RALPH ADAMS CRAM

I wish to speak of Ralph Adams Cram with special reference to his work at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York.

However, to understand the many and varied architectural qualities of the Cathedral, one has to consider the equally versatile nature of its architect.

A life in architecture in America - which began professional practice in 1890 and has maintained constant professional activity until 1940 - is necessarily one in which the processes of changing conditions are reflected. From a very dull architecture as it was in the eighties to the amazing confusion we have reached today has been a course which has failed to lead to clearness of conviction as to the future.

From mortar and masonry for centuries well understood and well handled by capable men in nearly every age - to skeletons of steel and reinforced concrete; - from sound and lasting walls of stone to shell-like surfaces of metal, glass, or plastic; - out from soundness into strange exaggeration has been our American course.

Cram has always been an alert energetic and fascinating figure with vibrant intensity of thought and movement. His ideas have swung with all-embracing devotion from style to style and from country to country though usually restrained to Christian Europe between the eleventh and the sixteenth centuries.

I have known Mr. Cram well for more than thirty years. As early as 1902 his articles on Chruch Building which had appeared in the 'Churchman' made the initial contact for me. Some four years later while
still in College, I had the privilege of visiting regularly for design criticism Mr. Cram in Boston and Mr. Goodhue in New York. This was the beginning for me of a period of great enthusiasm and happiness in working under the stimulating direction of these two wonderfully able yet wonderfully different men.

As the years passed my contacts were more with Cram than with Goodhue for the old firm of Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson ended in 1913 with Mr. Goodhue practising alone until his death in 1925.

In all these years I have always found Cram to possess that rare grace of being a wholehearted egoist, one who no matter how long he may live will seek to make a better, jollier and more religious world along his own lines and filled with his enthusiasm. After all that is not undesirable – we need many such believers in splendid possibilities even though they do not agree with each other or with us. It is this full certainty of the richness of the world he would recreate and its architecture which makes Cram the unique character he is.

We are so accustomed to opinions which are hedged by qualification and lack of decision and totally without convictions which are worth fighting for – that Cram's militant declarations, whether accepted or not, are stimulating even in their exaggerations.

It is my intention to be as brief and clear as I can in recording the intensities, the convictions and the contradictions which have characterized Cram, through his enthusiastic life which has been timed to this vast period of change in our country's architecture.
Possibly he has seemed more acutely aware than others of the rashness with which that change seemed determined to deny past centuries and all their history and their religious beliefs. Naturally to be fair to Cram one must have some personal convictions which are friendly toward his most favorite field - the Christian Church.

Apart from that field Cram would be an architect of sensitive good taste and refinement - but he would in no way approach to the position he has reached of enduring influence. Both by his work and by his writings his influence will long continue in the field of Church building.

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Cram was the son of a Unitarian minister who chose to direct him into the profession of architecture.

By the custom of the eighteen eighties he entered an architectural office in Boston as an apprentice in 1881 at the age of seventeen.

For more than five years he worked as a draftsman - plodding his way, though his interest seems to have been far outside his field - in music, drama and writing. He was at that time and continued to be a reader of many many books on many subjects. His dimming eyesight has denied him for several years this - his greatest pleasure.

On failing to win an architectural competition which would have provided a year of foreign travel and study, he left the architectural office of Rotch and Tilden to become art critic for the Boston Transcript. He makes clear in his autobiography that he was encouraged by the caption which was given by the Transcript's editor to one of his articles - 'Have We a Ruskin Among Us?'. This reference to his beloved Ruskin had much to do with his change to journalism.
As a newspaper man some five years pass during which two journeys abroad were made by him to England and to Italy. Each gave time for prolonged stays amid the 'Stones of Venice' which with 'The Seven Lamps of Architecture' had been his introduction to architecture as a boy of high school age.

As a result of this travel comes the decision he so dramatically describes as reached by him in Venice in 1889 - "Venice consolidated the gains won through Palermo. It was to be architecture for the future, if place could somehow be found for a temporary renegade; and it was now just a matter of getting back to Boston and first principles, and making that place in one way or another. Funds for maintenance were entirely gone, and the sources hitherto relied upon for loans had ruthlessly shut down. I tried to think they were in league with Destiny.

By way of Verona and the Brenner Pass to Innsbruck with its valley castles -- and so to Switzerland and the through train for the Calais-Dover boat. This was the end of apprenticeship; in some way, architecture as a profession would have to be accomplished."

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Cram returned to Boston and sought to establish himself as an architect. Within a year he formed a partnership with Charles Francis Wentworth. Thus in the year 1890 at the age of twenty seven his professional career began.

The practice was one usual to young architects - small residences and unimportant commercial buildings or alterations.

