SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA: Architectural Innovation and Urban Intervention in Response to the Phenomenon of Pilgrimage

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ABSTRACT
In the Middle Ages, commissions from the Catholic Church were the pinnacle of architectural exploration and innovation. Cathedral building became an important practice in the development and formation of cities. The prominence of the church in everyday life was evidenced by an effort to centralize city plans around a cultural, societal, and religious center fronted by the church façade. Forecourts and atriums became important public places for reception and communication. Many of the architectural edifices that survive from this era have undergone a considerable amount of adaptation. There is evidence in the building fabric of ancient cities of a movement from the church as an engaged building, attached or integrated into another building to a freestanding structure. The attempt to build larger, more prominent cathedrals in some cases created problems of congestion and overcrowding. The practice of urban planning expanded in response to this, and is demonstrative of an ideological shift whereby the reality of a monumental church and the ideal of cathedral as the center of culture caused a change in the urban fabric of many cities. In this paper, I will explore the example of Santiago de Compostela, as a cathedral that has inspired the urban planning. In this case study, the city plan evolved integrally and was reoriented in various stages to embrace the major church.

In the Middles Ages architectural expression across Europe was glorified in the development of church typology. The single most important contribution to this development was an increasing prominence in the practice of pilgrimage. The pilgrimage route now known as the “Camino de Santiago” or the “Way of St. James” has remained the most populous Christian pilgrimage route in the world for the last 1100 years.¹ The Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela,
the final destination of the Camino, exemplifies the “pilgrimage church typology” and is a masterpiece of both Romanesque and Baroque architecture. The history of Santiago is characterized by architectural and urban interventions that successfully responded to the specific needs of the time and place. The conditions which promulgated the creation of the current shrine, as well as its subsequent alterations and additions, affirm the preeminence of pilgrimage in the exploration of new architectural forms. Likewise, the implications of pilgrimage at the urban scale are evident in the city plan surrounding the cathedral, as well as in the various infrastructural developments along the Camino. The integral growth of Santiago de Compostela is demonstrative of a greater pattern of development that spread across Europe in response to the cultural phenomenon of pilgrimage.

According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, a pilgrimage is “a journey of prayer,” which often includes “visiting holy sites,” or “accompanying the poor, oppressed, and refugees in their times of trial.” Saint Helen, the mother of the first Christian Roman Emperor Constantine, began the practice of pilgrimage in Christendom when she traveled to Jerusalem in 324 A.D. During her two years in the Holy Land, St. Helen rediscovered many important sites from the life of Christ, including the hill of Calvary and the rock-cut tomb. St. Helen also recovered the true cross, the cross of Christ, and thereby began the tradition of collecting relics. A relic is a physical object which is connected or associated with a particular saint. The most sacred relics are the earthly vessels with which the saints interacted with the physical world, or their physical bodies. Relics are important to the faithful, who believe that graces can be obtained by venerating the saints. Churches that house the relics of notable saints were the first places to be popularized by pilgrims. By the early Middle Ages, populous pilgrimage destinations served as epicenters of culture and community. Pilgrimage at this time was a rigorously demanding and sacrificial act. Most often pilgrims were traveling by foot, sometimes going days between towns without access to food, water, or shelter. Churches along pilgrimage routes would often allow pilgrims to sleep on the floor. One medieval pilgrim wrote of his journey to Santiago: “If you want to know misery / you should follow me on the road to Santiago.” Yet, as historian Spiro Kostof attests: “in medieval society relics mattered more than
any other fixture of daily existence.”

