Architectural Crusades:
A Comparison and Interpretation of French Cathedrals and American Mega Churches as Cultural Catalysts and Material Culture

Karen McKenzie
International Degree in Anthropology
November 30, 2007
Architectural Crusades: 
A Comparison and Interpretation of French Cathedrals and 
American Mega Churches as Cultural Catalysts and Material 
Culture

by

Karen E. McKenzie

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of

Bachelor of Arts in International Studies in Anthropology

Presented on November 30, 2007
AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF


The Gothic cathedrals of France arose in a particular social and political environment, and the material culture, the structures themselves and their contents, bear witness to those realities even today. In addition, the cathedrals themselves were catalysts for cultural change. They encouraged urban growth in a country that had previously been mostly rural, as craftsmen and parishioners moved closer to the construction sites to enable themselves to take part in the architectural and social evolution that was occurring as a result of the unprecedented building projects. The cathedral towns become county seats, and as such, the center for social and cultural activities. The cathedrals themselves were symbols of the partnership of Church and State, and the strength that partnership had garnered. The cathedrals changed the face of French society forever.

The American mega churches today could be interpreted as a similar phenomenon in some regards. They have served as a catalyst for cultural changes, creating strong communities. Perhaps they represent a comparable partnership between Church and State, even if this is not the most politically correct interpretation at this point in history. The mega churches have cultivated
their own cultures, sometimes seeming like small cities with all that they have to offer – coffee shops, bookstores, childcare, social programs and worship – all in one large, convenient location.

The research represented in this paper has sought to examine the differences and similarities between the medieval churches and the modern day mega churches, and to make a logical and insightful comparison of the two phenomena and then to develop an appropriate interpretation of that comparison.

Although many fairly evident differences exist between the two, the research revealed many similarities between the Gothic cathedrals of France and the American mega churches, both in their construction and in their cultural impacts. The resulting analysis revealed much, not only about French culture and history, but about the American culture today as well.

Abstract approved: __________________________________________

Dr. David Brauner
Bachelor of Arts in International Studies in Anthropology  
Thesis of Karen E. McKenzie  
Presented on November 30, 2007

Approved:

Dr. David Brauner, 

Dr. David McMurray

Dr. Joseph G. Hoff, Academic Coordinator, International Degree Program

I understand that my thesis will become part of the collection of Oregon State University. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request. I also affirm that the work represented in this thesis is my own work.

Karen E. McKenzie, Author
Acknowledgements

Thanks to Bruce, Kyle, my mother, and Dr. Brauner. Thanks to each one of you for your immeasurable contribution to the fabric of my life, and to this paper and the wonderful adventure it represents.
## Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................... Page 2  
Signatures ........................................... Page 5  
Acknowledgements ..................................... Page 6  
Table of Contents ..................................... Page 7  
Introduction ......................................... Page 8  
Methods ............................................... Page 11  
Laying the Foundation: France in the Middle Ages Page 12  
Medieval Cathedrals and Symbolism .................... Page 20  
Elements of Gothic Architecture ........................... Page 22  
An Enduring Style ...................................... Page 27  
A Look at American Mega Churches .......................... Page 28  
Comparing Modern and Medieval Churches .................. Page 36  
Conclusions ............................................ Page 39  
References Cited ....................................... Page 40
Introduction

Gothic architecture, the major architectural movement in Europe during the Middle Ages, was the product of, and the catalyst for, a period of intensive social and economic transition. The joint power of Church and State were expanding rapidly in Europe, and technology and culture were changing in response to that expansion. This complex and unique architectural form represented major technological developments which ultimately enabled the construction of much larger and more impressive structures than had previously been seen in Europe (Bumpus 1927:2).

