Buildings, Institutions, and Architectural History

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INTRODUCTION

In his 1961 lectures at Cambridge University, E. H. Carr criticized the nineteenth-century historian Ranke, who had remarked that the historian's work was "simply to show how it really was". On the contrary, Carr believed that an event of the past became historical fact through a process of selection, interpretation, and acceptance by the body of historians – in other words, by an institutional sanction, conscious or otherwise.[1] He suggested that the events of the past become historical facts through mediation with the present to which the historian belonged, that "[history is] a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past."[2] Carr has had his share of critics, and at least some of the criticism leveled against him was appropriate.[3] This does not undermine the importance of issues in historiography that he brought out. Particularly, the distinctions between events of the past and historical facts, between objectivity and subjective judgment, the processes of selection and construction, remain important. Hayden White asserted recently:

> By history (considered as an object of historical research). we can only mean the sum total of all events ... that happened 'in the past'. The events have to be taken as a given: they are certainly not constructed by the historian. It is quite otherwise with 'facts'. They are constructed: in the documents attesting to the occurrence of events, by interested parties commenting on the events or the documents. and by historians interested in giving a true account of what really happened in the past and distinguishing it from what may only appear to have happened. It is 'facts' that are unstable. subject to revision and further interpretation. and even dismissible as illusions on sufficient grounds.[4]

This distinction between events of the past and historical facts has important implications for architectural history, as seen in the changing interpretations of modern architecture from the time of Giedion and Pevsner through to the present day. Juan Pablos Bonta's important research on the Barcelona Pavilion and my recent paper on Wright's Guggenheim Museum explain, in different ways, how individual buildings themselves may be subject to changing significance.[5] This paper takes the notion "historical fact" as a point of departure to comprehend the relationships between architecture and other institutions it houses, and their potential manifestation in built form. The Boston Public Library building (1888 – 95), by Charles McKim of McKim. Mead, and White elucidates those relationships. That the library is significant both architecturally and as an institution makes it a resonant example. The paper discusses historical constructs of architecture and the public library in late-nineteenth century America where the Boston Public Library assumes importance. Next, interpretations of the building in historical and critical texts are discussed. Last, the lacunae left by historical writings, particularly in addressing the relationship between architecture and other institutions as are addressed. A broadening of epistemological frameworks in the historical examination of architectural works is called for, so that a closer relationship between history and design may be established.

HISTORIES OF ARCHITECTURE/LIBRARIES

The idea of a "search for order" in a dynamic and transforming environment underlies much of historical writing on the late-nineteenth century America. While earlier historical writing emphasized a democratic consensus among Americans aiming to rationalize and order their world, later writings have seen these aims as riddled with conflict, with different groups attempting to impose their ideas of "order" on the environment. Architectural and library history of the period follow the trajectory set by American historiography in significant ways.[6] Over the last several decades, positions accorded to American Beaux-Arts architecture (of which McKim's building is seen as a prominent example) and the Public Library as "historical facts" have also varied. For architecture, it has shifted from being accorded a prominent position in its heyday, to being rejected by modernist critiques, through to being subject to more serious consideration in recent times. For the library, it has shifted from being an exemplar of democratic ideals to being an institution that has also exerted its powers to differentiate and even discriminate between its patrons.

At the end of the nineteenth century, American architects trained in the principles of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts were prominent in the architectural community. The shear number of commissions they received, as well as their role in organizing profession and discipline education is testimony to this. That they lost prominence af-

ter the advent of modernism is evident in the histories that were written since the mid-twentieth century. Histories that saw the root of American modernism in the work of the Chicago School architects over-emphasized the conservative nature of Beaux-Arts architects in the nation.[7] Other writings examined important contributions of Beaux-Arts architecture to give it greater historical significance. Many, whether in a critical mode or otherwise, recognized that the idea of attaining particular kinds of "order" was significant to those architects. The architectural search for order was seen to manifest in these ways: first, Beaux-Arts architects were seeking a formal order derived both from classical architecture and from design methods taught at the French school.[8] Scientific eclecticism, based on an academically received knowledge of historical works, and principles of composition, distribution, symmetry the *marche*, and the like equally informed them. Second, they were responding to larger social and cultural conditions of a modernizing nation, to control them with traditional and even retrogressive values that that architecture was supposedly charged with.[9] The genteel tradition, with the respect accorded to a peculiar European heritage and to particular values in individual behavior and artistic manifestations, is seen as significant to this. Third, those architects were striving to rationalize their newly-formed profession through the promotion of universal standards of practice and education, thus seeking an internal order particular to institutions of architecture.[10] The established system of education that the Ecole des Beaux-Arts was an example to emulate in a nation with no formal architectural education until the year 1865. Historical writing charges Beaux-Arts architecture with a complex web of meanings, making it retrogressive in its formal vocabulary, progressive in its response to changing professional and disciplinary conditions, and traditional in its cultural underpinnings.

