

## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# The Centenary of A Famous Firm

**T**his is the 100th anniversary of the founding of the firm of McKim, Mead and White, a name which is to architecture what J.P. Morgan is to banking and Dom Perignon is to champagne. To the public, it means monuments, mansions and millionaires, and the glamor of high society and high life. It also means Evelyn Nesbit and Harry K. Thaw and a crime of passion on the roof of the former Madison Square Garden — appropriately, a McKim, Mead and White building.

The victim, the architect Stanford White, is remembered as a celebrity, bon vivant, man about town, creative genius and arbiter of taste — a Fountainhead-like image (establishment rather than maverick division) of the sort that occasionally propels architecture into the popular imagination. So great is the power of the legend that local mythology credits any opulent and elegant turn-of-the-century house to Stanford White, who could not possibly have designed them all, while every sufficiently grand public building is assigned to Charles McKim.

Scholars are busy sorting it all out. Meanwhile, the centenary of this prestigious and productive firm (more than 785 commissions) is being marked by a series of events, from exhibitions to walking tours. The early monographs have been reissued and Brendan Gill's biography of Stanford White is eagerly awaited. A major show at the Brooklyn Museum, called "The American Renaissance," deals with all of the arts and many of the artists of the period from 1876 to 1917, and will run through Dec. 30. Appropriately, the Brooklyn Museum is a grandly colonnaded McKim, Mead and White building.

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A small, selective exhibition of McKim, Mead and White architectural drawings, shown with photographs of completed buildings and work in construction, will be on view in the rotunda of the Low Memorial Library of Columbia University through Dec. 14. These are previously unexhibited documents from the collection of Avery Architectural Library that offer fascinating sidelights on the principals' work and personalities. Appropriately, Low Library, with its Pantheon-like space and massive columns and marbles, is a McKim, Mead and White building.

The firm of McKim, Mead and White was founded in 1879, when the young Stanford White joined Charles Follen McKim and William Rutherford Mead in a practice that would soon become the most important and influential of its time. Domestically, it ranged from the large shingle "cottages" of the New England aristocracy to the marble chateaux of the Newport overachievers; institutionally, it included the civic centers, state capitols, universities, libraries and museums that represented the political power, cultural ambitions and philanthropic ideals of the day.

The period of the firm's ascendancy was called by most of its art world participants — few of whom could be faulted for modesty — the American Renaissance. It involved a collaborative effort in all of the arts, based on what was fondly believed to be the Italian Renaissance model. Instead of noble and papal palaces, McKim, Mead and White built private clubs and mansions for the new millionaires, where ambitious projects were initiated over lavish meals, fine wines and Havana cigars.

The architecture built in this spirit still looms large on the landscape. But the taste for it has had its ups and downs. From a high point around the turn of the century, it reached its low point during the modernist revolution, when its eclectic, classical design stood for all the things that modern architecture was rebelling against. Everything this work represented — the borrowings from the past, the trappings of the power structure — had to be destroyed if the revolution was to succeed. For years, these buildings were treated like some giant indiscretion on the street.

Although much that was rejected were tiresome and pretentious cliches, the good, unfortunately, was jettisoned with the bad. Today's young "radicals," in revolt against orthodox modernism, are looking for some of the lost symbols and skills that were grounded in so many centuries of a highly developed and continually metamorphosing tradition. What they have found is the Academy, the Beaux Arts and the American Renaissance. Only something so completely out, could now be so far in.

In fact, a McKim, Mead and White anniversary celebration of this sort would have been virtually impossible not too

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David W. Dunlap

The Municipal Building designed in 1914  
by McKim, Mead and White

# A Firm's Centenary

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long ago. Or it would have been a very small party. Admirers of the American Renaissance, like Henry Hope Reed Jr. and John Bayley, the founders of Classical America, have been trying for many years to roll the firm's reputation back uphill with Sisyphean determination. Their major vindication came with the Museum of Modern Art's large Beaux Arts exhibition in 1975. And now the unthinkable has happened; some young architects are actually designing in the classical style.

No one would have been more surprised at the changes in their fortunes than McKim, Mead and White. Certainly humility was not part of their style. There is the story about the planning session of artists and architects for the Columbian Exposition of 1892, for which McKim, Mead and White set the imperial image that was to turn the Chicago fairgrounds into a great, white, City Beautiful. In a fit of esthetic euphoria, Augustus St. Gaudens turned to Daniel Burnham to sum up the feelings in the room. "Look here, old fellow," he said, "do you realize that this is the greatest meeting of artists since the 15th century?"

A far less sanguine observer at the time was Louis Sullivan, who, almost alone, did not espouse the classical revival that was to sweep all else before it after the phenomenal success of the Fair. The golden arches of his Transportation Building were neither snow-

white nor indebted to Greece or Rome; their bold forms and interlaced ornament were meant to be a creative contribution to a native American development. The Fair helped break Sullivan's heart. His often-repeated observation was that its reactionary design would set back the course of American architecture 50 years or more.

He was right, of course, and he was wrong. We eventually got both the best of the Academy and the best of the brave new world. And we are standing at the point where we no longer have to choose sides. This is the moment when the two faces of art — the academic and the innovative — are finally being put back together, and we are once again looking at history whole.

Now, if we can just look at it straight. The range, in 19th- and 20th-century academic work, is from the magnificent to the merely impressive to the perfectly dreadful. That which lacked greatness filled the void with pomposity and monumental vacuity. The craftsmanship and materials were generally superb, but some of the embellishing art definitely makes one queasy. The work of McKim, Mead and White maintained an exceptional standard, and has provided buildings that are among the chief ornaments and richest adornments of our cities. But that firm, too, could produce buildings that were as cold and spiritless as they were nonfunctional. It is now up to the scholars to sort out the hits, the misses and the errors. ■