ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Growing Up In a Beaux Arts World

Many of my earliest and most persistent architectural memories are of the Beaux Arts in New York, but I was unaware of it, like Molière's bourgeois gentilhomme who didn't know he was speaking prose. When I did become aware of it, I found out I wasn't supposed to like it. Alas, it was too late. Those buildings were as much a part of my life as my family, and I could neither dismiss nor neutralize my feelings toward them, which were intimately involved in the process of growing up.

By a curious coincidence, one of the institutions that taught me that they were all wrong now tells me that they're all right, and I'd be confused if I weren't delighted. The Museum of Modern Art, in a scholarly reversal of its own tradition as keeper of the flame of modern architecture, is currently featuring a large and beautiful show of 19th-century French academic drawings called "The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux Arts" (through Jan. 4). The Beaux Arts style, in its variations from ornate French classicism to cool Roman and Renaissance revivalism, is to be found in this country's major monuments from 1890 to 1910 and later. The Architectural League has prepared a tour list, available at the Museum, of some of the best local Beaux Arts buildings. In connection with these activities, I would like to present my own list. It might be called Beaux Arts buildings I have known and loved (or hated) in New York.

I grew up, all unwittingly, in a Beaux Arts structure called the St. Urban, whose style and substance were light years away from today's architectural congame known as the "luxury" apartment house. All the

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milestones of my childhood and adolescence are colored by Beaux Arts experiences. I think of Grand Central Terminal, not in its present sad state, battling for its life, but as I remember it on Friday afternoons when we would take the Merchants' Limited—crisp white damask and roses in silver bud vases in the diner—to visit family in Boston. The trip began in the Grand Concourse, which seemed to hold all the nameless promises of pleasure and adventure of travelers past and present in its constantly moving, muted rhythms beneath the great sky-blue vaulted ceiling with its illuminated constellations. (Tomorrow, the universe.)

Grand Central's monumental richness and superb efficiency were accepted without question by New Yorkers; in fact, it was fashionable only to question its style, considered inferior to European models and somehow tainted with American utilitarianism. I can see now that it is absolutely one of the best things of its kind anywhere in the world. The facade from Park Avenue South is quintessential Beaux Arts—immense arched windows and paired, fluted columns rising building-height above the girdling roadway like a triple triumphal arch, fronted by the bronze Commodore in his astrakhan-collared coat directing taxis to the other side. It is hard to imagine New York without Mercury, Hercules and Minerva atop Jules Coutan's monumental clock; it is part of the city's essential image and remaining elegance.

There were trips from Penn Station, too—McKim, Mead and White's Roman extravaganza of 1910 in cream travertine and pink granite, later soot-darkened, where the traveler debouched into the tepidarium of the Baths of Caracalla. It was demolished in 1966. "One entered the city like a god," Vincent Scully has written, " . . . one scuttles in now like a rat."

The New York Times

A detail from the roof of the Metropolitan Museum—"true-blue Beaux Arts"

When I was allowed to roam New York by myself, I went first to the Museum of Natural History, where I spent spellbound days in the old J. C. Cady wing of 1877, a dark, blackish-brown pile later cleaned to a surprisingly frivolous pink. The blue whale suspended from the entrance ceiling became my friend. So did the building. When the Museum built its new centerpiece in 1936, an archeologically correct Roman monument in retardataire Beaux Arts by John Russell Pope, I hated it, and still do. Not because anyone told me to hate it (by then I knew), but because those pompous, forbidding, overscaled steps led to huge, cold, tomb-like halls, vast, dim, dead spaces in which one felt depressed and diminished. This is a kind of building totally devoid of joy. I cannot make myself go there now, but I am glad that lots of other people do.

The world really opened for me across town, at the Metropolitan Museum. It was true-blue Beaux Arts (Richard M. Hunt, Richard H. Hunt, and McKim, Mead and White, successively, from 1895 to 1906) and its grandeur worked. The steps invited rather than repelled, in that formal Beaux Arts *marche*, or moving progression of spaces, that invited one into the high-ceilinged hall with its tapestries, chandeliers and stray knights in armor or oversized antiquities. (I have never been able to reconcile myself to its current "restoration," a slick cross between IBM and I. Magnin glamour.) In the best Beaux Arts fashion, these spaces either beckoned you up the grand stairs (if you were young and supple) to the painting galleries, or led you left or right, to the worlds of Egypt, Greece and Rome. It is no exaggeration to say that this building shaped my life.

So did the 42d Street Library (Carrère and Hastings, 1898-1911), when my art studies began to take me there for research. Another beautiful Beaux Arts building became a friend. It made no pretense at chumminess; it was intended to impress; but, again, it worked. A sense-expanding spatial sequence from the arched and colonnaded portal to more marble and massive stairs and richly detailed rooms inside provided both grace and grandeur and suggested that man might be noble, after all. Or at least that he knew quality from junk.

Walks around town left indelible impressions. There was the New York Yacht Club on West 44th Street (Warren and Wetmore, 1889), a baroque extravaganza with flowing water carved below galleon-shaped windows—what child would not adore it? I was a post-post graduate student before I knew that this was *architecture parlante*, defined in the Architectural League's guide as "architecture whose function is literally articulated by its form and decoration"—here ships and sea in stone.

A woman still does not enter New York's great Beaux Arts men's clubs, except as a pariah through designated areas. I remember visiting the University Club (McKim, Mead and White, 1889), a Renaissance superpalazzo, and making an instinctive architecturally-propelled rush for the great, gutsy marble columns visible from the door. None of that, now. I was peremptorily turned aside into a pusillanimous "ladies" dining room. The insult was as much architectural as personal.

At the Battery, I found the U. S. Custom House (Cass Gilbert, 1907), 40 giant columns around its sides, embellished with dolphins, rudders, tridents and winged wheels, guarded by Daniel Chester French's Four Continents. Farther along, on Liberty Street, was James Baker's 1901 Chamber of Commerce Building, a particularly rich fruitcake of dormers and bull's-eye windows, colonnade and copper-crested roof, frosted with garlands. Delighted by their outrageous assurance, I adopted them both.

From my office window, as I write, my constant companion is a small Beaux Arts skyscraper directly across 42d Street. It is elegantly composed and decorated, with three elongated, vertical bands of round-arched windows dominating a delicate, five-bay arrangement, topped with a crown of carved stone. The street at its feet is porn-country; the neighborhood around it is a disaster area. But the finesse with which the building proposes that skill and order are not only justifiable but desirable is somehow reassuring. I raise my eyes for an architecture-break in a city that is as heartbreaking in its beauty as it is in its poverty and decay. It is still a city of dreams—promised, built and broken.