Early historians of the public library in America, such as Jesse Shera and Sidney Ditzion, interpreted the development of the institution since the nineteenth century as a consequence of a democratic impulse.[11] The public library was to be a progressive institution open to all, keenly interested in the education and uplift of a diversifying population. Rosemary Du Mont suggested that library historians followed the schema set forth by Ditzion and Shera at least until the 1970s.[12] By this time, however, a growing number of historians, including Du Mont, were seeing the growth of the public library as more problematic. The egalitarian impulses of librarians were now judged complicated by conservative leanings and genteel idealism, by their authoritarian nature, by a fear of growing working-class unrest that needed mechanisms of social control of which the library was a part, by the ambivalent and often paternalistic intentions of public philanthropy, and by the exclusionary attitude of institutions toward women, children, and the minorities.[13] However, this did not mean that those early histories had no foundation in past events. Rather than debunking contributions made by those historians, Dee Garrison saw them as offering incomplete understandings of the past.[14] Accordingly, it was not as though there were no common set of ideals that brought together the librarians of the nineteenth century. Even as many historians later interpreted the supposedly progressive nature of library-institution as being strained by the conservative, they still saw among its members a certain ideological consensus typified by a genteel, educated middle-class.

Moreover, as much as architects, librarians were also responding to the need of organizing their institutions, aiming to rationalize their services. A search for order, perhaps restricted to a group, was still comprehensible in its cultural manifestations and professional activities. And it seemed crucial in shaping the public library and its buildings.

At least since 1876, when the American Library Association was formed, pioneer librarians such as Justin Winsor and William Poole were addressing the problems related to the design of library buildings, implicitly understanding the dilemmas of housing novel institutions with their peculiar functional programs in buildings.[15] This was not simple task: for it dealt with both, forces of modernization exemplified in the concern for the planning of library buildings and tradition-based values librarians may have harbored. Complex issues, ranging from the distribution of the public in their buildings based on social and cultural distinctions, to the forging of public and private realms within the buildings, through to the organization of books and their spatial relationship with the public were given attention by them. In the design of central library buildings, the situation was further complicated when architects, coming from similar cultural backgrounds to those librarians and sharing many of their ideals, also approached architectural problems in ways that conflicted with librarians' ideas on their buildings.

THE BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY AND ITS CRITICAL RECEPTION

As plans for a new building went under way in the early 1880s, the Trustees of the Boston Public Library asserted that were no precedents for its peculiar program. Since its inception over three decades earlier, the library was viewed as a "people's library" with an aim to circulate books to all. However, its collection grew in two distinct directions, of which popular material represented only one. The other part comprised the research material used by scholars and the cultural elite of Boston. The earlier building, designed by Charles Kirby and completed in 1859, housed these collections in distinct quarters, with the popular, circulating books in publicly inaccessible alcoves on the first floor and the research material in a hall on the second floor.[16] Although the design of the earlier building was emulated in others, as the library grew the building was judged by its administration to have serious functional shortcomings. Particularly important was the decade from 1868 to 1877, when Justin Winsor was in charge of running the library. Not only did he reorganize the administration of the institution, he also altered the architectural layout of the building to make it more effective.[17] But by the beginning of the 1880s, the Trustees made it clear that only a new building would effectively undo the problems in the existing building, which included not just delays in service and insufficient room, but also poor ventilation and lighting.

