Design as Emblem
The Royal Courts of Justice in Imperial Britain

Ariyuki Kondo

Faculty of Letters, Ferris University
Yokohama, JAPAN   kondoa@ferris.ac.jp

Abstract: In the designated competition of the Royal Courts of Justice held in 1866-67, the assumption that the new Law Courts would be Gothic must have been a given, for, although no detailed instructions regarding the particular style to be used were supplied to the competitors, and the question of style was left entirely up to each architect, all of the invited competitors submitted proposals using Gothic, while those who were widely seen as representative Neoclassicists, i.e. those who were incompetent in their use of medieval designs, declined the invitation.   Recollecting the fact that, in the competition held in the mid-1830s for rebuilding the new Houses of Parliament, the style of the buildings had been specified to be either Gothic or Elizabethan, it is suggested that, by the mid-1860s, Gothic had come to be fully recognized as a style applicable to monumental civic architecture, symbolic of a triumphant nation.   The stylistic uniformity of the competition designs for the Royal Courts of Justice was unsurprisingly well-received by the proponents of Victorian medievalism, and the *Ecclesiologist* described it as "a matter of much congratulation".   On the other hand, the same architectural phenomenon was seen negatively by others, including James Fergusson, the pre-eminent architectural writer at the time, who described what he saw at the public exhibition as a "masquerade of Mediaevalism".   In fact, there was some truth in Fergusson's description, for all eleven designs submitted to the competition were medieval, but never so in a strict sense, as they synthesized Gothic irregularity with Classical order.   The designs were influenced by the Victorian enthusiasm for celebrating national style and artistic identity, and one of the main objects of interest for many was whether the executed exterior would be worthy of such an important building.   George Edmund Street, the appointed architect, tried to measure up to expectations of the execution of a triumphant architecture by employing Gothic-Picturesque composition with an exterior which was ecclesiastical in appearance.   Focusing on the design of the Royal Courts of Justice, a great example of Victorian Gothic, this paper explores the high regard in which historic design was held by the Victorians as a design emblematic of the times and nation they lived in.

Key words: Gothic Revival, Victorian Architecture, Royal Courts of Justice, George Edmund Street

1.   Public exhibition and stylistic uniformity

When the public exhibition of designs submitted to the designated competition of the Royal Courts of Justice opened in February 1867, the interest of most observers must have been in the question of style, for the eleven renowned architects who had been invited to compete ― Henry R. Abraham, Edward Middleton Barry, Raphael

Brandon, William Burges, Thomas N. Deane, Henry B. Garling, Henry F. Lockwood, John P. Seddon, George Gilbert Scott, George Edmund Street, and Alfred Waterhouse — all used the same style: Gothic. The assumption that the new Law Courts would be Gothic must have been a given. Unlike the case of the competition held in the mid-1830s for rebuilding the new Houses of Parliament, in which the style of the buildings was to be, according to guidelines set by the Select Committee, "either Gothic or Elizabethan style" [1], in the competition for the Royal Courts of Justice, although "the conditions were drawn up with meticulous care and in the greatest possible detail" [2, p. 94], there were no specific instructions favoring a particular style. The question of style was left entirely up to each architect's judgment and preference.

The stylistic uniformity of the submitted competition designs suggested the recognition of Gothic as the style most applicable to monumental civic architecture, symbolic of the triumphant British Empire. For the proponents of Medievalism this was a desirable outcome; *The Ecclesiologist* described the Gothicists' triumph as "a matter of much congratulation".

Nevertheless, there were many writers and reviewers who were critical of this uniformity. *The Builder* referred to the uniformity of the competitors' choice of style: "It appears to have been understood from the beginning that the Law Courts were to be in the Gothic style, and Gothic they, doubtless, will be" [3, p. 103]. James Fergusson, the pre-eminent architectural writer at the time, regarded Medievalism in Victorian architecture as retrogressive, describing the Gothic designs displayed in the public exhibition as a "masquerade of Mediaevalism" [3, p. 103]. There was some truth in Fergusson's description, for all eleven designs submitted to the competition were, in one way or another, nominally Gothic, attempting to unite "the picturesque capabilities of medieval architecture" with "the stateliness and dignity that were considered classical" in a manner that was forced and unpersuasive [3, p. 104].

