investigated by Klengel, who was an exemplar of that oddly cosmopolitan, culturally curious, artist-cum-civil servant figure that has a long pedigree in the history of German architecture.

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Renzo Dubbini, editor

Henri Labrouste 1801–1875


In Italian, with essays by Barry Bergdoll, Henri Bresler, Renzo Dubbini, Marco Gaiani, Roberto Gargani, Françoise Hamon, Neil Levine, Robin Middleton, Pierre Pinon, Marc Saboya, Werner Szambien, Simona Talenti, David van Zanten, and Stanislaus von Moos

This excellent book will be of considerable interest to architectural historians. Each of the fifteen essays included presents new information or insights on Henri Labrouste. As Renzo Dubbini explains in his introduction, most of the texts were developed from papers given at a conference held in Venice in 1996; others were written later, to complement those from the conference. While each is amply referenced, the publication also includes a biographical essay by Françoise Hamon, a bibliography, and a list of pertinent archives and collections.

The only monographic study of Labrouste hitherto available was a small—if thorough and precise—exhibition catalogue by Pierre Saddy, Henri Labrouste architecte 1801–1875 (Paris, 1977). While Saddy’s work will remain important for students of Labrouste, the more in-depth studies presented in Dubbini’s volume are better documented, drawing from institutional and administrative archives. For Dubbini, the objective was to bring Labrouste more clearly into focus, to peel back the persistent “myths” that have prevented clear perception of the full complexity and richness of his oeuvre.

In his essay Dubbini shows how this “mythologizing” began during Labrouste’s own lifetime. Critical perception of the architect’s work tended to be dominated by his early use of exposed metal in monumental public architecture, specifically in his two Parisian masterpieces, the Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève (1818–50) and the Bibliothèque Nationale (1854–75). This emphasis on structure eclipsed the complexity of Labrouste’s relation to classicism and to architecture’s representation of itself through signifying forms. As Dubbini further explains, from the writings of Louis-Auguste Boileau to those of Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc and of Labrouste’s son, Léon, the reductive categorization of Labrouste as a “structural rationalist” was well in place before a partisan modernist historiography developed his image as an “anti-academic” “precursor” of twentieth-century functionalism. Sigfried Giedion, influenced by Le Corbusier, presented Labrouste’s place in architectural history in terms of “revolution,” notably in his Bauen in Frankreich, Bauen in Eisen, Bauen in Eisenbeton (Leipzig, 1928); for Dubbini, it would have been far more appropriate to speak in terms of “transition.” Giedion’s admirer Walter Benjamin was among those who spread the influence of this reading of nineteenth-century French architectural history (Das Passagen-Werk [written between 1927 and 1940, published in Frankfurt, 1982]), along with other modernist historians such as Emil Kaufmann (Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier [Vienna and Leipzig, 1934]). “In the Modernist battle, Labrouste was used as a banner, becoming a myth . . . loaded with ideological meanings, so that even his extraordinary architectural talent ran the risk of remaining obscured” (15).

Most of the essays presented in this volume are in keeping with the ambitions outlined in Dubbini’s opening text. With additional historical distance as well as access to new documentary evidence, the authors correct and flesh out our perceptions of Labrouste, his architecture, and his place in history. Thus the “mythologizing” of Labrouste in modernist historiography is analyzed in greater detail by Stanislaus von Moos in his “Giedion, Labrouste e la modernità.”
It is an important contribution, shedding light on the constitution of the historiographical lens through which Labrouste was perceived during much of the twentieth century.

In “La formazione presso l’atelier de Vaudoyer e Lebas,” Barry Bergdoll discusses the architect’s training at the École des Beaux-Arts and presents the issues and controversies that preoccupied architecture students and their professors during the Restoration. Particularly striking is the intensity with which these men studied historical architectural types with a view toward developing valid models for contemporary purposes. The exploration of the basilical form and its evolution from pagan to Christian uses was of special importance. As Bergdoll points out, the urbanization of new parts of Paris at this time presaged the need for the construction of several new parish churches, and for which Notre-Dame de Lorette (1823–36), realized by Labrouste’s teacher Hippolyte Lebas, could serve as a sort of prototype. The competition and development of this church thus became the object of intense critical and theoretical scrutiny. Labrouste, as a pensionnaire of the Villa Medici in Rome, sent Lebas measured drawings of the Corinthian capitals of the temple of Antoninus and Faustina to be used on the portico of Notre-Dame de Lorette. Such adaptation of ancient forms for contemporary applications was deeply anchored in the needs and practices of the era, and, when seen in this light, previous readings of Labrouste’s student years in terms of “revolt” and “antiacademicism” seem distorted.

