explored, at first in studies of the peculiar monuments has come to be valued and for a quarter century, the specificity of post-World War II scholarship. However, domical church construction. St. Peter’s successive steps in that of the Gothic cathedral; Hagia Sophia and of the Greek temple; Chartres in that of the morphological evolution of the form Parthenon embodied a specific instant in thethetic morphology or “style.” The shakiest accomplishment of all—aes-region, author and—the greatest and accepted order of monuments by date, associations and its fixing of a generally century was its avoidance of this flow of about professional architectural history. One of the things that was “scholarly” float, for very distinct reasons and at spe-

circulation of art objects in culture—for example, in the work of W. J. T. Mitchell and others, and now also in architecture. First came monographs on buildings that embraced construction history as well as design, patrons, publics, artisans, and architects, an expansion of analysis inspired by Manfredo Tafuri and James Ackerman. More recently the materiality of the build-
ing and the moment of its erection have eroded before studies of its consumption (a word no longer placed in quotation marks)—sometimes in everyday life—perhaps most directly in Neil Harris’s Building Lives (1999); sometimes placed in an ongo-
ing historical narrative like Mary Beard’s Parthenon (2003) or John Pinto and William MacDonald’s Hadrian’s Villa and its Legacy (1995); or sometimes as a point of reference in a general cultural history, as in the case of Robert S. Nelson’s Hagia Sophia, 1850–1950, the book here under review. It is a history of the monument’s intrusion on the modern mind without any reference to its production, as the dates in its title alert us.

Nelson has chosen the (relative) high road rather than the (relative) low road of Mitchell and Harris, the history of Hagia Sophia’s reception in the architecturally informed mind rather than its recirculation and rebuilding in general culture. He includes chapters documenting the initial Byzantine Revival in European Romantic architecture circa 1850, especially in Germany; Ruskin’s slightly later Byzantine enthusiasm inspired by Venice (not Constantinople/Istanbul); the picturesque embrace of the Byzantine monument in lithography and photography; the fin-de-siècle interest (represented here in the Arts and Crafts personalities of William Morris and W. R. Lethaby plus the cultured diplomat Lord Curzon); Yeats’s Sailing to Byzantium; the interwar Byzantine restoration projects concentrating on the American connoisseur Thomas Whittemore; and finally Frank Lloyd Wright’s late response to Hagia Sophia’s imagery in his Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church near Mil-
waukee (1955–61). Nelson executes these chapters with fascinating care. Each item is treated with equal precision, while inter-

connections (some quite brilliant and thought provoking) are identified and emphasized. There is a profound pleasure in following his sheer craft of documenta-

tion and argument.

But, of course, the question is: what do these seven foci tell us and are these foci the right ones? Interestingly, a compet-
ing book has just appeared in J. B. Bullen’s encyclopedic and gorgeously illustrated Byzantium Rediscovered (2003), and one can compare.1 The two volumes do not cite each other. Bullen’s focus is much more general, balancing Nelson’s in sketching a history of many possible links, but treating none with Nelson’s richness of imagination. Bullen is exhaust-
tive and immensely erudite and includes every particle of a spreading but literally defined narrative. It is impressive how much information he can get into a single paragraph. Yet Curzon, Whittemore, and Wright are entirely omitted, presumably because they were too tangen-
tial or too modern in different ways. Bullen documents a formal vocabulary that was reworked in unmistakably histori-
cist architecture down to its demise in the 1920s. In doing this his volume is a corrective: we realize that within the profusion of architecture, the reaction to Byzantine architecture and to Hagia Sophia in particular was more general than Nelson’s focused essay indicates. Yet the result is a much less interesting and challenging book. We are still dealing with a stylistic vocabulary and have not jumped to cultural imagery. Whittemore and Wright are important in showing how tricky and close historicist questions still are for us.

It is clear that Nelson, the art histo-

ian, is doing something very different from Bullen, the English professor: Nelson dissects Yeats’s text itself, sets its words against words in parallel texts, and (true to his documentary brief) focuses on just what pieces of art and architecture—what photographs from what angle, what illustrations in what books—Yeats had in his head and was trying to translate into poetry. For Nelson, images exist not just in the mind, but on the ground—in buildings, in documents, in

Robert S. Nelson
Hagia Sophia, 1850–1950: Holy Wisdom and the Modern Monument

A number of buildings in Western culture float, for very distinct reasons and at spe-

times, promiscuously and sometimes frighteningly through our common cul-
tural consciousness—the Parthenon, Chartres, the Florentine Duomo, St. Peter’s, and Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. One of the things that was “scholarly” about professional architectural history when it emerged in the mid-nineteenth century was its avoidance of this flow of associations and its fixing of a generally accepted order of monuments by date, region, author and—the greatest and shakiest accomplishment of all—aesthetic morphology or “style.” The Parthenon embodied a specific instant in the morphological evolution of the form of the Greek temple; Chartres in that of the Gothic cathedral; Hagia Sophia and St. Peter’s successive steps in that of domical church construction.

This inheritance was bequeathed to post-World War II scholarship. However, for a quarter century, the specificity of monuments has come to be valued and explored, at first in studies of the peculiar authors’ previous scholarship. If, then, portions of this material will be familiar to some readers, the trade-off is a volume of real scholarly authority, with a depth not found in generalist studies of St. Peter’s and a range absent from specialized histories of the basilica. Chapters are written in lively, engaging prose, and most include ample endnotes containing a wealth of primary and secondary bibliographical sources and suggesting fruit-
ful avenues for future research. The book will be a valuable resource to scholars of architectural, art, and papal history at every point along this spectrum.

