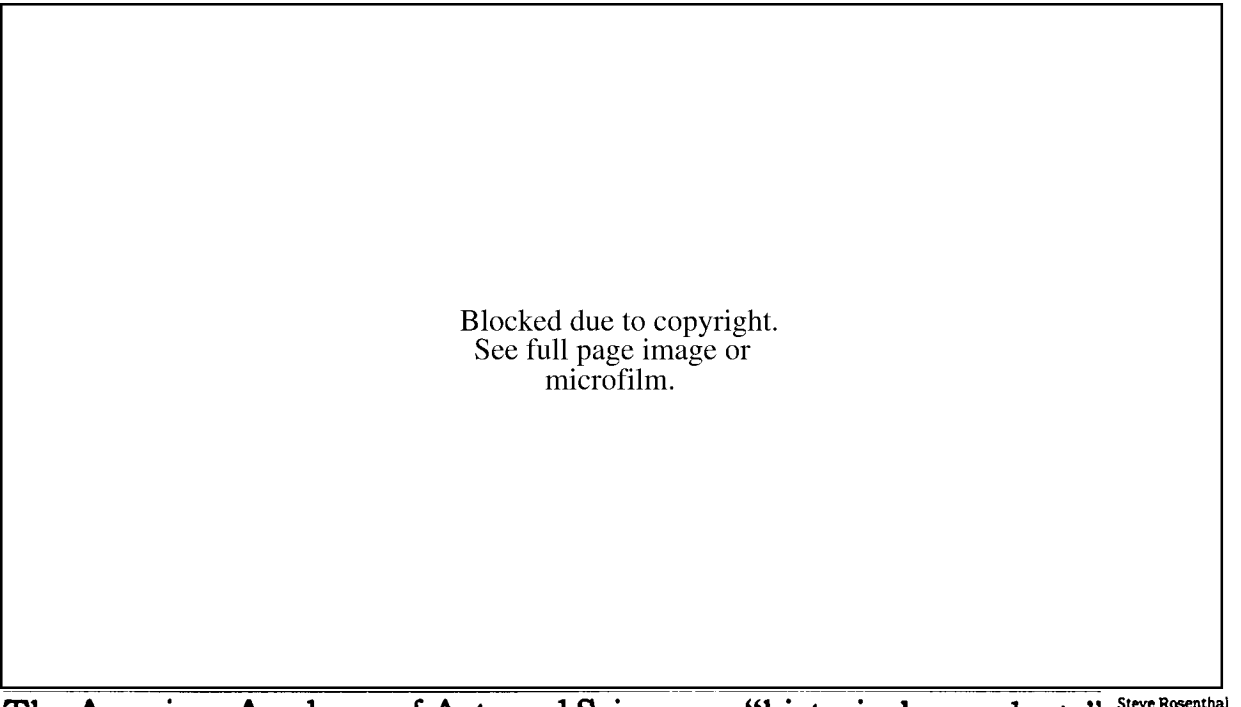
**ARCHITECTURE VIEW**

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# Classical Clarity In an Academy Design




The American Academy of Arts and Sciences—"historical precedents" Steve Rosenthal

CAMBRIDGE, Mass.

It is fashionable now to find echoes of other periods and styles in new buildings, as evidence of a cultivated architectural mind and the creative use of the past. It is possible to find reminders of the California architects Greene and Greene and their debt to the Japanese way with wood, Mackintosh and the Glasgow School, and Otto Wagner and the Vienna Secession in the handsome new headquarters of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cambridge, Mass. What it is not possible to find is any resemblance to the architects' most noted previous work, the Boston City Hall — the competition-winning design by Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles, now the Boston firm of Kallmann, McKinnell and Wood.

That well-publicized example of the "New Brutalism" of the 1960's continues to have a substantial and impressive public presence; the Boston City Hall suggests a symbolic strength and probity through its bold massing of brick and concrete that Boston's traditional political reality notoriously lacks. Such is the undeniable power of architectural images. And it is architectural images that the designers of important new buildings are dealing with increasingly today, as the modernist dictum that form follows function yields sophisticated complexities of meaning and use.

Measured against Gerhard Kallmann's and Michael McKinnell's previous allegiance to the International Style, the new academy building is unabashedly traditional in its use of arcaded brick walls, sloping copper roofs with supporting timbers and finely crafted mahogany trim. It looks like a drastic step backwards, or a radical change in taste and style. But it represents neither inconstancy nor inconsistency on the part of the architects. In line with today's much freer approach to design, they are no longer trying to find a "pure" 20th-century solution. They see the problem of housing and institutions devoted to the cultivation of knowledge as something more than the pragmatic relationships of program and plan; they have made a sincere effort to deal with the building's traditional and symbolic aspects.

One also finds, in the academy's instructions to the architects, a repeated injunction against a solution that would be "a vehicle for a trendy or personal stylistic statement." That warning was first sounded by Lawrence Anderson, former head of the M.I.T. School of Architecture, who wrote an unusually comprehensive and helpful preliminary program, and was repeated by the physicist Victor Weisskopf, who was president of the academy when the project was undertaken. He requested a design that would "respect old and new esthetics, combine the traditional with the innovative, and correspond to the character of the academy, devoted to the exploration of past, present and future values."

