanfaçon's. Moreover, while Sanfaçon wrote in a period when French Flamboyant architecture remained relatively understudied, at least by present standards, de la Riestra is writing about a late German Gothic tradition that has been celebrated and studied with care in the century since Gerstenberg wrote on *Deutsche Sondergotik*.



Fig. 4 Iphofen, Stadtpfarrkirche, Gallery at the Northern Portal, ca. 1508 [De la Riestra 2018, p. 265, photo 498]

Many of the fascinating buildings illustrated and discussed in *Die Revolte der Gotik* nevertheless remain obscure, and de la Riestra has done a great service for the field by presenting them in the context of this multi-faceted study. In broader thematic terms, meanwhile, de la Riestra's book makes a powerful argument for the merits of a Germanic tradition in which many of the norms of French Gothic design were not just modified, but actively subverted. In sum, therefore, *Die Revolte*

der Gotik ranks as a significant and welcome contribution to the literature on late Gothic architecture, which deserves the attention of all readers interested in the subject.

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BEI DER REDAKTION EINGEGANGENE NEUERSCHEINUNGEN

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VERANSTALTUNG

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