The Gothic cathedrals of France, the best example of Gothic architecture, have been a source of inspiration and awe to those who have entered their doors since their construction during the Middle Ages. Their incredible immensity, combined with the elaborate and extraordinary craftsmanship that resulted in a beautiful material culture, even today presents thousands of visitors each year with an otherworldly experience, surely much as they probably did during the period in which they were developed. Those fortunate enough to have the opportunity to visit such places tend to respond with amazement and wonder, regardless of their spiritual or religious leanings. But these buildings are more than the sum of what can still be seen today. They are the articulation of a culture and a place in time that presents us with the opportunity to glimpse a past way of life, and a catalytic point in time that literally changed the world.
One only has to know how to translate the material remains into an accurate interpretation of the intents, beliefs and strivings of their planners and creators.

This paper will seek to inform the reader regarding the social, political and religious origins of the cathedrals in France. Once the historical foundation is laid, the physical structures of the cathedrals themselves will be examined. Common structural and design elements will be highlighted, along with an interpretation of their practical and symbolic purposes within the structures.

It is also the intent of this paper to examine the human experience of cathedrals today in and of itself and then to compare it to the similar experience of those visiting the modern mega churches in the United States, and to answer some of the following questions related to the origins of the structures and their eventual effects on culture.

What were the intentions of the builders of the Gothic cathedrals of medieval France? What was the socio-political scenario in which they arose? What was the relationship between church and state at the time? How did that relationship contribute to the development of the architectural phenomenon? Finally, how did the material culture express the beliefs and ideas of the people of the time?

Next, the definition of “mega church” will be considered. This relatively new phenomenon in the United States displays very specific characteristics of its own. In comparison to the French cathedrals, what were the intentions of the builders of the American mega churches? What was the social and political
scenario in which those particular churches have developed? What was the relationship between church and state in the United States during the 20th century? Did that relationship contribute to the choices made in the development of mega church architectural phenomenon in America? How does the material culture today express the beliefs and ideas of the churchgoers and builders of our time?

Finally, what conclusions, if any, can be drawn from any similarities and differences between the medieval Gothic churches of France and the modern day American mega churches? Despite their geographical distance, is it possible that there exists an evident universality of intent on the part of those in power in the construction of the subject structures? Is there a similarity in the fashion in which symbols and material culture have been and are still used to express beliefs and ideas? Is there similarity in the emotional response felt by visitors to the two distinct types of structures? Answers to all these questions have been sought in the research process.

Obviously, the Catholic churches in medieval France are far different from modern American Protestant churches. However, it is the similarities that are perhaps the most interesting in the comparison. The comparison itself has nothing to do with whether the church in question is either Catholic or Protestant, but rather the focus of this study is the significance of the role played in the culture of each type of church and comparing cultural phenomenon to cultural phenomenon.
Methods

Preliminary research began prior to the writer’s arrival in France and consisted of literature review focused on determining the viability of the proposed subject matter and the thesis structure. Once a foundation for the research was established, on-site research in France was undertaken. The in-country research took place over a period of ten months, and it consisted of site visits to the churches, the collecting of French written documentation regarding each subject structure, and the photographing of various pertinent aspects of each building and its contents.

Stateside research continued with additional literature review and visits to mega church structures. Here, it must be noted that some of the information related to the American church is drawn from personal experience and knowledge of the author as a previous member of an American mega church. So, there is the element of an inside informer that is part of the process as well. It must also be noted that finding good anthropological sources of information relating to mega churches was a difficult task, due to the fact that they are a relatively new phenomenon, having only really appeared in the past three to four decades.

Finally, the data was assembled in logical fashion and comparisons were made relating to structural similarities, political and social climate of the respective eras in which the structures arose, and the other research questions
posed, along with similarities in the writer’s experience as it related to the buildings.

