ARCHITECTURE VIEW: PHOTOGRAPHS RECALL THE GLORIES OF CHICAGO'S COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION

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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Photographs Recall the Glories Of Chicago's Columbian Exposition

How we forget, how we accept novelty and fashion as a substitute for knowledge; how arrogant we are in our preoccupation with ourselves and our ignorance of the past. Occasionally an event opens our eyes to what we have discarded, jogging cultural memory and unsettling esthetic judgement.

There is such an event right now—small in size and large in impact—at Columbia University. An exhibition of rare platinum-print photographs of the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, the famous "White City" that turned American architectural taste from colorful Victorian revivals to snowy Beaux Arts classicism in the space of one summer season, is on display in the Rotunda of Low Memorial Library through April 21 (Mondays through Fridays, 9 A.M. to 5 P.M.)

The pictures are startling, not only for their extraordinary clarity of detail but for their evocative immediacy; all that is missing is the sound of bands and the motion of flags and gondolas gliding over the lagoon on that day 85 years ago when these images were fixed in time. The large, panoramic views, taken by Charles Dudley Arnold, the Fair's official photographer, are from the collection of Avery Architectural Library, under the direction of Adolf Placzek. They have been installed by Jane Sabersky, curator of the university's art properties, with the assistance of Alice Mackin.

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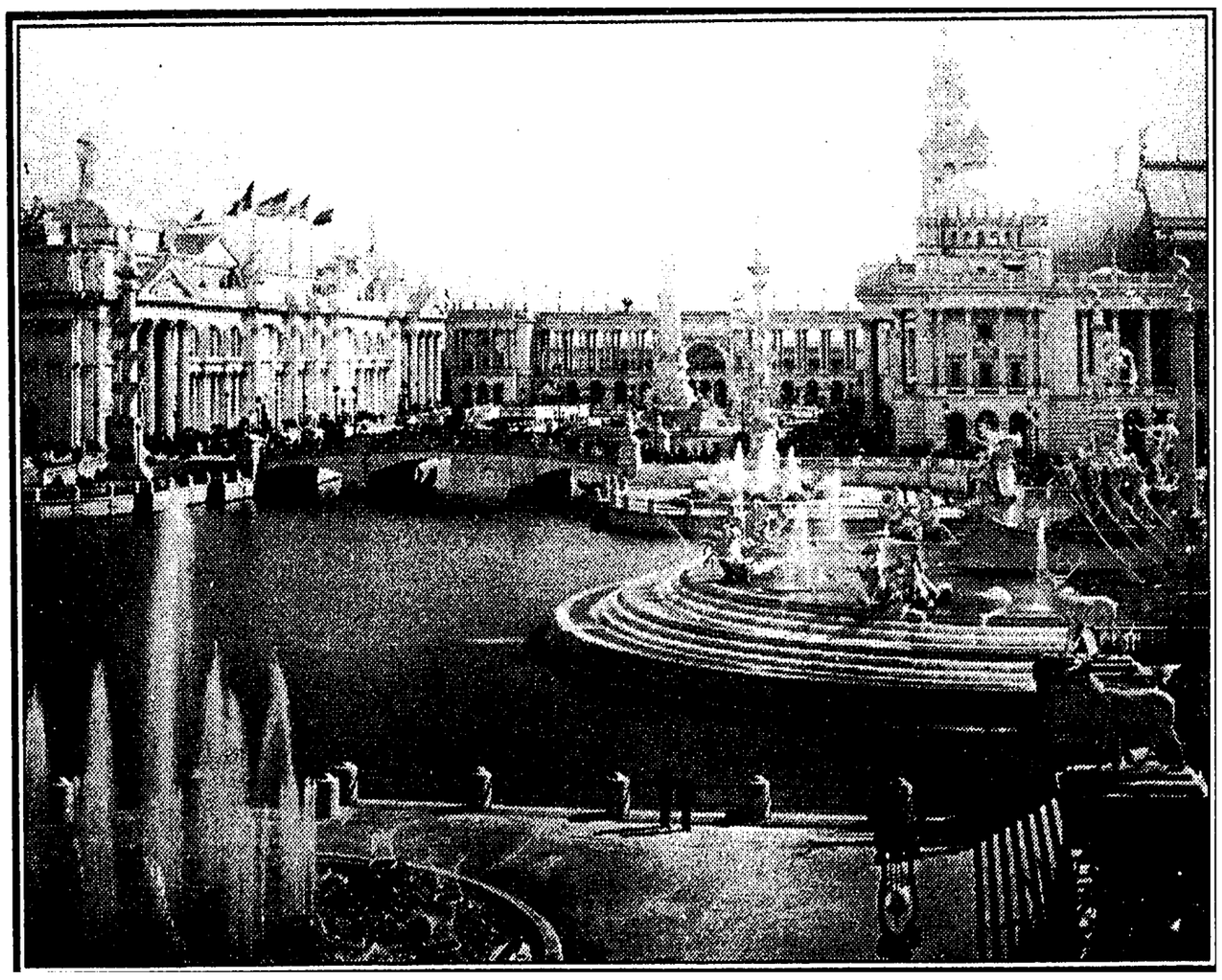
But the most startling thing of all is how absolutely superb the Fair looks. After years of being downgraded as a vacuous exercise in empty styles, this assemblage of monumental palaces, this Olympian stage set of colonnaded arcades, peristyles, porticos and pavilions with a trumpeting of allegorical statuary, is an incredibly impressive achievement. It was the fulfillment of the academic architect's fondest and wildest dreams of how to build without the restraints of reality.