2. Exterior over interior

From Raphael Brandon's magnificent picturesque composition to Henry F. Lockwood's perfectly balanced semi-classical composition, all the designs, with the exception of the one submitted by Thomas N. Deane, attempted to convey a dignified grandeur which synthesized Gothic irregularity with stately classical order.

The judges were "unable to select any one of the designs as the best in all respects" and "recommended that an offer be made to those two architects", Edward Middleton Barry, a son of the late Charles Barry, and George Edmund Street, a son of a City solicitor, "to act conjointly in the preparation of the final plan to be executed" [4]. The judges were of the opinion that Barry's design (Fig. 1) was best in regard to the planning and arrangement of the interior. On the other hand, they were of the opinion that Street's design (Fig. 2) was the best in regard to architectural composition and the look of the exterior. Street himself seems to have been aware of the merit of his exterior design, as he urged the members of the Royal Commission, shortly after his submission of the competition design, "not to devote too much attention to aspects of planning and too little to the 'architectural character of the elevation'" [3, p. 148].

However, it wasn't long before the decision to have a joint appointment was reconsidered. The judges
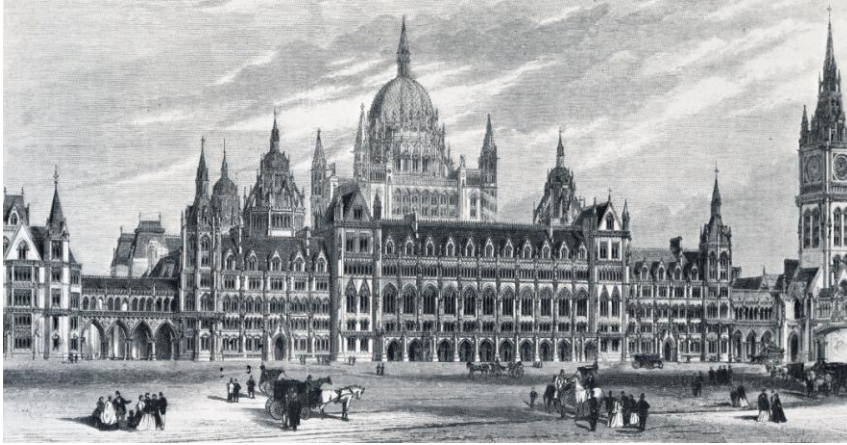
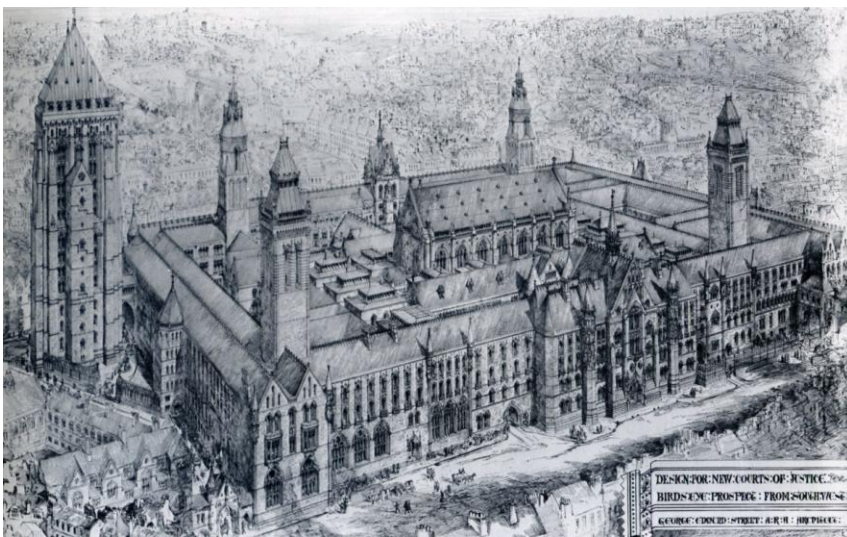Fig. 1　Edward Middleton Barry. Competition design for the Royal Courts of Justice. 1866-67. Perspective.

