ARCHITECTURE VIEW: ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS AS ART

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New York Times (1923-Current file); Jun 12, 1977; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 93

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Architectural Drawings As Art

Architectural drawing is the stepchild of the arts. After seeing the exhibition of "Two Hundred Years of American Architectural Drawing" at the Cooper Hewitt Museum (2 East 91st Street, through July 17), I have been wondering why the subject has always had a kind of second-class status. By any definition, this is a major show, and it is also a superb one, both as a record of the American building genius and as a moving experience of a consistently subtle and exquisite esthetic. Many of the drawings are breathtaking in their technical mastery and expressive skills, and their beauty is further enriched by their revelation of conceptual ideals. Here is architecture as it comes straight from the mind and the eye and the heart, before the spoilers get to it.

In fact, one thing that this exhibition makes abundantly clear is that the architect worthy of the name is an artist first of all—a creative sensibility involved in the making of art, however wisely or unwisely he uses that art and whatever corporate or structural corruptions take place in his practice of it. These drawings present the act of architecture in its most pure form, and on this level they can be enjoyed for their own sake. But the viewer adds to that sensuous pleasure the intellectual pleasure of the rational and esthetic processes that go into a built work, which must answer to the highest and most complex considerations of sculptural form and painterly light as well as to sociological and symbolic need. Architecture can then be seen as the most real and abstract, the most visionary and pragmatic, the most vulnerable and absolute, and perhaps the most sensuous art the world has ever known.

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Then why did the sponsors of this exhibition, the Architectural League of New York and the American Federation of Arts, have such a hard time finding a place to show it? (The newly opened Cooper Hewitt has filled a conspicuous New York gap in this respect; right now there are three fine architecture shows there, including a spectacular display of Palladian models and a vignette on the Carnegie Mansion, which was converted for the museum last year.)

There are several possible answers, having to do with some tired conventional wisdom. Architectural drawings are commonly considered a specialized subject and taste. Not so; the only requirement is a love of good drawing; loving buildings is a bonus. Drawings are not usually rated as dramatic exhibition material. Certainly these are no more or less spectacular than other examples of the genre; drawings are essentially an intimate art, with very personal rewards of direct communication between artist and viewer.

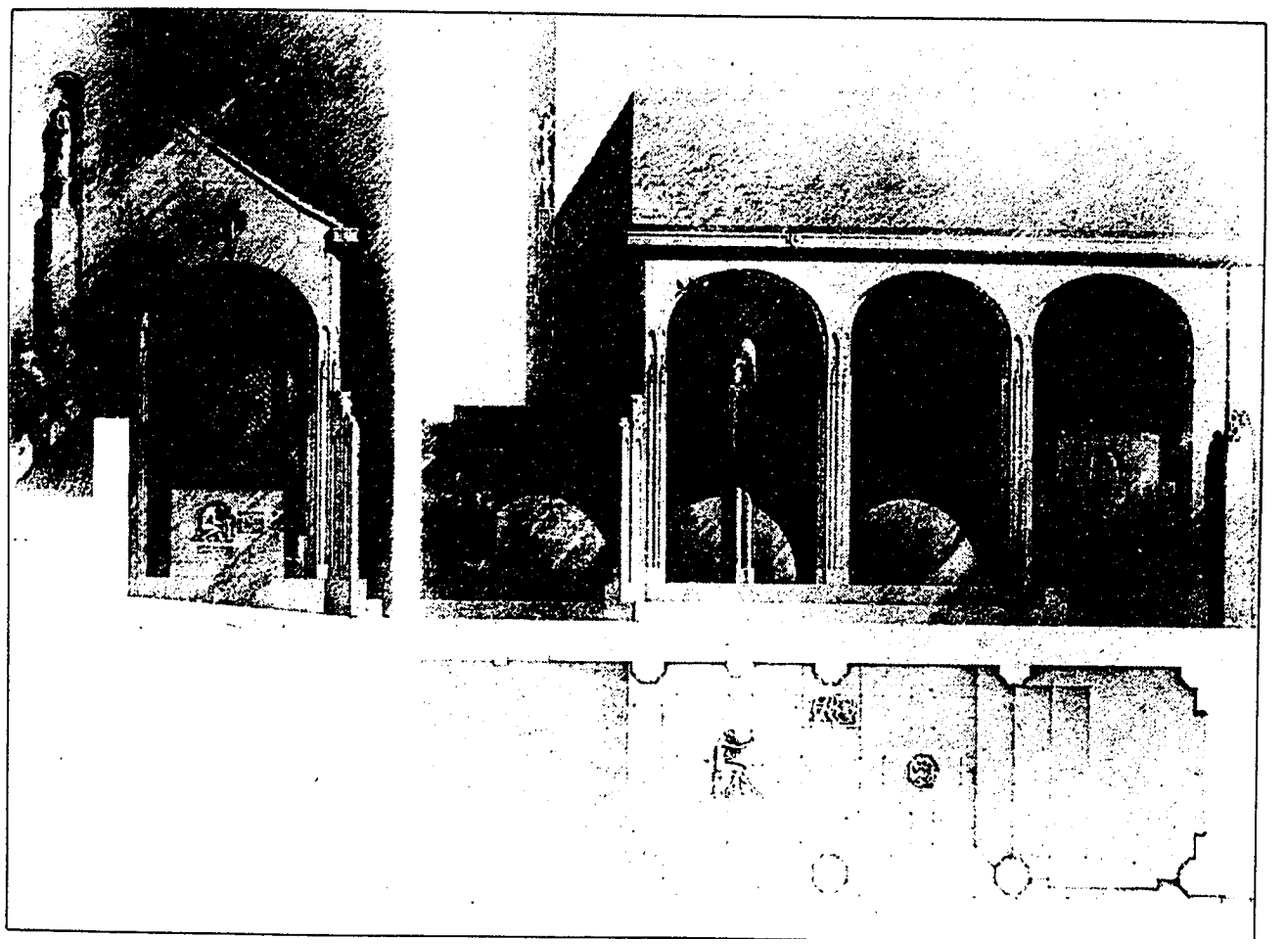
Architectural drawings, in particular, are not considered crowd-pullers or media favorites by the big museums, which are increasingly devoted to head counts and publicity. That judgment goes for architecture in general. Clearly, someone is out of touch with the current cultural scene; the interest in architecture in this decade has expanded explosively, particularly among the young. I will be surprised if the attendance at the Cooper Hewitt, short of early summer doldrums, is not most grafitying.

