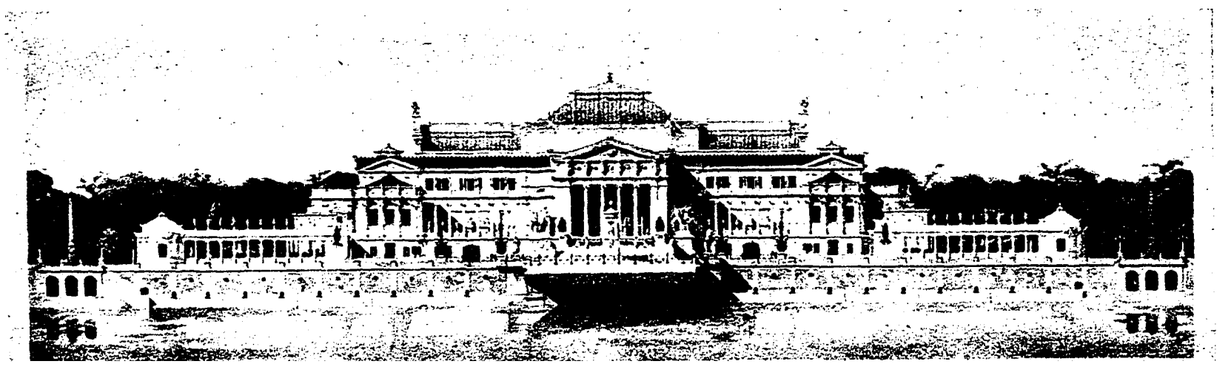
Design: Beaux Arts-the latest avant-garde

By Ada Louise Huxtable

New York Times (1923-Current file); Oct 26, 1975; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 266

Design



In 1867, student Emile Bénard won the Prix de Rome with this design for a Palace for an Exhibition of Fine Arts. The drawing, part of his work at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, will hang in a show, "The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux Arts," opening to the public Wednesday at the Museum of Modern Art.

Beaux Arts-the latest avant-garde

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Nineteenth-century Paris. *Vie de Bohème.* Artists in garrets. The Beaux Arts ball. The architecture students of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in M. Gaudet's famous atelier on the Left Bank, smocks stained with *encre de Chine*, working on palatial projects for the Prix de Rome. They run careful washes behind meticulously rendered public monuments or ink in painstaking reconstructions of ancient Greek temples. A few *nouveaux* clean brushes for *les anciens*. The drawings are enormous, skillful representations of classical grandeur. Stoves at either end of the large, cluttered room barely heat the chill air. Along one wall, untidy bookshelves hold dusty copies of Vitruvius and Palladio and the prizewinning designs of students who have gone on to fame. The Ecole des Beaux Arts is more than a school. It is *la source*, the fountainhead of official architecture for Old and New Worlds.

No more. Over the past 50 years, Beaux Arts has become a bad word. For this is the large slice of architectural history (and a large part of the civilized world) which the modern movement exorcised. It is, in fact, what modern architecture rebelled against.

Now, in one of those increasingly popular, paradoxical reversals of art and taste, the discarded academic past is becoming the intriguing avant-garde. The Beaux Arts will be the subject of a large and enlightening and undoubtedly controversial exhibition starting Wednesday at that bastion of the modern movement, the Museum of Modern Art. The Academy is dead. Long live the Academy.

"The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux Arts" is the museum's major fall show and, in the opinion of many, one of its most important contributions to tastemaking and art scholarship since "The International Style" formally introduced modern architecture to this country in 1932. It comes under the heading of that growing historical exercise called "radical revisionism," a questioning of the conventional wisdom in which reputations

A 19th-century Beaux Arts student carries his competition drawing from studio to school in a cart, or charrette. *The phrase* en charrette *is still used to mean working against a deadline.*

and movements are re-examined and reclaimed.