Fig. 2　George Edmund Street. Competition design for the Royal Courts of Justice. 1866-67. Bird's-eye view.

themselves must have been well aware of the inevitable consequence of their tentative decision, for they were just then witnessing the ongoing controversy over the authorship of the New Houses of Parliament.　While a number of rumors concerning the nature of Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin's employment in the Parliamentary project had already been circulating when Charles Barry and Pugin were finalizing the executed design, it was after both men had died that the controversy of the authorship of the Houses of Parliament became a matter of public dispute between the two men's sons, Rev. Alfred Barry, later the Bishop of Sydney, and the architect Edward Welby Pugin.　Charles Barry was the winner of the design competition and therefore the official appointed architect; yet the controversy was never satisfactorily settled, mainly due to the then widely-spread impression that the greater part of the work was done by Pugin as a sort of ghost designer.

This controversy continued simultaneously with the screening of the submitted competition designs for the Law Courts, and it proved difficult for the two distinguished architects to work together harmoniously to execute a single building.　A choice, therefore, had to be made between Barry's convenience of plan and Street's art and composition; ultimately Street was appointed the architect of the Law Courts.

The High-Church Ecclesiological Society network among the Lords of Treasury might have worked to the advantage of Street, who himself had been an Ecclesiologist since his early twenties. Nevertheless, the decision to appoint Street meant that more consideration was given to exterior composition than to the arrangement of the interior. Barry could not easily accept this decision, for the instructions of the competition had stressed "the need for efficient planning, which was to override all other considerations" [3, p. 105] and that "it was made clear to competitors that the designs would be judged wholly on questions of convenience and efficiency and without respect to style or artistic intention" [2, p. 94]. Victorian architectural competitions, however, were not always organized and conducted openly and fairly. In architectural competitions of the nineteenth century, "essential information was often omitted from the instructions, ambiguities arose, and the rules were even changed in mid-course", and it was even possible for the committee to "overturn an outside assessor's verdict", and "change their minds, even after publicly announcing the result" [5, p. xiii].

3. Encouragement of a national style

The final decision made by the Treasury, in which greater consideration to exterior composition was given than to arrangement of the interior, might have been influenced by the predilection of Victorian public commissions for encouraging a national style. As Roy Strong writes, "The first half of the nineteenth century throughout Europe witnessed a deliberate attempt to create national mythologies strong enough to hold the minds of the masses who now made up and were necessary to the working of the modern state" [6, p. 42]. In Britain, this attempt continued into the High Victorian era, and, in the domain of architecture, led to the rise of social expectations for great public buildings designed in historical styles, emblematic of national mythology and worthy of the British Empire.

As early as the 1830s British society was interested in "how an industrialized Britain might assert its artistic identity against such European rivals as Germany and France" [7, p. 213]. Edward Edwards, a promoter of government patronage of the arts, proposed in 1840 that "state patronage should be implemented through the commission of history paintings and monumental sculpture for public buildings" [7, p. 213] and found the ideal opportunity to convert his assertion into practice in the ongoing rebuilding of the new Houses of Parliament. Edwards's proposal had become official governmental policy by 1840. In that year, under the chairmanship of Prince Albert, the Prince Consort, the Fine Arts Commission was established for the purpose of encouraging a national style.

In large part this encouragement of a national style was a response to the transformation of Munich into a major center of art under the outstanding patronage of King Ludwig I of Bavaria. The fact that extensive building construction plans were crucial to this transformation of the Bavarian capital did not go unnoticed in Britain, and encouraged Victorian Britain to forge a national identity in designs of major public buildings.

In the case of the Royal Courts of Justice, for example, the Treasury emphasized the monumental appearance of the Royal Courts of Justice, emblematic of the wealth and sophistication enjoyed by imperial Britain. In fact, the Treasury actually intervened in Street's design at one point, ordering him to reconsider his plan for the building's principal facade so as to "render it more worthy of the importance of the Building and of its position

in the Metropolis" [3, p. 225].

By the mid-nineteenth century, the majority of the British public was well aware of the government's promotion of nationalism in the building of public architecture. Public displays of designs submitted to public competitions had become a tradition when the designs for the Parliamentary buildings were publicly exhibited in the 1830s, and when the public exhibition of the competition designs for the Royal Courts of Justice was held, it was given prominent coverage and achieved great popular success.

Street, in turn, was well aware of the extensive interest of the public, and tried to measure up to expectations for the execution of the new Law Courts by designing a building worthy of being a "Palace of Justice" [8, p. 63]: he expressed his intention to achieve a "grand architectural effect" [8, p. 13] and make the Royal Courts of Justice "worthy of its object, the age, so rich a nation, and so great a city" [8, p. 62] in his *Explanation of his Design for the Proposed New Courts of Justice*, which he submitted to the competition along with his proposed design in 1867.

