Gothic Revival Style

Just mentioning the style “Gothic Revival” easily brings an image to one’s mind of the corner church or local cathedral. Now look at the four photos of Gothic Revival buildings here. They date from 1845 to 1979 and look nothing alike. How can they all be considered Gothic Revival style?

Original Gothic buildings, dating from the late 1100s to the late 1400s, primarily include European churches and palaces distinguished by pointy windows, groined vaults, buttresses, and luxurious ornamentation. Among the most beautiful is Sainte-Chapelle in Paris (1242-1247), one of the inspirations for Heinz Chapel (1938) in Oakland. Clearly, Sainte-Chapelle is Gothic due to its 13th-century construction and soaring vaults and Pittsburgh’s Heinz Chapel is Gothic Revival, but where does the Gothic end and the Revival begin?

The Gothic style was so apt and inspirational that it seems there have always been buildings designed with Gothic elements. Some historians call them Gothic “Survivals” and use the phrase to refer to buildings that employ Gothic elements and were built between 1500 and 1700.

The English Gothic Revival began in the early 1700s with architectural follies or garden structures designed to offer a picturesque alternative to the reigning Classicism. Through ignorance or shallowness, the English aristocrats who commissioned the earliest buildings did not associate them with Roman Catholic France, but saw in these architectural bonbons the romance of ruined monasteries and attributed to them the virtue of independence from the Roman Catholic Baroque style then dominating Europe. This interpretation developed into a full-blown orthodoxy through the writings of Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852) and his book *True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, published in 1841.

Shortly after its publication, W. R. Crisp directed the construction of St. Peter’s Church (1843-1846) in Brownsville, Fayette County, using many of Pugin’s recommendations (above). Pugin urged that a building’s form depend on the material used and that all of its features be necessary to its structure. He felt that only those elements essential to a building’s structure should be elaborated and embellished with ornament. The precepts of Gothic Revivalism were endlessly discussed in the pages of a journal, the *Ecclesiologist*, started by three Cambridge students in 1841. What began as a means of gathering descriptions and drawings of medieval churches to lobby for their appropriate restoration became a forum for determining the correctness of new construction and an instruction manual for church committees seeking new buildings. The journal opened a New York branch which, like its English counterpart, suggested certain rules and then later acerbically insisted on them, sometimes referring to churches that did not meet the standards as “odious” or “abominations.” The necessary components of the ideal Gothic Revival cathedral, church, or chapel became enshrined in their pages and hardened into a canon few architects could actually achieve. St. Peter’s in Brownsville is only one of many earnest examples in Western Pennsylvania.

The Gothic style has two outstanding attributes; it is durable and adaptable: durable since it never truly left the architectural world and adaptable because it is constantly re-interpreted to represent a variety of ages and points of view. As we have seen in 18th-century England, the perception of the style grew from whimsy to orthodoxy.
19th-century France, it harkened back to the earliest French chapels and grand cathedrals and was constantly revived by the necessity of restoring these grand spaces. Architects came to understand the brilliance of the engineering involved in a true Gothic cathedral. They analyzed the ribbed vaulting, counterbalanced by flying buttresses, that allowed enormous openings in the walls, which artisans then filled with stained glass of transcendent beauty.

Gothic Revival buildings in the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries (unlike England and France) could not refer back to castles or aristocratic estates, since we had none. Instead, the popularizers of the style in this country promoted it as healthy and naturalistic. Alexander Jackson Davis (1803-1892) claimed to design cottages that were a means of moral enhancement. He also celebrated the true nature of their building material (wood) with the board-and-batten method of joinery and a full panoply of sawn ornament. The Rex house in Greene County (c. 1874), while late for the style, reflects many of a Gothic Revival cottage's hallmarks such as the T-shaped plan and steeply gabled roofs (page six).

Later, the Collegiate Gothic was chosen for its ability to evoke memories of Oxford and Cambridge, both bastions of English higher education. One can hardly find a campus in the United States without Collegiate Gothic buildings; among the most famous of these is the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh (1926-1937), designed by Charles Zeller Klauder (1872-1938) and significant for its 42-story height, three-story Commons Room, and unique Nationality Rooms (far left).

And finally, again illustrating the durability of the style, is PPG Place (1979-1984) downtown, inspired by the Collegiate Gothic Cathedral of Learning and the grouped towers of nearby St. Mary of Mercy Church (left). The building is called Postmodern Gothic because its pointed battlements, similar to those of a medieval fortress, are clothed in glass to show off the wares of a modern American corporation. Architect Philip Johnson (b. 1906) puts it more succinctly: "It's just this pointed thing. It's just decoration."