Architecture: A Man For All Styles A.J. Davis: A Man For All Styles
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Architecture

A Man For All Styles

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IN The New-York Mirror (A Repository of Polite Literature and the Arts) for Saturday, September 4, 1830, appeared a view of new buildings on Ann and Nassau Streets, drawn by an "architectural composer," A. J. Davis. Mr. Davis got six dollars for the drawing. The New-York Mirror got an exclusive.

From approximately that year on, the work of Alexander Jackson Davis, illustrator, architect, stylistic innovator and renderer to the 19th century (1803-92) was one of the single most important factors in forming and recording American taste. Designing houses and public structures in partnership with Ithiel Town of New York, providing drawings for the writings of the great mid-century tastemaker, Andrew Jackson Downing, or "delineating"—a favorite 19th-century word—his Classical, Gothic, Italianate or Egyptian structures in precise and elegant watercolor, Davis was a cultivated, talented and prolific arbiter of the 19th-century building art.

A modest selection of these drawings can be seen in a special show at the Metropolitan Museum through February 19. Thirty-five designs for capitols, courthouses, cemetery gates—another 19th-century favorite—banks, colleges and houses form a small, select testimony to some of the more admirable aspects of 19th-century taste, and to the 20th century's insensitivity to architecture as history and art. The delicate drawings have proved more durable than brick or stone.

Davis's Harrall-Wheeler house, a Gothic Revival masterpiece, was reduced to rubble a few years ago in an act of official vandalism by the city of Bridgeport, Conn. Colonnade Row, built on Lafayette

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Street in New York as La Grange Terrace from 1831 to 1836, exists tenuously today as four mutilated relics of a magnificent block of nine town houses joined by a giant Corinthian order. Other New York examples, churches and dwellings, fell victims to "progress" in their own century.

A few major works survive. The Town and Davis Greek Revival Custom House on Wall Street, constructed in the 1830's with Massachusetts marble walls five feet thick and used later as the Subtreasury Building, has been preserved as the Federal Hall Memorial Museum. Lyndhurst, the palatial Gothic Revival fancy on the Hudson at Tarrytown, is now owned and administered as a historic house museum by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

One of Davis's finest houses in the Italian, or Tuscan style, as it was variously called, is Litchfield Villa, the estate built for Edwin Litchfield in 1857-58 in what is now Prospect Park. This building, city-owned, still stands. It has been used successively and destructively as a police station and Parks Department offices.

Recently, the Parks Department obtained a figure of $156,000 for essential restoration. The money has been budgeted, after years of neglect, misuse and cool disinterest. The building will be repaired to prevent further deterioration and will continue to be used as offices. Restoration must necessarily be limited, since the department could not possibly afford the costs of interior restoration and furnishing, even if this were possible or desirable.

Curious Confusion

Comparison of costs with another Prospect Park project, the Children's Farm, is instructive. That dubious addition will cost $230,000, with a private donor giving $90,000 toward construction, and the city footing the $140,000 difference and an annual $90,000 drain for operation and upkeep. There is a curious confusion of values here. In spite of some pious preservation hoopla, New York is obviously very late in coming of architectural age.

Davis was at his best in his houses, as a designer of charm and sensitivity and a successful interpreter of the principles of Victorian romanticism. These structures, ranging from "cottages" to mansions, are at once enchanting and heartbreaking. Uncounted and unrecorded numbers have been destroyed, and the thinned ranks grow thinner every year.

Asymetrically planned and massed, with the evocative touch of a tower and the practical touch of a porch, with all of the proper picturesque appurtenances of the age, they show his mastery of the eclectic range of Victorian styles. Whatever the frosting, Gothic jigsaw or Greek acroteria, the proportions were felicitous and the detailing refined.

The earliest houses are those cast as classical temples. The Greek Revival, which swept the country in the 1830's, presented certain domestic difficulties in the matter of doors, windows and chimneys. See, for example, a late version of 1845 in the show —an ambitious design with a flat, central dome, huge columns in antis running full height to a roofline entablature fronting enormous double bronze doors, flanked by equally impossible windows. It is quite clear why the style died.

The Gothic Revival that followed in the 1840's and 50's proved more amenable to practical uses and the prevailing pursuit of romance. A high spot of the show is the 1855 rendering of a "castellated mansion" in the English Gothic style for John J. Herrick in Tarrytown, a random stone delight in a rustic setting shown, naturally, by moonlight. A cozy porch encloses its circular keep and a white flag flutters gently from its tower.

Head and Hand

One can covet both Davis's houses and his drawings, for the architect's head and heart led directly to his hand. A particular appeal of the exhibition is that art and architecture are inextricably united in his exquisitely executed renderings.

Today, there are also architects who draw, and draftsmanship is coming back into fashion after a long period of neglect, providing, of course, that the architect has the time. But the architectural drawing, which, surprisingly, is still frequently a precise watercolor rendering, is separate, big business today, and renderers are specialists. The product is often cold and impersonal, and so, for one reason or another, are the buildings.

The pleasures of this little show are intensely personal, but pathetically limited. Davis's work is exceptionally well documented in New York, in outstanding collections at the Avery Library of Columbia University, the New-York Historical Society and the Metropolitan Museum. Surely at this time of awakening interest in the American architectural heritage, the three collections could have been drawn on for a much more substantial exhibition of one of the 19th century's most important practitioners.

It could have opened, in the manner of fashionable art shows, with appropriate festivities—for the obvious purpose of publicizing the Litchfield restoration and dramatizing the plight of preservation in New York. Or isn't architecture really fashionable yet? Both the show, and the city, seem to have missed the boat.