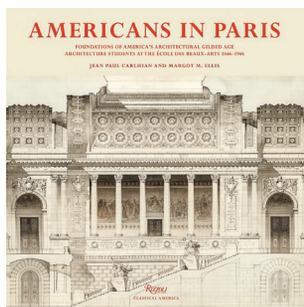


BOOKS



Americans in Paris: Foundations of America's Architectural Gilded Age

Jean Paul Carlhian and Margot M. Ellis
Rizzoli, 2014

Reviewed by William Morgan

A lavishly illustrated study of the education of 503 aspiring architects from the antipodal shore at the *École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts*, *Americans in Paris* also documents their remarkable influence when they returned home to practice. Just providing the names of the Americans who trained at the *École* and reviewing their role in architecture, education, planning, and landscape design would be a valuable addition to the literature of the Gilded Age. But this monumental treatise goes further, reintroducing the entire Beaux-Arts ethic.

Beaux-Arts is one of those stylistic terms, like Victorian or Brutalism, which can be anathema to some generations. Frank Lloyd Wright referred unkindly to attendees of the *École* as bozos. In a course on modern architecture in the 1960s, my professor depicted the Beaux-Arts as a dastardly place where Americans were forced to draw the classical orders and reproduce ancient buildings as inappropriate containers for contemporary commerce and government.

That same professor worshipped Louis Sullivan as a modern architect while ignoring how Beaux-Arts training infused his masterworks. We also learned how Walter Gropius, upon arriving at Harvard in 1938, took a hammer to plaster casts of classical figures. While the story of the

smashing of the drawing-class props was apocryphal, Gropius nurtured a generation of historically illiterate architects.

As Jean Paul Carlhian and Margot Ellis demonstrate, there was much more to education at the *École* than exquisite renderings. History was crucial (the students “regarded Palladio and Bramante as relatives”), but the multiyear training was rigorous and embraced a complete belief system. Discipline was foremost, but there was certain freedom to be gained from working within strict requirements and limitations. (The presentation paper stayed the same size for 135 years.) From the initial 12-hour *esquisse*, through the six-week *projet*, to the final presentation, students learned to think architecturally, to express themselves succinctly, and to accept logic as their “undisputed mentor.”

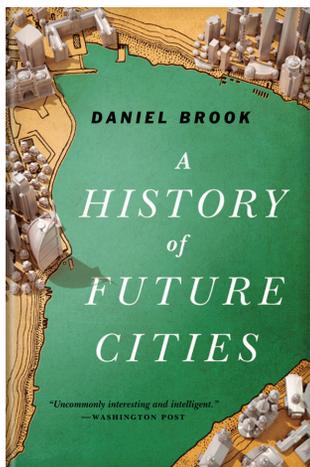
Americans such as Guy Lowell, Raymond Hood, John Mead Howells, John Russell Pope, and Charles McKim internalized the primacy of the *plan*. There were no contours or orientations in the Paris ateliers—only plan, section, and elevation. Such notable *École* students as William A. Delano; Arthur Brown, Jr.; James Gamble Rogers; and William Van Alen enriched America's Gilded Age with monumental and heroic buildings: the original Pennsylvania Station, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the unparalleled collection of classical government buildings that comprise the Federal Triangle in Washington, several state capitols, and our handsomest college campuses.

Americans in Paris reacquaints us with so many of these brilliant designers whose reputations were eclipsed by European Modernism. There was room, however, for competing philosophies. Carlhian, a product of the *École* and Harvard, himself combined the best of both worlds in his half-century at the Boston firm of Shepley Bulfinch Richardson and Abbott.

That Hub establishment was a bastion of Beaux-Arts-trained men, Henry Hobson Richardson being the fourth American admitted to the *École*. It is impossible to understand that great American architect's work without recognizing its underlying Beaux-Arts clarity; the libraries, for example, leave no doubt as to either their entrances or their circulation. The authors call Harvard's Sever Hall “a perfect plan” and note that Richardson's 1892 sketch of Trinity Church gave the configuration of the site in “four bold strokes of the pen.”

Similar Beaux-Arts training dominates the work of Louis Kahn, through his mentor Paul Cret, another American teacher who studied at the *École*. What are the symmetrical, classical, and plan-driven creations such as the Salk Institute or the Bangladesh capital buildings if not continuations of the Beaux-Arts schemes delineated in *Americans in Paris*?

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A History of Future Cities

Daniel Brook

W. W. Norton & Company, 2014

Reviewed by Deborah Bentley

Written in the same genre as Bill Bryson's *At Home* and Deyan Sudjic's *Edifice Complex*, *A History of Future Cities* delves into the social and political intrigue behind the initial *raison d'être* and subsequent development of St. Petersburg, Russia; Shanghai; and Mumbai, India. These brave new cities of the past share certain traits: They were born out of the desire to impress and attract foreigners, and some of their subsequent residents politically shaped their countries through revolution.

Apart from maps at the beginning of the book, there are few illustrations to support the prose, so if you are unfamiliar with these cities or the buildings that are discussed, be prepared to Google such items as “Bombay Art Nouveau” and “Pudong People’s Square” to comprehend the variety of shape and form of the development in India and China. For each city, the history of the developers, urban planners, and architects of important buildings is discussed, which underscores that the practice of the iconic building as a billboard is now seen as a political prerequisite for a “Future City.”