**Laying the Foundation: France in the Middle Ages**

An understanding of the origin of the French cathedrals demands some knowledge of French history preceding their construction. The early Middle Ages in France were an extremely turbulent time, with many invasions and revolutions as nobility struggled to assert and maintain power and territory, and peasants resisted. Feudalism cultivated a society of warfare, an issue the Church eventually sought to rectify (Evans 1969: 5). However, in spite of all the divisions and disruption, France maintained a sense of country. In addition, a tremendous amount of intellectual, political, social and artistic growth occurred during the Middle Ages, heavily influenced by the preceding Roman culture (Evans 1969:1). The monarchy and the church developed a partnership that was based on the idea that the king’s power was given to him by God (Evans 1969:11). The Crusades occurred in the second half of the eleventh century, and consequently, pilgrimages became a part of life which eventually focused on the cathedrals (Evans 1969:37). The crypts of the saints, which were an essential element in the cathedrals, gave the pilgrims a reason to travel long distances to the churches. The pilgrims made the voyages, often seeking a miraculous cure for terrible illnesses from the relics of the saints who rested in the crypts (Hollister 2002:308).
The Crusades of France had a strong influence on politics and religion in the country, providing a focus for chivalry for the nobility (Duby 1991:113). Then, as the Crusades began to draw to a close, a new kind of crusade began to bring together the countrymen and women of France. The task of building the monumental cathedrals, which would serve as the crowning glory and designating characteristic of capital cities, united the French people in a way of life that changed France forever (Evans 1969:66). With its network of parishes and local communities of believers, they brought to fruition a new, more complex social organization. They became the centers for all major social activities. It was within their walls that christenings, masses, weddings and funerals took place. The cathedrals brought together people of all walks of life in one place and one endeavor, creating a new deep-seated and much-needed sense of community (Sot 1997:139). They spurred the development of strong urban centers in a country that had previously been largely rural. The construction of the cathedrals provided an almost limitless opportunity for craftsmen to refine and practice their arts, resulting in a rich material culture that still bears witness to some of the realities and thought-processes of the day (Sot 1997:131). In addition, the great cathedrals served to solidify the developing partnership between Church and State, while at the same time strengthening the position of the Church in medieval French society (Sot 1997:139). It must be noted here, however, that there was some scattered rural resistance to the new type of construction and the demands of the projects, which is reflected in the
persistence of Romanesque architecture in some areas of the countryside (Sot 1997:135).

Interestingly, some of the churches that still stand today actually represent a blending of Romanesque with Gothic. Instead of building entirely new structures, the existing ones were enhanced by the addition of new Gothic style architectural elements. An outstanding example of this is Sainte-Radegonde in Poitiers, which was dedicated in 1099. The exterior is obviously Romanesque in origin, while the interior exhibits traits of Gothic architecture such as the high vaulted ceilings, large windows and elaborate stained glass. The Gothic elements in the church were added during the 13th century (Favreau 1999:33). Another excellent example of the blending of the two styles of architecture is at the Abbey of Saint Jean de Montierneuf, originally built around 1069, and updated with Gothic elements at the end of the 13th or beginning of the 14th century ((Favreau R. 1996:3).

Pacey referred to the period of cathedral construction as the “Cathedral Crusade”. Following closely on the heels of the actual Crusades, the time reflected the spirit of adventure and the idealism inherent to the quest for souls. Once the building of the first cathedral began, the new ideas almost instantly took root, and similar building projects rapidly sprang up across France (Sot 1997:133). Despite the uniqueness of each structure, reflecting the individual philosophy and the creativity of each respective planner/builder, the buildings all
shared common characteristics, including flying buttresses, lightness and verticality of structure, and brightly colored windows (Sot 1997:134).

Abbot Suger began construction of the first cathedral in St. Denis, France in the late 1130's in response to a need for a new way to unite the people and move forward. The king of France was absent from the country at the time, and Suger, an advisor and personal friend of Kings Louis VI and VII, was the acting ruler of France (Pacey 1992:17).

Abbot Suger developed the Gothic style of architecture to reflect his own philosophies, and he utilized it in the construction of the abbey church of Saint-Denis, about four miles from Paris (Photos 1 and 2). His spectacular new building was consecrated in 1144. In planning the building, he very deliberately set out to design and to construct a structure that would be a physical representation of Heavenly Jerusalem, with a lofty construction and an abundance of brilliant color and light. The building was also created to represent the power of the Church and its relationship with the State, a visual reminder of things both religious and political. In addition, the expansive and lofty structures emphasized, for all to see, the immensity of the universe and the glory of God, in contrast to the apparent smallness and insignificance of mankind (Branner).
In short, Suger planned every element of the architecture to be symbolic of his own philosophical and political ideals, based on the thought that there would be a second crusade in the near future. Suger’s unprecedented project caught the imagination of the French people, and eventually cathedral building in and of itself became the second crusade (Pacey 1992:18).

