
BACKGROUND BOOKS

ARCHITECTURE

Architects and builders have always had more in mind than mere shelter or work-and-storage space. Old and new buildings celebrate the glory of religions (the temples of Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Istanbul's Hagia Sophia, Chartres Cathedral); of governments (Britain's Houses of Parliament, the Kremlin, the U.S. Capitol); of families (the Marlboroughs' Blenheim Palace, the Rockefellers' Japanese house in Pocantico Hills, N.Y.).

Renowned designers and unknown masons have collaborated on monuments to victory in war (the Arc d'Triomphe); on tombs for the powerful (Egypt's Pyramids, the Taj Mahal); on huge complexes for public gatherings (Athens' ancient Theatre of Dionysius, Australia's modern Sydney Opera House, Houston's futuristic Astrodome).

Yet despite architecture's importance, its history is still largely taught in colleges as part of art history. Hence, the excellent bibliography in J. M. Richards' illustrated **Who's Who in Architecture; From 1400 to the Present** (Holt, 1977) cites many volumes in the Pelican History of Art series.

One of the few books that purports to cover world architecture over the centuries is Sir Banister Fletcher's **A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method**, first published in 1896 (Scribner's, 18th ed., 1975).

Fletcher's old-fashioned text is illustrated with black-and-white photographs and diagrams. He includes every kind of Western architecture from Stonehenge, through the medieval kitchen and buttery, to

Rome's Palazzo Farnese (atop which Michelangelo added a story), and to the Johnson Wax buildings in Racine, Wis. Most later writers fail to follow Fletcher's good example in going beyond the Western tradition to describe the architecture of the East (from the Mesopotamian clay-brick fortifications, c. 3500 B.C., onwards) and the indigenous design of Canada, Mexico, and Central and South America.

R. Furneaux Jordan's **A Concise History of Western Architecture** (London: Thames & Hudson, 1969, cloth; Harcourt, 1970, paper) provides strong chapters on Christendom's Romanesque (4th-11th centuries) and Gothic (12th-16th centuries) ecclesiastical construction. Jordan calls Henry VII's Chapel at Westminster, with the lace-like stone of its vault, "the end of English Gothic. There was nothing more to do."

A useful reference is **The Penguin Dictionary of Architecture**, compiled by John Fleming, Hugh Honour, and Nikolaus Pevsner (Penguin, 1966, 1973, paper only). Such succinct entries as "Dwarf Gallery. A wall-passage with small arcading on the outside of a building" help the reader who tends to get lost in the rococo prose of some writers on architectural subjects.

American architecture has been well-served by historians, sociologists, and writer-practitioners like Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) and Louis Henri Sullivan (1856-1924).

Wright's **An Autobiography** (Horizon Press, 1932, 1977) was followed by his book about Sullivan, for

whom he once worked. In **Genius and the Mobocracy** (Horizon Press, 1949; enlarged ed. with photographs, 1977), Wright laments both Sullivan's death—alone and penniless—and “our present servility in the art of architecture.”

Sullivan, considered the first master architect of the skyscraper, designed many Chicago buildings and The Bayard on Bleeker Street in New York. An artist, he decorated the facades of his buildings with terracotta ornamentation. His own story of his life, told in the third person, is **The Autobiography of an Idea** (AIA, 1924; Dover, 1956, cloth & paper).

John Burchard, M.I.T.'s emeritus Dean of Humanities, and Albert Bush-Brown, head of the Rhode Island School of Design, ask some interesting questions in **The Architecture of America: A Social and Cultural History** (Atlantic-Little, Brown, abr. ed., 1966, paper): Did the confused American architecture of the 19th and early 20th centuries reflect the turmoil of a people “who had lost the values of a unitary, agrarian, Protestant society and were trying to come to terms with a pluralistic, technological-urban, heterogeneous” one? Have any building types emerged on which Americans would lavish “extra money, extra labor, extra love,” such as were brought to the Acropolis or to Mont St. Michel? Not yet, it seems.

Other noteworthy studies include **Architecture in the United States: A Survey of Architectural Styles Since 1776** by the University of Michigan's Ralph W. Hammett (Wiley-Interscience, 1976) and **The Rise of an American Architecture** (Praeger, 1970), in which Henry-Russell Hitchcock writes on American architecture's influence abroad, Albert Fein describes the “ideal” and the

“real” U.S. city, and Vincent Scully discusses American houses from Monticello onward.