At Santiago de Compostela, the major relics of St. James the Apostle, the brother of St. John, have attracted pilgrims since the 9th century. St. James’s was killed by the sword of King Herod in 44 A.D. According to a 12th century apocryphal text, the *Codex Calixtinus*, two of St. James’ disciples took his body and carried it to Jaffa, where a miraculous ship took them on a seven day journey through the Mediterranean and up the west coast of Spain to a remote region near Iria Flavia Galicia. Once there, a pious woman gave the disciples land to bury the Apostle. They erected a tomb and set up an altar above the body. The location of the tomb was hidden during the Moorish invasion of Spain in the 700s, and subsequently forgotten. About the year 813, a hermit named Pelayo, living on the present site of Santiago de Compostela, saw mysterious lights in the sky. He called this to the attention of the Bishop of Iria, named Theodomiro. Upon investigation into the phenomenon, the ruins of a small building were discovered which Theodomiro recognized to be the lost burial place of St. James. He communicated news of the discovery to King Alfonso II, ruler of Asturias and Galicia, who immediately commissioned the reconstruction of the tomb and the addition of a small nave. Whether or not the apocryphal is accurate, the medieval audience believed it to be, and a town quickly formed around the chapel. In 899, King Alfonso III mandated the creation of a new church on the site in the mature Asturian-Visigotic style to accommodate and impress the townspeople. The new church brought more attention and popularity to the relics, causing the town to develop considerably in a short amount of time. By 997, the city was large enough to attract the campaign of Almanzor of Cordoba, who raided the city and caused considerable damage. The church underwent reconstruction and was again consecrated in 1003. By this time, popularized routes to Santiago had begun to fenestrate the surrounding regions, and the amount of people making pilgrimage to the site continued to increase.

By halfway through the century, it was evident to Santiago’s Bishop Don Diego Pelaez that a new church was necessary. To accommodate the growing number of pilgrims, Bishop Pelaez recognized that the new church would need to be a formidable size. Furthermore, he desired that the edifice be a spectacle of grandeur to
make the arduous journey of the Camino worthwhile. Bishop Pelaez realized that in order to achieve the necessary size, the monastery of San Pelayo de Antealtares, adjoined to the existing Church on the east, would need to be demolished. Though challenged by the hostility of the monastery, Bishop Pelaez acquired the support of King Alfonso VI. Whitehill asserts the audacity of Bishop Pelaez’s vision, “best realized when one remembers that half a century before nothing was being built in Spain (as distinct from Catalonia) that could be called architecture.”

The new Cathedral was conceived in a manner alike to the pilgrimage churches of southern France, adopting many features to accommodate large quantities of pilgrims. Kenneth J. Conant, one of the most important historians of medieval architecture, described the vocabulary of the pilgrimage typology as “Typically, grand in scale, with a long nave, aisles and a gallery, a wide transept, and a spacious sanctuary arm. An ambulatory about the perimeter of the building, demarcated by arches and columns, and often the use of barrel vaulting.” In addition to these features, the design adopted the convention of a Latin cruciform plan linearly oriented to face the east. The church would include a cloister and was to be engaged in the urban fabric (as opposed to freestanding). By 1077, the site had been acquired, and the construction of the new edifice began in 1078. Brown granite was chosen due to the proximity of a nearby quarry. With half the building complete in 1112 (apse, transept, and four bays of the nave), the sanctuary was consecrated. By 1120, the completed church spanned 365 feet in length and over 250 feet in width. This monumental scale accommodated many features envisioned by Bishop Don Diego Pelaez. Adapted from the tradition of northern European churches, a massive west facing façade, called a westwerk, was the primary entrance façade. Seven initial towers marked the expanses of the building as well as the transept crossing. An ambulatory running about the perimeter of the building allows for the celebration of the sacraments to remain uninterrupted by pilgrims. Gallery space atop the ambulatory quantifies the capacity for pilgrims to gather. Nine protruding apsidal chapels behind the main sanctuary apse allow for private celebration of the sacraments away from the main altar. Not long after the initial construction, fortifications and a new bell tower were added in the 12th century.
In the immediate area surrounding the building, a strategic effort was made to preserve open space for public squares. Four plazas break the dense urban fabric to allow for façade frontage and entrances to the cathedral. The large forecourt in front of the westwerk, called the “Praza de Obradoiro,” is the largest square in Galicia and provides space for pilgrims to convene. Stonemasons used the space during construction, earning it the name obradoiro which is a Galician term for a workshop. To the north of the cathedral is Praza Inmaculada, to the east is Praza de la Quintana, and to the south is Praza de las Platerias (named so due to the proximity of silversmith shops). Facing the church façade onto an atrium enhances the experiential prominence of the building and qualifies a sense of grandeur. The geographic location of the cathedral at a high
elevation in the city further enhances the sense of monumentality and commands the attention of the pilgrim from a long distance away.\textsuperscript{30}