As a result of Suger’s influence, medieval religious architecture developed into a veritable art form created to reflect the heavenward aspirations of those who built and worshiped within the buildings. It developed during a pivotal time when the social and economic landscape in all of Europe was changing rapidly. Both the iconography and the architecture of the cathedrals give us a glimpse into the worldview of the people of the period (Branner).

Funding for the building ventures came from occasional gifts from kings as well as contributions from townspeople and merchants. The cathedrals in France were always extremely expensive, and they required the financial and professional contributions (through monetary gifts, taxes and time donations) of many parishioners and craftsmen, in addition to the state funds that were devoted to the cause. Consequently, the communities surrounding the building projects grew rapidly and exponentially as the many workers and craftsmen relocated to live close to their work. Since the buildings took at least decades to construct, the growth of the area was always relatively permanent. In addition, people moved closer to the cathedrals because of the shift to industrialization that came about in response to the new technologies that developed to
accommodate the construction needs of the massive structures. They migrated to the towns where they could earn a living and be close to their place of worship. New population centers sprang up, and as people came, they contributed to the building endeavor, both financially and through their labor. In return, they received a sacred place of worship. The indulgences which were granted in return for monetary gifts toward the building projects were another source of funding. The greatest percentage of financial support, however, came from the exhibition of saints’ relics and the resulting contributions from even the poorest people and pilgrims who traveled long distances to view them (Pacey 1992:25).

The churches quickly became the center of the communities. The bells of the cathedrals rang to mark public events such as the birth of a royal heir, the death of a significant individual, battle victories, and to call university students to study. The churches served as the central gathering place for not only religious but also civic events, including town councils, assemblies of nobles and princes, and victory celebrations (Hollister, 2002:307).

The cathedrals were the symbolic gateway to High. One might say that Church and State were married in the cathedrals of the Middle Ages. The majestic stained-glass windows, along with the elaborate statuary, illustrate treasured Bible stories, as well as providing images of the royalty of the day. In addition, the other items which were deliberately placed within the church give
us insight into the minds of the builders, planners and worshippers. Many 
statues and icons of both heaven and of politics fill the buildings (Branner).

Gothic architecture was thus developed and used widely in Western 
Europe from the 11th through the 16th century. It was preceded by the 
markedly less ethereal Romanesque style and characterized by the immense 
stained-glass windows, rib vaulting, pointed arches and spires, and a developing 
emphasis on verticality and the impression of height. Flying buttresses were 
developed to support the skeletal walls and large expanses of glass.

The cathedrals of Europe represent a rich legacy of artistic and 
architectural expertise, and they are noteworthy due to their contribution to the 
developing world at that time and their long-lasting influence on architectural 
design. The architects and the patrons worked together to bring their projects to 
fruition. Some of the most notable architects of the time are: Robert de 
Luzarches, who worked with the local bishop to produce the Cathedral of 
Amiens; Peter Parler, who worked on the church in Prague; Pierre de Montreuil, 
who was the creator of the great Notre Dame in Paris, the abbeys of St. Germain 
des Pres, and St. Denis; and Villard de Honnecourt, who created an important 
manual for the construction of the cathedrals, but of whom there is no known 
record of actually having actually constructed a church (Branner).

The style became popular first in France and soon spread to the rest of 
Europe. The Gothic cathedrals consisted of the same basic parts, but were fluid 
in their sizes and shapes, and tailored to the needs of the congregation building
each one. Gothic architecture remained popular through the 16th century (Branner).