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1 The competing book has just appeared in J. B. Bullen’s encyclopedic and gorgeously illustrated Byzantium Rediscovered (2003), and one can compare. The two volumes do not cite each other. Bullen’s focus is much more general, balancing Nelson’s in sketching a history of many possible links, but treating none with Nelson’s richness of imagination. Bullen is exhaustive and immensely erudite and includes every particle of a spreading but literally defined narrative. It is impressive how much information he can get into a single paragraph. Yet Curzon, Whittemore, and Wright are entirely omitted, presumably because they were too tangential or too modern in different ways. Bullen documents a formal vocabulary that was reworked in unmistakably historicist architecture down to its demise in the 1920s. In doing this his volume is a corrective: we realize that within the profusion of architecture, the reaction to Byzantine architecture and to Hagia Sophia in particular was more general than Nelson’s focused essay indicates. Yet the result is a much less interesting and challenging book. We are still dealing with a stylistic vocabulary and have not jumped to cultural imagery. Whittemore and Wright are important in showing how tricky and close historicist questions still are for us.

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258 JSAH / 66:2, JUNE 2007
photographs published in a certain way in certain books. Exploring the physicality of images disrupts conventional chronological narrative. Bullen attempts to add the Byzantine motif to our general understanding, and his facts and color illustrations inspire further ruminations; he tells a story. Nelson analyzes an intellectual construct, and as is often the case with such an effort, he does not follow a chronological track. Bullen's pages make you hungry for Nelson's analyses and interpretations. Nelson is more respectful of Bullen's field of literary analysis than Bullen is of Nelson's field of art history.

What about Nelson including Wright's Church in Wauwatosa, outside Milwaukee? (Bullen ends with Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue's more expensive and less interesting Nebraska State Capitol in Lincoln, 1919–32.) Generally one tries not to discuss Wright's work after the Guggenheim Museum (designed in 1943) when he seemed to fall into a vulgar exoticism. With the Milwaukee church, more than anywhere else in Nelson's book, the masterpiece of Hagia Sophia is set in a popular concept—that of contemporary Greek Orthodox churches in America—proving little, I think, because regardless of Wright's exaggerated geometry, his design is still broad, cohesive, and spatially powerful. In the mid-twentieth century it is not the exact set of ethnic meanings or general church types that matter, but instead purely formal issues of spatial geometrics. The architectural lens through which to view the Milwaukee building is perhaps the work of Bruce Goff, and the real comparison to make is with the work of Hans Scharoun, Gottfried Böhm, and even Walter Netsch. Nelson's effort to see the Milwaukee church narrowly saves us the trouble of doubting this.¹

I have three complaints about Nelson's truly excellent book. First, after his early chapters on German Romantic Neo-Byzantinism, we never really leave the Anglo-American world. (Here Bullen is more balanced.) Austria, that most Byzantine of modern empires, makes no appearance at all. This deprives us of two puzzling and important aspects of Hagia Sophia's cultural circulation. First, the intense political and cultural exchange between the German and Austrian empires and the Ottomans manifested in a broad, shared, turn-of-the-century Byzantine-Islamicism across southeastern Europe, powerfully present in all the expanding metropolises there, especially in Vienna and Istanbul. Where is the chapter on Gustav Klimt? Furthermore, Nelson makes no mention of that central motif of Germanic avant-garde design, the pendentive-domed and semidomed gathering place, whether in the fantasies of Berlage, Belling, Kohtz, or Kropfholzer, or in such monuments as the Sacrée-Coeur on the Koeckelberg, which is such an unavoidable and troubling presence for anyone visiting Brussels. Nelson touches on German imperial fantasies in his Romanticism chapter; but where is Hagia Sophia on the eve of the world wars? In the end, this is first and foremost a Central European and Germanic subject.

Second, in balancing the reproduction of Byzantine forms (especially in chapter two) and literary images (especially in chapter six), Nelson has missed an important architectural middle term, namely the idea of Byzantine decorative pattern, freed in the late nineteenth-century French decorative explorations of Vaudremer and Train to inspire the accomplishment of H. H. Richardson, JohnWelborn Root, Harvey Ellis, and Louis Sullivan. This is an extremely important plane of cultural work—ornament and its place in the larger enterprise of nineteenth-century architecture—that both Nelson and Bullen omit.

Third, to return to my first complaint, the territory upon which Nelson focuses is, in the final analysis, scary. There always seems to be something worrisome about the intrusion of Byzantine imagery into Western democratic culture. Nelson's relentless evenness of documentation levels such utterly disparate enterprises as German imperialism and American restoration campaigns in Europe, and such resolutely distinct personalities as Lethaby and Curzon, Whittmore and Wright, while continuing to document a uniqueness about which he does not permit himself to wonder. Why did people get so involved in this strange thing? A little more amazement and outrage is needed to loosen up this narrative—for certain there are ample amounts of amazement and outrage in this extraordinary story.

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Notes
3. Hendrik Petrus Berlage, Afbeeldingen van de Ontwerpen voor het Pantheon der Menschheid (Rotterdam, 1915); Hermann Belling, Architektur Skizzen (Stuttgart, 1904); Otto Kohlz, Gendanken über Architektur (Berlin, 1908); Alexander Jabcous Kropholzet, Kunst en Leven (Amsterdam and Antwerp, n.d.).