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Notre-Dame de Paris cathedral chief architect Philippe Villeneuve smokes a cigarette by the cathedral during an interview with Associated Press, Tuesday, Dec. 3, 2024 in Paris. (AP/Louise Delmotte)

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The day after the inferno struck [Notre Dame on April 15, 2019](#), Philippe Villeneuve walked despondently into the remains of his cathedral. Smoke choked the spring air, the spire lay in rubble, and charred beams littered the nave. “We had lost the framework, the roof, the spire, and three sections of the vault,” Villeneuve, its chief architect since 2013, said.

Yet just hours earlier, President Emmanuel Macron had issued an extraordinary decree: Notre Dame would rise again — in just five years. “There was one sole (problem),” Villeneuve said in an interview with The Associated Press, “the deadline.”

It felt impossible. Yet as Villeneuve stepped through the wreckage with doubts in his mind, he was caught by surprise. Terrifying as it was to see the charred remains of the 861-year-old Gothic treasure, a beacon of hope emerged.

“All the stained-glass windows were spared, the great organ, the furniture, the paintings — everything was intact,” he realized. “It was doable.”

A historic restoration

Macron’s decree became the driving force behind the most ambitious restoration in modern French history. The announcement — to restore an edifice that took nearly 200 years to build in just five years — sparked unprecedented global support, [with donations quickly nearing \\$1 billion](#).

Yet, other obstacles came in waves. First, [the fire’s immediate aftermath brought a lead contamination crisis that halted work for a month, and woke the world up to the dangers of lead dust](#). Then came the pandemic, forcing workers off-site. Weather, too, seemed to conspire, with heavy rains delaying the removal of the scorched scaffolding that had fused into a skeletal reminder of the disaster.

But Villeneuve persisted, working with his team on what he called the “presidential building site” to redefine what was possible under extraordinary conditions. He lobbied for the final reopening date to be delayed from April of this year to align with Dec. 8 — a Catholic holy day celebrating Mary’s conception without sin — a symbolic choice that felt both achievable and sacred.

His irreverent sense of humor — delivered amid expletives, and with a childlike grin that belies his 61 years and his silver hair — seems to have carried him through the relentless five years of work.

But as the reopening fast approaches, Villeneuve confessed his lingering anxiety.

“I’m not calm — not at all. I’m completely stressed out,” he said. “This was not just about restoring a building. This was about restoring the heart of France.”

More beautiful than ever

There were positives. The fire badly scarred the cathedral but also revealed its hidden brilliance — with many who [glimpsed the restored interiors last week](#) saying they are more majestic than before the catastrophe.

“It’s horrible to say (of the fire), but every cloud has a silver lining,” Villeneuve said, smiling. “The stone is luminous now. It almost glows.”

The intense heat and falling debris left behind a film of toxic lead dust, requiring meticulous cleaning of every surface. Sculptures, walls and organ pipes were painstakingly stripped of grime and soot, [exposing a brightness unseen for centuries](#)

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Strolling through the medieval wooden beams of the reconstructed framework, so complicated it is known as the “forest,” or beneath the newly restored spire, Villeneuve felt the work was so seamless it seemed as if the inferno might never have happened, he said.

“That’s success,” Villeneuve said. “If I can make (cathedral visitors) doubt there was ever a fire, then I’ve erased the horror.”

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Inked devotion

While his restoration adhered faithfully to the historical designs of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, Villeneuve found a deeply personal way to mark his connection to Notre Dame.

He knew he could not leave his name etched into the stone, so he chose to get a long, bold tattoo running down his forearm, calling himself “Rock and Roll” for it.

It depicts Viollet-le-Duc’s original spire — the one that collapsed in the fire — not [the newly restored version crowned with the golden phoenix cum rooster](#).

Complementing it is another tattoo over his chest, inspired by the cathedral’s stained glass, forming a rosary design. “This wasn’t about me,” he said, “but I’ve left my mark in my own way.”

Viollet-le-Duc’s 19th-century spire, a meticulous recreation of a medieval aesthetic, remains at the heart of the restoration. “He was a genius,” Villeneuve said of the architect. “My role was to ensure that vision endured.”

Lingering mystery of the fire

While Notre Dame’s restoration has proceeded with remarkable precision, one question still looms over Villeneuve: the cause of the fire, a frustrating investigation into one of the biggest mysteries in France in living memory. Despite extensive efforts, money and interest, authorities have still not identified the blaze’s origin. Initial theories suggested an electrical short circuit, possibly linked to ongoing renovation work, but no definitive cause has been established.

The lingering uncertainty still troubles Villeneuve as the cathedral nears its reopening. It’s personal, particularly as he was in charge when the fire broke out.

“It’s something that haunts you. Not the responsibility for the fire — I know very well that I bear no personal responsibility for it,” he said. “At least, I think so.”

“But it annoys me not to know.”

In the wake of the disaster, lessons have been learned, and steps taken to ensure Notre Dame’s protection in the future. Villeneuve and his team have installed cutting-edge fire safety systems in the cathedral to prevent a similar catastrophe. The attic, now divided into three fire compartments—choir, transept, and nave—features advanced thermal cameras, smoke detectors, and a revolutionary water-misting system. Unlike traditional sprinklers, this system releases a fine mist of water droplets designed to extinguish flames while minimizing damage to the fragile wood and stone.

“The mist saturates the air, reducing oxygen levels to smother fires without harming the wood or stone,” Villeneuve explained. “These are the most advanced fire safety systems in any French cathedral. We had to learn from what happened. We owe it to the future.”

Triumph of Notre Dame

Standing on the banks of the Seine, Notre Dame’s spire once again reaching into the Parisian sky, Villeneuve allowed himself a moment of quiet pride as he took questions and compliments from passersby — enjoying his new “celebrity” status. For Villeneuve, the journey — his life's work, shortly before he retires — has been as personal as it was monumental.

“The cathedral burned, she collapsed, and I collapsed the same day,” he said, speaking of the monument in visceral, human terms. “I gradually got back up as she got back up. As the scars began closing, I felt better. Now I feel ready to leave the hospital.”

He suggested that the nation’s wounds are also healing as the reopening approaches. With 15 million visitors expected per year — 3 million more than before the fire — Villeneuve’s work continues to resonate, both in stone and spirit.