To get beyond this, we find him reaching within a few years the decision to seek some definite field - In his own words:
"My hopes were higher, however than for a career in house building, and I told Charles that if a young firm such as ours was to get anywhere we should have to find some comparatively virgin field and if possible make it our own. A careful survey indicated that there was such a field and that was one of which my new interests, acquired in Rome, argued acceptance. That was the building of churches."

There is no record of much progress in the next year or two. Some preliminary plans for four churches in or near Boston developed.

It is then that a brilliant young draftsman - from the office of James Renwick, architect for Saint Patrick's Cathedral, New York, - joined the office of Cram and Wentworth with the problem of a Cathedral for Dallas, Texas - which he had won in competition. This young man was by name Bertram Grovenor Goodhue. He was to live but a short span of life yet long enough to become probably the greatest creative influence of this century in our architecture.

Several years later in 1895 the firm of Cram, Wentworth and Goodhue was formed. And still later - in 1899 - on the death of Mr. Wentworth, Frank Ferguson succeeded him and the firm name under which the most notable achievements were wrought became that of Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson.

From this point forward the work became far more extensive and far wider in its field as well as in its geographical limits.

Therefore, with this hasty review of the background, I will try to limit myself to Cram's progress in church building as it has developed from 1900 to 1940 - and with an effort to parallel this with his writings relating to the church.
I know of no other American architect whose active practice in his chosen field has been so extensive who at the same time has kept a leadership in his field by his writings. A leadership which was even more established by his continued articles on church building than by his churches.

We have two parallel lines to follow - 1st. Cram's written opinion as it expanded and became more varied; 2nd, Cram's work in church building as it progressed.

It is my purpose to show how these have merged in his Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

I will begin, therefore, with his first recorded views on church architecture as they appeared in the 'Churchman' in 1900 - and were republished in book form in 1901 under the title 'Church Building'.

He has chosen the English Gothic - I give you his reason.

"We may pass over the various fashionable styles with hardly a word, for none will be found bold enough to advocate classic architecture in any of its forms for the service of the Church. Romanesque has wrought its own downfall and there is none so mean as to do it reverence. To Gothic we return inevitably; but the process of exclusion does not cease here. Were we to continue as now, building essays in archeology, today in French Flamboyant tomorrow in Early English and later in Decorated, we should still be following out the old principle of artificiality. One style, and only one, is for us and that is the English Perpendicular. Every other phase of Gothic rose in response to a demand, culminated and passed. If we play with them, we are making experiments in archeology - not serving God through his Church".
This was Cram's opinion at the outset - before a broader practice and more extensive travel had given a more wholesome maturity. But over and beyond the maturity gained by more extensive practice of church building - and still more frequent travel abroad, there existed another more catholic change, that is the change which comes with limitless freedom of the pencil - the ability to express, harmonize and make real things which otherwise would be dull and dead. This maturity came through comradeship in creative effort with Bertram Goodhue.

Even as Cram relates this we can see its power.

"My general tendency in design was at first, I can now see, rather archaeological, I was so anxious to demonstrate the continuity of tradition (theologically as well as artistically) in Christian culture; while I had spent so much time in intensive study of the Catholic architecture of England and the Continent that I tended naturally, at first, to reproduce rather than to recreate. Bertram had none of this feeling. Religious matters had no particular interest for him: he saw the problem from a purely aesthetic point of view, and his vivid imagination led him to think of all he did as adventure, invention, the exploration of new fields. It was this that gave whatever came out of our office a quality of vitality that, to me at least, was very convincing."

Thus we have a sketch picture of the forces which were building, unbuilding and rebuilding the manner of the man.

We could choose many enthusiastic words of Cram as from year to year he leaves far behind the narrowness of his first chosen English Perpendicular. By these we might explain his personal designs which were so strongly toward Early English or toward Norman French. These we can see later in the lantern slides.
It is essential, however, that we recognize his totally unpredictable migration toward the Spanish Gothic.

Following a year spent in Spain his acceptance of Gothic as a style of greater possibilities than he had previously conceived or imagined is declared —

"It was not alone the architecture of Spain that appealed so powerfully. This sequence from the highly individual Romanesque of the old Salamanca Cathedral, through the varied Gothic progression of Toledo, Seville, Burgos, Segovia and all Catalonia, including Mallorca, to the Baroque of a dozen cities and the Plateresque found nowhere else in Europe, was sufficiently revealing and educational. It did much to remove inhibitions and modify inherited and acquired prejudices in favour of what once was held to be the Puritan virtue of a "pure" style. For the future (for me) it ought to be possible to do things not hitherto contemplated."

Possibly I have been able to indicate with these scant touches upon the versatile quality of Cram the unfolding of a direction as well as a conviction in his later years.

In each step the major meaning of his work to himself was that of a mission — sacred and sacramental.