In addition, the cathedrals represent a penchant for experimentation and pushing the limits of structure and aesthetics, along with an unwillingness to accept anything as being enough. Competitiveness between towns was also a factor, with each town working to make their cathedral the biggest, most beautiful and best. This drive echoes the spirit of conquest that was exemplified in the Crusades (Pacey 1992:23).

**Medieval Cathedrals and Symbolism**

Because of the meticulous and thoughtful fashion in which each one was designed and constructed, the cathedrals of France can be read like a book. They are repositories of symbolic representations of the cleric, laymen and communities of the time in which they were constructed (Sot 1997:138). Every aspect of a cathedral is an expression of a concept, a theological order, sacred space, and of the Christian community. It was seen as a representation of the body of Christ (Sot 1997:135). Sot describes the cathedral as a window into medieval thought, the articulation of the hierarchy between the material and non-material worlds. It provides clues today that enable one to understand, to a small degree, their vision of the habitation of God (Sot 1997:137). The twin-towered western sides of the cathedrals were built as the gateways to God’s residence on earth (Crewe, 1986: 13)(Photo 1). The richness of the aesthetics of the cathedrals cannot be separated from the morals and theology they
The cathedrals’ interior spaces are places of hierarchy, organization, value, positivity, sanctified and sanctifying. All these represented qualities were created as a contradiction to the disorganization of the external world, similar to the contradiction between the Christian order and the rest of the world (Sot 1997:138).

Pacey cites church texts relating to church building dedication as making it clear that one intent in building such amazing structures was the creation of a representation of the New Jerusalem seen by Saint John the Divine in a vision in the book of Revelation in the Bible. In addition, the cathedrals were related to the historic city of Jerusalem as well as Solomon’s Temple (Pacey 1992:44). Pacey also writes of cathedrals as “an art form, expressing religious truths through symbolism, and religious emotion through mass and space and soaring
height” (Pacey 1992:23). In addition, because of the relationship between Church and State in their construction and use, the cathedrals themselves signified the piety of the State and its love for God. Architecture was more than a simple structure in the case of the cathedrals. It was an intellectual expression of things Christian: hope, faith, trust in God and love for Christ (Bumpus, 1927:3).

**Elements of Gothic Architecture**

Gothic architecture was very different from its predecessor, Romanesque style, and represents a major transition in the church and society, reflected in architecture. The Gothic style is much more open, lofty and light than the older architectural form. Romanesque often consisted of stone ceilings and extremely thick supporting walls, making it impossible to use large windows or high ceilings. This resulted in very large, dark buildings (Branner). Due to the fact that the Church was the entity truly responsible for its development, the Gothic style is best known and most visible in its use in the building of cathedrals and churches of its time. Although the style came to be used in many types of buildings throughout the centuries during which it was in vogue, it was the Church that recruited some of the best minds and talents of the day in order to create the revolutionary architectural form. At that time, education was the purview of the church, and it was for that reason that many of the great minds of the time were available to take on the task of developing a new way of building (Branner).
Gothic architectural style features high skeletal stone structures which provide framework for prolific and sizeable stained glass windows (Photo 4). These windows allow well-lighted interiors and are integral to the form. Also featured are pointed spires (see Photo 5), flying buttresses (see Photo 6), cluster columns, ribbed vaults (see Photo 7), and ogive-shaped, pointed arches (see Photo 8). Great sculptural detail is another characteristic of Gothic architecture and can be seen in all the structures of the style as well as in statues both on the interior and the exterior of the buildings (see Photo 9) (Hollister, 2002:305).
Photo 5 - Notre Dame, Paris

Photo 6 - Montierneuf, Poitiers
Photo 7 - Saint Pierre, Poitiers

Photo 8 - Saint Pierre, Poitiers
Cathedral floor plans were that of a Latin cross, with a sanctuary with aisles and radiating chapels (Bumpus 1927:5).
An Enduring Style

Although more than one of the great structures have collapsed during or shortly after construction, or were later destroyed in war or weather, many still stand today to give the interested observer insight into the culture which contributed to their development. They themselves remain as windows into the past, allowing the willing observer to witness a snapshot in time and to experience some measure of the awe that the men and women of the day must have felt upon entering the immense, impressive works of art (Branner).

