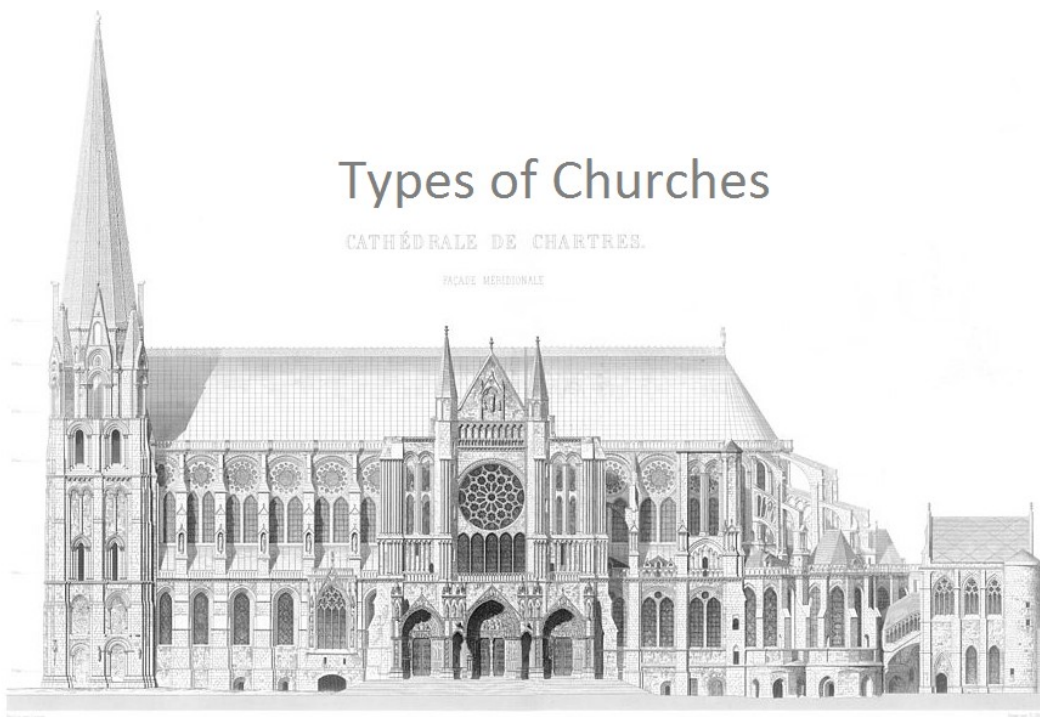


Cathedral Architecture — Overview

The Cathedrals, Basilicas, and Abbeys of the Middle Ages, are some of the most impressive buildings ever built, and during the Middle Ages, they were the pride of Europe. Many of the Great Churches took decades to build and whole communities sacrificed for generations to produce them. They were landmarks known throughout the world, the resting places of saints, the homes of some of the greatest works of art in Western Civilization, and the destination of pilgrims.

The original Christian churches were based on the design of Roman Basilicas, which served as public meeting places, rather than Jewish temples. Eventually, however, Christian architects added important improvements so the great Cathedrals of the Middle Ages were more elegant and impressive than even the grandest Roman Basilicas.

The basic principles of Cathedral architecture were known throughout Europe, so even church builders in modest sized towns and villages imitated features of the famous cathedrals. By studying the architecture of the great Cathedrals, we can understand design and symbolism of most Christian churches from Roman times to the late 20th century.



Before covering architectural principles of Christian churches, it is helpful to know the difference between Basilicas, Cathedrals, Abbeys, and regional Churches. These names refer to the usage of the church rather than its architectural design.

- **Cathedral** — A Cathedral is the seat of the bishop of a town or region and it takes its name from the term *cathedra*, the throne of a bishop. Cathedrals are typically the largest church in a region, and in addition to regular liturgy are used for ordinations, confirmations, and special events.

- **Abbey** — Abbey Churches are usually associated with historical monasteries and are frequently part of a complex including a cloister, a library, a chapter house, and living quarters for religious. In addition to regular liturgy an abbey church is used by religious orders to chant the Divine Office.
- **Basilica** — The term Basilica is inherited from Roman times, when it was used to designate a large public building. It is used by the Catholic church a special title in reference to a great church of interest as a pilgrimage site due to its historical or architectural interest, or to its association with a saint. There are four 'Major' Basilicas in Rome, but over 1500 minor Basilicas worldwide.
- **Shrine** — A Church that is dedicated to a particular saint and is of interest as a pilgrimage site can be designated a shrine. A National Shrine is must be approved by a national council of bishops. An International shrine must be approved by the pope. Pontifical Shrines are usually of great architectural importance, but local shrines can be very modest structures.
- **Chapel** — A chapel is a small church that is associated with a larger institution that can be either religious (such a Monastery) or secular (such as a hospital or military unit).

