

ECLECTIC CLASSICISM

Last Lingua Franca

It is possible to view the history of American building as the search for a national vernacular — a discrete urban *architecture de rapport* whose language could be enjoyed as common property. In eastern row houses of the 18th and 19th Centuries, such a vernacular existed, despite the shifting parade of “styles” that masked their façades as the latter century wore on. But row houses, by their very nature, are a conservative lot, and the stylistic chaos that later developed in mid-Victorian America was more evident in new and nondomestic building types.

The proliferation of historical styles, inseparable from the notion of the picturesque, was also fundamentally anti-urban. The polite conversations between Georgian and Greek Revival terraces became a marketplace squabble between the Romanesque breweries, Renaissance banks, and Egyptian warehouses of new commercial centers. Indeed, the ruthless individuality with which our ancestors built their fortunes and their lives is evident with belligerent clarity in the architecture of their cities.

In creating the picturesque pile and the unique silhouette, economy of plan was often sacrificed to eccentricity of design, with attendant costs and inefficiencies. By 1860, Americans were able to see that they had built of their cities a Tower of Babel—a polyglot collection of buildings lacking both internal coherence and communal integration. A new order was needed and a new Rule of Taste that would yet satisfy the period’s delight in expressive surfaces and massing. Both were met in the architecture of Second Empire Paris.

The enormous influence of Paris, first through the Second Empire style and then through the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, persisted in this country through the 1930s. The intrinsic merits of the period as well as its formative influence on 20th-Century architecture have been largely ignored by historians of the modern movement, partly because the initial acceptance of the new approach could only be achieved through the deposition of the earlier, academic mode. But Eclectic Classicism was one answer to a recurring problem that has again become contemporary — the need for an urban vernacular; as such it bears renewed examination.

Red brick with white stone trim in classical styles ranging from French Renaissance to Colonial Georgian, were used to form the city’s domestic backbone.