In truth, so arcane, so unfashionable, so discarded as proper intellectual and esthetic baggage is the world of the Beaux Arts, that this may be the first invitation to a museum opening (tomorrow night) that includes an explanation of what the show is all about. "The exhibition examines the dominant ideas of 19th-century French academic architecture," the invitation states. "Many of the more than 200 drawings in watercolor and ink, some as large as 18 feet wide and extraordinary in their opulent and varied detail, have not been unrolled since they were submitted by students to their professors at the Ecole des Beaux Arts 150 years ago."

The unrolling has been done by Arthur Drexler, director of the museum's Department of Architecture and Design, over the last eight years, in the attic of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, where he, and they, were covered with a century and a half of soot.

But a little soot has failed to dim their essential *gloire*. As drawings, they are breathtaking. The techniques of ink and wash are handled superbly; the subjects are a galaxy of monumental structures increasingly overwhelming in size and complexity as the century moved on. The subjects are unvaryingly grand and their treatment elegant, elaborate and ornate. They deal in all the taboo words and practices—élitism, ornament, overt extravagance—of modern architectural usage.

It is a never-never world of palaces of kings, palaces of justice and palaces for the arts, of cathedrals, conservatories, stock exchanges, state banks and thermal baths, emperors' pavilions, ambassadors' compounds and mansions for rich bankers. (The last was considered a controversially ordinary subject in 1866; if a student could design a great state edifice, it was argued, he could toss off an establishment for a banker.)

More pragmatic themes were public granaries and markets, barracks for the military and, later in the century, railroad stations. But there was nothing small or humble. Among Prix de Rome competition subjects were an imperial residence at Nice (1860), a palace for the governor of Algeria (1862) and a casino on the sea (1889), scattered among more or less routine *orangeries, hôtels de ville* and royal residences. It is a world that today seems far less accessible than the moon.

The first impact of these impressive renderings is that they represent a dead society and lost skills. They are enjoyable as beautiful drawings and illuminating as indicators of style and standards that go beyond art to reveal the social structure and cultural norms of a closed chapter in history. In this sense, they are provocative and informative documents to a very high degree.

The point that the museum is hammering home, however, in a rather hermetic, scholarly way, by overt demonstration and massive innuendo (18-foot drawings are not exactly understatement), is that this work is not irrelevant at all. According to Arthur Drexler, whose modernist credentials are impeccable, it offers the kind of satisfaction of the spirit and the eye which has always been an essential component of the art of architecture, and which is now largely lost to the modern movement through an insistently narrow and false polemic (functionalism, purity of form, abolition of ornament).

In fact, he goes right down the line to the basic definition of architecture. The Beaux Arts defined it as the public building. Modernists define it as the total built environment. Drexler thinks that a lot of values were lost in the trip from the monument to the environment. That the world of the Beaux Arts depends on an exclusionary and aristocratic concept of architecture does not bother him at all. The clear suggestion is that the emperor, today, is wearing no clothes, and it may be that we need the emperor after all.

That is an impossible oversimplification of a complex argument. But the far-from-buried thesis is that we have a lot to learn from the disdained Academy. The museum backs and fills a bit, skirting its way around an outright declaration with layers of involved and often irritatingly abstruse scholarship. (A book will appear later this year, with essays by Drexler, David Van Zanten, Neil Levine and Richard Chafee, who have also collaborated on the show.)

This is heresy, of course, because it clearly suggests that the modernist world for which the museum has unswervingly crusaded is not the best of all possible worlds, and is even in need of critical re-evaluation. It forces a re-examination of modernist doctrine—something that has actually been in process in upper intellectual strata for some time—when it has finally become the thoroughly accepted basis of establishment culture. (God may live, but the avant-garde is dead.) And it goes for the jugular by attacking the clichés, rigidities, theoretical fatigue and excesses that have built up with time (modernism is close to a century old now and has its own academy) and that were exactly the kind of thing that led to the demise of the Beaux Arts.

