Design Notebook

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A mansion that deserves more than platitudes.

As a research freak, I am certain that dazzling discoveries as well as elementary accuracy reward those who dig in dusty archives, or at least consult the standard references. I am secretly convinced that the revelations of genius come not from a celestial thunderbolt, but from a combination of sitzfleisch and an intensely curious mind. Unfortunately, newspaper research time, unlike doctoral dissertation time, consists of a few days rather than a few years, and I must rely on the efforts of those who prepare exhibitions and write books for adequate and accurate information. This research is my profit and pleasure; one of the perks, so to speak, of the job

And so the prospect of an exhibition of architectural drawings of the Felix M. Warburg house, now the Jewish Museum, at the northeast corner of Fifth Avenue and 92d Street, sent me hotfooting it uptown to the museum for the promised display of unique documents from its files. This French Renaissance mansion, built in 1907-08 by the architect C.P.H. Gilbert, is one of those notable turn-of-the-century haute-bourgeois palaces that add so much to the style and quality of New York. I expected, at the least, a richly concise presentation of the original data, plus some intriguing insights into the architectural and social history of the city.

What I found was a scant seven drawings of elevations and sections on display (through March 16) in a kind of ground-floor nonspace, and a handful of photographs of the original interiors, which seem to have been a singularly graceless lot. We are told, in a label, that these examples were selected from "many." The facades show late French Gothic detail, and the rooms inside seem to have been substantially furnished with chairs of French and Italian persuasion, scattered randomly in the drawing room, lined up rigidly in the dining room, and standing about uneasily in the conservatory.

This niggardly group is accompanied by a text that does not describe or explain the building in anything but the most minimal platitudes about eclecticism. The splendor and status of these turn-of-the-century New York mansions that dealt in such a fascinating mix of social and esthetic aspirations are neither explored nor set into the context of a period and place.

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To have the original documents, and not to have done the homework, is appalling. Certainly for anyone interested in architecture, the presentation is woefully inadequate. The location of the building is even described incorrectly, as the northwest corner of 92d Street, which would move it across Fifth Avenue and into Central Park.

We are never told anything about C.P.H. Gilbert, or who he was, beyond the unsurprising news that he was a Beaux-Arts trained architect, with a laundry listing of some of his other houses. To start with basics, the first rule of research is to supply full names, or at least first names and initials. After all, there was the architect Cass Gilbert, a better-known name and confusingly close in time — the celebrated designer of the Woolworth Building. Were Cass and C.P.H. the same or related? Was Cass doing these palatial pied-à-terres for the businessmen who built the temple-topped towers? Unless you are a student of the period — and I, for one, am not — I think these are reasonably fair questions.

Off I went to find C.P.H., as I was beginning to call him. There was no time for a trip to Columbia University's Avery Architectural Library, which contains all the answers and many of the pleasures of scholarly pursuits, and since it was the weekend, I couldn't even call. I turned to my handy New York guidebooks, of which there are an edifying number, new and old, good and bad. They failed me, too. All but one gave me the C.P.H. runaround.

The exception was John Tauranac's "Essential New York" (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979). Mr. Tauranac had done his homework. For starters, his book informed me that C.P.H. was Charles, which I pass along even to the Landmarks Preservation Commission, for inclusion in future editions of its brand-new and excellent "Guide to New York City Landmarks." He has subsequently provided me with a second name, Pierrepont. There is something considerably less mysterious and impersonal about an architect named Charles Pierrepont H. Gilbert. It is a very classy name, and it gives us, if you will pardon the expression, a handle on the man.

At least, now, I've got my Gilberts straight. A number of Gilberts spanned overlapping generations and styles in New York, from High Victorian to High Eclectic, and all did interesting work. There was Bradford L. Gilbert, who specialized in railroads and remodeled the first Grand Central Terminal in 1892 into a marvel of multiple mansards. Charles P.H. Gilbert was apparently a kind of l'architect du roi for American millionaires, who designed or collaborated on a series of really smashing mansions that included the present Cartier's (with Robert W. Gibson, for Morton F. Plant, in 1903-05) and the Otto Kahn house (with J. Armstrong Stenhouse, in 1913-18), both in a masterly Italian Renaissance manner, as well as a scattering of French chateaus along Fifth Avenue, for Isaac D. Fletcher (1899, later the Stuyvesant house) and the Warburg house eight years later.

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Cass Gilbert is the architect of some of the city's most romantic skyscrapers. He is celebrated equally today for his ornate Woolworth Building of 1913 and the stripped functionalism of his Brooklyn Army Terminal Building of 1918. My own favorite is his early, 1905 tower at 90 West Street, superbly scaled and decorated in the French Gothic style. Cass Gilbert Jr. appears to be best known for the last-gasp classicism of the United States Courthouse in Foley Square, done with his father in 1936.

Which brings us back, finally, to Charles Pierrepont H. Gilbert's Warburg house. For a lively exposition on the history of New York's French chateaus and the trip of the genre from the Loire Valley to Fifth Avenue, I recommend John Tauranac's entry in "Essential New York" for the Fletcher house at 79th Street, now the Ukrainian Institute of America.

The Warburg house seems considerably less impressive, but at present it is very hard to tell. The building has been badly treated in its present incarnation as a museum. In 1963 a Fifth Avenue addition was built for the museum, which not only became the main building but also shifted the focus from the old mansion, leaving it in a kind of limbo. The American Institute of Architects Guide to New York City (which failed to unravel the mystery of C.P.H. and actually got his credits quite wrong) offers a succinct and definitive description of the museum marriage: "A Gothic chateau with a Miami Beach annex."

In fact, my frustration began at the entrance, where one goes in not through the formal French doors of the Warburg house on East 92d Street, but through a banal, jazzy facade of the kind that serves the corporate and condominium image in warmer climates. The Warburg doors and ground floor windows are dark or blacked out, and the building is about as uninviting and unappealing as this kind of neglect and denial can make it. Perhaps it is the sooty veneer that makes it feel so dour. But I am convinced that children and buildings respond with visible personality changes to the degree that people care about them.

For an object lesson in how to turn an eclectic mansion into a museum, one need go no farther than two blocks south on Fifth Avenue to the Cooper-Hewitt, the Smithsonian's National Museum of Design, now housed in the former Andrew Carnegie mansion. We have clearly learned a great deal about adaptive use since the 1960's, and have developed a lot more understanding and affection for the academic architecture of the turn of the century. These palaces of the past enrich and adorn New York's present. I only wish that the Warburg house didn't seem so unloved.

A drawing by architect Charles Pierrepont H. Gilbert of the Felix M. Warburg house.

The Jewish Museum