



Jason R. Crow

A New Material Interpretation of Twelfth-Century Architecture

Reconstructing the Abbey of Saint-Denis

Amsterdam
University
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A New Material Interpretation of Twelfth-Century Architecture

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Selbst ein Teil des Organismus, muß in ihm zwar, wie in jedem Knochen, eine lebendige Selbstbildung gedacht werden, so daß, hiernach betrachtet, er von seiner Seite vielmehr das Gehirn drückt und dessen äußere Beschränkung setzt; wozu er auch als das Härtere eher das Vermögen hat. (Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 329)—For Torben

Cover illustration: The Chalice of Saint-Denis began as a small sardonyx cup. The Abbot Suger had artisans remount the cup in gold inlaid with precious and semi-precious stones, pearls, and glass as part of his larger project to expand and rebuild the abbey church at Saint-Denis. From the Widener Collection, Accession number 1942.9.277, courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington.

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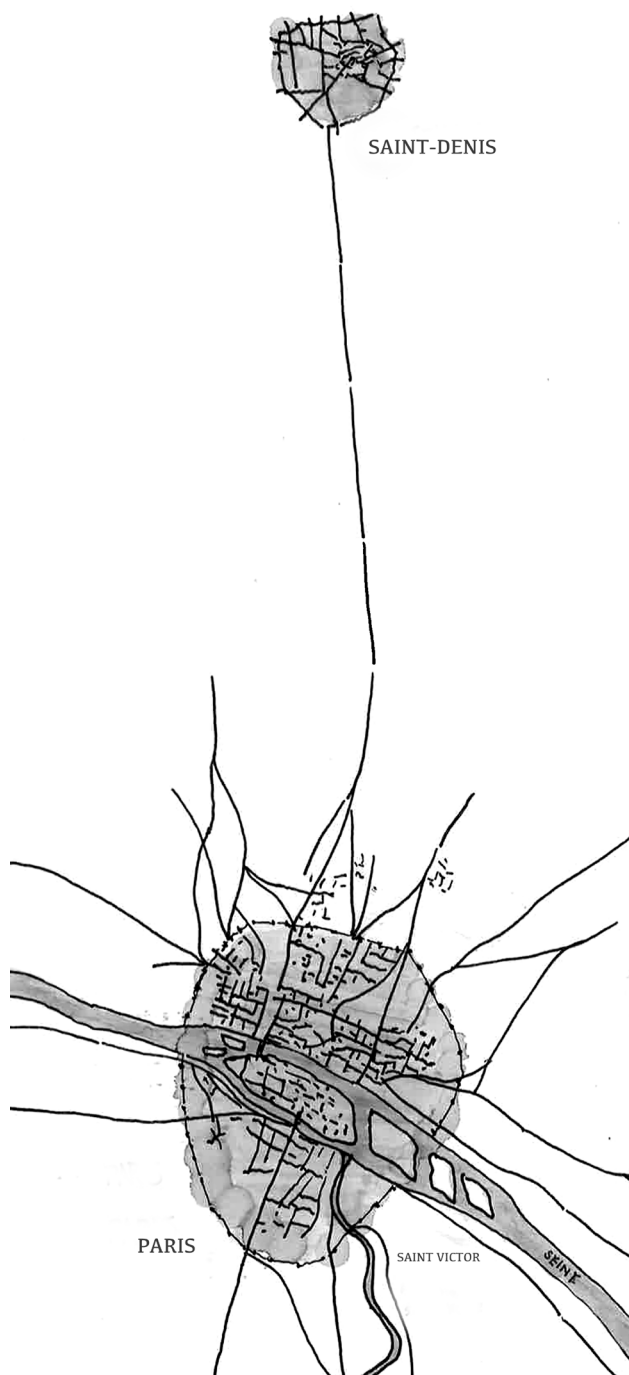
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Introduction

Today, we perceive Gothic cathedrals as light-filled forms representing the sacred. The colored light projected from brightly-colored stained glass windows onto the walls and floors of these buildings seemingly dances, as it simultaneously suggests the presence of divinity. Opening the walls to allow for the insertion of the glass that brightens the interiors of what once had been, perhaps, dark and claustrophobic spaces is understood to be the key characteristic of the Gothic form of twelfth-century architecture. Suger (1081–1151CE), the abbot of the monastery of Saint-Denis, just outside the walls of Paris, is credited with originating the architectural change that filled later medieval structures with light. However, focus on the form and structure of Gothic architecture has elided attention to the material out of which medieval churches were made. In this book, I argue that the materiality of the church offered and continues to offer insight into how an individual, such as Suger or one of his monks, achieved a mystical union with divinity.