4. Gothic-Picturesque composition of the Royal Courts of Justice

However, various revisions and reconsiderations had been made in the long process of design, and continually there were budget constraints that had to be dealt with. Thus the final design differed greatly from Street's initial design. Unlike his original version, in which a High Victorian ideal of a medieval-classical synthesis was envisioned, in the final version the principal façade, fronting the Strand, was found to be totally lacking in unity and in the monumentality desired for a great public building. Instead, it had become a Gothic-Picturesque composition, consisting of various and almost disjoined masses and parts, and this was criticized. *The Times* argued that:

> The best that can be said of Mr. Street's design as a whole is that it has a certain picturesqueness. Picturesqueness is very well in its way; Gothic architecture lends itself to the picturesque, and in Beckford's house or Walpole's villa we can be quite content with the picturesque and no more. But we want much more than this in a great building devoted to a great purpose, a building which is intended to stand for ever, in the centre of a metropolitan city, as a chief credential of its empire and pre-eminence. We require pure and noble form, exalted dignity, entire unity. That these are not incompatible with Gothic architecture and with wealth of detail no one knows better than Mr. Street, but he has given us instead of these a chaos of ill-distributed masses of weak and confused outline, without form, and void of everything but freaks of detail with which they are stuffed full from basement to pinnacle. [9, p. 11]

In fact, however, Street never ceded the dignity of the building; the exterior composition was never a mere "chaos of ill-distributed masses of weak and confused outline". Rather, the execution of Street's Gothic-Picturesque composition was the consequence of Street's careful observation of the *genius loci* of the construction site, where "three out of the four fronts" were to be built in "comparatively narrow thoroughfares" with no possibility of "any distant view" [10, p. 19]. For the principal elevation in the Strand (Fig. 3) in

Fig. 3   George Edmund Street. The Royal Courts of Justice. The Strand façade. 1866-82.

particular, Street attached a great deal of importance to the fact that the building would face a street which would not be "more than some 60 feet in average width", and therefore would always be seen "bit by bit, or in a very foreshortened perspective" [10, p. 20].   As far as Street was concerned, the "only charm or claim" of a long, regular, unified design of frontage to be elected would be the "visibility in its completeness" [10, p. 19]. However, the principal façade of the Royal Courts of Justice, facing the Strand, had no chance of being seen in its entirety, and the view of the façade would be "foreshortened in the most extreme way" [10, p. 19].   Under such circumstances, to design the facade in a "very regular and uniform fashion" meant nothing but an utter disregard for the *genius loci* of the site.   Thus, while making a distinct center to the Strand facade, *viz.* the gable and great portal with two different-sized octagonal towers on each side (Fig. 4), from which "the greatest

Fig. 4   George Edmund Street. The Royal Courts of Justice. The great portal and octagonal towers. 1866-82.

number of people will approach the Courts" [8, p. 6], Street produced an agreeable and diversified contour and a variety of light and shade by expressing the rise and fall, the advance and recess, the convexity and concavity of different parts of the building so as to add greatly to the picturesqueness of the exterior composition through a very foreshortened perspective.   Street strove to give the new Law Courts presence, so that they would stand out in the crowded environment, taking "the position and surroundings" of the building into consideration: in Street's view, that is "what the treatment of the design ought to be" [10, p. 19].

The employment of Gothic-Picturesque composition could be further justified.   Street, who had averred in 1858 that "we are mediævalists and rejoice in the name" [11, p. 240], firmly believed in the superiority of Gothic design over Classicism.   He chided Classicism for being "foreign" and "unsuited in its effects to English habits, and in its design [in relation] to … English climate" [12, p. 5].   Yet his Gothicism was never exclusively nationalistic.   Almost yearly Street toured France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, and Spain in order to study various Gothic precedents.   He admired "almost any architecture in which the pointed arch was employed" [3, p. 23] and was convinced that "no study of architecture was complete which did not proceed exhaustively with the study of all European varieties" [13, p. ix].   It was his extensive knowledge of Gothic precedents that *The Times* referred to as a "wealth of detail [of Gothic architecture that] no one knows better than Mr. Street" [9, p. 11].

