MAKERS OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE

VOLUME II: FROM LE CORBUSIER TO REM KOOLHAAS

A NEW YORK REVIEW COLLECTION

MARTIN FILLER
Unveiling of the model for Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret’s Palace of the Soviets of 1931–1932, their unexecuted project for the national parliament of the USSR in Moscow. Two collaborators lift the drape at left; Le Corbusier stands at right with a double bass. (Illustration Credit Front endpapers)
Tod Williams and Billie Tsien at work in their studio, New York City, 1996, photograph by Michael Moran (Illustration Credit Frontispiece)
Makers of Modern Architecture
Volume II

Martin Filler

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS

New York
For
Robert Silvers
Editor, hero, and friend
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Almost all the contents of this book originally appeared, in somewhat different forms, in The New York Review of Books between 2008 and 2013 and were edited by Robert Silvers, with the help of the Review’s remarkable editorial staff, whom I have consistently found to be unparalleled in their intelligence, diligence, and commitment—without question the finest group of professionals I have worked with during my four-decade publishing career. The one exception to my Review pieces is the chapter on Carlo Scarpa, which was first published in 1999 in The New Republic and was edited there by its longtime literary editor, Leon Wieseltier, who has my sincere appreciation.

For a wide variety of assistance, from helping me to gain access to buildings to generously sharing their ideas and research with me, I wish to thank John Anderson, Grant Bannatyne, Tim Benton, Barry Bergdoll, Francesca Bianchi, Sissel Breie, Ingrid Moe, and Aslaug Nygård of the Royal Norwegian Consulate General in New York; Larry Busbea, Jean-Louis Cohen, Joshua David, Gabrielle Esperdy, Octavia Giovannini-Torelli, Christopher Gray, Robert Hammond, Robert A. Heintges, Donald Hoffmann, Margot Jacqz, Bill N. Lacy, Rose-Carol Washton Long, Caroline Maniaque-Benton, Mary McLeod, Marco De Michelis, Stanislas von Moos, Guy Nordenson, Süha Özkan, Peter Palumbo, Styliane Philippou, Leland M. Roth, Suzanne Stephens, Marco Venturi, Leslie Waddington, Elizabeth White, and Samuel G. White.

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I am tremendously grateful for the support of Angela Hederman of New York Review Books, who encouraged this second volume of my collected writings on architecture. She and her husband, Rea Hederman, the publisher of The New York Review, rank among the most admirable contemporary guardians of literary culture. The Hederman family’s scrupulous and high-minded stewardship of the Review since they acquired it in 1984 has been a decisive factor in guiding the paper so successfully and uncompromisingly through a phase of profound difficulty and change for print publications.
To my great pleasure, New York Review Books was able to reassemble the same creative team that produced the first volume of *Makers of Modern Architecture* in 2007. Once again, Michael Shae, the editor of New York Review Collections, not only supervised this book but was also instrumental, in his parallel role as a senior editor at the *Review*, in preparing all but one of these essays for publication in their initial form. Michael has proven to be an ideal arbiter and collaborator, displaying the same consummate skill, equanimity, tact, and attentiveness that I experienced working with him the first time around.

Louise Fili has created a superb pendant to her elegant dust-jacket design for volume one of *Makers*, and Bordon Elniff’s internal typographic scheme again impresses me as classic. Alaina Taylor has reprised her job as a responsive and resourceful photo researcher, equal to any I have worked with at major commercial publications. Duane Michals, an esteemed artist whose portraits of me and my family have marked the most important occasions in our lives over the past thirty-five years, has once again honored me by taking my author’s photograph, an act of friendship, generosity, and continuity that touches me immensely.

Several of the chapters in this book have been augmented by material that originally appeared in the *NYRblog*, an online publication that began in 2009 and is edited by Hugh Eakin, a senior editor of the *Review*. With the same high standards of intellectual rigor that inform the paper’s print edition, Hugh has made the blog an incisive and timely vehicle for topical commentary and thus has significantly extended the paper’s reach to a new generation of followers. Matthew Howard, the *Review*’s director of electronic publishing, has been of enormous help in bringing my writing to that wider audience.

