FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Architecture

**Great Cathedrals**
Bernhard Schtz
Theresa J. Slowik
978-0-8109-3297-5
(November 30, 2002)

A photograph of the vivid octagonal ceiling of the Cathedral of Ely graces the cover of this imposing book. One notices first the colors, exploding outward from a central point: elaborate, even riotous, yet somehow contained by the carefully ordered, gold-painted ribs that radiate outward from a central star. The author's handling of his topic is very similar: with a profusion of architectural feats to discuss, spanning seven European countries and thirty-six cathedrals, he somehow manages to tame his subject matter and present it harmoniously.

Professor of Architectural History at the University of Munich, and an authority on the architecture of the Middle Ages and the Baroque and Romantic periods, Schultz begins by simply defining his subject. He notes that when they see the title of this book, most people will undoubtedly think first of the famous Gothic cathedrals of France. He explains, however: "the word 'cathedral' actually has nothing to do with Gothic, but simply describes the church of a bishopric. That is why there are also cathedrals in the Romanesque, Renaissance, Baroque, and every other style, including contemporary, up to the present."

The author continues in this precise vein throughout his sizeable work, explaining, connecting, drawing conclusions-a very able guide to follow through these massive architectural wonders. Information-packed, the book is laid out in an orderly fashion, organized first by country and then by cathedral within that country. Schultz offers a useful overview of each country's architectural history (as well as the political and historical trends behind it) at the start of each segment. Throughout are hundreds of black-and-white photographs and plans, along with beautiful, full-color prints.

These stunning photographs of (equally stunning) subjects are unquestionably impressive—it is difficult to not marvel at the grand, sweeping heft of a fantastically domed ceiling, the texture of ancient and elaborate stonework, or the intricate detail of a choir, even in black and white. In the color plates, the glorious gilt-and-rainbow of the stained glass windows

is especially breathtaking. Yet this is no mere coffee table book, full of pretty pictures and a few light observations and quotes. The author discusses the political and historical motivations behind the building of each cathedral, as well as the architectural traditions that led up to and followed it. Schultz even shares interesting asides, such as excerpts from the journal of Abbot Suger of Cluny about the design and erection of his cathedral. These extra tidbits are useful as well as entertaining. Schultz, somewhat wryly, mentions an anonymous thirteenth-century English author who “broke into metaphorical raptures” describing Lincoln Cathedral. As he describes that author’s vision of decorative shafts as “slender maidens dancing in a ring” and vaults as birds “spreading their wings to fly high into the clouds,” the reader gets a still stronger sense of the creative art behind the cathedral’s design.

Schultz shares his own vision as well, most notably in the introduction. Touching on the inherently religious and inspirational nature of these buildings, he writes: “The architectural structure and the windows together create an aura that has something mysterious and numinous about it, and is also an expression of the transcendental. Thus, even today’s cultivated visitors detect, with the same powerful immediacy as the Romantics before them, when they rediscovered the Gothic cathedrals and praised them in hymns, that this is the house of God. It is a holy place, to which reverence is due. Never before or after has the vision of sacredness so magically affected the mind.”

Schultz’s undoubted expertise, the beauty of the many color photographs, and his fascination with his subject do not mean, however, that this is an easy book to read. Even an architecture scholar may find the amassed information daunting, and a reader who knows nothing whatsoever of architecture might well find himself out of his depth, as Schultz describes spandrels, triforium arcades, corbels, and ambulatories in mystifying detail.

The text is small, and the book is physically, as well as intellectually, weighty. Light reading, however, is not what one looks for in a book on this subject. Instead, thorough scholarship and plenty of information, coupled with a straightforward approach, are most to be desired-and Schultz succeeds in this regard. The plenitude of photographs is an extremely attractive bonus. This book is an invaluable aid to students of architecture, and a source of illumination for cathedral buffs. The less knowledgeable, drawn to it by the gorgeous color pictures, will receive an education.

*Julie Dawson Govan*