William L. MacDonald (1921–2010)

Although we remember him primarily for his contributions to our understanding of Roman architecture and urbanism, William L. MacDonald, who died on 6 March 2010, described his main interest broadly as the history of architecture with an emphasis on classical architecture, its variations, and its influence on Western culture. The breadth of classicism from Greece to Gehry, seen through the eyes of antiquity, occupied his creative and inquisitive mind to the end, when he had been working on a reflective volume on Vitruvius’s “eleventh book” and another on climbing famous buildings inside and out. He contributed numerous essays and articles to journals and anthologies, but Bill MacDonald was mainly a writer of books that mattered and changed the way we looked at architecture. The three short chapters of his first book, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (1962), are harbingers of his keen interest in the spatial and volumetric aspects of architecture and his ability to express it in original and penetratingly precise language, as when describing the interior of S. Vitale in Ravenna: “The restlessness of the turning polymorphic aisle and gallery spaces contrasts with the calm of the middle space, reaching above the surrounding forms to the brighter light of its clerestory” (32).

Three years later, *The Architecture of the Roman Empire: An Introductory Study (ARE I)* came out, bursting with ideas about the kinetic and dramatic nature of Roman architecture in its structural, spatial, and symbolic manifestations. (A revised edition appeared in 1982.) Few works on Roman architecture since then have been devoid of some inspiration from and debt to his seminal vision. Reflecting Bill’s sense of independence, the *Introductory Study* is not a chronological survey of the subject, but a compendium of selected themes and episodes that explicate the nature of Roman architecture—especially the so-called architectural revolution that was characterized by the expert and dramatic use of the arches, vaults, and domes that were made possible by the use of *opus caementicium*. The new horizons that opened to Roman architecture because of the competent exploitation of materials and techniques and the spectacular and expressive use of complex, curvilinear forms and seamless spaces, dramatized in Nero’s Golden House, were not discovered by Bill. In this insight he was indebted to John B. Ward-Perkins, his senior colleague at the British School in Rome. In turn, both MacDonald and Ward-Perkins were indebted to a number of earlier scholars, including Giacomo Boni, Giovanni Rivoira, and Giuseppe Cozzo. Their articles, published in varied and sometimes obscure Italian sources, had noted the originality of Roman engineering and vaulted construction. However, many of these wide-ranging and at times political and polemical theses were brought to maturation and clarified by Bill’s creative and expansive vision.
The result was as revolutionary as Nero’s vaulted rooms in the Golden House, where “high and narrow, all were dominated by the curves of vaults . . . as parallel supports rose to become turning, concave surfaces above, the standing human form and the space within its reach were implied in heroic outline. It is this outline that was the essence of Roman architectural revolution.” (44).

In 1976 MacDonald’s interest in the structural prowess and symbolic depth of Roman architecture found its culmination in a small monograph on the Pantheon in Rome (The Pantheon: Design, Meaning, and Progeny). Written with the easy assurance and authority that come only with a long-term mastery of a subject, this compact but broadly conceived treatise pursued the elusive meaning of this “most celebrated edifice” through the restless spirit of Hadrian, its builder; the universal geometry of its form; and its “unified, perfected, seamless, comprehensive whole . . . sanctioned and watched over by gods” (p. 92). The book remains the most satisfying single work on this architectural icon. While forging a synthetic and limitless view of classical architecture, much as his Yale colleague Vincent Scully was doing for modern architecture (neither scholar set much store in the restrictive kind of field archaeology), Bill collaborated with Richard Stillwell and Marian McAllister as principal editors for The Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites (1976), a magisterial contribution to scholarship and the product of long and diligent industry.

Throughout all his work, MacDonald conveyed an irrepresible delight in experiencing architecture. A keen observer, he joyfully walked the streets of Roman cities throughout Europe, North Africa, and the Near East, reveling in the texture of polished marbles, the play of light and shade on fluted columns, or a beckoning monumental arch in the distance that was at once a visual terminus and the frame for yet another arch beyond. His perceptive eye is evident in the evocative original photographs he took and in the informative and engaging axonometric drawings he commissioned. In 1986 he published a second volume on imperial architecture, integrating his broad academic and experiential knowledge. Provocative and inspiring, The Architecture of the Roman Empire II: An Urban Appraisal (ARE II) received the Alice Davis Hitchcock Award from the Society of Architectural Historians and the Kevin Lynch Award from MIT. In this beautifully written work Bill explored how and why the Romans forged a coherent urban experience across the empire and over time, emphasizing the liveliness and homogeneity of Roman imperial architecture. Such a broad geo-temporal approach contrasted with prior studies organized by reign, style, or typology. MacDonald believed “to assess style and content (understandable in light of the need to make sense of so much diverse material), would be counterproductive: the nature of an evolving process is not revealed by stopping it” (249). He moved beyond the abstraction of city plans to consider space-making and especially urban armatures, the connective tissue composed of streets, plazas, and key public buildings whose potency, development, and impact occurred cumulatively through sequential and evolving interrelationships.