Picture books on American architectural history crowd American coffee tables. Two of the best are Wayne Andrews' eclectic **Architecture in America** (Atheneum, 1960; rev. ed., 1977, cloth & paper) and G. E. Kidder Smith's two-volume **A Pictorial History of Architecture in America** (America Heritage/Norton, 1976).

Kidder Smith drove 130,000 miles to photograph some 3,000 structures. He moves from the gable and chimney detail of the Ironmaster's House, in Saugus, Mass. (1646), to the sun-struck court of the Salk Biological Research Institute at La Jolla, Calif. (designed by Louis I. Kahn, 1967) and “The Strip” in Las Vegas, Nev.

The Strip provides the focus for a much-talked-about work on “vernacular” architecture in the United States, **Learning from Las Vegas** (M.I.T., 1972; rev. ed., 1977, cloth & paper). Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour note that modern architects see in the suburban residential landscape, with its Regency, French Provincial, and “Prairie-Organic” modes, its carriage lanterns, mansards, and “split-level sheds,” the debased values of a consumer economy. These architects, they argue, throw out “the variety with the vulgarity.”

The history of the stark Bauhaus influence on American architecture and design (in fabrics, furniture, graphics, even art education) has its own superb monument in **The Bauhaus** by Hans M. Wingler (M.I.T., 1976). Harvard, where Walter Gropius was appointed a professor in 1937, and M.I.T. became centers of the U.S. Bauhaus movement.

The Language of Post-Modern Architecture by Charles A. Jencks

(Rizzoli, 1977, cloth & paper; rev. ed., 1978, paper) says what has gone wrong with modern architecture. A *New York Times* reviewer wrote that Jencks's "basic point—if God wanted chapels to look like boiler houses he would have given Chartres a smokestack—comes through with clarity."

In **Kicked a Building Lately?** (Quadrangle, 1976, cloth; 1978, paper), the *Times*' own architecture critic, Ada Louise Huxtable, sees burgeoning public sensitivity to what architects and builders are doing to harm or enhance cities and neighborhoods. "My obsessions are now shared," she writes, "and my co-conspirators are everywhere."

Many of Huxtable's co-conspirators are in the growing architectural preservation movement. In **Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States before Williamsburgh** (Putnam's, 1965), Charles B. Hosmer, Jr. chronicles the saving of Philadelphia's Independence Hall, Virginia's Mt. Vernon, and other historic landmarks, along with unsuccessful efforts to prevent the destruction of many more prior to the 1949 creation of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

A new surge of interest in saving the best of the older suburban houses (Tudor, Norman, Spanish, Dutch Colonial, Georgian) may lead to more books like **Scarsdale: From Colonial Manor to Modern Community** by Harry Hansen (Harper, 1954). This interesting mix of social journalism and architectural history was

commissioned by the Town Club of Scarsdale, N.Y.—a village founded in 1701 that grew up to be a commuters' haven for upper-middle-class families moving out of Manhattan.

Until the 1940s, the typical Scarsdale dwelling was a two-story, 8-to-12-room house, often with dormers. The post-World War II threat from "hit-and-run builders of look-alike houses," as one Scarsdale old-timer called them, led to new local regulations in 1950 that restricted dimensions, roof shapes, and other elements of design.

Hansen's book is far more readable than Herbert J. Gans' sociological work, **The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community** (Pantheon, 1967; Vintage, 1968, paper). Gans lived in Levittown, N.J., for the first two years of its existence; oddly enough, he has next to nothing to say about the mass-built houses he and his neighbors occupied, beyond the fact that the "mixture of house types" had little social impact ("the variations in number of bedrooms encouraged people to make family-size rather than class distinctions").

More than 50 years ago, Lewis Mumford, master critic of the urban scene, published **Sticks and Stones: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization** (Dover, rev. ed., 1955, cloth & paper). His conclusion, as good now as it was then: "Sooner or later we will learn to pick our way out of the debris . . . towards the things that are symbolized in the home, the garden, and the temple. Architecture sums up the civilization it enshrines."

EDITOR'S NOTE. *The American Institute of Architects'* librarian Susan Molton, assistant librarian Stephanie Byrnes, and Mary Rapp, librarian of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, assisted in the research for this essay.