Pierre Pinon, in “Il valore della ricerca archeologica,” lays to rest the persistent myth of Labrouste’s antiacademic revolt during his student years. He shows that Labrouste’s study of architectural remains that were not part of the classical canon of the time (Etruscan vestiges at Volterra and elsewhere, for example) was entirely in keeping with the tradition of architectural travels in Italy from the eighteenth century onward. He also provides a fully documented analysis of the famous episode that opposed Horace Vernet, the “romantic” director of the French Academy in Rome, and Quatemère de Quincy, the “classical” secrétaire perpetuel of the Académie d’Architecture in Paris, supposedly over Labrouste’s proposed restoration of the Greek temples at Paestum, which he sent to Paris as his fourth-year envoy. Labrouste’s criticism of the work of his predecessor, Claude-Mathieu Delagardette, on the Temple of Neptune apparently caused some consternation. But Pinon shows that the conflict between Vernet and Quatemère de Quincy had more to do with administrative power and turf than with any provocation caused by Labrouste’s archaeology or the “romantic” polyphony of his restorations.

Along with the demythologizing of Labrouste, the presentation and analysis of his lesser-known works make another important contribution. Together, Simona Talenti’s rich study of Labrouste’s villas and biotek particuliers, Werner Szambien’s discussion of his funerary and commemorative monuments, and Dubbini’s detailed presentation of three utilitarian public projects permit a deeper grasp of Labrouste’s architectural thinking and mode of operation. In particular, Labrouste’s projects for a psychiatric hospital in Lausanne (1836–37) and for a central prison in Alessandria, in Piedmont (1839), demonstrate the architect’s in-depth research into the evolution of programs of such building types within a broad context of social reform and modernization. His familiarity with the theories of Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol and with contemporary prison architecture in the United States did not contradict his classical training. A cutaway perspective of the Alessandria prison (110) suggests that his earlier observations of the Colosseum and the Theater of Marcellus (third-year envoy from Rome, 1827) had an impact on his proposal of combined annular and radial vaulting for this structure.

Based on a wide range of archival and other documentary sources, Roberto Gargiani gives a detailed analysis of the construction and architectural expression of the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève in “Ornamento e costruzione in Sainte-Geneviève.” Labrouste’s tremendous sensitivity to the correct use of materials in relation to structure is interpreted by Gargiani in terms of the classical tradition, in particular as affected by the studies of Galileo Galilei and Carlo Lodoli. Gargiani draws attention to Labrouste’s treatment of constructive detail and to its architectural representation, from the different types of stone used for various parts of the façade, to the sober presentation of the real arrangement of the blocks (contrasting with Félix Duban’s masking rustication at the contemporary Palais des Études of the École des Beaux-Arts), and the expression of the anchoring of internal metal structures. Particularly striking is Labrouste’s handling of the ornamental metalwork in the curved iron trusses of the reading room: the plates masking the bolts that fasten the parts of the truss are ornamented with carvings of winding bits of cord, signifying the attaching function.

In “La struttura in ferro della Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève come base di un decoro civico,” Robin Middleton further examines Labrouste’s ornamental metalwork in the library, relating it to the architect’s designs for urban decors and public ceremonies and festivities, most notably the lamps he created for the Pont de la Concorde (1837–38) and the setting for the ceremonial return to Paris of Napoleon’s ashes in 1840. He analyzes them in the context of the industrialization of architectural ornament in France during this period and its impact on changing modes of architectural expression. In addition to the biographical essay included at the end of the volume, Françoise Hamon has contributed a penetrating reassessment of the personal and professional relations between Labrouste and Duban, bringing more clearly into focus the institutional and human dimensions of Prix de Rome architects’ careers in nineteenth-century France.

