


Cameron Macdonell, PhD
Assistant Professor
School of Interior Design
Ryerson University
SID-210, 302 Church St.
Toronto, ON, Canada
M5B 2K3



April 5, 2022

Dear Ben Ewen-Campen and Members of the Somerville Ward 3 City Council,

Thank you for the opportunity to address the topic of demolition at the Masonic lodge that was formerly the First Universalist Church of Somerville, Massachusetts. Having reviewed the letter calling for demolition and having reflected on research into the life, architecture, and legacy of Ralph Adams Cram (both my own work and the work of others), I cannot support the building's demolition based on the arguments presented. Cram's history of racism is real, but it's also complex—far more complex than the letter's authors have acknowledged, more complex even than claimed in the 2016 senior undergraduate thesis by Taylor Jetmundsen, cited in the letter.

Jetmundsen ignored the nuanced line between advocacy and supremacy for the sake of quick portraiture, which is not uncommon for undergraduate essays. That Cram advocated for British cultural heritage from within the United States of America is beyond question, but Cram's advocacy was not necessarily the same as a proclamation of supremacy. Cram self-identified through British ancestry and built an architectural career (especially in the early years) through an Anglo-American design language that appealed to other Americans who self-identified through their Anglo-Saxon ancestors. If one were to exchange Cram with that of a minority architect who self-identified through their ancestors and designed architecture in ways that highlighted ancestral traditions for a clientele that also self-identified through those traditions, that minority architect would not likely be so hastily labeled as a racial supremacist. The difference is power and opportunity, where Cram's self-constructed racial heritage appealed to people with power in the United States, which afforded him ample opportunity to build in ways that spoke to their shared but not necessarily identical claims to heritage. Consequently, Jetmundsen's characterization of Cram as part of a "small group of men who advocated Anglo-Saxon racial supremacy" (quoted in the letter supporting demolition) is misinformed because Cram's career thrived on far more than the patronage of a small group of men, racist or otherwise, and their reasons for hiring him were not necessarily the same as his reasons for working with them. The tribalism of racial self-identification was a much larger phenomenon in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and if that is criteria for the demolition of buildings, then much architecture in the greater Boston area will need to fall. Singling out Cram reads as a token effort to foreclose a far more sensitive discussion because it's easy to point at him for using the words "Anglo-Saxon" and "race" together.

The fact that the letter writers describe Jetmundsen as a researcher and misattribute co-authorship of that document to Jetmundsen's undergraduate supervisor is telling of their own research skills. Concomitantly, their characterization of my doctoral thesis (with no mention of my subsequent book) as further proof of

Cram's racial supremacism is skewed. So too is their reductive assertion that Cram denigrated the Romanesque style as "less pure" than the Gothic and worthy only of inferior people, such as the Universalists who occupied the building under discussion prior to it becoming a Masonic lodge. Such an assertion is difficult to defend when Cram selected a Burgundian/Mediterranean Romanesque style for the highest of High Church Episcopalian commissions: the Conventual Church of St. Mary and St. John in Cambridge, Massachusetts, later in his career. A more accurate statement would be that, since his youth, Cram deeply admired the Romanesque Revival when in the hands of a master, such as Henry Hobson Richardson, but he felt that others debased the style in trying to emulate Richardson too closely. Cram himself first focused on British Perpendicular Gothic designs but, by 1905, was already expanding his design language to embrace a wider gamut of Gothic possibilities. More importantly, before the First World War, Cram explored non-Richardsonian versions of the Romanesque for all kinds of designs, including another archly High Church commission at Peterborough, New Hampshire (All Saints' Episcopal Church) and the private chapel on his Sudbury, Massachusetts, estate. If the Romanesque style was so impure to Cram's mind, why select it for himself? Instead, as Cram explained in the 1924 edition of *Church Building*:

Apparently one becomes less of a purist, or rather stylist, with advancing years, finding beauty in unexpected places and significance in things once disregarded. It may be that to him vital art seems now to draw from many sources rather than one alone, so relating itself more closely to life rather than to an empirical theory. Perhaps also religion in its formal aspects seems less national, less racial than once it did, and so essentially more catholic as well as Catholic. (p. 276)

These are not the words of an intransigent racist but of someone who learned from his myopically zealous past and tried to be better. For that, I cannot condone the rote extermination of his memory.

Ultimately, drawing a straight line from an architect to architecture is rarely convincing. A building is often the work of a firm with more designers and artisans than the name (or names) on the company letterhead, not to mention the various community stakeholders with input in most projects. Yes, Cram is problematic, but based on the available research, the First Universalist Church of Somerville, Massachusetts, was not some profoundly dark self-portrait of his worst tendencies. My recommendation is to find ways to develop a fuller picture of Cram's legacy in your community rather than to wish him out of existence because he was far, far from perfect.

Yours sincerely,



Cameron Macdonell, PhD