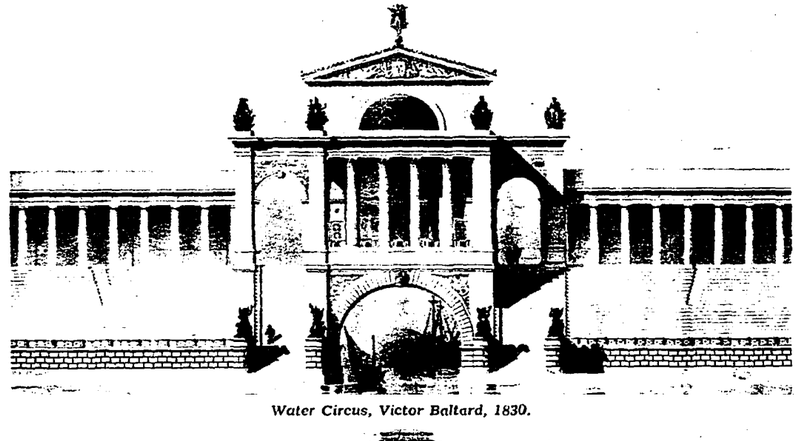
But it is not the questioning that will create the greatest unease—it is the form that the questioning is taking. The deliberate revival of the discarded ideals of the Beaux Arts—the villain of the modern movement—will be pretty strong medicine for a lot of well-indoctrinated modernists to swallow.

These ideals are based on prescribed and elaborate rules of formal classical design. In Beaux Arts practice, the work was judged by composition —the relationship between exterior volumes and interior spaces; by *parti*—the way in which the plan was resolved; and by *marche*—the quality of the progression of the spaces as one imagined walking through them. Plans were usually axial and symmetrical.

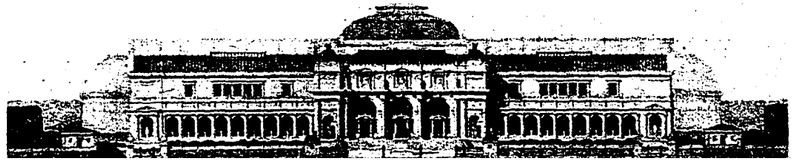
For these elaborately formulated esthetic design considerations, the modernists substituted a dogma of simple utility and technology. While form, in the basic sense, was always meant to grow out of function, and always has in the best and most rational buildings, the new architecture used a narrowly "scientific" and pragmatic measure of use and structure, while the old defined it in much broader terms of symbolism and sensuosity.

It also defined it, stylistically, in terms of the classical-renaissance (*Continued on Page 80*)

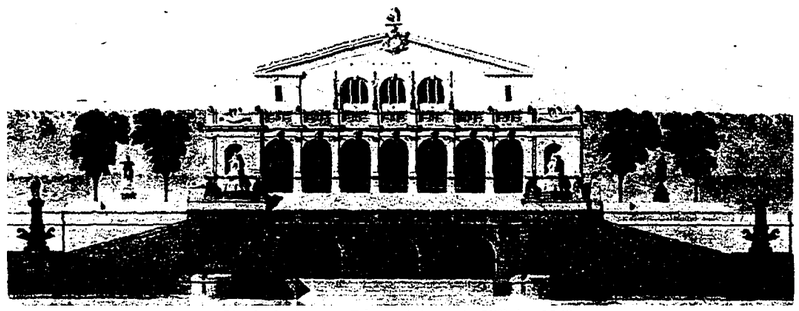
Other 19th-century Ecole des Beaux Arts students earned awards with the drawings on this page: Above, Barracks for Light Infantry, Antoine-François-Girard Bury, 1804.