In their initial estimation the new building was to be a functional library – an envelope for the books. However, by the time McKim, Mead and White were commissioned in 1888, the Trustees' conception had become more complex. According to the Annual Report of 1889: "The trustees have insisted that convenience and use-

fulness should not be sacrificed to show, and that the internal arrangement of the building should be first considered. They did not, however, lose sight of the fact that the building was to be a 'palace of the people,' and, as such, should be a monumental building, worthy of the city of Boston."[18]

Consequently, it was believed that neither architectural form nor institutional function needed to suffer at each other's expense. But upon completion, the building was both hailed as a major architectural landmark as well as criticized for its functional problems. An independent examining committee wrote that the Trustees were to be congratulated as, "They have spared us an essay in archaeology, and given us, especially in the interior, grace and dignity, in a style associated with one of the grand eras of human progress." Ralph Adam Cram maintained that the library was "beautiful in that sense in which things have always been beautiful in periods of high human culture."[19] Other architectural writers of the time thought the building too austere and unoriginal, while prominent art and architectural critic Mrs. Van Rensselaer defended the architects by writing that they had "won a victory, not only for their own building, but for the general cause of architectural sobriety, dignity, simplicity and refinement."[20] Whatever the tenor of comment, architectural writing of the time gave greater credence to the formal characteristics of the building, with relatively little consideration to function. This was not true for librarians. Represented by William Poole, they took the view that the architects, by stressing too much on form, had been rendered poor in every function. The debate between Poole and Trustee and Superintendent of the library, Samuel Abbott is an indicator of this.[21] Poole criticized almost every aspect of the building and its design; both the accommodation of books and readers was found wanting by him.

The library and its building have been given a fair share of attention in historical writing too. Among the early examples is the house history of the institution written by its superintendent Horace Wadlin, and the two chapters on the commission in Charles Moore's *The Life and Times of Charles McKim*.[22] The former included a largely uncritical documentary on the construction of the building. Moore's text, on the other hand, hailed McKim's effort as an artistic endeavor. More significant than those are the later histories written by Walter Muir Whitehill and William Jordy, noted earlier. Whitehill's history of the institution has a discussion on the various schemes drawn before the McKim commission, and the controversies that continued well after the building was completed. Giving much of the credit to McKim and to the Trustee Abbott who consistently supported him, Whitehill echoed the praise lavished upon the building over the years. But writing in the context of late-nineteenth century architecture, Jordy was far more critical of the building. Placing it firmly within a Beaux-Arts tradition, Jordy suggested that the most fundamental problems with the building arose from the formalist tendencies of McKim, which lead to the poor functional layout of the building. If for Whitehill, the success of the building was due to the architect, then for Jordy the failings of the building were to be blamed on McKim and his academism. Surprisingly, while both mentioned earlier ideas – verbal and visual – on the shape that the building would take, neither saw them as informing the architectural program of McKim's building.

INSTITUTIONS AND ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN: RECONSTRUCTING INTERPRETATIONS

Jordy cited several historical sources for McKim's formal scheme, including the Coliseum, Alberti's San Francesco at Rimini, Labrouste's Bibliotheque St. Genevieve, and Richardson's Marshal Field's Wholesale Store. Significant as these may have been for McKim, they all lay outside the institutional boundaries of the Boston Public Library. But there were several architectural precedents within that institution, impacting both the form and the functional layout of the building, implying intersections between institutions of architecture and the library. These included:

1 Changes that Winsor made to the administration and spatial organization in the earlier building, following critical appraisals by him and independent examining committees. Not only did he form new departments such as the Shelving Department, the Ordering and Receiving Departments, but he also allocated specific spatial requirements for these and other work areas such as those for Cataloguing. Each of these would be included in all the future architectural schemes for a new building.

2. The early schemes that were drawn by the City Architect George Clough (1883) and Henry Van Brunt, who had acted as consultant for the Trustees. Particularly significant is Clough's scheme for a building on the present, Copley Square site. Like McKim's building, that scheme placed the main reading room (Bates Hall) on the second floor, laterally aligned to Copley Square, with the stacks at the rear. Also similar was the arrangement of administration, workspaces and special reading rooms along the north and south wings of a building punctuated by courtyards.

