A Vision Restored

Photography: Richard Barnes
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The view up Palo Drive, with Memorial Church a mile in the distance, is one of the great architectural perspectives in the world. In a single stroke, that axis continues through the Quad to the Knoll with the church at its center. Not even Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia, Stanford's chief rival in American campus design, was conceived on so bold a scale.

After Central Park in New York, the grand design of the Stanford campus was probably Frederick Law Olmsted's most brilliant achievement. The long axis must have appeared even grander before the 1906 earthquake toppled the church's massive central tower, whose octagonal spire soared to an ornamental cross some 150 feet above the ground.

When the 1906 earthquake struck, the church fell apart even though it had been completed only the year before. Chunks of the tower collapsed through the roof of the nave. At the front of the church, the upper half of the gabled facade—mosaics and all—fell outward into the Quad. The walls of the rounded chancel and transept wings, defining lordly interior spaces, and the 56-foot arches of the crossing somehow remained intact.

The church was a wreck that needed rebuilding. It was decided to restore it, in outer appearance if not internal structure, almost exactly as it had been, except for the tower, which was considered either too risky or too costly to replace.

Yet, if the previous structure had been wildly unstable, the church had been a visual marvel in provincial California. It was directly inspired, in overall form and many details, by the swelling volumes and heroic stonework of Henry Hobson Richardson's Trinity Church in Boston. In that pivotal work, built largely between 1872 and 1877, "Richardson Romanesque" made its first appearance in the grand manner. Trinity's antecedents, in turn, can be
traced back to the 12th-century Notre-Dame-la-Grande in Poitiers and the Old Cathedral in Salamanca.

Richardson, who studied architecture in France, upheld such authentic medieval monuments as models to his gifted assistants. One of these was Charles Allerton Cooledge, a young Bostonian and a partner in the firm of Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge. Cooledge was still in his 20s when he received the Stanford commission and, together with Olmsted, conceived the powerful Romanesque architecture of the Quad.

The warm sandstone masonry, the steady procession of the long arcades, the broadly massed red tile roofs, above all the decisive horizontal sweep of the beautifully integrated buildings were never surpassed by Cooledge himself, and were merely paralleled by later architects at Stanford.

Unfortunately, Cooledge never had a chance to develop a final design for the church. He was booted out of the job, about the time Senator Stanford died in 1893.

Jane Stanford then veered in new architectural directions. In contrast to her husband, who had admirably maintained the unity and calm strength of the original concept, Jane Stanford and her brother Eliel Saarinen were not bound by aesthetic consistency. Luckily, Memorial Church did not suffer much from their caprice. Cooledge, in drawings that date back to 1887, clearly foresaw the church much as it was eventually built between 1903 and 1905 by a local worthy named Clinton Day. As Jane Stanford’s chosen architect, Day topped the crossing with a version of Cooledge’s tower, making it the spectacular centerpiece of Olmsted’s plan.

"Nay," Jane Stanford might have said, "not a mere centerpiece, but the University’s crowning glory." Of all her buildings, the church was dearest to her heart. She once remarked, with perfect sincerity, that her soul was in the church—hence the operatic Venetian mosaic of the Sermon on the Mount, sprawling over the gabled facade.

Though this might have shocked an architect as good as Cooledge, it is so "high camp" that it can be accepted today as a kind of Surreal Victorian, mixed with wifely piety and pride.

For Memorial Church—and this point is important—was not a monument to the fragile boy, Leland Stanford Jr., in whose memory the University was

Viewed from the east transept, these three niches at one corner of the chancel (above) are adorned with gold glass mosaic tiles, known as tesserae.

The face of the child on the column in the foreground is one of a number of children’s faces represented in the church. It is thought they are studies of children who either lived on campus or were children of workers who built the church.

The strong, simple lines of the wooden ceiling (facing page) are now illuminated by recessed lighting that was added during the recent restoration. The mosaic on the lower right depicts Adam and Eve in the Garden (Genesis 3:6) and was designed by Antonio Paoletti and made by the Salviati workshop of Venice.
The church, thus, is better than new. It should last as long as Stanford lasts. To enter from the shadowy arcade of the Quad, passing the rich Byzantine mosaics of the dark vestibule, and then arrive in the magnificent luminous space of the church—growing with the golden light that plays over tens of thousands of stone—is virtually to enter a lost age of absolute confidence and power.

The strength of the Stanfords and their vision seems as vigorous as it was in that remote Victorian era when it was tellingly expressed in stained glass, gold leaf, sculptural friezes and mosaics. That enormous wealth of ornamental art has all been done with handcraft skills that, one had thought, had quite vanished in high-tech America.

Much of this work was done personally, or supervised, by one of the foremost restoration artists of our time, Lesley Bone of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, whose reconstruction of Levi's wing is so deft that the archangel looks no different from the three other Heavenly Messengers. Quite right, modern techniques and materials—fiber glass, stainless steel, epoxy and other high-strength adhesives—have been used to make the Old once again radiantly New, which is a definition of higher education.}

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