At some point, early in the twelfth century, Suger likely began planning to tear down the existing church at his abbey, dedicated to Saint-Denis, the third-century Bishop of Paris, so that the building could be reconstructed to accommodate the growing number of pilgrims who visited the church. In addition to being the Abbot of Saint-Denis, Suger is recognized for his achievements as a historian and a politician. Suger's reconstruction of the abbey church at Saint-Denis formed an expansive and integrated program of work to reconstruct France and the terrestrial realm. Suger was intimately connected with Louis VI, Louis VII, and the papacy in Rome throughout his career as a monk, abbot, and politician. He deployed his skills in the political realm to develop and solidify the emerging territory of France as a state that he understood to be a vassal of the abbey, as outlined in his *Vita Ludovici Grossi Regis*, a history of the life of Louis VI. However, the abbey Suger inherited from his predecessor, Adam, was held in disrepute and had fallen into disrepair. Reforming the monastery was a lifelong concern of Suger and included reestablishing the reputation of the abbey and its importance for the monarchy. Part of this work involved the creation of a

Figure 1 Map of the City of Paris and the Town of Saint-Denis

Map showing location of the town of Saint-Denis in relation to the city of Paris around 1180CE. Note: The walk from the Île de la Cité to the Abbey of Saint-Denis covers roughly ten kilometers in distance. Permissions: Drawing by author.

church that matched this political ambition. While Suger's stated goal for his renovations at Saint-Denis was practical, namely, to increase the church's capacity to handle pilgrims, the architectural program for his abbey and its church must be observed as part of his larger theological agenda to place the world in order with state and king subordinate to bishop and abbey, which were in turn subordinate to the universal church and God.

Suger's earliest endeavor, undertaken between 1122 and 1125, was to repair and repaint the Carolingian structure left to him by Fulrad. In 1125, he initiated his project to reconstruct the west end of the church, and textual evidence points to major work on the project being underway by 1137. It seems certain that plans to rebuild the east end of the church were also conceptualized at this time. Foundation work was likely begun on the towers of the new westwork in the 1130s and for the choir in 1140, and the reconstruction at both ends was completed quickly, with the consecration occurring in 1140 and 1144, respectively.¹ Around 1148, work was underway on new transepts and possibly expanding the church aisles. However, the thirteenth-century project to rebuild the nave and transepts portion of the church has made dating for Suger's "new middle" of the church impossible with certainty.

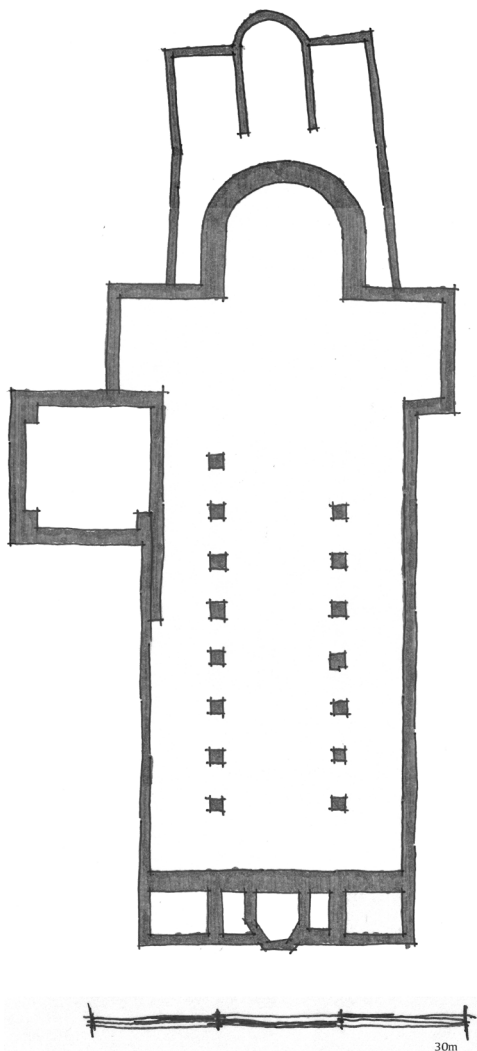
The transformation of his church that he envisioned and realized is considered to be grounded in structural innovations, which opened the walls of stone and filled them with multicolored stained glass. The imagined experience of these walls presented images of jewel-like light flooding into the new church. This modern understanding of the abbey church at Saint-Denis as a light-filled form is most indebted to Otto von Simson's writings about the Gothic style, who argued strenuously that light was the primary element of Gothic architecture. It is largely from his work that the style is associated with a "transparent, diaphanous architecture."²