3. The design competition held in 1884, and the winning entries. Although none of the entries were seen as entirely satisfactory, the brief and the four winning entries are important indicators of the layout that the library judged suitable for housing their institution. The brief and the designs resemble Clough's drawings (and McKim's scheme) in the layout of functions, the organization and location of stacks and reading room, and in the overall formal arrangement of a building with courtyards.[23]

Plans published at the beginning of the design process in 1888 and after the completion in 1897 show that McKim maintained his formal parti throughout.[24] In the arrangement of functions, McKim seemed to have used the requirements set forth by the library in the earlier schemes, and even organized them in a more reasoned way. His design was of a near square building organized around an open court, with the main reading room in front and the stacks behind. As with the earlier designs, administrative spaces were set on the south wing, with secondary public spaces and reading rooms in the north. Yet, the special libraries, all on the top floor were better organized than those scattered in the residual spaces in earlier designs.
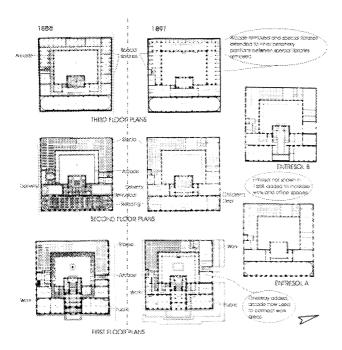
Figure 1: McKim's plans for the Boston Public Library, the initial scheme of 1888 (left) and the completed scheme, 1897. Both published in Annual Reports of the Trustees, Boston Public Library.

But balance also had to be maintained between all those functional requirements and the professed principles of composition and "scientific eclecticism". In all the iterations of McKim's plans, while publicly accessible areas such as vestibules, the grand staircases, the main reading room and lobbies, remained symmetrically disposed, those away from public view were not. Indeed, those internal spaces seem to have been guided by functional concerns rather than formal ones. The division of spaces between those that express a tendency towards formal composition and others seem to tell, in this particular case, of the division between public and private realms of the institution. But further, it also speaks of the coexistence of two institutions – architecture and the public library – within the same building. The publicly visible spaces, designed with scholarly knowledge of principles of design and of historical precedent, quite literally formalize the special skills of the maturing architectural profession in the nation. But that that very scholarship also promoted the traditional cannot be denied.

In the initial iteration, certain spaces, such as the arcades around the central court set at various levels, seemed to serve little purpose apart from providing an architectural experience of the building. On the other hand, the continual changes made to the functional organization of the building, which intruded on "architectural" space like the arcade, show the library as an institution in the throes of modernization. But they also described an institution with room for deference to recognized architectural traditions. Moreover, rather than dividing up the stacks into the popular and research sections with their own public access areas as in the older building, the library chose to combine the two collections in McKim's building, citing a policy of non-discrimination.[25] Even Herbert Putnam, an important librarian admitted in 1897 that the building was an "experiment" These changes, and indeed the criticism levied by Poole and others need be understood in the larger context of the library-institution which had little consensus on the design of its buildings. Debates between Poole who advocated the arrangement of books and readers in subject departments and Winsor, who supported a singular closed stack, surely had formal implications. Poole's criticism of the Boston Public Library and its stack system needs to be seen in the light of his own, regularly presented ideas on library design in the forums provided by the library-institution.

Thus, concealed within the form/function duality may be deeper issues that strike at the very basis of relationships between architecture and the other institutions that it must necessarily house. This is especially observable when these institutions are themselves in the process of maturing and deciding on the relationships between values from the past and the exigencies of the present. This necessitates a re-examination of events of the past, including buildings and discourses on their design as well as earlier constructions of historical facts now seen as events, and thus a broadening of epistemological frameworks for historical study. Based on the awareness that we are not so far removed from fundamental dilemmas of modern architecture, architectural history and historiography may themselves become tools to comprehend conditions that inform design and the institutional environments in which it necessarily operates.

Figure 2: View of McKim's building from H. H. Richardson's Trinity Church across the square, and a sequence of interior public spaces from the entrance, to the grand staircase through to the vestibule leading to reading and delivery rooms. Photographs by author.

NOTES

[1] See *What is history?* (New York) 1967, p.5.

[2] Ibid. p.35.

[3] Arthur Marwick, "'A Fetishism of Documents'? The Salience of Source-Based History," *Developments in Modern Historiography*, Henry Kozicki, ed. (New York) 1993.

[4] See "Response to Arthur Marwick", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.30 (London, Thousand Oaks CA, and New Delhi) 1995.