In recent years, tremendous efforts have been made to salvage and renovate what is left of the structures. Many cathedrals have been repaired and now serve not only as places of worship, but they have also been given their rightful places as valuable cultural and historical sites. They have become civic treasures which tell the story of a brave new era of thought and creativity. So, they are an important part of European culture even today, and as a result thousands of tourists visit them each year.

The Gothic architectural style itself occupies a significant place in history throughout the western world, and the churches and cathedrals which still stand today bear witness to that fact. Their unprecedented beauty and complex design and the fashion in which they engaged both those in power and the common man make them an important part of the material culture of the European continent and they will stand as monuments to human achievement and ingenuity for centuries to come.
A Look at American Mega Churches

During the twentieth century, the Christian church in the United States began to grow exponentially. The movement focused strongly on converting individuals in large numbers, a virtual quest for souls, and recruitment events were often referred to as “Crusades”, echoing the Crusades of the Middle Ages. The first mega churches began to appear in the 1970’s (Axtman, 2003). As the church as a whole grew throughout the 1980’s, 90’s and into the new millennium, more and more mega churches began to appear in suburban areas. This phenomenon presented an opportunity for the gathering of unprecedented numbers of believers under one roof. Perhaps the new mega churches were spawned by a feeling of impotence which was prevalent amongst Christians at the time, and the hope that in banding together in large numbers they might wield more power. Mega churches provide a way for a group of people to create a symbolic presence in modern American society. They take up noticeable religious and social space as well as being visible on the physical landscape. Because of this, they draw people to themselves. Growth begets growth (Thumma 2006).

A mega church is defined as a very large, Protestant congregation, generally having 2,000 or more persons in attendance at weekly worship; a very active seven day a week congregational community; a charismatic, authoritative senior minister; a complex organizational structure; and multiple social and
outreach ministries. The largest mega churches in the United States today boast memberships of approximately 35,000 members. Some researchers believe that the appearance of the mega church following the 1970’s is a response to cultural, political and social changes in the country (Megachurches 2006).

Thumma lists three types of mega churches: nontraditional, traditional and a composite of the two. The nontraditional churches avoid the traditional architecture and instead build buildings that reflect other typical buildings in the social milieu, such as shopping malls and office buildings. The traditional churches tend to use either Colonial or Neo-Gothic architecture in their structures, and employ a multitude of traditional Christian symbols, such as crosses, candles, doves, and stained-glass windows within the building itself. The composite churches are a blend of the two types, with the exterior reflecting traditional church building ideology, while the interior is more like a theater, with comfortable seating, excellent sound systems and video capabilities (Thumma, 2006).

Examples of modern mega churches are the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California (Photos 10 and 11); Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas (Photos 12 and 13); and Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois (Photos 14 and 15). Each of these represents a nontraditional approach to both exterior and interior design, with modern style architecture and theater-like worship spaces.
Photo 10 - Crystal Cathedral (Symonds 2005)

Photo 11 - Crystal Cathedral (Symonds 2005)
Photo 12 - Lakewood Church (Symonds 2005)

Photo 13 - Lakewood Church (Symonds 2005)
Each of these styles of church structure also reflects a desire on the part of the church leadership and congregation to meet specific needs within society today. The nontraditional building is built with the unchurched in mind, while the traditional is for the those who want the conventional Christianity venue, only bigger and better. The composite type of church reflects a respect for the traditional forms, while embracing the contemporary ideas of worship (Thumma 2006).