Seeking answers for what he saw on the ground, MacDonald boldly interrogated post-ancient examples, expertly analyzing design solutions in the Baroque and other periods. He drew especially on contemporary developments in architecture and urban planning to help enrich and clarify his arguments. Bill had lively conversations with practitioners throughout his life, perhaps initially sparked by those with Robert Venturi when both were Fellows at the American Academy in Rome in 1956. He specifically credited the work of Sitte, Jacobs, Lynch, Venturi, Whyte, Gould and White, and other modern thinkers and critics with helping to “ventilate” classical art and architecture (Journal of Architectural Education 41, no. 3 [Spring 1988], 29).

Vincent Scully’s introductory comments to Venturi’s Complexity and Contradiction (1966) apply equally to The Architecture of the Roman Empire II: An Urban Appraisal: “It is a
very American book, rigorously pluralistic and phenomenological in its methods” (9). MacDonald, too, sought to analyze the enduring human design elements evident within built environments, such as “the universal urban need for an architecture of connection and passage” (ARE II, 30). Exploring the persistency of classicism up to the present, he dissected the “essence . . . that assures its ready visual identification” (ARE II, 143). Such quests resonated with contemporary practitioners. For Bill, interaction with designers was natural and necessary (not the result of artificial calls for interdisciplinarity); they were also bi-directional. He specifically addressed architects through illustrations that emphasized design rather than archaeological concerns, and through engaging writing peppered with architectural terminology and insightful references to modern architects. In a 1988 article for the Journal of Architectural Education, Bill spoke persuasively to designers: “[Roman cities] have much to teach us. They abound in distinctive urban neighborhoods. Public buildings are dispersed in them in instructive ways. They are all related to each other by an apposite imagery and other effective cognitive systems and are easily navigable because of an irregular but telling deployment of highly visible experiential markers” (29). No wonder his publications are the most cited works on antiquity in architecture schools, or that design studios today continue to use terms and concepts—such as urban armature—that MacDonald popularized for the field.

The intersection of MacDonald’s interests in Roman imperial architecture and its reception by later architects naturally led him to Hadrian’s Villa, near Tivoli. MacDonald’s last major book (co-authored with John Pinto), Hadrian’s Villa and Its Legacy (1995), interprets the Villa Adriana both as a major monument of Greco-Roman culture and an abiding artistic force in later times. The villa emerges as “a paradigm of classicism’s role in Western art, and its extended history is an unusually full record of the cross-currents and projections visionary creations generate” (3). These projections are manifest in the work of major twentieth-century architects, including Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Louis Kahn. For Hadrian’s Villa and Its Legacy MacDonald received his second Alice Davis Hitchcock Award, as well as the American Institute of Architects Book of the Year Award.

MacDonald memorably observed that “in the study of architecture there can be no substitute for leaning against one’s buildings” (ARE I, xi). As both a teacher and a scholar, he was always acutely sensitive to the physical, three-dimensional qualities of buildings: their tactile surfaces, the effects of illumination, the metrics of spaces arranged in combination. MacDonald’s 1980 JSAH article (with B. M. Boyle) on the Small Baths at the Villa reveals the exacting attention he paid to the building’s fabric. The research preparatory to writing Hadrian’s Villa and Its Legacy involved intensive on-site study and a systematic campaign of photography in order to provide a fresh interpretation of the imposing complex.

Bill MacDonald took the broadest possible view of the history of architecture. He was as interested in vernacular architecture as he was in canonical monuments, and he delighted in photographing buildings wherever he traveled. The most enduring example of his engagement with the architecture of small-town America is his 1975 book on Northampton, Massachusetts. MacDonald’s own black-and-white photographs illustrate the book and reveal his sensitivity to materials and texture, and also to setting and landscape. As an architectural photographer he amassed a formidable slide collection, which is being digitized by Princeton University and will be made available through SAHARA. From Bill’s first days in Rome, Italian architecture of the 1920s and 30s caught his attention. This interest found expression in his 1982 essay “Excavation, Restoration, and Italian architecture of the 1930s,” which explored the multiple links connecting archaeology, politics, and design during the Fascist regime. In 1979 he published an incisive study entitled Piranesi’s Carceri: Sources of Invention, which probed the artist’s achievement in giving “new life to slumbering but inextricable continuities subsumed in the name of Rome.” (29)

A raconteur par excellence, MacDonald was a born teacher. He began his academic career at the Boston Architectural Center and Wheaton College, followed by longer stints at Yale and Smith College, where he was the Alice Pratt Brown Professor of the History of Art. Taking early retirement in 1980, Bill enjoyed holding numerous distinguished visiting positions—from Harvard to Berkeley—moving with ease among departments of architecture, art history, classics, and history. Generous with his ideas and time, he established a network of grateful students and scholars whom he mentored throughout his life.

An international conference on Roman Architecture celebrating Professor MacDonald’s contributions to the field will be held at the American Academy in Rome in early December 2011.

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