[5] Bonta, *An Anatomy of Architectural Interpretation : A Semiotic Review of the Criticism of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion* (Barcelona) 1975. Samiran Chanchani, "Between Icon and Institution: The Vacillating Significance of Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum," *The Journal of Architecture* 5:2 (Summer 2000) 159 – 188.

[6] Michael Krauss and David D. Joyce, *The Writing of American History* (Norman OK) 1985, provide an informed and critical survey of American historiography.

[7] John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown, *The Architecture of America: A Social and Cultural History*, (Boston and Toronto) 1961,1966: See especially part III which covers the periods 1885-1913, pp. 141-234. Also, Lewis Mumford, "The Imperial Façade," *Sticks and Stones: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization* (New York) 1924: 123-54.

[8] See, for example, Vincent Scully, *American Architecture and Urbanism* (New York and Washington) 1969: 135-39.

[9] Apart from Burchard and Bush-Brown and Mumford, examples of this treatment of Beaux-Arts-trained architects and of their works abound in histories of Modern Architecture. See, for example, Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture* (New York) 1979: Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* London and New York, 1985: Leonardo Benevolo, *History of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge MA) 1971; William Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900* (New Jersey) 1996.

[10] See Joan Draper, "The Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the Architectural Profession in the United States," *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession*, edited by Spiro Kostof, (New York) 1977, 1986:209-37; William Jordy, "The Beaux-Arts Renaissance: Charles McKim's Boston Public Library," *American Buildings and their Architects: Progressive and Academic Ideals at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York) 1972:314 – 375.

[11] Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library: The Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England*, (Chicago) 1949. Ditzion, *Arsenals of a Democratic Culture: A Social History of the American Public Library in New England and the Middle States from 1850 to 1900*, (Chicago) 1947.

[12] Du Mont, *Reform and Reaction: The Big City Public Library in American Life*, (Westport CT and London) 1977:6-7. Du Mont also mentions Gwladys Spencer as being one of the pioneers in seeing the relationship of the public library with a larger social context in her dissertation *The Chicago Public Library: Origins and Background*, (Chicago) 1943.

[13] See Du Mont, op. cit. and the following texts: Dee Garrison, *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876 – 1920*, (New York and London) 1979. Phylis Dain, "Ambivalence and Paradox: The Social Bonds of the Public Library," *Library Journal* 100 (1975) 261-66. Ellen Fain, "Books for New Citizens: Public Libraries and Americanization Programs, 1900-1925." In *The Quest for Social Justice: The Morris Fromkin Memorial Lecture, 1970 – 1980*, edited by Ralph M. Aderman (Madison WI) 1983:255-76.

[14] Garrison, xi – xvi.

[15] For Winsor's scheme, see "Library Buildings." *Public Libraries in the United States of America: Their History, Condition and Management, Part I*, Department of Interior, Bureau of Education, (Washington DC) 1876: 465 – 75. For Poole's ideas, see "The Construction of Library Buildings," *Library Journal* 6 (April, 1881) 69-77.

[16] The old building is discussed in Walter Muir Whitehall, *Boston Public Library: A Centennial History* (Cambridge MA) 1956: 55-75.

[17] See the *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library* (Boston MA), especially 1868 – 1898, for discourses on the design of the building. Changes effected by Winsor, and his ideas are discussed in the years 1868 to 1877.

[18] *Thirty-eighth Annual Report*, 6..

[19] Cited in Whitehill, 162.

[20] Discussed in Jordy, Op. cit.

[21] See *The Library Journal*, 10 (October 1890) 297-302. Jordy discusses the debate.

[22] Wadlin, *The Public Library of the City of Boston: A History* (Boston MA) 1911: 69 – 107. Moore, *The Life and Times of Charles Follen McKim* (Boston and New York) 1929.

[23] For the competition brief, see *Preliminary Description of the Building for the Public Library of the City of Boston in the Competition for Designs 1883* (Boston) 1883. The discussion of the competition drawings and of Clough's schemes is based on a survey of the collections at the Fine Arts Department, Boston Public Library, conducted for my forthcoming dissertation.

[24] Apart from architectural publications such as the *American Architect and Building News*, various iterations of the plans were published in the Annual Reports, 1889, 1897 and 1898. These are the sources for the illustrations of McKim's schemes.

[25] See Whitehill, 155.