Another group of essays pursue a
different approach than Dubbini’s, particularly in response to the legacy of modernist historiography. For example, Neil Levine’s “Il rovesciamento del sistema della rappresentazione nelle biblioteche di Labrouste” presents a subtle, sensitive, and penetrating analysis of the system of architectural representation in Labrouste’s two libraries. Unlike Dubbini, he acknowledges an important debt to Giedion. To complete or complement the earlier historian’s approach, Levine aims to shed light on “the urgency of establishing a historical tradition for modern architecture [Giedion had] decided to ignore”: the classical aspects of a system of representation that is nonetheless modern (167). Marc Saboya analyzes Labrouste’s collaboration with César Daly’s Revue Générale de l’Architecture and its adaptation of architectural image, rhetoric, and representation to the medium of the press in “Ala conquista di un immagine.” Understandably, he is also concerned with the modernity of this aspect of Labrouste’s work.

In a thought-provoking piece, “La Salle des Imprimés alla Bibliothèque Nationale. Finzione e interpretazione,” David van Zanten describes the evolution of his own thinking about Labrouste over a twenty-five-year period: his earlier perceptions, marked by the context of American architecture in the 1970s and the “magic realism” of Michael Graves, have been nuanced by new documentary evidence. Thus when analyzing the “Pompeian garden” effect of the reading room, with its multiplicity of thin metal columns, nine enamel “vela” cupolas and painted treetops, he argues that it should also be understood as arising from an abandoned earlier project that had only a single cupola, which would have been less effective in distributing reflected light.

Marco Gaiani’s well-documented and knowledgeable account of Labrouste’s travels in Italy stands in most vivid contrast with the project outlined by Dubbini in his introductory text. After von Moos’s clear explanation of the partisan and reductive way in which modernist historians linked Labrouste with Le Corbusier, it is a bit disconcerting to find Gaiani comparing the two architects’ drawings. Moreover, his juxtaposition of certain of Labrouste’s architectural renderings of ancient vestiges with Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot’s vedute of the same sites shows that both men visited the same places, but stops short of a historical argument. Finally, his comparison of the architect’s 1829 view of Palermo with paintings by Giorgio de Chirico (74) seems anachronistic and ahistorical. Yet, the comparisons are useful, for they compel us to stop and take a closer look at the drawings. Ultimately, Gaiani’s approach reminds us that architectural history also has an essential aesthetic dimension.

Many publishers seem hesitant to publish books that grow out of conferences, fearing that the multiplicity of authors will result in a lack of coherence and unity. But such publications can provide an invaluable cross section of approaches, raising issues that are essential to our discipline. Such is the case here, and Labrouste is a perfect vehicle for the debate. My only real complaint is a practical one. While the reader cannot fault the quality, pertinence, and, often, beauty of the illustrations—particularly the photographs by J. C. Doerr—they are not numbered. The reader is thus obliged to flip back and forth to find a given plate under discussion.

Despite this irritating flaw, the book is important, both for what it teaches us about Labrouste and for the issues raised by the contrasting historical approaches of its authors. The editor is to be credited for allowing such diversity and including essays that at times directly contradict his own positions. As a group, the texts seem to warn against the pretension of claiming to identify the “real” Labrouste, as opposed to the “mythological” one established by modernist historiography. They also remind us that each generation will inevitably bring its own sensibilities and preoccupations to the historical material examined, even as new documentary evidence is made available. In the end, what is likely to make this volume another turning point in the Labrouste historiography is precisely its inclusive approach, which permits scholars to develop readings and interpretations more freely, no longer marked by the need to refute a “myth.”

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Thomas S. Hines
Irving Gill and the Architecture of Reform

In a 1916 essay that was probably his most important written statement, Irving Gill railed against contemporary historicism and argued for a return to origins: “the straight line, the arch, the cube and the circle.” His ideal was not the primitive hut but an equally convincing trope that he called “the stone in the meadow.” This phrase implied a method by which the rational was to be brought into an intimate relationship with the organic: “We should build our house simple, plain and substantial as a boulder, then leave the ornamentation of it to Nature” (11).

Thomas S. Hines begins his monograph on Gill with a discussion of this essay, which is appropriate, but it also serves to emphasize the problem facing anyone studying Gill’s work: the dearth of written evidence. In 1928, when he closed his Los Angeles office, Gill reportedly put ten truckloads of documents in storage; they have never been found. The Gill archive is thus, “sadly fragmentary,” requiring Hines to combine “the methods of the architectural historian with the sensibilities of the archaeologist—attempting to divine meaning from the shards of Gill’s experience” (15, 18). The result, as Hines admits, is a highly speculative biography full of “must haves” and “might haves.” It is not, as he warns us, the catalogue raisonné the architect deserves.

Much appreciated in his own day, Gill’s work was frequently praised by journalist Eloise Roorbach—Gill’s