Abstracts

Expose Ignorance and Revive the Bon Goût: Foreign Architects at Jacques-François Blondel's École des Arts

This article focuses on four foreign architects who attended Blondel's school during the 1740s and 1750s: the Dutch architect Pieter de Swart, Sir William Chambers, and German architects Simon Louis du Ry and Karl Philipp Christian von Gontard. Through analysis of relatively unknown documentary evidence, the author reconstructs the actual content of Blondel's teachings. These sources underline Blondel's importance as a proponent of the study of architecture at all levels of society, a principal teacher of both theory and design, a master of spatial organization, a critic of contemporary architectural taste (Rococo and early neoclassicism), and an enthusiastic advocate of the interests of the architect as a professional in control of the entire building process. On the whole, Blondel's views were heartily embraced by his foreign students. These facts suggest that, from an international perspective, Blondel should be regarded as a major propagator of the renewal and revival of the language of classicism and not merely as a traditionalist or as the last great theoretician of the Renaissance. Designs completed by his foreign students in their subsequent careers illustrate Blondel's efficacy in changing attitudes to classical architecture and theory, particularly outside France. After their schooling at Blondel's École des Arts, Chambers, de Swart, du Ry, and Gontard all rose to important positions in their homelands and, thanks to their acquired skills, used their education to redirect the practice of architecture. Moreover, their approaches to architectural education, theory, design, history, and contemporary taste clearly distinguished them as disciples of Blondel. To a large extent, they personified Blondel's new professionalism and were responsible for spreading his doctrine and renewed classicism throughout Europe during the second half of the eighteenth century and, at least in part, for carrying it well into the nineteenth century.

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Accidental Affinities: American Beaux-Arts in Twentieth-century Chinese Architectural Education and Practice

This essay looks at the adoption of American Beaux-Arts in China. China's first architecture school was established in the 1920s in Nanjing. The Nanjing School enjoyed a prosperous time in the 1940s when a group of young architects joined the faculty. Most of them had been trained in the 1920s at the University of Pennsylvania under Paul Philippe Cret. The most prominent among them was Yang Tingbao, a star pupil of Cret's. Yang became one of the most influential architects and educators in twentieth-century China, and he remained the spiritual leader of the Nanjing School until his death in 1982. The early history of Chinese architectural education and of Yang's practice shows accidental affinities that have marked the encounters between two cultural frames. Based on a selected ‘thick description’ of Yang's teaching and architectural works between the 1920s and 1980s, this article suggests that the Beaux-Arts method, from its early contacts to its later transformations, has corresponded to Chinese artisan traditions in a series of interesting areas. They include the process of cultivating in producing and appreciating a craft, axial planning and space perception, and close collaboration between architects and builders. Instead of underlining cultural difference, I attempt to shed some light on the entangled nuances between the universal Beaux-Arts method and the traditions of one of its adopted localities, China.

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The Comfortable Tasty Framed Cottage: An African American Architectural Iconography

African American architectural history is not a secondhand version of the European American white experience; evidence of African American architectural agency can be discovered by tracing the evolution of the iconography of the ‘comfortable, tasty, framed cottage.’ Arising out of aspirations of assimilation before and after emancipation, the image of an idealized African American middle-class house was understood not only as a healthful and convenient shelter, but as the measure of racial progress and as a strategy for gaining acceptance into the dominant white culture. Three institutions within the African American community promoted this iconography: industrial education, the women’s reform movement, and the print media. While abysmal living conditions existed for most African Americans, a small
number created houses that were informed by the iconography of the ideal black home. Indeed, so powerful was this architectural message of assimilation that black possession of a middle-class home often provoked white violence. While the origins, development, and promulgation of the idealized image can be outlined with some assurance, judging its ultimate value is more uncertain, and some have denounced the African American iconography of domestic architecture as a false and destructive adaptation of white hegemonic cultural values.

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The Villa Savoye and the Modernist Historic Monument

This article argues that the debate over the fate of Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye (1928–1931) in Poissy, France—which was in derelict condition by the 1950s—occasioned an international reconsideration of the architect’s work as well as a reconsideration of the French architectural patrimony. The author argues that, while the house has been discussed since the time of its completion in largely formal terms, more recent scholarship has opened up the debate on the material circumstances of its construction and the ideological implications of its design. As part of this new perspective, it is important to understand the house not simply as a universally applicable design solution by its architect, but as an object that was altered and restored in response to changing perceptions of Le Corbusier and his work.

The process by which the Villa Savoye was preserved, restored, and established as an official historic monument of the French state, between c. 1958 and 1967, brought about a reconceptualization of modernist architecture and of the historic monument in France. Modernist architecture, including the Villa Savoye, was incorporated during the postwar period into a celebratory cultural history of France.

Among government administrators who participated in this process was André Malraux, who in the postwar period attempted to reconstruct France’s international prestige on the basis of its cultural production. Prodded into action on behalf of the Villa Savoye by architects, critics, and scholars around the world, as well as by an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Malraux finally acknowledged that the work of Le Corbusier could be admitted into the corpus of monuments on which French identity was to be built.

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