His seminal text, *The Gothic Cathedral: The Origins of Gothic Architecture and Medieval Order*, declares that the originality of the Gothic style is to be found in "the use of light and the unique relationship between structure and appearance." He immediately qualifies this introduction to his subject by saying that when he speaks of light, he is discussing its relationship "to the material substance of the walls."³ In the following pages of his book,

1 Conrad Rudolph, *Artistic Change: Abbot Suger's Program and the Early Twelfth-Century Controversy Over Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 20-21.

2 In particular, see Otto Georg von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 3.

3 Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral*, 4.

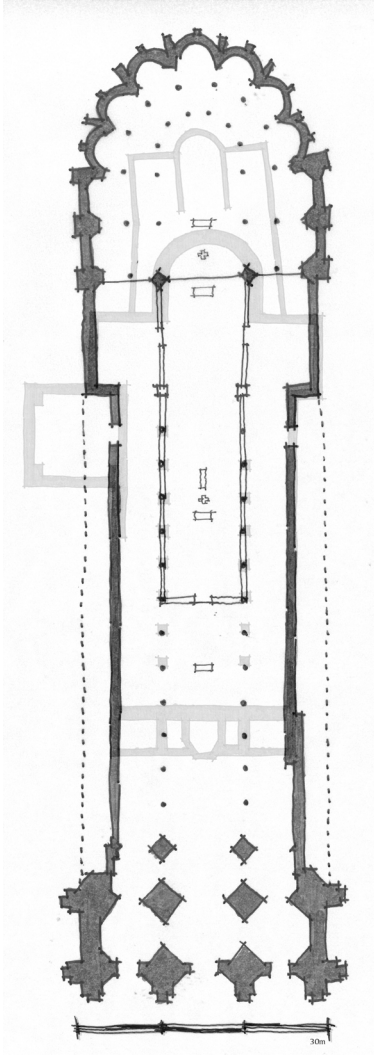
Figure 2 Reconstructed Plan of Fulrad's Church ca 1080CE

Reconstructed plan of Fulrad's church
(768-775CE) with Hilduin's Chapel
(832CE) and Charlemagne's Tower,
following Crosby, *The Royal Abbey of
Saint-Denis*.
Permissions: Drawing by Author

however, Simson's lack of consideration for the material nature of the walls is quickly apparent. In his analysis, the walls of the Gothic cathedral become transparent, invert gravity, and deny the "impenetrable nature of matter."⁴ They are reduced to the formalism implicit in his "geometrical functionalism."⁵

4 Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral*, 4.

5 Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral*, 8.

Figure 3 Reconstructed Plan of Saint-Denis Showing Suger's Reconstruction

Reconstructed plan of Saint-Denis showing relationship to Fulrad's church. The light gray shows the extents of the Carolingian structure and the dark gray represents the work, as completed during Suger's lifetime. The westwork was completed between 1137 and 1141CE. The new chevet was built between 1141 and 1144CE. The dotted line provides the approximate location of the foundations dug for the new nave walls between 1147 and 1151CE. After Crosby, *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis* and Wyss, *Atlas Historique de Saint-Denis*. Permissions: Drawing by Author

In his discussion of the twelfth-century renovations of the abbey church, Simson encapsulates his understanding of the Gothic as the Abbot's Dionysian-inspired "invention." He states, "Suger was the first to conceive the architectural system as but a frame for his windows, and to conceive his windows not as wall openings but as translucent surfaces to be adorned with sacred paintings."⁶ Strip away the sacred paintings, and Simson's

6 Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral*, 122.

interpretation of Saint-Denis resembles the Crystal Palace of 1851 despite the radically different philosophical and historical contexts of these two buildings. In reducing the Gothic light-containing church to a discussion of form, Simson overlooks the twelfth-century understanding of matter. This subject is critical to Suger's own framing of how the church is to be interpreted.