It is perhaps not customary for writers to thank the doctors who attend them, but in this case I consider it obligatory to mention the two men who have quite directly enabled me to complete this book. During the winter of 2009–2010, when in close succession I suffered a pulmonary embolism and a ruptured heart valve, my life was saved because of the combined efforts of my primary-care physician, the gifted and compassionate cardiologist Timothy C. Dutta, M.D., and the great cardiothoracic surgeon Leonard N. Girardi, M.D., of New York Presbyterian Weill-Cornell Medical Center in Manhattan. Together they restored me to health, my family, and my work, and have made me aware on a daily basis of John Ruskin’s irrefutable admonition that “there is no wealth but life.”

By my side not only throughout that ordeal but at every step along the way during the past thirty-five years has been my wife, mainstay, and inspiration, Rosemarie Haag Bletter, the love of my life. By far the soundest judge of architecture I have ever met, as well as a distinguished scholar and historian of the Modern Movement with few equals, Rosemarie has been the single most important influence on my thinking since we first met at Columbia nearly forty-five years ago. I flatter myself to think that what I have learned from her, and continue to learn from her every single day, is evident here,
most obviously in my chapters on the Bauhaus and on Ernst May and Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, which are among her areas of particular expertise. Because I was eager to have “Grete Lihotzky: Der Kompagnon von May & Co.”—a 1920s satirical poem written most likely by the architect’s husband, Wilhelm Schütte (see this page–this page)—available in English, I am especially thankful to Rosemarie, my first and most valued reader, for her translation from the German of this delightful and evocative verse.

This book is dedicated to Robert Silvers, who first asked me to write for The New York Review in 1985 and thereby not only opened the most important chapter of my career but also, I believe, thoroughly transformed the quality of my work. As has long been noted by the many writers who have benefited from his encyclopedic knowledge in multiple disciplines, Bob’s mastery of technique and diction, his impeccable taste, his keen insights into the psychology of creative motivation, his social acuity, and his unfailingly sound judgment make him the foremost literary editor of our time. His half-century of heroic public service at the Review has established and maintained it as the international paragon of what an intellectually, politically, socially, culturally, and morally engaged paper can be.

When I first came to New York as a Columbia freshman, in September 1966, the issue of The New York Review then on the news-stands included, among other offerings, a new poem by W. H. Auden, a review of Bernard Malamud’s The Fixer by V. S. Pritchett, and a civil-rights manifesto by Stokely Carmichael titled “What We Want.” This was an intoxicating mix for a teenager with one eye on the Columbia College Contemporary Civilization syllabus and another on current events. I soon noticed that the brightest of my classmates invariably had in their rooms this intriguing-looking paper, its front page emblazoned with chunky serif type (Clarendon Bold, I later discovered) like some hip Wild West wanted poster, a robust font so different from the anemic sans serif Helvetica then in vogue. Very shortly I became a devoted reader of the Review myself, thrilled by its early and courageously outspoken stance against the war in Vietnam, its wickedly incisive David Levine cartoons—Daumier on the hoof—and its essays by Morningside Heights neighbors, including Hannah Arendt, F.W. Dupee, and Susan Sontag, who were objects of intense fascination among my small circle of friends. Above all, the Review gave a biweekly demonstration of how clear, superlative writing and spirited, persuasive argument could shape the thinking of one’s contemporaries and set the agenda for our more serious discussions, even amid the social unrest, political upheaval, and countercultural distractions that swirled around us.