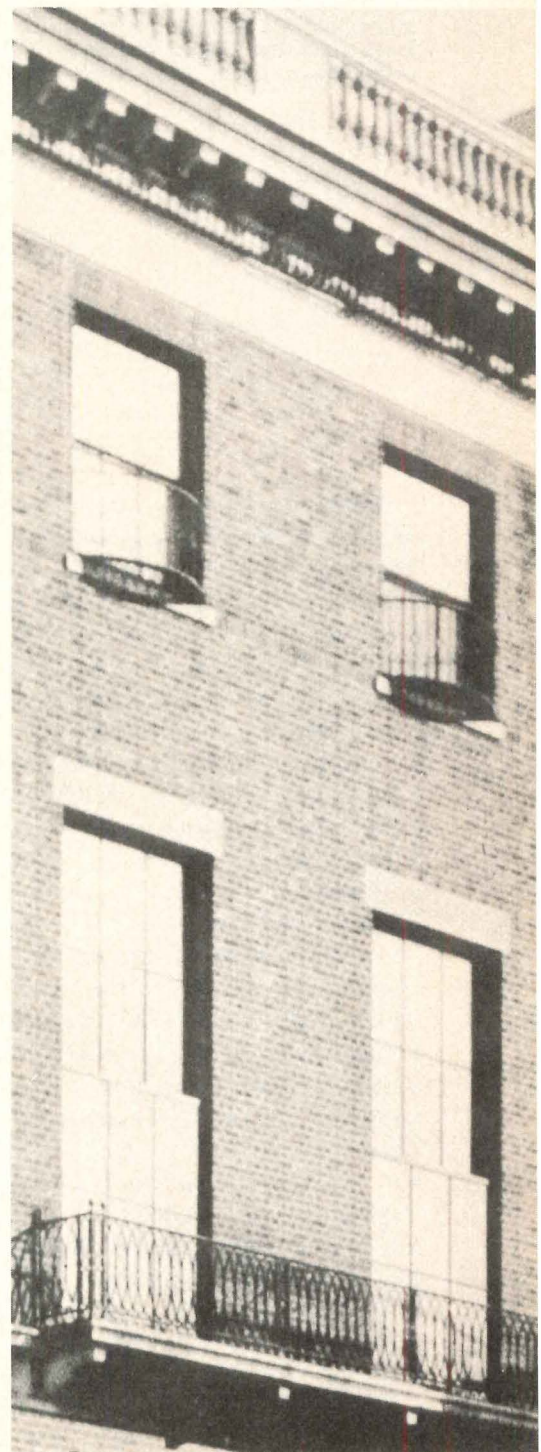
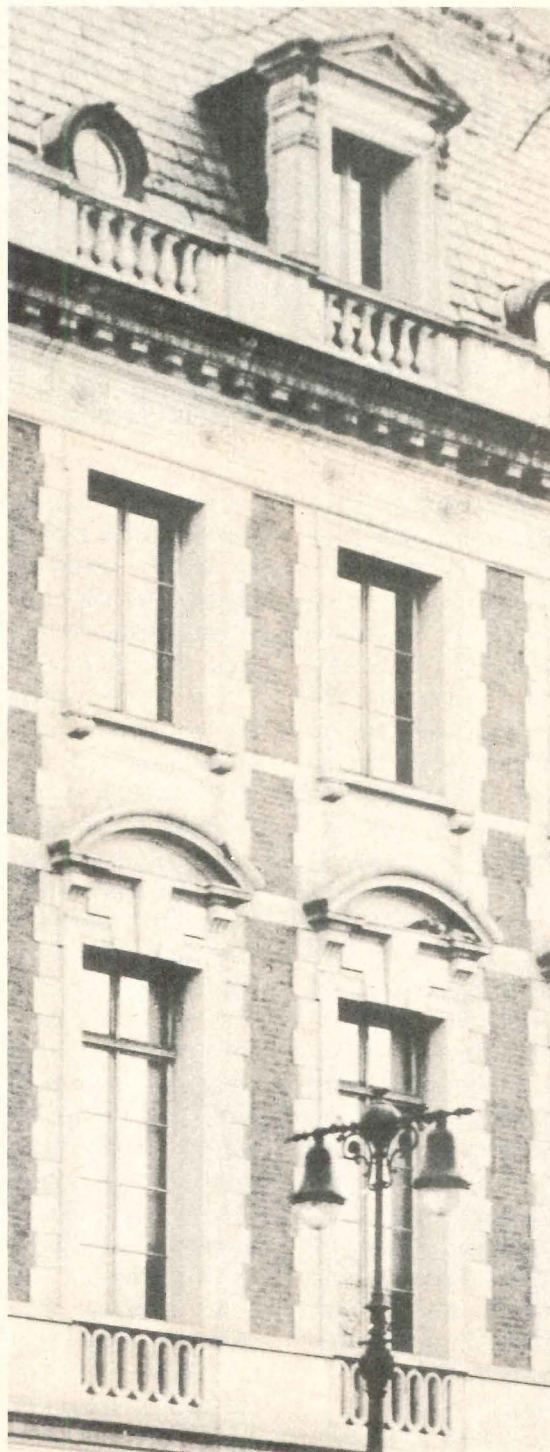
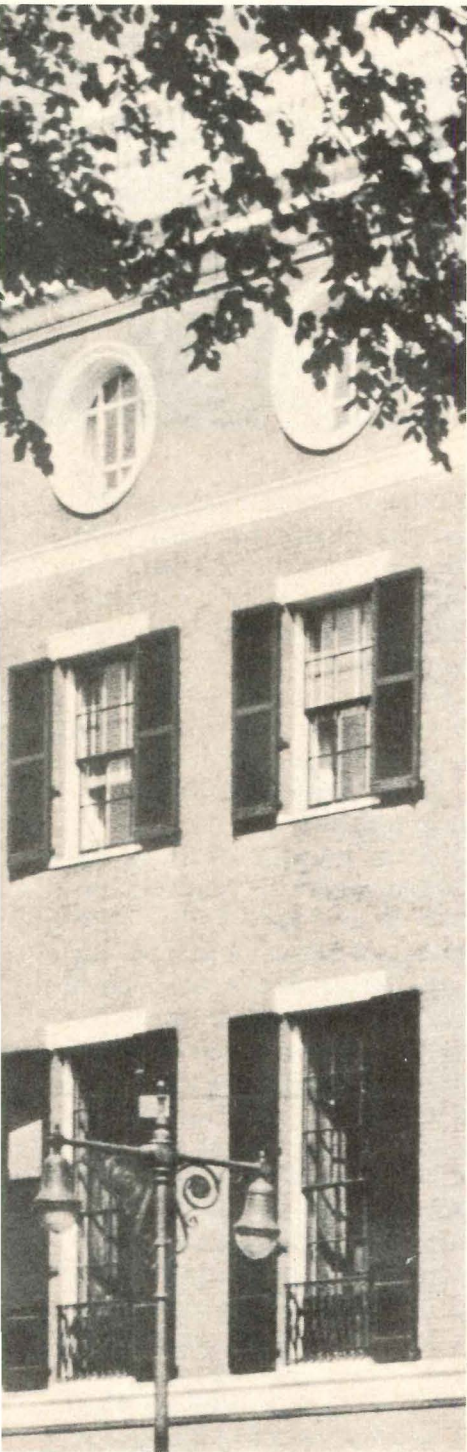
Lotos Club (formerly Schieffelin Residence), New York. Richard H. Hunt (1898–1900).