New galleries have been opening that feature architectural drawings. The Spaced Gallery, at 165 West 72d Street, is having a continuous series of architectural shows. The Drawing Center, at 137 Greene Street, has an important display of rare drawings by Antonio Gaudì, directed by Gaudì scholar and architectural historian George R. Collins, with loans from the Spanish Government. Interest has been impressive.

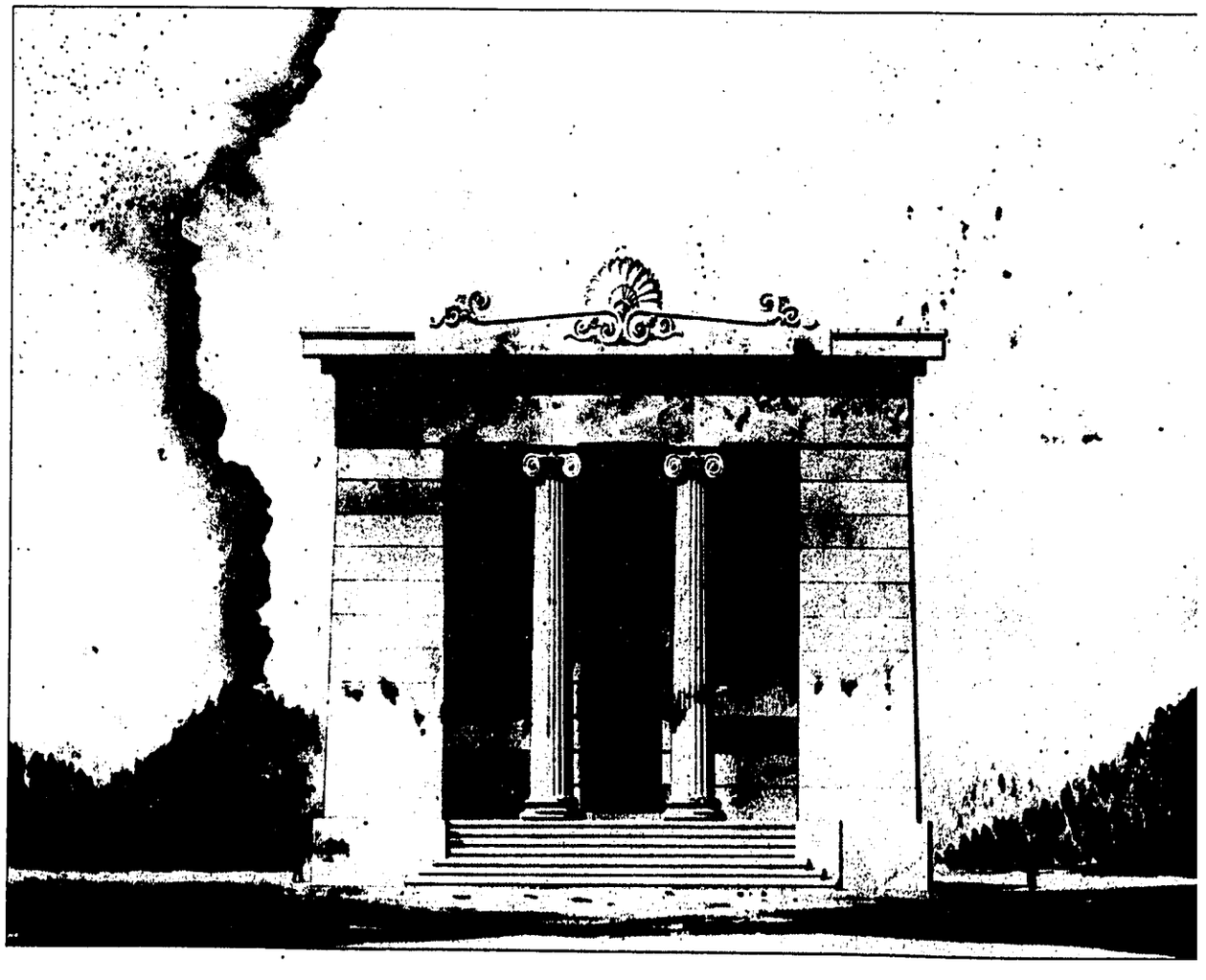
The Cooper Hewitt exhibition is the first that attempts to deal with the subject of American architectural drawings comprehensively. There is an accompanying scholarly catalogue by David Gebhard and Deborah Nevins, who are also the curators of the show. The work has been aided by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, and the Architectural League of New York.