The original Romanesque projection of the Cathedral of Santiago was a seemingly monolithic and highly volumetric massing.\textsuperscript{32} Sculptural reliefs above the entrance lintels were the only ornament present on the facades. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the building exterior underwent a complete transformation. Pena de Toro designed a new tower in 1667 for the westwerk's southern corner, later matched by another on the north corner. In 1738, Fernando Casa y Novoa added an entirely new façade in the Baroque-Churrigueresque style. 524 feet across the width of the west front, the Obradoiro façade replaced the 12th century edifice and created an entirely new experience of the cathedral.\textsuperscript{33} In contrast to the austere

Figure 2: View of the current (Baroque) westwerk from the plaza de Obradoiro\textsuperscript{31}
granite of the Romanesque projection, the highly sculptural Baroque ornament further dramatizes the building’s size by giving a sense of scale and depth. Historian Alejandro Lapunzina emphasizes the new façade’s “attention to detail and relief, ascending sequence of superimposed tiers of columns, pilasters, and deeply carved arched niches lodging statues, and fragmented arched pediments that do not interrupt the accentuated verticality of the façade’s new monumental centerfold.”34 The expansion of the center pediment and addition to the towers give the impression of a freestanding structure set above the surrounding urban fabric. The baroque transformation was so extensive that the only part of the Romanesque façade that survives is the Puerta de las Platerías.35

In addition to the innovations within the city of Santiago, the route of the Camino de Santiago has influenced the surrounding landscapes through the development of infrastructural projects. In the 11th century, King Alfonso V (and later Alfonso VI) financed the building of bridges in the high road through the Pyrenees Mountains.36 The wealthy Count of Blois and Tours similarly built a bridge in 1035 spanning twenty-seven arches over the Loire which he intended to be for all pilgrims “be they foreign or native, poor or rich, come they on foot or mount, with burden or without.”37

The cultural phenomenon of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages was the single most important contribution to the development of new architectural typologies and urban interventions. For 1,100 years, the city of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Spain has attracted pilgrims by having the major relics of St. James the Apostle. A typological development of the pilgrimage church, the Romanesque Cathedral was designed to both accommodate pilgrims and impress the viewer. The integral development of the cathedral and the surrounding urban fabric have successfully mitigated the increasing numbers of pilgrims by adapting to their specific needs. Whitehill emphasizes that “almost any other church seems cold beside it, for the cathedral of Santiago is a living thing that has grown more beautiful with the passing of the centuries.”38 Likewise, Alejandro Lapunzina testifies: “the cathedral of Santiago stands as a living testimony to the internationalization of architectural developments and building techniques provoked by the fluid traffic of ideas triggered by the growth of the pilgrimage.”39 The architectural and urban innovations that punctuate the history of
Santiago de Compostela are indicative of a pattern of development that permeated throughout Europe from the Middle Ages onward.

Figure 3: Plan of the romanesque cathedral⁴⁰
Figure 4: Baroque Exterior Overpowering City\textsuperscript{41}
NOTES


4. Ibid.


6. Ibid.


13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.


16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.


21. Ibid., 266.


25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.


29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 31-32.


33. Ibid.


35. Ibid., 35.


37. Ibid.


40. Julio Donón Cordero, *Planta de la Catedral de Santiago*, 1866, Descripcio historico artistica arqueologica de la Catedral de Santiago, Available from: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Planta_de_la_Catedral_de_Santiago._Descripcio_hist%C3%B3rico-art%C3%ADstica-arqueol%C3%B3gica_de_la_Catedral_de_Santiago._1866.jpg.