This was, and is, heady stuff. The buildings are, for the most part, gigantic and spectacular exercises in elaborate, sophisticated Beaux Arts design. Thomas Tallmadge, writing from his own memories in 1936 in his "Story of Architecture in America," said that 33 years had not dimmed his memory of the Fair's splendor. "Imperial Rome in the third century might have approached but surely did not surpass it."

A crowd of nearly half-a-million heard President Grover Cleveland's opening day address. There were at least 150 buildings on over 550 acres in Chicago's Jackson Park, facing the lake. Planning and construction took two-and-a-half years under Daniel Burnham's imperious direction, and more than 97 of the country's most distinguished architects participated, with a heavy emphasis on the fashionable, Beaux Arts-trained firms of the East. The star performers included Richard Morris Hunt, McKim, Mead and White, and George B. Post of New York, Peabody and Stearns of Boston, Van Brunt and Howe of Kansas City, and Burnham and Charles Atwood of Chicago.

The focus of the Exposition was the Court of Honor, which had Hunt's domed Administration Building at one end of the lagoon and Charles Atwood's Peristyle of 48 columns representing states and territories at the other. (From the records of one of Burnham's planning meetings: "All hailed this as a bully thing.")

Between these palatial structures were the tasteful skills of the McKim, Mead and White Agriculture Building, and Peabody and Stearn's somewhat overwrought Palace of Mechanic Arts, which managed to combine elements of the Place de La Concorde, the Louvre and an eclectic assortment of towers and domes. Post's Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building placed triumphal arches against an arcaded volume



The Beaux Arts Columbian Exposition of 1893—"in fashion again"

reminiscent of his now-demolished Produce Exchange in New York. This elaborate classical camouflage covered enormous interior exhibition spaces of exposed industrial metalwork.

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Only Charles Atwood's cool, correct Art Palace, copied from a Prix de Rome design, was built as a permanent structure for the Chicago Art Museum. All the rest was made of skeleton forms covered with wire, lathe and plaster, sprayed white with a squirt gun. The labor alone is incredible; the sheer throwaway grandeur is staggering. Nothing failed to aim for magnificence, not a column or pilaster was left unfluted or unfoliated; figures and ornaments crowned every surface as if a mad pastry chef were at work. What did not come out of architects' heads could have come from the pages of Carême's "Le Patissier Royal Parisien."

Much of the statuary was the work of the leading sculptors of the day. Daniel Chester French created the huge female figure of the Republic at one end of the lagoon, and Frederick MacMonnies contributed the Columbia fountain at the other—a heavy confection of chastely draped maidens representing Arts and Industries manipulating marzipan oars, as Fame and Time navigate Columbia's barge. St. Gaudens's familiar, slender Diana stood tippy-toe with bow and arrow on the central dome of the Agriculture Building. Indians, bulls and bison filled the allegorical gaps. There was no underreaching. St. Gaudens is reported to have said to Burnham, when all of the architects and sculptors were assembled, "Look here, old fellow, do you realize that this is the greatst meeting of artists since the 15th century?"

All this glory is remembered now for the invention of the Ferris wheel and the death of an American architecture. The demise of a native American style, killed by the Chicago Fair, has been the accepted architectural mythology. As Tallmadge put it, the Fair was looked on in later years as "an artistic calamity, the buildings as whited sepulchers, their Classic style a Roman sword plunged into the heart of a national expression in art."

And that is how we have been taught to think about the great Columbian Exposition ever since. We certainly have not been encouraged to look at it—which is why these photographs are an instructive and illuminating delight. We have accepted Louis Sullivan's dictum (he created a magnificent maverick of a structure in the Fair's Transportation Building) that as the result of a "snobbish, alien, imposed culture . . . Architecture died in the land of the free and the home of the brave." His prediction that "the damage wrought by the World's Fair will last for half a century" became the modernists' official lament.

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Another architect, Henry Van Brunt, saw the Fair differently. "It is hoped," he said, "that these great models, inspired by a profound respect for the masters of classical art, will prove such a revelation that [American architects] will learn that true architecture cannot be based on undisciplined invention, illiterate originality, or, indeed, upon audacity of ignorance."

Well, one man's audacious ignorance is another man's art. And there are more ways than one to skin a building. Perhaps Tallmadge, surprisingly prescient in the 1930's, should have the last word. "Even without this fairy vision by the lake, our national restlessness would soon have tossed aside [current practice] like a worn-out toy or last year's hat, and we should have turned inevitably to something more amusing and more fashionable." By a curious turn of the Ferris wheel of fate, the Chicago Fair is in fashion again. ■