Uniquely for twelfth-century buildings, the abbot wrote three different treatises on his architectural endeavors—*De Administratione*—*On the Administration*, *De Consecratione*—*On the Consecration*, and *Ordinatione*—*On the Ordination*.⁷ His writings are the earliest known medieval account of an architectural project. The texts largely relate to the management of the abbey, its monks, and its lands. However, they also describe Suger's justifications, program, and consecration for his rebuilt abbey church in detail. A constant theme in Suger's three short documents is that the old abbey church, though beautiful, fostered chaos and confusion due to its small size and, therefore, had to be enlarged to accommodate the masses of pilgrims visiting its collection of sacred relics. However, architectural historians have, by and large, used these texts to support an entire theory of Gothic architecture based on Neoplatonic concepts of divine light. Foremost among these was Erwin Panofsky, who, in 1946, translated and published selections from these texts that he perceived to address Suger's architectural intentions.⁸ Panofsky became the scholar most directly responsible for the association of Suger's renovation project with Pseudo-Dionysian light metaphysics. According to Pseudo-Dionysius (late fifth to early sixth century), mystical ascent was achieved through contemplation of material things, which, in turn, could lead to greater intellectual understanding and unity with the godhead. Panofsky supports a link between Pseudo-Dionysius and Suger's discussion of mystical ascent in which the abbot claims that he was carried away into ecstatic bliss through the contemplation of the relics and liturgical vessels in the church's treasury.

7 The primary Latin-French translation of Suger's works is by A. Françoise Gasparri (2008). The most accessible Latin-English translation was created by Erwin Panofsky (1946) and revised in a second edition by Gerda Panofsky-Soergel in 1979. However, Panofsky's edition is only partial. See *Suger: Oeuvres*, trans. Françoise Gasparri (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2008) and Erwin Panofsky, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and Its Art Treasures*, 2nd Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). Hereafter, references to Suger's texts will be by the short names of the text, page numbers, part, and section numbers in Gasparri's edition, followed by section and line numbers in Panofsky's work. Book chapters and sections will follow in parentheses, i.e., "Gasparri, *De Administratione*, 1 (II, 1); Panofsky, 1 (I, 1)."

8 Panofsky, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis*.

The site of the Abbey of Saint-Denis, just north of Paris, was associated with the martyrdom of Denis, the patron saint of France. Denis was a conflation of three historical figures: Dionysius the Areopagite, a pagan converted to Christianity by the apostle Paul; Saint Denis, martyred Bishop of Paris; and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, late fifth- or early sixth-century author of a Christianized Neoplatonic light metaphysics. The assumption that the three figures were the same formed the basis of Saint-Denis' claim to be the royal abbey of France. As early as the sixth century, the abbey became the burial place of the kings and queens of France and the repository for royal documents.⁹

The earliest chapel built on the site of the supposed martyrdom can also be traced back to the sixth century, and evidence survives in the foundation walls of the current church of this earlier structure.¹⁰ The Merovingian King Dagobert I (died 639) expanded the chapel. However, it was the construction of a larger basilica and crypt by Abbot Fulrad (710-748) that cemented the association of Saint-Denis with the monarchy of France early in the Carolingian era.¹¹ Fulrad's church, which does not appear to have been completed before the ninth century, was the building Suger inherited when he became abbot in 1122.¹²

Any modification to Fulrad's church required careful consideration and significant expertise. According to church legend, the structure and the material out of which it was built were considered sacred, having been miraculously sanctified by Christ himself. However, Suger has been characterized as a bit of a nincompoop who was dazzled by material wealth. After Panofsky's glowing endorsement of Suger's originality, scholar after scholar has questioned the abbot's role in the project. Foremost among Suger's detractors is Peter Kidson, who took both Suger and Panofsky to task for overselling themselves and the abbey. For Kidson, Suger was simply a politician playing with politics and words. He was not an intellectual, lacking the sharpness and precision needed to justify the reconstruction of Saint-Denis. Kidson stressed that the records on Saint-Denis stem from the patrons of the work, not the artisans. While he does not doubt that clergy would have created a symbolic overlay for medieval art and architecture, that symbolic contribution told only a partial and superficial story. "Armchair art

9 Sumner McKnight Crosby and Pamela Blum, *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis: From Its Beginnings to the Death of Suger, 475-1151* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 4-5.

