

Building Identity
Architecture and Collective Identities in Medieval and Modern Europe
(11th-18th centuries)

Nantes, June 12 and 13, 2025

From the 1970s onwards, the notion of collective identity, defined by philosopher and sociologist Julien Freund, emerged as an object of study. For him, collective identity refers to the identification of several people who share something in common. “What cements a collective identity is both the common representation that members make of the objectives or reasons that constitute the group, and the mutual recognition of all within this representation¹”. Collective identity can therefore only exist “based on an awareness of particularisms²”.

Since then, sociologists have established links between collective identity and architecture³. The interest of social sciences in this concept has also found an echo in art history, with the recent organisation of symposia. Their various contributions have provided an essential starting point for reflection, particularly in the history of architecture. However, the subject remains largely confined to contemporary periods⁴.

Thus, the relationship between architecture and collective identities before the creation of modern nations also warrants examination. From the 11th century onwards, Europe experienced major upheavals in the spatial and social organisation of its societies⁵. A community-based system emerged. At the same time, as social taxonomies developed, various signs and markers, such as coats of arms and seals, appeared to guarantee individual identity⁶.

¹ FREUND, Julien, “Petit essai de phénoménologie sociologique sur l’identité collective”, in BEAUCHARD, Jacques (dir.), *Identité collective et travail social*, Toulouse, Privat, 1979, p.74.

² *Ibid.*

³ In particular: KING, Anthony D., *Buildings and society: Essays on the Social Development of the Built Environment*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Londres, 1980; DOVEY, Kim, *Becoming Places: Urbanism/Architecture/Identity/Power*, Routledge, Londres, 2009; JONES, Paul, *The Sociology of Architecture: Constructing Identities*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2011.

⁴ In particular: *Fabriquer les identités collectives: un chantier de l’art à l’époque contemporaine* (May, 27-28 2021, en ligne); *Les Formes visuelles du collectif, XIX^e-XXI^e siècles* (November, 07-08 2019, Tours); *Workshop Identitäten / Identités (II)* (March, 31 and April, 1st 2020, Paris).

⁵ MORSEL, Joseph, “Les logiques communautaires entre logiques spatiales et logiques catégorielles (XII^e-XV^e siècles)”, dans MAGNANI, Eliana, FRANCO, Hilario Junior, DE CAMPOS, Flávio (dir.), *Le Moyen Âge vu d’ailleurs, II: Historiografia e Pesquisas Recentes*, São Paulo, Universidade de São Paulo, 2004, p. 253-278.

⁶ BEDOS-REZAK, Brigitte, “Medieval Identity: a Sign and Concept”, dans *American historical review*, n°105, p. 1489-1533.

Social groups also formed around shared territorial, economic, political, or linguistic characteristics. By gradually expressing themselves through visual symbols, notably in architecture, collective identities become recognisable. These identities could overlap and multiply within the same building. This is why, since modern times, although art historians traditionally classify works by country and region, borders have proven to be more complex and fluid⁷. Architecture can thus serve as both a social and spatial marker. Furthermore, the expression of these identities in-built production is never the result of spontaneous formation, but rather of deliberate, concerted or otherwise, actions. Therefore, the question is not whether architecture can embody collective identities, but how, and in whose interests⁸.

The purpose of this symposium is to examine the construction and development of collective identities within architecture throughout a long period, from the 11th to the 18th century, and across a broad territory, Europe. These identities can be reflected in the shape of buildings, in interior or exterior decor, or in the techniques, materials and expertise employed. To encompass a wide range of groups, all architectural forms can be studied: dwellings, monumental structures, rural architecture, urban planning, etc., as well as representations of architecture in other media (seals, paintings, illuminations, etc.). Three themes, likely to intersect, are to be prioritised.

1. Visual and Spatial Semiotics

In response to the desire for spatial affirmation, visual elements can be developed to embody the group. How is a collective identity translated into plans, architectural decor, or an urban ensemble?

The notion of “model” also needs to be questioned. Indeed, social groups may identify with a particular type of building or decor, and reproduce it subsequently. The choice of models therefore requires careful consideration. Moreover, when creating a new object, the archetype serves as a starting point⁹. But to what extent does the finished product emancipate itself from the model?

2. Materials, Techniques and Expertise

When visible, the techniques and materials used are intrinsically associated with the semiotic discourse. For instance, the region's geological resources may lend its buildings a

⁷ DACOSTA KAUFMANN, Thomas, *Toward a Geography of art*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004.

⁸ DOVEY, Kim, *op. cit.* p. 45.

⁹ CHOAY, Françoise, *La Règle et le modèle. Sur la théorie de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme*, Paris, Seuil, 1996 (2e édition).

certain unity. However, resources are imported and people travel, leading to the transfer of skills.

If expertise cannot be visually displayed, can it still reflect a collective identity? Is the importation of materials based solely on visual criteria, or is the place of origin a determining factor?

3. Building: Between Individuality and Collective Creation

The architectural programme often responds to a need, identified upstream by the art commissioner. His role in the architectural choices must therefore be examined. Similarly, the function attributed to architecture should be questioned: do we identify ourselves with it, or are we meant to be identifiable through it? Moreover, can the use of visual identity discourse within the group be planned or regulated?

It is also necessary to consider the various professions that operate and collaborate (architects, craftsmen and workshops, engineers, draughtsmen, etc.). These professionals may work alone, highlighting their individuality, or they may be part of a corporate or family group. Thus, we must study the protagonists involved to determine their role in the elaboration of identity discourse: is the choice of these different professionals decisive in shaping the identity discourse? Can their experience or origin be pivotal? What is their respective role in this process?

Submission Procedures

Please submit an abstract of no more than 2,000 characters (including spaces) in English or French. It must include a provisional title, an indicative bibliography and a short biography of the author. Abstracts should be sent by email, in PDF format, by Friday, December 13, 2024, to the following address: architectures.id.collectives@gmail.com.

Presentations are expected to last between twenty and twenty-five minutes, and may be given in either French or English.

This study day will take place on June 12 and 13, 2025 in Nantes. A publication is under consideration.

Scientific Committee

- Thomas FLUM, Professor of Medieval Art History, Centre Lucien Febvre, Université de Franche-Comté.

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