Willard Straight Residence, New York. Delano and Aldrich (1913–15).

William Starr Miller residence, New York. Carrère and Hastings (1912–14).

Knickerbocker Club, New York. Delano and Aldrich (1914–15).



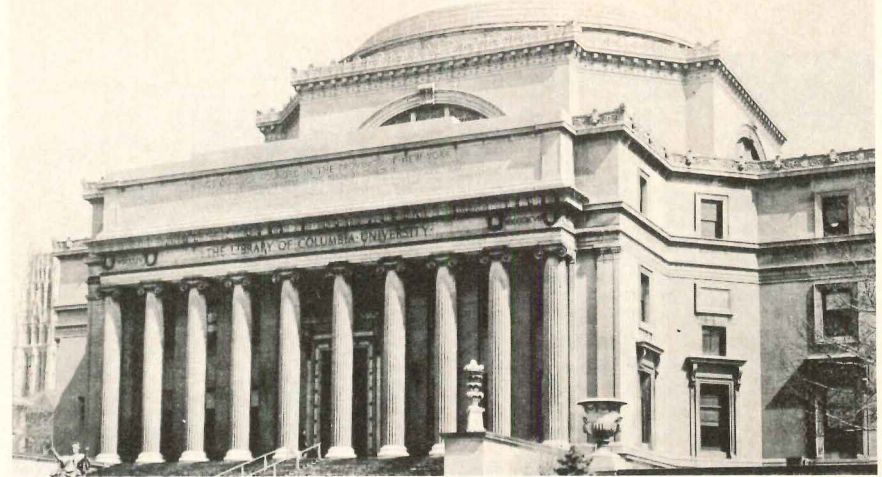


Well-dressed limestone, in the more emphatic Roman and Renaissance manners, were used largely for monumental public buildings.

Metropolitan Museum of Art, of New York; central portion. Richard Morris Hunt (1894–95). Begun shortly after the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where Hunt retained design control for the entire vast project, it was conceived on the scale of a Roman bath with an Imperial Parisian plasticity.

Low Library, Columbia University, New York. McKim, Mead & White (1893–97). One of MMW's most perfect monuments is the focus of a complex formal plan.

Grand Central Terminal, New York. Warren and Wetmore (1903–13). Splendid monumentality and an extensive use of glass make this one of America's finest embodiments of the Beaux-Arts ideal.