This historicism of Street's, crystallized in the medievalistic design of the Royal Courts of Justice, was severely attacked as a "perfectly intolerable" work of accurate imitation by James Fergusson [14, p. 254].   However, Street's Gothic revivalism was never blind historicism nor cranky superficial medievalism.   He was latitudinarian in his view of the alteration of medieval precedents, and wished to reconcile his medievalist convictions with the practical needs of his times.   Instead of advocating a complete restoration of medieval Gothic, Street felt, by stressing the practicality of Gothic forms, that they should be adapted as necessary to suit contemporary societal needs.   For Street, Gothic was a progressive, not a static, style.

This practical medievalism was embodied in the Royal Courts of Justice in its compilation of separate buildings, each with a different function, which nevertheless shared an ecclesiastical exterior, as if the buildings really belonged to an ecclesiastical community.   Street agreed with Pugin on the handling of exterior design. Pugin had dismissed Classic "Pagan" architecture for its use of "unreal", "unmeaning" features and details crowded together merely to make buildings look costly [15, pp. 16-17].   He maintained that "the great test of Architectural beauty is the fitness of the design to the purpose for which it is intended, and that the style of a building should so correspond with its use that the spectator may at once perceive the purpose for which it was erected" [16, p. 1].   Street likewise was critical of superficial appearance, valuing instead straightforward display of the interior arrangement and the object of the building clearly revealed in the exterior composition. The Gothic-Picturesque "ecclesiastical" composition of the Royal Courts of Justice criticized by those in favour of Neoclassical monumentality and unity had, in fact, been carefully planned and thought out.

How, then, is this manifested in the Royal Courts of Justice?   It is the great front gable and façade of the central hall which dominate the Strand and define the visual character of the Law Courts.   By employing the absolute

Fig. 5   George Edmund Street. The Royal Courts of Justice. The central hall. 1866-82.
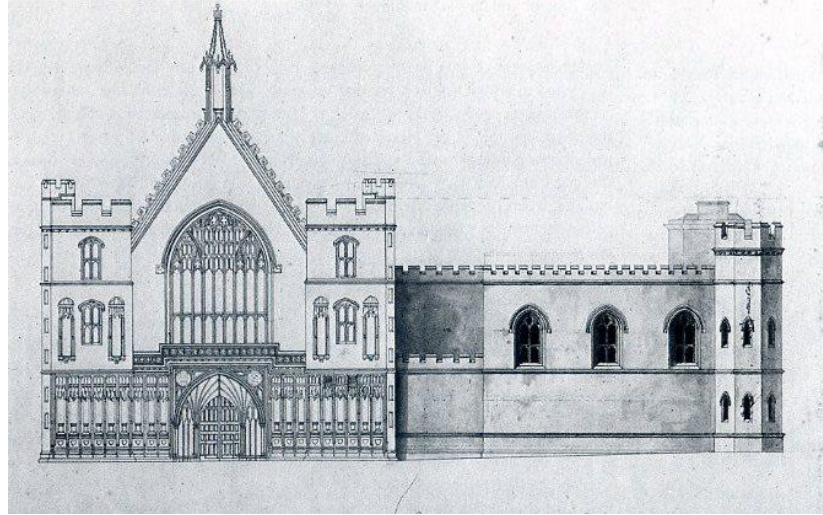

Fig. 6   John Soane. North elevation of Westminster Hall and the adjoining Law Courts at Westminster. 5 May 1824.

strength of such ecclesiastical features, Street succeeded in asserting the importance of this public building in its crowded environment.   The strong exterior presence of the central hall directly reflects the interior arrangement, in which the central hall functions as the hub (Fig. 5).   At the same time, this facade alludes to English precedents, "paying particular homage to the north face of Westminster Hall", which served as "the *salle des pas perdus* for the adjoining courtrooms built by John Soane" [3, pp. 218-19] (Fig. 6).   David Brownlee writes, "The appropriateness of making an allusion to this ancient locus of English law in the design of its new home surely captured Street's imagination …" [3, p. 219].