The three years of research involved have been a kind of treasure hunt with tragic overtones. With a few notable exceptions, architectural archives are buried, uncatalogued and deteriorating, for lack of money and care. They are apt to languish in unlikely places if they have not been lost or destroyed. There were some surprising discoveries, such as the fine Bulfinch drawing of the Worcester County Courthouse found in the Worcester County Engineering Department, and outstanding 19th-century work from the South. Only recently has there been a concerted effort to survey and record sources by the relatively new Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Resources.

There are more than 200 drawings by more than 80 architects on display in the exhibition, including 16 from the Cooper Hewitt collection. The work is arranged chronologically, in six time periods that correspond roughly to the dominant movements and styles of two centuries. The range is enormous—from the illustrations of Asher Benjamin's do-it-yourself vernacular Georgian houses of the Early Republic and the more worldly classicism of William Strickland and Benjamin Latrobe of the early 19th century through the Post-Civil War High Victorian exuberance of H. H. Richardson and Frank Furness to examples of the present day. The one word that seems to unite almost all of this work, surprisingly, is delicacy. Louis Sullivan's tiny, thumbnail sketches of the 1890's burst from the page with the power of fully realized structures, complete with miniaturized efflorescences of his famous ornament. The early 19th-century renderings of James Dakin and A. J. Davis share the same serene pastel washes and orderly shadows of the mid-century Gothic Revival churches and Tuscan villas by Richard Upjohn.



Eliel Saarinen's drawing of Cranbrook Academy



James Dakin's drawing of the Bank of Louisville

'Here is architecture straight from the heart, before the spoilers get to it.'

Marion Mahoney Griffin's bird's-eye view of a housing development of 1912, done in gouache on silk, has the sensitivity of a Japanese landscape. Bertram Goodhue tops a craggy rise with a 1915 house that suggests Wuthering Heights more than Westchester. Eliel Saarinen's incredible pencil rendering of Cranbrook Academy in 1926 is an ethereal miracle of line and tone. One notes, repeatedly, in this work, a feather touch, using the finest ink line or pale, thin washes, the most expressive pencil (pencil and charcoal are magic-marker casualties), the most subtle tones and textures. The boldest skyscrapers are suggested by gentle nuances. Above all, they consistently illuminate the processes of design.

It is evident here that Mies was speaking for the whole profession when he said that God was in the details. But the details are often lost on the way to the finished product. The history of architecture therefore splits into two realities: the drawing, which, as the authors of the book point out, contains the real architectural intent, and the completed construction, which may be a markedly different thing. The influence of drawings on the history and practice of architecture— from Andrea Palladio to Hugh Ferris, from the 17th to the 20th centuries—has been enormous and consistently underrated.

The quality of delicate sensibility not only unites 200 years of American work, it also characterizes today's most advanced practice. It is there in the lyrical, Necco-wafer colored abstractions of John Hejduk, the artfully mannerist collages of Michael Graves and the sophisticated pastels of Richard Meier. The architect's expressive dedication to a precise esthetic vision is essentially unchanged. What is different now is not the quality, but the nature of his art.

The exhibition has been installed at the Cooper Hewitt by Dorothy Twining Globus and Maureen Healy, and it could not possibly be more enjoyable than it is in the rooms and spaces of the remodeled Carnegie Mansion. This says something for the pleasures of the house museum as a particularly suitable scale and setting for drawings, as well as for the pleasures of recycled landmarks.