There is no doubt that Paris, the heiress to an earlier classical tradition, produced the most civilized urban architecture of the mid-19th Century. Although the cubic austerities of the Classic Revival were no longer acceptable in the reign of Napoleon III, a classical idiom was still preferred. It was the genius of Lefuel, successor to Louis Visconti in the grand project to unite the Tuileries with the Louvre, to employ a classical vocabulary in the highly three-dimensional manner demanded by contemporary taste. But it was not the Louvre project, nor the Opéra, nor any single monument that made the Paris of these Imperial years a center of architectural civilization. Rather it was the high standard of taste and competence in the design of blocks of flats and commercial buildings that lined the new avenues and boulevards — united by common materials, proportions, vocabulary, and quality of execution. It seems unlikely that a similar standard could have been achieved in, say, the Gothic mode, which seemed, as Henry Russell Hitchcock said, “excessively dependent on the individual capacities — not to say the caprices — of its leading practitioners.” In fact, none of the more exotic Romantic styles seemed capable of yielding an urban vernacular. Nevertheless, these Parisian modes bore one important resemblance to the High Victorian Gothic — both were pure 19th-Century creations, instantly recognizable as such — and not archaeological reconstructions.

The first recorded use of a mansard roof in Ameri-

ca (the most obvious element of the French style) was in the Schiff House (New York, 1848–50), built by Detlef Lienau, a Danish student of Henri Labrousse whose later Schermerhorn houses were considered “superb examples of French design.” Richardson, a student of Henri’s brother Théodore, also worked in the Second Empire mode immediately after his return from France in 1865. Although he soon abandoned it for Gothic and Romanesque inventions, the splendid rationality of French planning remained evident in much of his work.

But the true beginning and greatest credit for the American practice of architecture *à la française* belongs to Richard Morris Hunt (1827–1895). Hunt was sent to Paris at the age of fifteen to prepare for entrance in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts under Lefuel himself. The master, who had already replaced Visconti on the Louvre project, further advanced to become Architect to the Emperor, and had his brilliant pupil appointed Inspecteur de Travaux. In this capacity, Hunt was responsible for the design and plans of the vigorous Pavilion de la Bibliotheque (completed 1855). Although he enjoyed the best connections in Paris and was offered attractive government positions, Hunt chose to return to America in 1856. There, in a series of important public and private commissions, as well as through the students he trained in his own New York atelier, Hunt spread the new French manner. The studio he built on West 10th Street, where his apprentices included George



Post and Henry van Brunt (both of whom later worked with him on the Columbian Exposition), as well as William R. Ware, and Frank Furness, was designed in a contemporary French vernacular. It was followed in 1868 by the first New York apartment house, built on east 18th Street for Rutherford Stuyvesant (destroyed 1956). This house, influenced somewhat by Viollet-le-Duc, was a startling innovation for New Yorkers who considered it rather scandalous to be living all on one level with strangers above and below. With scandal allayed, it became, after the office building, the century's most important building type.

Hunt's chateaulike Vanderbilt House (New York, 1879) was another departure for, until that date, the American aristocracy were content to live in modest, if tasteful, terrace-houses whose façades belied the real wealth of their occupants. This opulent *hôtel* was a favorite of Charles F. McKim. The monumental central portion of the Metropolitan Museum façade was conceived on the scale of a Roman bath with an Imperial Parisian plasticity. It dates from 1895, two years after the Columbian Exposition in Chicago where Hunt retained design control for the entire vast project. Through his role in this exposition, which established Eclectic Classicism based on French planning as a national style, Hunt exerted a great measure of his influence. But at least as important a part was exerted through his student William Ware who, in founding the schools of archi-

ecture at MIT (1866) and Columbia (1881) on the Beaux-Arts model, formed the tastes and habits of generations of architects well into this century.