Many of the modern mega churches, particularly the nontraditional ones, have dispensed with the use of religious symbols in the structure and décor, or at the very least greatly curtailed it (Symonds 2005). The goal of this exclusion is an effort to make those who would feel uncomfortable in traditional décor to feel welcome and relaxed. The commercial, casual, comfortable and entertaining multimedia world is embraced (Buggeln, 2004). Along with a deliberate absence of religious symbols in the structure, the mega church culture urges informality of dress, no longer pushing the idea of “Sunday best” that has for so long been a part of the church culture in America (Axtman, 2003). Even the pastors themselves often wear business casual attire, having set aside the dress suit that has long been the costume of church leadership. They dress very much like those in the congregation rather than in a manner that sets them apart or above the flock (Florian, 2004).

It is interesting to note, as an aside, that a contemporary composite church, First Baptist Church of Orlando, actually states in their brochure that the
building is “built with the feeling of a cross in a modern configuration similar to a cathedral but with a contemporary design” (Thumma, 2006).

Modern mega churches often reflect the personality of the senior pastor. This man is generally the founder of the church, and the creator of the vision for the congregation. As such, his ideas for the architecture of the structure are often borne out in reality (Thumma 2006). Under the direction of Senior Pastor Joel Osteen, and according to his vision, Lakewood Church in Houston actually acquired the Compaq Center in Houston where the Houston Rockets had once played (Photos 12 and 13), and renovated the building complex for their congregation (Symonds 2005).

Mega church members tend to give financially far in excess of the national average, enabling the construction and renovation of structures using the very best building materials, creating environments that are pleasant and inviting (Buggeln, 2004).

Mega churches seem to have sprung from a generation that is used to large institutions: hospitals, high schools, universities, even shopping malls, provide places where many people congregate under one roof. They are a response to a demand for a communal experience, and a product of religious marketing, an entertainment-oriented outlook, and religious marketing that is identical to the way that businesses do marketing. While 60 churches per week with memberships under 100 are closing their doors, mega churches have increased their number by 30% in the past four years. This phenomenon is
much the same as that experienced when Walmart or Costco moves into an area previously occupied only by small businesses. There is a consumer shift from the smaller businesses to the larger stores that conveniently offer more products in one place (Axtman 2003).

Mega churches, due to the diversity of attendees, must meet varying social needs. As a result, the mega church has developed into a place for one-stop shopping. The church building actually functions like a spiritual shopping mall where many different ministries can operate in to meet the needs of the many different consumers. The church serves as a social center for its members (Thumma 2006). Services such as low-cost bulk food, self-help groups, financial counseling, bookstores, food courts, coffee shops, organized sports, summer camps and even auto repair are offered by many of the organizations (Symonds 2005). Symonds writes of “Sunday schools that look like Disney World and church cafes with the appeal of Starbucks” (Symonds, 2005). Disney World and Starbucks are very succinct expressions of modern culture; perhaps it isn’t surprising that a church venture that works mimicks those parts of American culture that make people feel good. The mega church, in a phrase, is culturally relevant. It acknowledges the culture in which Americans live, and focuses on meeting the needs of the people (Florian, 2004).

Mega churches draw attendees of all ethnicities, many of them having essentially equal numbers of Hispanic, white and African American members (Axtman 2003).
Used to the anonymity of modern life, people seek out a place to worship that affords them a similar level of anonymity (Thumma 2006). Anonymity is also important to those people who have had negative experience in smaller churches (Axtman 2003). In addition, the feel-good spirituality is an response a culture that is essentially me-centered (Florian, 2004). People today are always looking for ways to enhance their lives, and the mega church offers products that do just that.

The mega church appeals to an entertainment-oriented society, often having a rock concert feel to their services, and a heavy reliance on multimedia (Axtman 2003). Mega churches focus on a message of hope, life, victory and celebration, not the traditional message that some feel has created a victim mentality and a sense of having been beaten down (Axtman 2003). The mega church focuses on an image of polished professionalism in line with modern culture in its multimedia presentations, drama, and music, functioning from the belief that excellence pleases God (Florian, 2004).

Comparing Modern and Medieval Churches

In a fashion similar to the cathedrals, mega churches arose in the United States quite rapidly following the appearance of the first ones. There was a veritable explosion of mega churches during the 1980’s (Thumma, 2006).