The church functions described above are not mutually exclusive. An Abbey can be used as a Cathedral, and either can be designated a Basilica or a Shrine. Even a chapel could be recognized as a shrine if it is of great historical interest.

Cathedral Floor Plans

Ad Orientem—To the East

Cathedral floor plans are always designated such that the Apse, or Altar area is to the 'East', the side areas or Transepts are to the North and South, and the Nave and main entry door are to the West. For most of history, these directions really did correspond to the actual orientation of most churches. The altar was at the east end of the church, and both the laity and the priest faced towards the east ("ad orientem") during most of the service.

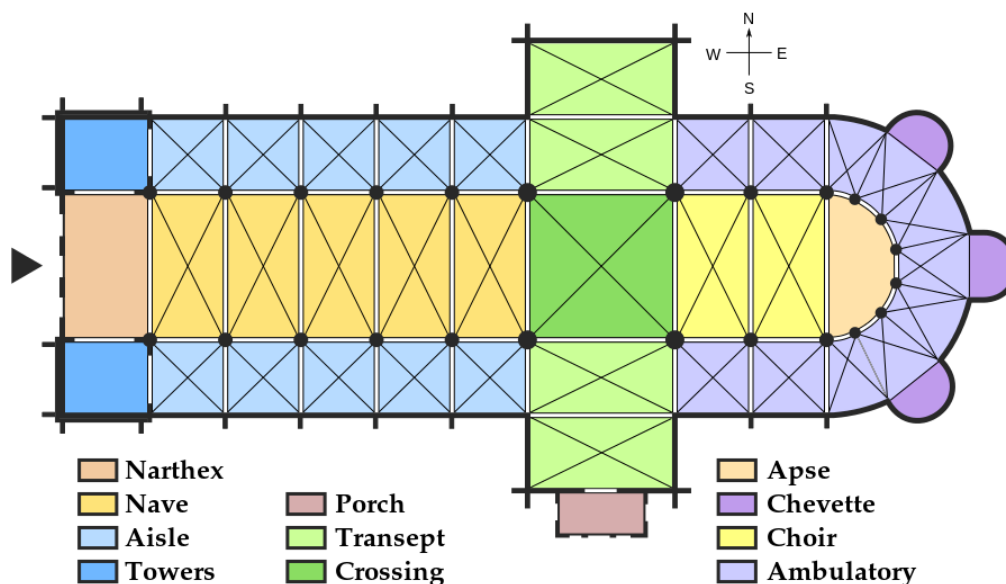
In modern times, Churches are frequently built with the Apse and altar facing some other direction than East, but in terms of Church architectural design, floorplans are shown using traditional directions. For this reason, the term 'East' always means in the direction of the Apse, or Altar, 'West' always means in the direction of the Nave, or main seating area of the laity, etc.

Cruciform—Cross Shaped

Most of the Roman Basilicas, on which the design of early Cathedrals were based, were rectangular. From the late days of the Roman empire, however, most cathedrals were built in the shape of a cross. In some cases, the transepts--that is, the left and right (North and South) arms of the cross were very narrow, providing little more than an entryway. In other cases, they were wide and provided secondary seating. But until *after Vatican II* almost all Catholic churches were built using traditional architectural principles, in the shape of a cross.

Areas of a Cathedral — Terms and Definitions

- **Narthex**—Entrance or Lobby Area west of the Nave. In ancient times, those not eligible to fully participate in the service (catechumens, penitents), could hear the service from the Narthex.
- **Nave**—Main area of a church where the laity worship, separate from the clergy.
- **Aisle or Aisle Bay**—In Cathedral Architecture, 'Aisle' refers to the covered passage way north or south of the piers that uphold the vaulted ceiling above the nave. The ceiling above the aisle is typically lower than that above the nave.
- **Transept** Transverse section that forms the north and south arms of a cross-shaped church, separating the Nave (West) from the Chancel (East).
- **Crossing**—Junction of the four arms of a cross-shaped (cruciform) church, often covered by a dome or tower.