If Hunt was chiefly responsible for the introduction of French-based classicism in America and its acceptance by leading patrons, the firm of McKim, Mead and White (henceforth MMW) nationalized the style and brought it to fruition. McKim's studies in Paris and travels in Italy, as well as his experience (together with Stanford White) in Richardson's office, yielded a firm grounding in French planning and classical design. Nevertheless, his early work in the Shingle Style revealed a taste for the picturesque that, to some degree, always informed his work. MMW's move from decidedly picturesque to more formal styles seems to have been effected through the influence of Joseph Wells, a European-trained designer employed by the firm who had himself worked with Hunt. The turning point came with the Villard Houses (1885) and the Century Club (1891) both in the 16th-Century Italian style, for whose design Wells was chiefly responsible.

But if MMW showed an early preference for the Italian Renaissance, they were equally competent — often brilliant — in a variety of classical styles including Imperial Roman and Georgian Colonial. Although very consciously and creatively eclectic, there is considerable unity in the firm's production, particularly after the Columbian Exposition where, jointly with Daniel Burnham and under the watchful eye of Hunt, they formulated a new and national standard of taste. Italian Renaissance or Roman designs, executed in well-dressed limestone, were used largely for monumental public buildings, with Roman preferred for a particularly grand effect as, say, the focus of a complex Beaux-Arts plan (Low Library, Columbia, 1898). For domestic and less conspicuous public buildings, they opted for Colonial or Renaissance styles, using a more modest red brick with limestone trim. This disposition of materials, which broke the pattern of the brownstone decades and connected with the earlier Georgian tradition, was perhaps the firm's most valuable contribution. Since the ubiquitous, inexpensive brick was the most suitable material for an urban vernacular — a fact ignored by the taste for relatively costly and poorly weathering brownstone veneers, its reinstatement as an acceptable surface was an important step toward a more realistic, unified city architecture.

These materials continued to be used in a variety of classical idioms by the next generation of architects, of whom many of the most distinguished passed through MMW's offices. These included John Carrère, Thomas Hastings, Edward Palmer York, Philip Sawyer, Cass Gilbert, William Howells, and Harold van Buren Magonigle. In addition to the training they received under the partners, most had studied at the Beaux-Arts-based architecture schools of MIT or Columbia (both of which, from the beginning employed French instructors) and often at the Parisian Ecole itself. Other major architects of the

period who did not work with MMW, including Chester Aldrich, Whitney Warren, and John Russell Pope, nevertheless studied at one or another of these institutions.

The result was that, by the first decade of this century, America boasted a greater number of extremely well-trained architects — all practicing in very closely related styles at an extraordinary level of competence — than ever before. Moreover, they had instituted a new method of working — in large groups with armies of specialized designers and draftsmen — that made them among the most efficient in the world. The complexity and number of projects successfully undertaken during these years by such firms as MMW, Warren & Wetmore, Carrère & Hastings, York & Sawyer, and Delano & Aldrich made them world leaders with as great an influence in Europe, particularly England, as had earlier been exerted upon them. The firms tended to specialize, to some degree, both stylistically and by building type. Warren & Wetmore's hotels and railway stations, for example, were executed in a particularly pure Beaux-Arts style, while York and Sawyer's many banks were often of Italian Renaissance inspiration. Carrère and Hastings, who rivaled MMW in commissions for fashionable townhouses and wealthy institutions, preferred a mid-18th Century French manner, although some of their best buildings are in the earlier Louis XIII style. Delano & Aldrich's townhouses, meanwhile, often displayed a chaste Federal simplicity.

Whatever the stylistic variations (something perceivable then only to the trained eye and thus almost invisible now), the total effect was one of an ambiguous and anonymous classicism, with all the symbolic advantages such images obtain. For an uncertain, if not parvenu, wealthy class, it satisfied the need for a Rule of Taste; a beacon for aesthetic Riding Hoods through the forest of Victorian pluralism. In addition, it provided a high degree of comfort and convenience in housing, as well as thoroughness of detail, through the design of less fanciful and more economic plans. The effect of such plans on the new office buildings likewise reduced costs while providing a respectable commercial image.