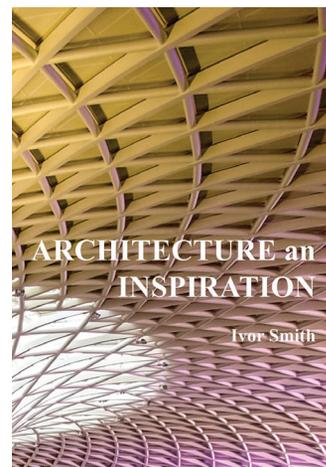
Author Daniel Brook weaves historical threads connecting the three cities. For instance, the Sassoons, an entrepreneurial family, were involved in the development of both Shanghai and Bombay, India,

and displaced Russians fled to Shanghai after the revolution of 1917. Little gems of information are also hidden in the narrative, such as the fact that the reason Bombay grew at a rapid rate was that its cotton industry benefited from the blockade of the cotton ships in the American Civil War, thus connecting the development of these cities to the history of the rest of the world.

When Brook moves on to describe the development of Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, research and details are given short shrift. The description of its early development is minimal, omitting any explanation of how or why the UAE evolved from the seven emirates and actions of Sheikh Zayed, a key political figure and the country’s first president. Brook also fails to mention Dubai’s architects and planners, especially the work of John Harris, who designed the first skyscraper in the city, which opened in 1979. The Dubai Golf Club Pavilion designed by Godwin Austen Johnson is so beloved by the Emiratis that it is illustrated on their banknote—but not in this book. Adrian Smith, the architect for the Burj Khalifa, is named (but not Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, whom he worked for at the time of the building’s design); Tom Wright, meanwhile, the architect at Atkins Design who designed the Burj Al Arab, is reduced to being referred to as “a white man in London.”

Perhaps Dubai is too new to try and record its history, and comprehending the politics of the region is certainly difficult from afar. (There is little transparency, and tribal family connections are not public record.) As a result, the city is full of rumors regarding who actually controls and funds what. It is a shame that the thin research on Dubai is included because it detracts from the insightful historical narrative of the older “instant cities.” Enjoy the book for its exploration into Shanghai, St. Petersburg, and Mumbai, but find another source for the story of Dubai’s origins.

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Architecture an Inspiration

Ivor Smith

Troubador Publishing Ltd, 2014

Reviewed by Ann Sussman AIA

When was your first time? When did you realize that you were obsessed with understanding and explaining, to anyone who might listen, the magic of buildings? If this describes your mindset, then make room for this book. If you’d like to become an aficionado of built form but feel a tad lacking, this book will bring you up to speed, too.

An English architect, Ivor Smith also writes, teaches architecture, and has directed architectural schools. Here, he synthesizes more than five decades of his experience contemplating buildings, doing so with verve and a certain urgency. Smith worries that too many people are negative about the discipline today, painting it with a broad brush. He is concerned that students, not always hearing feedback sent their way, fail to appreciate the resolved complexity of many of their predecessors’ work and the opportunity to elaborate on their own.

Architecture an Inspiration, a paperback book with more than 400 color photographs, strives to show that architecture that inspires does so not because it fits a certain style or fashion, but because it reconciles “a whole range of conflicting issues” into a “human and poetic synthesis.”

Smith explains how that happens by arranging the book into two parts:

The first considers “the Nature of Architecture” and the role of buildings in “facilitating activity, modifying climate, relating to context, respecting material [and] conveying meaning and delight.” The second section looks at the role of the designers, breaking down the mystery of an often ineffable process into separate chapters that consider the role of reason, intuition, precedent, metaphor, and search for harmony. In each case, he illustrates the concept using buildings that are mostly in the United Kingdom and Europe, often from the 20th century and sometimes from earlier periods.

In this way, the book is particularly useful for stateside residents. Did you know what the “gerberettes” are on Richard Rogers’ and Renzo Piano’s Pompidou Center (1977) in Paris and the role they play in holding the building up? Read Chapter 5, on “Respecting Material

and Structure.” Similarly, we learn that Norman Foster’s glazed mesh like, digitally designed and installed Great Court at the British Museum (1994), at two acres, is not only “a well-used civic space [but also] the largest covered piazza in Europe.”

But what is perhaps most interesting about Smith’s work is his own evolution. Smith is famous, or perhaps infamous, as one half of the architectural team that designed the UK’s enormous Park Hill public-housing development, in a Brutalist Corbusian style, for the industrial city of Sheffield (1957–61). “For the first decade or so the residents regarded Park Hill as paradise compared with what they had before,” he writes. But soon after, the complex fell into disrepair, becoming synonymous with drugs and crime. The collapse of the local steel and coal industry promoted the decline, but so did his own moves.

“In hindsight, I realize [the buildings] have one major shortcoming: streets in the air, as on the ground, should have windows onto them to enrich both the dwelling and the street.” Finally undergoing renovation today, Park Hill has a new redevelopment firm and new architects. This team is introducing color on the exterior and wood in the interiors and, the author says, has “got the balance right between respect for authenticity and the embrace of change.” Smith is talking about himself here, too, for in the book he makes a strong case for a plurality of approaches and celebrates mash-ups, where architects combine diverse building traditions as a hallmark of 21st-century design and the way of the future. After this tour de force, it is hard to disagree.

ANN SUSSMAN AIA is coauthor of *Cognitive Architecture, Designing for How We Respond to the Built Environment* (Routledge, 2015).