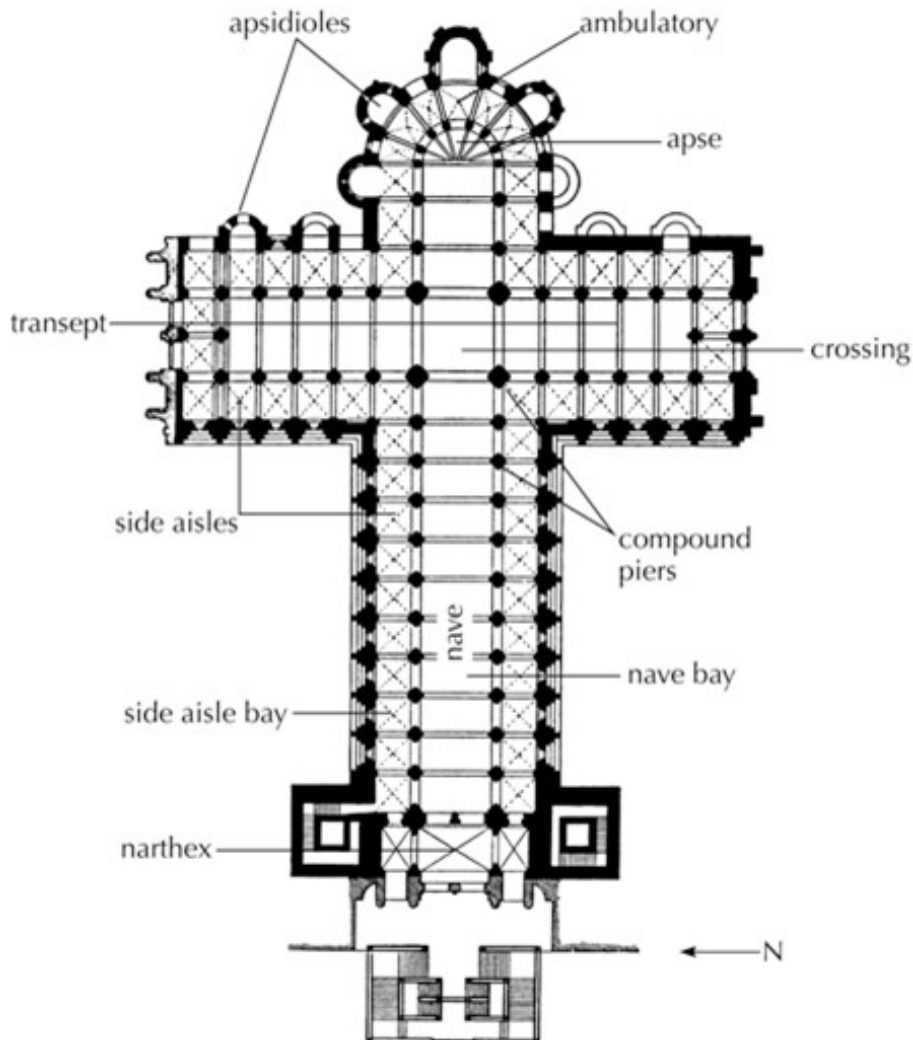
- **Apse**—semicircular "Eastern" portion of a church or Cathedral that contains the altar. The Apse often has an arched or domed roof.
- **Choir**—Part of the church immediately 'west' of the Altar that provides the seating for the clergy and choir. Used for chanting the divine office as well as singing during mass.
- **Chancel**—Space around the altar, including the choir and sanctuary. Clergy and acolytes worship in the Chancel area, separated from the laity.
- **Chevet**—Semi-circular chapels radiating out from the y. Clergy and acolytes worship in the Chancel area, separated from the laity.
- **Ambulatory**—Aisle or covered passageway surrounding the Apse or high altar on the east end of a large church. Frequently provides access to apse-chapels or sacristy.
- **Tower**—Many Cathedrals have twin towers to the north and south of the Narthex, or else a large 'crossing-tower' built over the crossing.
- **Cloister**—covered walk or arcade running along the wall of a building (usually a church that was once part of an abbey), that forms a rectangle. 'Cloistered' monks or nuns resided in this area.
- **Crypt**—Stone chamber beneath the floor of a church or a cathedral often used as a burial place.

These terms refer to rooms or areas within a Cathedral or large church, but are not architectural terms.

- **Chapel**—Space in a large church containing a secondary altar. Useful in a religious community where many priests say private masses.
- **Apse-Chapel**—Small chapels build on the east side of a Cathedral in area behind high altar.
- **Sacristy**—Room near the main altar where the priest vestments and sacred vessels are kept.
- **Sanctuary**—Term originally meant "sacred place" now refers to area the around an altar.

Example of Cathedral Floor Plans

Notice that in all cathedral floorplans, the APSE is considered to be on the East side of the building.



Interesting Cathedral Websites

- [Cathedral Quest](#)
- [Wikipedia: Cathedral Architecture](#)
- [Construct it All: Types of Arches](#)