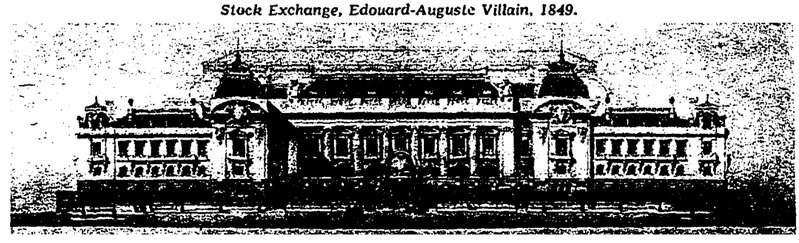
Water Circus, Victor Baltard, 1830.



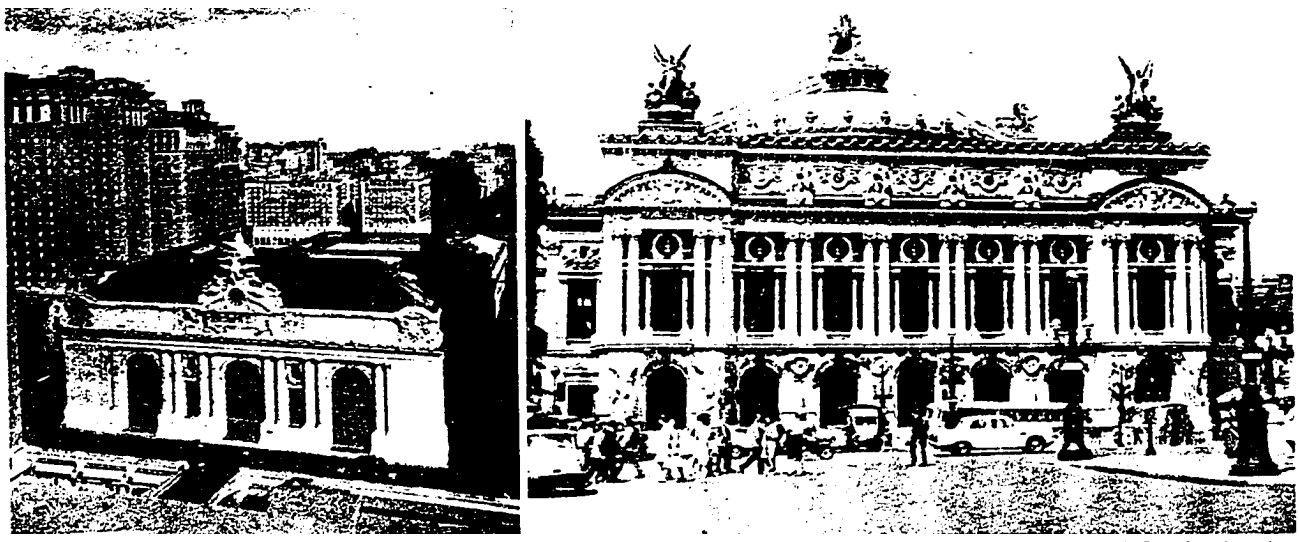
An Athenaeum for a Capital City, Paul-Henri Nénot, 1877.



Stock Exchange, Edouard-Auguste Villain, 1849.



A Building for the Central Headquarters of a State Bank, Tony Garnier, 1899.



Exemplary Beaux Arts: Grand Central Terminal, 1898-1913, Reed & Stem, Warren & Wetmore; Paris Opéra, 1861-74, Charles Garnier.

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tradition, a tradition in Western art that reaches to Greece and Rome. This is, in fact, the whole of the Western tradition, except for the remarkable episodes of the medieval and the modern.

The classical heritage, with its familiar orders defined by Vitruvius, Serlio and Palladio, became more archeological with the discoveries of the ancient world in the 18th century, and less restricted with the eclecticism of the 19th century. In both centuries, classicism was the official doctrine of the French Academy and the Ecole.