As the years pass, the writings become more and more intense — almost to the point of becoming as rigid in religion as his earlier position had been toward architecture. Throughout these I feel we must read the personal fullness of the man with his subject — his life and his work he feels can become part of the one great history which he counts greater in its lasting value than any or all others.
"—all the architecture, painting, sculpture, music,—came into being under the religious impulse and grew great and ever-glorious under the influence of definite, dogmatic religions and for the service of these religions, whatever may have been their nature or their habitat. From this religious service, art, vital in quality and definite in style, passed over to secular life, so that the fora and basilicas, the castles and guildhalls, palaces and manors, took their form from the religious models, secularizing these without loss of spirit or integrity. Also I learned that all Christian art of whatever kind, in its old estate for a thousand years, in its new acceptance for the last century, was originally the creation of the Catholic Faith through the Catholic Church,—"

Cram's reference to the Church may be made more clear if we go a step further. He tells us in yet another written work that

"The Roman, the Orthodox or the Anglican Church can not coalesce as units so long as each claims that it alone holds the True Faith, polity, rites and discipline."

He is an extremely advanced anglican whose ideal is that of the Church convincingly capable of leadership in all things.

In his ever exuberant way he has carried on—as it were—alone a crusade for Christian art as symbolic of the powers and spiritual ideals which are needed to recreate a more perfect state in which to live.

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With the aid of the views of his work I shall try to show the parallel of his writings and his building. In order that this be brief, I will use but few examples—chosen as representative of the points we desire to confirm.
The problem of a metropolitan cathedral for the Diocese of New York City became one of foremost importance in the late eighties.

It was at a time when the influence of work done in the Romanesque style of France under the genius of H. H. Richardson was paramount. Beyond this dominant style - the followers of Renwick and of English architects of the time were reaching toward the fully developed Gothic rather than its forerunner - the Romanesque.

A national competition was held in the year 1887 - in which a multitude of design were submitted running the long range of Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic - French and English - and on to Renaissance - French and Italian.

Out of the lot there emerged as the winner - the design of Heins and La Farge.

For the skill and artistry of America of 1887, it was a strong, rather powerful design based on the prevailing Romanesque manner of Church building - yet not archeological.

Between the years 1887 and 1912 the Cathedral of St. John the Divine was slowly taking form in stone. As was the historic custom of greater churches, the building was begun with the apse and would progress slowly to the west - that is, toward the nave and its portals beyond. Finally there would come completion in the great central tower and the minor towers.

Heins and LaFarge rather ably advanced their work with a noble feeling for the fine twelfth century churches of central and southern France. Because of very limited funds construction moved at a snail's pace - so that by 1912 - twenty-five years after its beginning - only the apse was complete and the west stone arches of the crossing raised in their rough unfinished vastness.
The entire scheme was a big one even as compared with the greater Cathedrals of Gothic Europe.

But in the same twenty-five years, America -largely led by the church building of Ralph Adams Cram and Bertram Goodhue - had completely changed from Romanesque solids to Gothic daring.

So it was that upon the death of Mr. Heins, the cathedral authorities chose to abandon the original plan and to seek a possible harmonizing of that which had been built with the vast portion yet to be constructed into a Gothic Cathedral.

It was at this stage that Cram became their advisor and that the firm of Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson became the architects for the Cathedral.

However, in the same year Goodhue decided to separate himself from the firm that he might practice alone. Therefore, the Cathedral became-as far as work or even sketches of any nature following that of Heins and La Farge-entirely the architectural creation of Cram.

SLIDES
In this vast work - noble in its conception - Cram has carried on at every stage in line with his Medieval Crusade. Whatever its confusion of style or its lack of vigorous and convincing relation to its surrounding or to its time, whether it might have fared better in opinion of the architects of today or those of tomorrow by being less archeological and of cleaner and simpler and therefore more enduring design, Cram can truthfully declare - as he does - that

"The New York Cathedral is honest straight masonry construction. The columns support through their stone alone. The visible arches do the work of spanning voids and carrying superimposed wall loads, the vaulting is real masonry, the buttresses perform their legitimate function of taking up arch and vault thrusts.

The style may or may not be Gothic, the design may or may not be good, but it is frankly, honestly and logically built and to this extent it is specifically Gothic".

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And so to Cram our praise - that amid a work vast beyond that of the past three centuries, he has followed the same of structural exactness mercilessly as they were followed in the Gothic past, yet has chosen from many styles and many countries-beauties of Gothic fabric without a single blem of style or country to blend these. well that they may culminate a catholicity of taste and bring together as one great cathedral the qualities of beauty he found and came to love in many a different church and many different countries.

The Cathedral of St. John the Divine is to me truly Cram's Cathedral. It will, I believe, become more and more to be so understood as the years and generations pass and it takes its place among the cathedrals of history.