The effect on the cityscape was especially profound. The particularity of buildings that fragmented the urban scene at mid-century yielded to

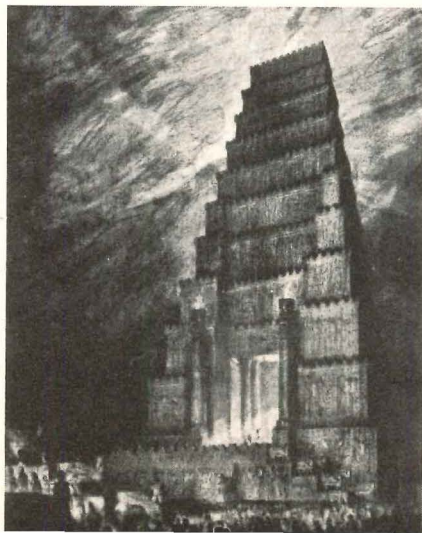
greater social ease and communication, the fruits of a common language and common materials. The fabric of the city began to assume a more uniform texture as the quality of a tapestry replaced that of a patchwork crazy quilt. The ability to conceive the city as woven of whole cloth, combined with the ability to plan and build on a grand, often formal scale, was the chief genius of this Beaux-Arts dominated period. Its effect on modern architecture is witnessed dramatically in Rockefeller Center, one of this century's most successful urban complexes. It is significant both that the Center was team designed, a concept first developed in these eclectic years, and that Raymond Hood, who had studied both at MIT (B.S. 1903) and at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (Diploma 1911) was a conspicuous member of its board of consulting architects.

