Churches Made Fit for a King: 
Alfonso X and Meaning in the Religious Architecture of Post-Conquest Seville

Danya Crites
School of Art and Art History, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242, USA
e-mail: danya-crites@uiowa.edu

Abstract
While interpretations of the visual language of medieval Iberian architecture are often confined to the ways in which it reflects the multicultural society of the Peninsula, this essay moves beyond such readings by examining how, after the Castilian conquest of Seville, Alfonso X expressed his political ambitions, both toward the Peninsula and in the greater context of Christian Europe, through the religious architecture of that city. This study proposes that Alfonso sought to establish Christian authority in the newly conquered city and transform it into a preeminent cosmopolitan capital by appropriating its Great Mosque as Seville’s cathedral and royal pantheon and by erecting primarily Gothic structures over the neighborhood mosques that had been converted into the city’s parish churches. The French Gothic features of these parish churches in particular signified the new Christian regime and Alfonso’s connections to the French monarchy.

Keywords
Seville, Burgos, Alfonso X of Castile, Great Mosque, church architecture, Mudejar, Gothic

For nearly 800 years, medieval Iberian society distinguished itself from that of northern Europe due to the cultural commixture of the three monotheistic religions: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. As a result, interpreting the meaning of the architecture produced during this prolonged period of cultural contact is often confined to the cross-cultural relations contained within Iberian society. This is particularly true of the monuments traditionally categorized as Mudejar—buildings of Christian or Jewish patronage with features largely associated with Islamic construction.1

1 The definition and even the use of the term Mudejar as an artistic category has been
While these monuments certainly reflect the complexities of the multicultural society that produced them, it is important to consider their significance beyond the Peninsula. Medieval Iberia may have been distinct from its northern neighbors in its cultural diversity, but its Christian rulers were still very much a part of the larger European political milieu.

This is perhaps most apparent in the case of Alfonso X of Castile, who in addition to striving to create a Spanish empire, pursued the title of Holy Roman Emperor. Alfonso expressed his political ambitions in much of his literary and artistic patronage, as did other royal patrons of the thirteenth century, including the influential rulers Emperor Frederick II and Louis IX.

In this essay I will examine the specific case of Alfonso’s architectural patronage in the city of Seville, arguing that he deliberately employed the city’s cathedral and “Mudejar” parish churches to assert Castilian sovereignty on two distinct levels: first, to establish a Christian presence in a city where sustained Castilian control was far from certain and, second, to transform Seville into a new capital worthy of a kingdom striving for preeminence within the greater sphere of Christian Europe. The symbolic value that Alfonso attached to architectural forms is apparent in his preservation and transformation of the city’s Great Mosque into a royal pan-

deated by scholars ever since it was first applied in the nineteenth century to a seemingly Islamicizing strain of late medieval Spanish art. A concise and up-to-date historiography on the topic can be found in Dodds, Menocal and Balbale (323-329).

2 On Alfonso’s literary and artistic patronage, see O’Callaghan (Alfonso X and the “Cantigas de Santa María” and The Learned King [esp. Chapter 9]) and Cómez Ramos (Las empresas artísticas de Alfonso X el Sabio). For discussions of his patronage in relation to that of his contemporaries, see Burns (“The Significance of the Frontier in the Middle Ages” and “Stupor Mundi: Alfonso X of Castile, the Learned”), as well as Kosmer and Powers. While general comparisons can be made between the patronage of Alfonso and that of Frederick II and Louis IX, the architectural patronage of Charles of Anjou in Sicily provides a particularly close parallel to Alfonso’s patronage of churches in Seville. Caroline Bruzelius claims that the Angevin ruler (who was Alfonso’s contemporary) sought to expand his power in the eastern Mediterranean by commissioning French Gothic churches that both emphasized his prestigious Capetian heritage and established the new French authority in recently conquered territories (Chapter 1). (Special thanks to Connie Berman for referring me to Bruzelius’ work on Charles.) This essay will argue that Alfonso also used French Gothic forms to allude to his familial connections to the French monarchy and to signify regime change in the city.

3 Although the Seville churches that are the focus of this study have prominent Gothic facades and sanctuaries, as will be discussed below, they have traditionally been categorized as Mudejar because of the influence of Andalusian precedents on their towers, centrally-planned chapels and some of their ornament.