Also similar to the way in which Gothic architecture was a departure from the preceding Romanesque movement, many modern mega churches broke from
the traditional Georgian, Gothic and Colonial styles of building that had previously been used for church buildings in the United States.

Like the churches in France, the modern buildings came at a great cost related to the use of fine materials and the importance of aesthetics. Also like the French churches, the construction occurred as a result of great sacrifice on the part of many people, both rich and poor, incurring criticism for the opulent buildings in a time when many people were destitute and suffering.

The mega churches today, like the cathedrals, often favor immense, high-ceilinged buildings with a lot of light, in spite of their nontraditional forms.

 Unlike the cathedrals, the modern mega church buildings do not represent a major architectural or technological accomplishment. Many other extremely large buildings have been built in past years, and there is nothing particularly remarkable about these, other than the size being built by a church. The modern churches do represent some level of social change, but not the all-encompassing change created by the building of the cathedrals. These buildings might change the face of the community in which they are built, but they do not engage the entire community in the same manner as the cathedrals. The changes created by the modern churches are the gathering of larger congregations and some restructuring within the church itself, such as home Bible study groups to enable members to have some intimate social contact with other believers apart from the huge assemblies, but there are no major changes in social or cultural life that are generalized to the entire population of the
community in which the churches appear. However, the gathering of such a large number of people in accord does give them the power of numbers, as was borne out in the way in which the religious right, perhaps made cohesive and given a sense of unity by the large churches, has swung the past two Presidential elections, thus causing major political and social changes in the United States. The church in America today boasts a membership including many affluent individuals and notable political figures, including George W. Bush and at least a dozen members of Congress. Unlike the cathedrals, the modern mega churches were not state subsidized, but they have had an astounding impact on American society and politics (Symonds 2005). The mega churches are the organization responsible for the get-out-the vote rallies, stressing the importance of politics to the religious, ultimately resulting in major political changes in 2000 (Axtman, 2003).

Mega churches are usually located in suburban rather than urban areas like the cathedrals (Thumma, 2006).

Unlike the medieval church, the church today is not dealing with an illiterate population, thus alleviating the need for extensive symbolism in the structure and contents of the building. Today’s believers can read in books what they need to read to understand their faith. However, the use of stained glass windows is still a favored construction choice in the traditional style structures, providing some opportunity for the building to serve as witness to tenets of the faith in some measure.
Conclusions

The built environment provides an archaeologist with a tremendous amount of useable data, and the medieval cathedrals and today’s mega churches are no exception. While there are many differences between the two, there are also some apparent similarities. Each of them provides a window into the culture of their time, illuminating facets of the societies in which they have been constructed. Both the cathedrals and the mega churches are products of their era, and at the same time, serve as catalysts for cultural, social and political change. Similar intents and ideas have cultivated their development, and similar cultural changes occurred as a result of their appearance on the social and physical landscape. It is evident that these buildings have had and will continue to have a significant role in culture.
References Cited

Axtman, K.

Branner, R.
Gothic Architecture, 15 November 2005

Buggeln, G.

Bumpus, T.F.

Clark, S. A.

Crewe, S.

Duby, Georges.

Evans, J.

Favreau, R.

Favreau, R., J. Marcade, M. Mathieu.
"Histoire du Chapitre et de la Paroisse de Sainte-Radegonde."

Favreau, R.

Florian, A.
History and Significance - St. Denis Abbey. 27 November 2005.
Hollister, C.W., and J.M. Bennett.  

Kraus, H.  

Megachurches. 2006. 18 October 2007  
<http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megachurches.html>.

O'Reilly, E.B.  

Pacey, A.  

Sot, M.  

Symonds, W.C., B. Grow, and J. Cady.  

The Anatomy of Mega Churches. 10 October 2005. 26 October 2007  

Thiry, P., Bennett, R.M., and Kamphoefner, H.L.  

Thumma, S.  
*Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena: Their characteristics and cultural context.* 2006. 18 October 2007  
<http://hirr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma_article2.html>.