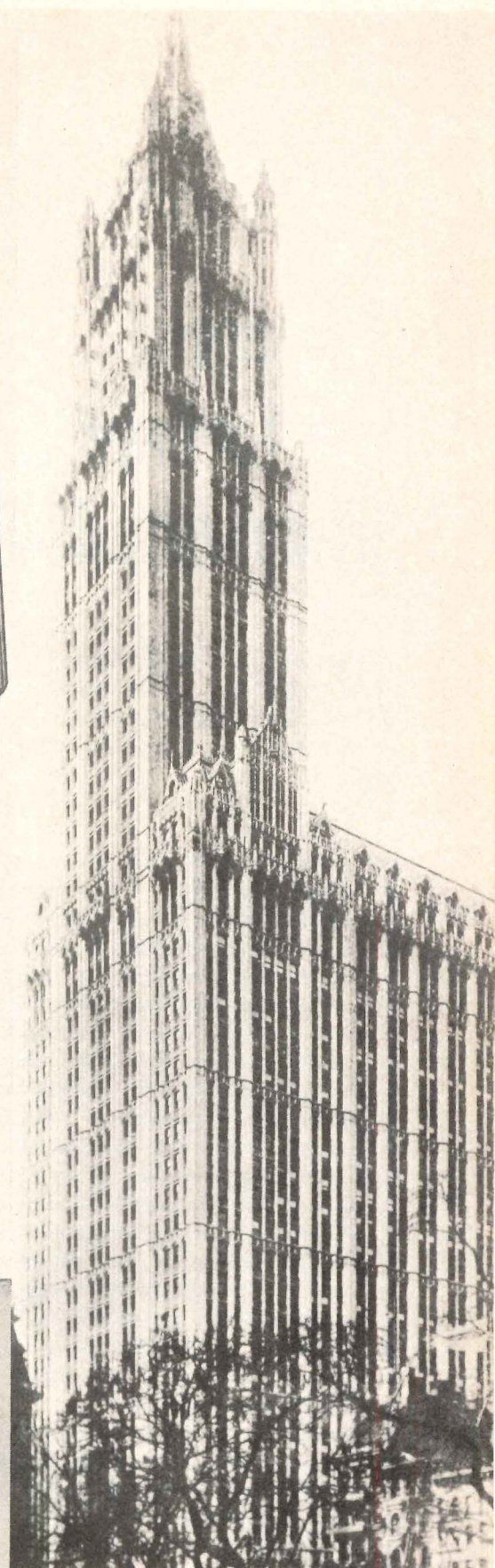
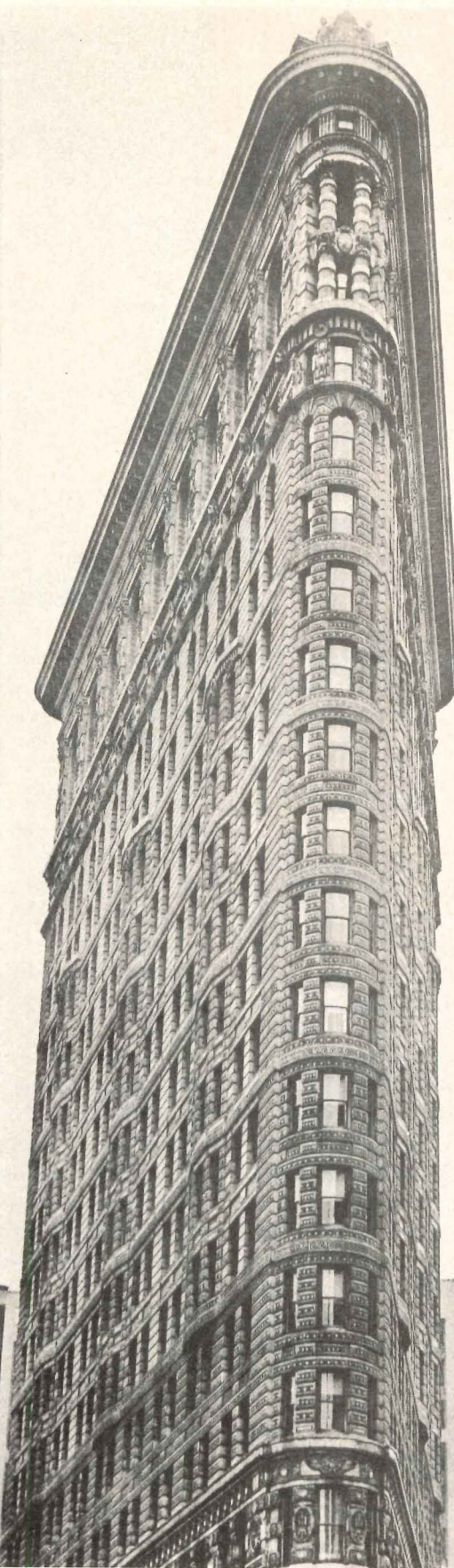
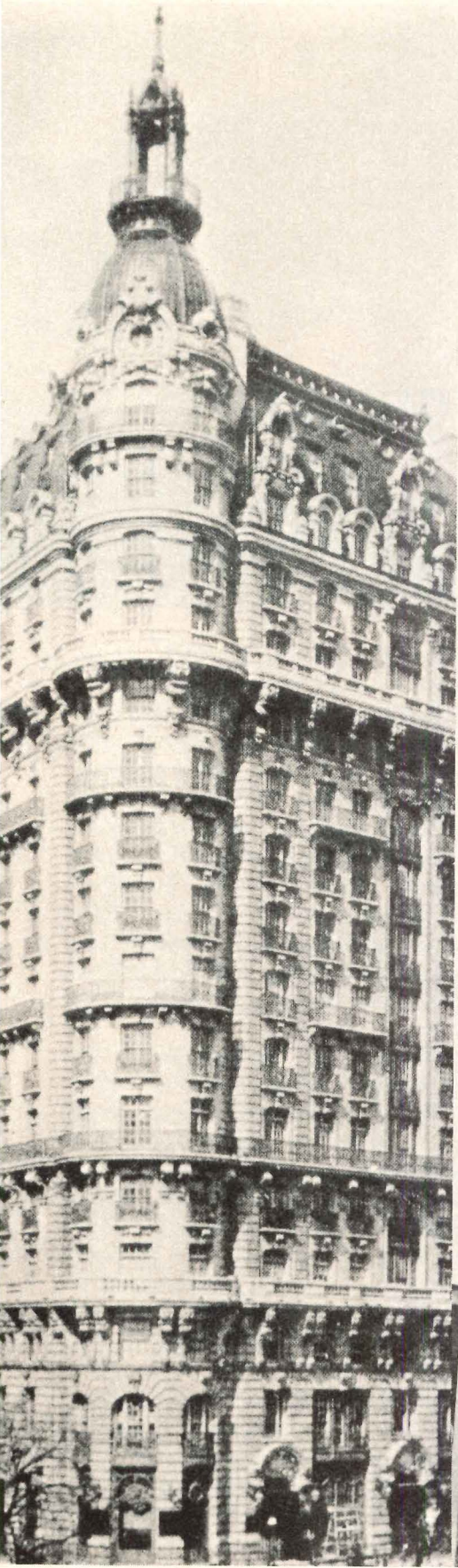
Through its principles of rational planning, taught to countless architectural students at home and abroad, the Beaux-Arts approach remained vital well into this century. The classical idiom in which the theory found expression, however, declined, partially, perhaps, for its apparent incompatibility with the tall office and apartment building. The classical vocabulary, enunciated *fortissimo* in buildings of Wagnerian proportions, easily became absurd (New York Municipal Building, MMW, 1908), particularly when the inspiration was Roman or Renaissance, rather than, say, Baroque. That it was possible to achieve through sensitive handling is evidenced by such masterpieces as Burnham's Flatiron Building (New York, 1901), Cass Gilbert's West Street Building (New York, 1905), and Albert A. Kahn's General Motors Building (Detroit, 1921). Nevertheless, the tall office building remained the subject of Romantic invention, often by those very students of the Beaux-Arts (e.g. Cass Gilbert, and York & Sawyer) whose work was otherwise consistently classical. It became increasingly so in the twenties and thirties when, partly in response to the new zoning laws, the silhouettes of office buildings began to recall medieval hilltowns and Mayan ruins. Since commercial buildings tended to be increasingly of the vertical type, the classical vocabulary began to disappear from the marketplace. In addition, the townhouses that provided a principal expression for the style became increasingly rare as center-city land costs soared in a no longer tax free economy, forcing a change in the lifestyles of the rich.

Ultimately, perhaps, the decline of classicism and concomitant rise of the modern styles (for they were seen then as alternative modes as they are again, in retrospect) simply reflected the renewal of American anti-urbanism and "individuality." These attitudes, which refused to acknowledge the city as a unique entity with each element responsible to both its immediate and far-flung neighbors, revived the chaos of mid-Victorian days. The notion of an urban vernacular disappeared once again in the idolization of genius and the "self-expression" of small minds.

Stephen A. Kurtz

Drawing by Hugh Ferriss of a reconstruction of Solomon's Temple.





The office building remained the subject of romantic invention by students of the Beaux-Arts whose work was otherwise classical.

Ansonia Hotel, New York. Graves and Duboy for W.E.D. Stokes (1899–1904). The classical Beaux-Arts vocabulary, enunciated *fortissimo* in buildings of Wagnerian proportions, easily became absurd.

Flatiron Building, New York. D. H. Burnham & Co. (1901–03). That the classical vocabulary could be successfully applied to the tall building, is evident in a few rare instances of sensitive handling.

Woolworth Building, New York. Cass Gilbert (1911–13). The tall office building remained the subject of romantic invention, often by architects whose work was otherwise consistently classical.

Photos: Courtesy Municipal Arts Society of New York.