The Ecole was an outgrowth of the Academy, which was established by Colbert in the seventeenth century; its members were *les architects du roi*. The two state institutions were metamorphosed many times by revolution, politics, polemics and French bureaucratic culture. With the separation of the Ecole Polytechnique after the revolution, the Ecole des Beaux Arts was free to pursue the high art of architecture, a division of art and structure that was later a matter of much debate.

By the eighteen-thirties, the Ecole was a stronghold of orthodoxy and conservatism. With the advent of a romantic rebellion, it reverberated with hairsplitting, hardly discernible currents of "radicalism" and "reform," led in the eighteen-sixties by the medievalist and rationalist, Viollet-le-Duc, but it remained essentially unchanged.

For two centuries, it was the headquarters of the French architectural establishment, producing France's leading practitioners of the art of building, and creating principles of design so strong that by the latter part of the 19th century they dominated official architecture internationally. Buildings such as Henri Labrouste's Bibliothèque St. Geneviève of 1845-50 and Charles Garnier's Paris Opéra of 1861-74 were enormously influential. In fact, all the permutations of the academic classical style became known eventually as Beaux Arts.

After the mid-19th century, the best-trained American architects were usually the product of the Ecole. Among its prestigious graduates were Richard Morris Hunt, H. H. Richardson and Louis Sullivan, although only Hunt carried his classical education over into his working style. It was not long before the architectural elite in the United States were virtually all Beaux Arts "boys," and with the Chicago Fair of 1893, the struggling strains of indigenous and innovative American design were eclipsed by the blinding white glory of the classical palaces on the lagoon conjured up under the leadership of Daniel Burnham and McKim, Mead and White.

The country's turn-of-the-century and later monuments —the great wave of museums, libraries like Carrère and Hastings' beauty at Fifth Avenue and 42d Street, as well as railroad stations such as Burnham's in Chicago and Warren and Wetmore, Reed and Stem's Grand Central Terminal in New York— were all built in exemplary Beaux Arts style.

There is no disagreement about the importance and influence of the Beaux Arts in its own time. Not only was it the official style, but almost all 19th-century and early-20th-century architectural education in this country was modeled on the Ecole. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology was established in 1865 by William Ware, a Beaux Arts graduate, who later founded the Columbia School of Architecture. The Prix de Rome winners of the Beaux Arts were assiduously imported as professors, and the course of instruction attempted to re-create the French precedent as closely as possible. In 1912, there were 102 Beaux Arts ateliers throughout the country.

The state-supported Paris Ecole des Beaux Arts consisted of Schools of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. The Architecture School was open to students between the ages of 15 and 30, French or foreign, tuition free. But it was far from open enrollment. There was an exacting entrance examination that included an architectural project to be devised in 12 hours, drawing from a cast and modeling from ornament in relief, exercises in mathematics and descriptive geometry and oral and written exams on ancient and modern European history.

Instruction combined remarkable freedom with the most rigid requirements. The courses consisted of lectures at the Ecole and design work in the ateliers, or studios. Each sudent proceeded, not as part of the group, but individually, at his own pace. Every stage of the way was judged by *concours*, or competitions, in *esquisse* or sketch form for the lesser ones, or as *projets rendus*, completed sets of plans, elevations and sections, for the major evaluations. A recurring assignment was the reconstruction of ancient ruins. A diploma, given at the end, was only instituted in 1862.

Chief among the *concours* was the prestigious and coveted Prix de Rome, established for architecture in 1720, which gave five years of study in Rome at state expense. It was also an almost assured stepping stone to high-level commissions and eventual election to the Academy. This signal honor was open only to unmarried, native-born or naturalized Frenchmen; Americans had to stop short of the top award.

Perhaps the system worked so well because the emphasis was on individual instruction and independent development, measured solely by the quality of work, under the highest professional guidance. The incentives, however, were pure 19th century — competitions and prizes. What was stressed, without apology or justification, because none was thought necessary, was the art of design, with all other subjects, such as mathematics, science, construction, history and drawing, secondary to it. Stuctural engineering was considered a totally different métier, and no one had yet invented socioesthetics or interdisciplinary training. Much has been made since of the split between art and technology. But everyone *drew* sublimely.

