“A New Architecture to Take Us Out of the Sterility of the Past…”[1]

Richard Miller

After the end of the first Great War came a drastic shift in Western thought, and as a result, Western art as well. Ideologies began to lose their bombastic nature and instead sought to capture a more humanistic essence. No longer did the gods control our lives (the Existentialists); no longer did a narrative follow an associative path from point A to point B (the literary technique Stream of Consciousness); no longer was a building an empty shell with pretty ornamentation (the International/Modernist Style). Western architecture owes a great deal to its Classical forbearers—The extent of which is quite obvious in almost any public, government and not a few private edifices—but the modern age demands an architecture more attuned to its time. While still remembering techniques taught in the days of yore, while not shunning the work of the master builders of the past, can an architectonic style be created to suit the needs of today? In the years after the First World War, and unfortunately to this day, the answer has been “Yes” and “No.”

Look around the country and note each public or government edifice you see, and virtually each one of them can be classified as Classicist. For centuries after the European Renaissance, Western architecture has focused on recreating the “glory days” of the past. Any building that was meant to communicate a symbol of strength, stability, or solitude took its cue from the Parthenon and other temples from the ancient Greeks. With the advent of more sophisticated construction techniques, structural members such as columns became merely architectonic ornamentation, becoming both false and devoid of meaning. Public works began to be egregious shows of hollow monuments wrapped in ostentatious decoration. Just look at McKim, Meade & White, a firm that became known simply for its Classicist style, and not for any advancement in architectural theory or practice. While occasionally a meaningful piece of work would be produced, most often

[1] Cesar Daly, *Revue Generale de l’architecture,* 1849, p. 26.

spaces "supported" by decorated columns and pediments all clad in marble were the result. This was a firm that gave the people (the modern day aristocracy, who unfortunately determined the course of architectural style up to this day) what they wanted.

This nostalgia (or would it be more appropriate to say overzealous veneration?) for the past has also affected the residential field of architecture. One has to look no further than the numerous mansions and high-end residences of the contemporary period. For these, ornate crown and base mouldings are used, not to cover joints, but to display wealth. Decorative pilasters are not structural support, but are invocations of Italian Palazzos. The theory of proportion, which so came to define Classical architecture, became lost in a need to have the grandest-looking residence. The use of these elements morphed from a union between aesthetics and engineering (a truly beautiful union indeed for its time), to an avaricious compulsion. One need look no further than Ayn Rand's novel *The Fountainhead* to see the apotheosis of hollow Classicism.

After the advent of the Industrial Revolution and the common practice of steel frame construction, new engineering and architectural feats could be achieved. Interior spaces could be opened up due to the structural steel grid, giving more freedom to manipulate space—the realm of the true architect; however, with this new technique came little change in architectonic features. The overzealous—and often unnecessary—use of the Classical column has continued to this day. If this element were to be used for its traditional, intended purpose, then there would at least be a hint of truth behind its use; however, for the most part this is a purely decorative element, as the edifice is supported by a structural grid. At the same time, the use of steel frame construction allowed architects to design almost without limitations in height. Yet, for quite some time buildings were limited in height to what was typical of the day. It was not until the 1930's and the advent of the "second" Chicago School that skyscrapers became commonplace in major cosmopolitan areas. But even the "first" Chicago School was not free from the Classical influence. For many buildings in the Chicago style, the building itself was an ode to the past. The Chicago Building is a remarkable example of the Classical influence. The first few floors are reminiscent of the base of a Classical column. As it rises, the intermediate floors become the shaft, and the ornate top becomes the capital. Even in more contemporary times (the 1970's), skyscrapers could not avoid the reaches of the Classical school. Using the former AT&T Building (now Sony Tower) as an example, the homage to the Classical column is again prevalent; however, unlike the Chicago Building, the AT&T Building's top (an open pediment) is a blatant recollection of the past.

Along with the newly utilized engineering feats of the 1920's and 1930's came a new school of thought that revolutionized (albeit much later) architectural practice. The International Style (later the Modernist movement) came to "ban" everything that the Beaux Arts schools came to epitomize. Instead of using heavy ornamentation to justify a building, the Modernists followed a doctrine of "form follows function," whereby *how* a space is used determines *what* the space will

ultimately look like. Later, this school also came to adopt a "less is more" approach, wherein architectural ornamentation was virtually banished. As would be expected from such a radical ideology, it was not well received in the United States until the Modernist boom in the post-World War II era.

Unlike the traditional Beaux Arts schools, the modernist movement sought to separate completely from the past and create an architecture for the present. One way that this was done was to place an emphasis on the structural aspect of a building (in a way, this can still be reminiscent of the Classical schools). The steel frame was often accented in a building to provide a sort of discourse between passers-by and the building proper.

In an effort to bridge the gap between the Modernist philosophy and the Beaux Arts doctrine, a sort of hybrid style was formed in the years leading up to the end of the Second World War. Like Modernism, Art Deco found inspiration in the purity of geometric shapes. Still, in order to appease the masses, hints (some more overt than others) of Beaux Arts influence were introduced to produce a highly distinct (if not confusing) style. One has to look no further than Manhattan's Chrysler Building to see the dichotomy of Art Deco. The rectilinear profile of the main shaft of the building falls in to the geometrical influence of the Modernist movement. However, towards the top, ornamentation begins to take over and indeed become the focus of the structure. Four gargoyles are placed at each corner, and the top is a "crown" with the sunburst motif typical of Art Deco.

After the Modernist movement had its run in the United States, from the end of the War up until the 1970's, the Post-Modernists—in what seems to be the architectural tradition of America—began to reject the tenets of Modernism, and sought once again to pay homage to the past. Again the creed was modern form, classical ornament—hollow theory. Each time an attempt has been made to recreate or mimic the past, (for many of the Post-Modernist, and even the Beaux Arts, projects are nothing more than copies of a glorified age), an architectural blunder is committed (AT&T Building) with few exceptions. The Chrysler Building's theory was executed in such a way as to be a well-liked structure to this day. What seems to be obvious, is that the pivotal question, "While still remembering techniques taught in the days of yore, while not shunning the work of the master builders of the past, can an architectonic style be created to suit the needs of today?" is still largely unanswered. One thing we can be sure of though—the past will not go away quietly.

Though Art Deco managed to bridge the gap between the orderly Beaux Arts phase and the radical Modernist phase, what still should be brought to attention is something that is rather disturbing. Despite producing world-renowned architects and designs, the United States has failed in producing a distinct "American" style (the sole exclusion to this would be Frank Lloyd Wright's "Prairie School"). This failure to innovate is directly related to an equally disturbing psychosis in America: the reluctance to acknowledge our own period in history. What then becomes obvious is that unless we get over this

“fear” of the future, neither a distinctly “American” style, nor a truly reflective style of our times, can develop.

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!

Nominating faculty: Professor Mary Elizabeth (Betsy) Calhoun, Architecture 1121, Department of Architectural Technology, School of Technology and Design, New York City College of Technology, CUNY.

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