10 Crosby and Blum, *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis*, 15.

11 Crosby and Blum, *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis*, 51-52.

12 Crosby and Blum, *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis*, 83.

historians,” such as Panofsky, “dream up iconographical fantasies that all too often could have never been taken seriously by any practicing architect.”¹³ For Kidson, only the architect of Saint-Denis was responsible for any innovations at the abbey and with the church’s reconstruction, and Suger was not the architect.¹⁴ Like Suger, Kidson was also not an architect, and unlike Suger, he imagines a role for an architect that did not exist in the twelfth-century.¹⁵ Although obscure to a contemporary visitor and reader, Suger left behind a building and a series of texts that, when read closely, reveal a sophisticated approach to maintaining the sanctity of Fulrad’s church, despite taking it apart and putting it back together with a mixture of new and old materials.

In this book, I contend that Suger presents a strong argument for the reconstruction of the abbey church through its materiality, the stones that make up the walls, floors, and many of the furnishings of the building. The work puts forward a sophisticated, theological argument that its crafted conditions demonstrate a material perfection that parallels the material perfection of the sacraments, through which divine power manifests in the terrestrial realm. Almost secondary to the matter of the church, the iconographical and sculptural program of the building act as a guide for understanding the material demonstration at stake at Saint-Denis. Effectively, the carefully wrought stones of the church demonstrate that craft prepares a body to be filled up with divine presence. Suger’s three little texts, the *De Administratione*, the *De Consecratione*, and the *Ordinatione*, supplement what the stones have to say about how worldly matter can be transformed to obtain something more like the perfect materiality of the incarnated Christ, the rock, as identified by Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians. Reading Suger’s texts with the material of the church in mind clarifies much of what has appeared muddled about his efforts at Saint-Denis. Instead of an apology for a fascination with opulence and wealth, Suger’s writing reinforces the reconstruction of the abbey church as a kind of material mysticism.

To unpack Suger’s argument for the reconstruction of the church, I examine the abbot’s infamous addition of a material pathway to Heaven to

13 Peter Kidson, “Panofsky, Suger and St Denis,” *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 50 (1987), 5.

14 Kidson, “Panofsky, Suger and St Denis,” 11 and 17.

15 To be fair, Kidson would have known and acknowledged the mason as the person most directly responsible for the building of the Gothic cathedral. However, his assumption that architecture is defined by its geometry and measure is problematic. Stephen Parcell traces the historical development of the role and position of the architect in his *Four Historical Definitions of Architecture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012).

the spiritual path of the Pauline Letter to the Ephesians within the broader context of twelfth-century matter theory. I follow with an analysis of the twelfth-century understanding of craft as a mystical practice. Subsequently, I explore the role of architectural metaphors in explicating mystical ascent. I conclude with a close reading of Suger's proclamation that to know the properties of stone is to know something about the process of mystical ascent. Placed within the context of matter theory, craft theory, and material metaphors for mystical transformation, the new abbey church at Saint-Denis demonstrates how twelfth-century theology and science offer a combined approach to completing the divine plan for creating the material world.

In chapter one, *Materializing the Way*, I introduce and contextualize Suger's reconstruction of Saint-Denis concerning how matter was theorized in the twelfth century. Suger is often denigrated for adding a "material way" to the Pauline discussion of ecclesiastical unity in the Letter to the Ephesians. Infamously, the abbot appears to misread the seemingly metaphorical reference in the letter that combines political unity with the image of the two walls of a church being joined together. Christ, in the metaphor, is like the cornerstone that joins the two walls. I argue that Suger takes this metaphor literally, building upon the underlying cosmology in Paul's letters. To support this approach to elucidating Suger's material way, I begin with a review of the role of materiality, particularly with respect to prime matter, in the scientific explanations for the origin of the universe. In the twelfth century, cosmology originated in the translation and commentary on Plato's *Timaeus* by Calcidius, the fourth-century philosopher. The critical role of matter in the teleology of the cosmos and the ultimate ends of creation was central to the incorporation of material approaches to Neoplatonic procession and return to unity with the godhead. Figuring God as an artisan heavily influenced the matter theory of the twelfth century and provided a central place for the materiality of Saint-Denis, stone, in realizing the divine plan for the material universe. Bernardus Silvestris (hereafter referred to as Silvester; d. 1178), the master of natural philosophy from the Chartres School, encapsulated Calcidius' creation mythology in his poetic reimagining of the *Timaeus* in his *Cosmographia*. Silvester's text is replete with craft and architectural metaphors that focus on transforming a pile of stones into a wall as the delimiting of cosmological and terrestrial bodies. While the scientific explanations for creation and material change seem divorced from theology, particularly in the twelfth century, a large portion of the first chapter is devoted to unpacking the matter theory embedded in Hugh of Saint-Victor's (1094-1141) *De Sacramentis*, noted as the first theological summa. Hugh, the abbot of the Augustinian canons at the

Abbey of Saint-Victor in Paris, is often mentioned as the intellect behind Suger's architectural and sculptural program at Saint-Denis. However, his questions about matter and its role in the salvation and redemption of the cosmos have gone unnoticed. In short, Hugh stated that making the world beautiful beatified it and those who transformed it. Suger's material approach to mysticism can be understood to be founded on a parallel set of beliefs that crafting the world led to its sanctification.

