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Barry Bergdoll to Take Part in an Event on Notre-Dame's Restoration

He discusses the massive, recently completed five-year project on the cathedral with *Columbia News*.

March 06, 2025



On March 12, 2025, [Maison Francaise](#) [↗](#) and the World Monuments Fund (WMF) will present the 2025 Paul Mellon Lecture, highlighting the monumental, five-year restoration of Notre-Dame de Paris, France, after the cathedral's [devastating fire in April 2019](#). Philippe Villeneuve, chief architect of the restoration, will deliver the lecture. He will be joined by [Barry Bergdoll](#), [↗](#) Meyer Schapiro Professor of Art History and Archaeology; landscape architect Bas Smets, who won the 2021 international design competition to reimagine Notre-Dame's surroundings; Patrick Malloy, dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, where the [6 p.m. event](#) [↗](#) will take place; and Bénédicte de Montlaur, president and CEO of WMF.

Bergdoll discusses the restoration of Notre-Dame with *Columbia News*.

What was your part in the Notre-Dame restoration project?

I did not contribute personally. My only participation was being one of the millions of people around the world saddened on the day before my own birthday in April 2019 to see one of the masterpieces of architectural history in flames in my beloved city of Paris. Subsequently, I signed petitions against President Macron's desire to replace the lost 19th-century spire (from which the statuary had been saved a few days before the fire, when the sculptures were taken down for restoration work) with a new, 21st-century spire.

As a scholar of 19th-century French architecture, and something of an expert on Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc—who restored Notre-Dame between 1843 and 1868—I was appalled at this suggestion, which flies in the face of the Venice Charter on Historic Restoration, and against the UNESCO designation of the cathedral as a world heritage monument. My signature on the petition in *Le Figaro* newspaper led to an interview on the subject in *Le Monde* newspaper, in which I contested the efforts to undertake a hybrid restoration/modernization. In the current controversy over the replacement of 19th-century, stained-glass windows in the cathedral, I have again signed petitions against this move.



What do you think were the most difficult parts of the project?

The need to move with military speed after the disastrous fire, which left Notre-Dame vulnerable to the collapse of more vaults in the days after the fire, and in the complex operation of removing the charred scaffolding from the heights of the cathedral.

Has the restoration prevented the possibility of massive future fires at the cathedral?

Yes. The rebuilt roof carpentry (*forêt*) has new monitoring systems, and is subdivided in ways to prevent the rapid spread of a fire, should one occur again in the upper reaches of the cathedral. Also, Notre-Dame's restoration has sounded the alarm for other cathedrals—notably, Sens Cathedral in France—with similar wooden roof structures.

How complex was the restoration?

Astoundingly complex. We would have to go back to the aftermath of the world wars to find a building whose structure had been so imperiled. It was a balancing act, and a miracle that today it is impossible visually to distinguish which parts of the vaults were reconstructed and which were simply cleaned. The sequencing of work to stabilize the cathedral, and then proceed to work was unbelievably complicated.

Anything that you would like to add?

Notre-Dame as restored retains a respect for its complex history. Philippe Villeneuve and his teams have not only given us back the medieval vaults, but also the subtle wall paintings and polychromy in the apse chapels, which are products of the 19th-century restoration by Viollet-le-Duc. Villeneuve's recreation of Viollet's spire is a masterwork, altered only by the addition of a new rooster atop the spire, signed by Villeneuve and given wings to suggest a phoenix reborn from a tragic fire.

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