Street also alluded to Christian faith in his display of an ecclesiastical exterior.   Street, an Anglo-Catholic and the diocesan architect for the diocese of Oxford, the wellspring of the High Church movement, firmly identified Gothic architecture with "Christian" architecture and Gothic Revivalism as "the revival of … Christian architecture" [12, p. 1].   He was convinced that "art must be considered generally in her religious aspect more than in any other" [17, p. 247], and that "the one great fact which separates by so wide a gap the architects, sculptors, and painters of the best days of the Middle Ages" from High Victorians was "their earnestness and their thorough self-sacrifice in the pursuit of art, and in the exaltation of their religion" [13, p. 407].   This identification of Gothic with Christianity is apparent in the exterior composition of the Royal Courts of Justice, which suggests an ecclesiastical complex with a chapel, chapter-house and cloisters, and symbolically in the placement of a figure of Christ the Savior at the top of the gable of the central hall, a great novelty for a secular building (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7   Figure of Christ at the top of the gable of the central hall.

5. A new national emblem

In clear contrast to how the streets of Paris were compulsorily redeveloped in the mid-nineteenth century, according to the municipal improvement program of Georges-Eugène Haussmann under the Second Empire, the construction of the Royal Courts of Justice in Britain was conducted in a far more moderate manner.   If, say, Queen Victoria's government had taken a hard-line stance toward dispossession of property as severe as that of Haussmann and the French government, sufficient property in the middle of London would have first been requisitioned, and no doubt a great Neoclassical masterpiece, such as the design Charles Barry prepared in the early 1840s for the Incorporated Law Society, would have been constructed.   The British government, however, had no such intentions and was practically "parsimonious to an almost unbelievable degree" [2, p. 115].   Thus, although the Gothic-Picturesque composition of the Royal Courts of Justice was not deemed worthy or eminent by James Fergusson and others, the Law Courts were, in fact, a worthy representation of the conservative inclinations and state of High Victorian society, both visually and spatially.   Street was never obstinate in his pursuit of the High Victorian synthesis of Gothic irregularity and Classical order.   What he sought was an unconventionally historical, never static, design, a new national emblem relevant to his times, the state of the Metropolis, and the state of the nation in Imperial Britain.

Note

References

[1] *Report from the Select Committee on Rebuilding Houses of Parliament with the Minutes of Evidence, and Appendix*, 3 June 1835. The House of Commons.

[2] Summerson, J. (1970). *Victorian Architecture: Four Studies in Evaluation*. New York and London: Columbia University Press.

[3] Brownlee, D. B. (1984). *The Law Courts: The Architecture of George Edmund Street*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press.

[4] *New Courts of Justice: Copy of Treasury Minute of the 23rd day of December 1865; of the Award of the Judges; and, further Correspondence relative thereto*, 17 June 1868. House of Commons Parliamentary Papers.

[5] Harper, R. H. (1983). *Victorian Architectural Competitions: An Index to British and Irish Architectural Competitions in* The Builder*, 1843-1900*. London: Mansell Publishing.

[6] Strong, R. (2004). *Painting the Past: The Victorian Painter and British History*. London: Pimlico.

[7] McLean, J. (2000). "Prince Albert and the Fine Arts Commission", *The Houses of Parliament: History, Art, Architecture*. London: Merrell Publishers, pp. 213-23.

[8]   Street, G. E. (1867). *Explanation of His Design for the Proposed New Courts of Justice*. London.

[9]   "The New Courts of Justice", *Times*. 19 August 1871, p. 11.

[10] Street, G. E. (1872). *The New Courts of Justice: Notes in Reply to Some Criticisms*. 2nd ed., London.

[11] Street, G. E. (1858). "On the Future of Art in England", *Ecclesiologist*, 19, pp. 232-40.

[12] Street, G. E. (1853). *An Urgent Plea for the Revival of True Principles of Architecture in the Public Buildings of the University of Oxford*. Oxford and London.

[13] Street, G. E. (1874). *Brick and Marble in the Middle Ages: Notes of Tours in the North of Italy*. 2nd ed., London.

[14] Fergusson, J. (1872). "The New Law Courts", *Macmillan's Magazine*, 25, pp. 250-56.

[15] Pugin, A. W. N. (1843). *An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England*. London.

[16] Pugin, A. W. N. (1836). *Contrasts; or, a Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries, and Similar Buildings of the Present Day; Shewing the Present Decay of Taste: Accompanied by Appropriate Text*. London.

[17] Street, G. E. (1852). "The True Principles of Architecture, and the Possibility of Development", *Ecclesiologist*, 13, pp. 247-62.