The most interesting and widely imitated aspect of the system was the atelier. Each atelier had its professor, or *patron*, a leading French architect. He might be a revered Academician or a young, "progressive" architect whom a number of students had petitioned to open an atelier. The rivalry was intense, particularly for the Prix de Rome.

The architecture student was apt to be a bit older, better educated, better dressed and better off than the other students of the Ecole; he was not, in the words of a 19th-century chronicler, "the son of a shoemaker." At the time of the *concours*, students worked around the clock, bringing their large drawings from atelier to Ecole for the judging in hand-drawn carts, or *charrettes*. During the last period of intensive, continuous work to make the deadline, the student was said to be *en charrette*, an expression that survives for deadline pressure in architects' offices today.

But that, and a few nostalgic words such as *esquisse* and *parti*, are about all that have survived — and those drawings in the attic. Plus a great deal of building from which we have been trained to assiduously avert our eyes. For a while, in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, the school straddled classicism and modernism with a stylish last flicker of Art Moderne— the French Beaux Arts updated with Viennese chic. Unrepentant academicism persisted in a few late bloomers such as Washington's National Gallery (1940) by John Russell Pope. World War II dealt the Beaux Arts the coup de grace.

The Ecole still exists, decentralized after the student riots of 1968, as Unités Pedagogiques, for the teaching of architecture, but it has neither funds nor influence. As with so much else, real estate proved to be ultimate destiny. The rising cost of dwindling loft space on the Left Bank after the war outlawed the free and easy establishment of ateliers, and the fluid change and development that made possible. As early as the end of the 19th century, the Ecole was being accused of "pedantry, despotism and a horror of progress." But it is hard to say at what point bureaucratization and ossification had set in.

Ultimately, the Beaux Arts is the casualty of a revolution in structural technology and massive changes in society and the economy. It is hard, even for would-be revivalists to rationalize the logic and costs of the grafting of classical forms and orders intrinsic to masonry construction onto the totally different requirements of modern steel and concrete. It is equally hard to fit the straitjacket of academic classicism on the many new building forms required by the 20th century, even if craftsmen were not extinct. The skyscraper added to its radical technology a vertical composition of unprecedented scale; the public building bowed before speculative commercial construction.

The educational doctrine of the Bauhaus, brought to Harvard in the nineteen-thirties by Walter Gropius and to Chicago by Mies van der Rohe a few years later, supplanted the Beaux Arts classical doctrine with a messianic machine esthetic. Whatever errors and inadequacies its polemics may have perpetuated, it faced realities that the 19th century never knew.

Interestingly, some of the best of the older modernists were Beaux Arts trained, among them the late Louis Kahn, whose buildings are included with the finest of this century. His work clearly reflects the best aspects of the formal thinking and elegant disciplines of the Academy. Side by side with the buildings of the modernists, and scored by them as sterile and passé, are the last-gasp monuments of the Beaux Arts tradition. The Jefferson Memorial in Washington, for example, completed by John Russell Pope and Eggers and Higgins as late as 1943, is commended by Drexler for its "French-Roman suavity and repose." Others persist in calling it stillborn.

The exhibition is obviously about to break a taboo. It is going to make the architectural Academy respectable again, as is already happening with the Academy in painting and sculpture. At its deepest level, it urges us to examine the "moral imperative" of utility and sociology, the modernist doctrine that is the basis of today's building. That is attacking a very sacred cow.

But the show has brought a lot of beautiful drawings and hidden history out of the closet, and it is certain to raise thoughtful issues about the meaning and practice of architectural design. The Museum of Modern Art is still performing its charter job of questioning the established order. This time, it is the order that it helped establish. And if it is making waves by looking backward, that is the nature of our times. ■