Chapter two explores craft more generally as a mystical practice or form of prayer. While much of the literature on the history of the craft manual has attempted to disentangle magical nonsense from practical instruction and recipes for the making of functional art, there is a growing appreciation for texts, such as Theophilus Presbyter's *de diversis artibus*, in explaining the tropological and even mystical role of craft to the artisan. The chapter begins with a review of the manner in which evocative descriptions and explanations of supernatural change were couched in more mundane transformations brought about by melting, carving, shaping, and polishing of various materials. The use of mixed craft metaphors by Peter of Celle (1115-1183), the twelfth-century Abbot of Saint Remi at Reims, where he undertook his architectural projects, is offered as an exemplar of how the sacramental change of bread into a divine body was understood in the Middle Ages. Peter's metaphorical appreciation of change introduces the writing of a second Peter, Peter the Painter (fl. 1100), who complained of his lack of time to write caused by his work as an artist. Peter the Painter and his discussion of Eucharistic change are of interest, as his metaphors overlap with his day-to-day activities. That overlap is acknowledged in Theophilus' book on the diverse arts through the series of prologues he wrote for each of his three books. These prologues guide the reader to an awareness of craft as a conduit for receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit, an infusion with divinity, thereby hinting at the parallel reception by Suger of divine presence through his work to rebuild his abbey and its church.

Chapter three shifts focus to analyze how Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), the spiritual leader of the Cistercians, employs mixed metaphors of artisanal practice to illustrate both the state of earthly perfection his monks and brothers might achieve and the ultimate material transformation that would lead to them fully becoming one with Christ as his bride. Although the assumed antagonism between Bernard and Suger has been defused by scholars such as Conrad Rudolph, Bernard's use of material metaphors in his treatises and sermons suggests an even closer affinity between the two abbots than has previously been realized. A central metaphor of the ecclesia or the body as a house that it is to be cleansed and purified cuts across his

early sermon *On Conversion* and establishes a more evocative metaphor in which the wall of the church is repaired to brighten the edifice and to open the spiritual vision of his community. Bernard's mysticism is thereby grounded in a material explanation if not a material way. However, the materiality of twelfth-century Cistercian churches adheres more closely to the materiality of Suger's renovated Saint-Denis. While abbey churches, such as Fontfroide, Fontenay, or Thoronet, differ from the iconographical and sculptural exuberance of Benedictine abbey churches like Suger's, there are hints and clues that twelfth-century matter theory guided their creation and design. From a material perspective, the Cistercian buildings were not that different from Suger's building. Suger's theological conclusions may have differed from Bernard's, but his path to develop them into an architectural program resonated with Bernard's mystical theology.

In the concluding chapter, I argue that Suger conceptualized the church and its reconstruction in the same way that he would have conceptualized the crafting to perfection of the gemstones he adored. Suger's focus on those stones and the church was grounded in the matter theory and theology of his time, which supported the idea that the artisanal transformation of the material world made it into what God had intended it to become from the initial moment of creation. The church in this context can be understood as a giant jewel, but not in the same way that Otto von Simson or Panofsky suggest when they attribute the origins of Gothic architecture to the abbot. Gem, church, and cosmos were equally the body of Christ to be brought to completion in the form God intended. That the completion of the terrestrial realm was possible in this manner was reinforced by the fact, for Suger, Hugh, and Bernard, that the bread of the Eucharist became the body of Christ, even if its form did not change. Contrary to his critics' implications of Suger's lack of intelligence, the abbot left a clear framework for understanding the material transformation of the old church into the new church within the inscriptions and sculptures that decorated it. His texts support and reinforce such a material interpretation of the abbey church, with its innovative glass and structure. Suger's material way, the mistaken addition to Paul, offered a sophisticated and careful path to completing God's divine plan for the nascent territory of France, within which the abbot acted as the bridge between Heaven and Earth.