That kind of charge, in the days of High Modernism, was usually the signal for an architect to fall flat on his face. The nation's capital is full of weak-kneed compromises, monuments to a lack of love or understanding of the past and a failed commitment to the future. The difference between the academy building and those earlier attempts at synthesis is partly in the nature of the times, as the 20th-century rift between new and old is finally being healed, and in the sensiblities of the architects. The difference between the academy and the Boston City Hall — and it is a watershed difference in the philosophy and practice of modern architecture — is that the architects have felt free to find their answers in terms of existing building types and historial precedents rather than through the invention of new forms.

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The 40,000-square-foot building on five-and-a-half wooded acres cost $4 million, and is the generous gift of Edwin Land and the Rowland Foundation. Mr. Land is the founder of the Polaroid Corporation and a former president of the academy. The structure is located on a parklike landscaped site — relandscaped and restored to its 19th-century beauty by Carol Johnson — on what is known as Norton's Woods, or the Sachs Estate, on the Cambridge-Somerville boundary of Harvard University.

Chartered in 1780, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences is one of the country's most prestigious scholarly communities. It has been somewhat peripatetic in its first two centuries. The members met first in the Philosophy Chamber at Harvard, and later in rented space from the Boston Atheneum and the Massachusetts Historical Society. The group acquired a home of its own in 1904, and became a wanderer again after 1955; its most recent sojourn has been at the Brandegee Estate in Brookline.

Historically, its quarters have always been referred to as the "house" of the academy, and that is an image that the architects have worked hard to evoke, for both tradi-

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# A Classical Academy

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tional and environmental reasons. This has been done through a very careful manipulation of character and scale. The copper roofs that will turn green to blend with the trees reduce the visual impact of the structure so that it suggests something much smaller and more domestic than the sizable institution that it really is. The overhanging eaves give a sense of shelter, and the building is integrated without barriers into the sloping, natural setting.

Mr. Land has strong feelings about intellectual exchange that have been reflected in the building's design. Those ideas, which are shared by Professor Weisskopf and the current president of the academy, Milton Katz, stress a "catalyst" theory in which the spontaneous meeting and interaction of good minds in a setting conducive to relaxed discourse produces good ideas. The architects were urged to provide "talking places" as well as the necessary public spaces for lectures and meetings. The building is full of intimate features and special amenities that can serve this purpose: the continuous, mahogany-framed glass doors that open to a sheltered brick arcade on two sides, a suite of social rooms that wrap around each other with nooks and hearths, cushioned window seats, generous views of gardens and woods.

The plan is formal, but fluid, organized around a raised, central entrance hall that opens to visible, surrounding spaces and rises to the full height of the skylit roof. The sequence of spaces leads from two conference rooms and their support facilities near the entrance through an interlocking library, study and garden room and large and small dining rooms to a 300-seat auditorium which also enjoys daylight and views, for the academy's monthly Stated Meetings, or lectures. Administrative functions, visiting scholars and the editorial offices of Daedalus, the academy's publication, are housed on the second floor.

Stylistically, the building goes beyond eclecticism to create something with a distinct character of its own. The architects have indulged clear historical preferences, such as the Wiener Werkstätte recall of the wood-surrounded, red granite mantels.

But one hopes that the furnishings so well begun by the architects will be broadened and enriched in its stylistic range and sources. Bare walls with mahogany framing, wainscoting and picture rails cry for good paintings; it is unfortunate that their absence is emphasized by the presence of a Polaroid reproduction that is technically remarkable and totally without redeeming esthetic value. The larger wood pieces are much too timid and bland. These generous, high-ceilinged rooms call for important and interesting furniture — Chinese lamps and jardinières and Jacobean library tables — objects in the manner of the handsome, eclectic 19th-century interiors that Boston understood so well. Mackintosh's dramatically vertical ladder-back chairs, now being manufactured again, could flank the high entrances to well-proportioned rooms to great advantage. These spaces cry for such assured and even eccentric additions.

That temporary default — and the equally temporary discomforts of a period of initial trial and use — are secondary to the fact that the new academy headquarters is a handsome and appropriate building that is both a laudable act of architectural patronage and a significant architectural milestone. The design goes beyond modernism. But it resorts to none of the tricks of post-modernism and it is no modernist mea culpa. There is neither the loss nor the rejection of the kind of discipline and restraint that have been at the heart of the modernist esthetic, and that is clearly basic to the interests of the architects. A modular and structural rationale is maintained throughout. The columns, for example, are square, in response to the bricks that form them, and the calculated transition from column to pilaster to wall plane is a model of reasoned and sensitive relationships. The building has a classical clarity. This is a serious, serene and skilled structure that proclaims its new-old faith subtly and gently, with quiet elegance and style. It seems just right for the house of the academy for the next 200 years. ■

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