What I never could have imagined at the time was that within two decades I would find my own work welcomed in the Review’s pages, and still less that upon this, the paper’s golden anniversary, I would have been a contributor for more than half of its existence. This long run I owe entirely to Bob. I feel that he has consistently brought out the best in me, and though he might demur that this is no more than any good editor’s job, the awe-inspiring evidence
provided by the 1,049 issues he has presided over during the Review’s first half-century—which by any measure comprises the most formidable concentration of literary talent in our time—makes his achievement all the more prodigious and historic. Having worked for several of the supposedly legendary figures in modern American publishing, I can attest that Bob is the only one among them who deserves that much-overused designation. As an architecture critic, I have been particularly heartened by his conviction that my subject is worthy to be included in the Review among the other matters of high public concern that the paper regularly addresses.

The fifty-year voyage of Robert Silvers at the helm of The New York Review of Books has been the embodiment of a ceaseless personal quest—the upholding of excellence, the pursuit of justice, and the enlightenment of minds. To be a fellow sailor on this great journey has been the glory of my professional life, and I salute Bob with the same optimistic and ever-encouraging words he customarily uses to sign off on the editing process with his grateful writers: “And on we go!”

Martin Filler
Southampton, New York
February 1, 2013
Introduction

Like the first volume of *Makers of Modern Architecture* (2007), this sequel is not intended to be a thoroughgoing history of the building art since the beginnings of the Modern Movement, but rather a series of interpretive studies of some leading architectural personalities from around the turn of the last century to the present day. Three figures addressed in the first volume are revisited in these pages: Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier, whose personal histories I here discuss in greater detail than in my earlier, more general overviews. Those two masters share an unchallenged position atop the critical hierarchy, and their status seems even more justified with the passage of time and the support of seemingly inexhaustible new scholarship. Conversely, among present-day architects Renzo Piano continues to be a prolific yet puzzling designer whose uneven but sporadically superlative output illuminates the crucial role that sympathetic patronage plays in the outcome of a commission, a factor that affects all architects though seldom as clearly as in his case.

The pieces on which the following chapters are based were all initially suggested by some topical occasion, including anniversaries, awards, newly completed buildings, exhibitions, publications, deaths, or some combination thereof. These events in turn prompted a variety of responses from me: reconsideration of widely renowned architects whom I thought merited more accurate historical judgment (Stanford White, the Bauhaus group), reassessment of once-celebrated figures subsequently much less well regarded (Edward Durell Stone, James Stirling), reestimation of canonical reputations rarely called into question (R. Buckminster Fuller, Eero Saarinen), recognition of unjustly neglected masters (Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, Carlo Scarpa), and evaluation of present-day practitioners with enough completed work to establish their relative standing (Rem Koolhaas, Bernard Tschumi).

If there is one recurrent theme that unites all these essays it is the central role that character and personality play in the creation of architecture, not altogether surprising given that this is the most public of art forms and thus inevitably indicative of the social values of its sponsors. The ways in which designers conceive, rationalize, develop, explain, execute, and promote their works are as varied as the commissions they receive, but their goal is always the same: to persuade others to have faith in their sometimes improbable visions and their ability to bring them to fruition. Even for the greatest master
builders, the pursuit of their art is a never-ending series of confrontations and challenges, accommodations and compromises, imposed by the needs (or desires) of clients, financial limitations, legal requirements, and countless other factors that constrain architects to a greater extent than their counterparts in other artistic mediums. Added to those impediments, the larger, inexorable forces of politics and economics always have an enormous effect on the profession, whether or not its exponents are politically engaged (although designers who work in the public sphere should always expect that their efforts will have direct social implications and, on occasion, unpleasant repercussions).

The greatest architectural disjunction of the twentieth century was caused by the rise of Hitler, a failed painter and architectural aspirant whose hatred of Modernism in all mediums brought an abrupt end to Germany's primacy as an incubator for artistic innovation. Hitler's maniacal anti-Semitism of course most immediately affected the numerous Jewish designers and clients who were in the forefront of the new architecture. But the repressive culture of Nazism affected non-Jews as well. Among the foremost exponents of the new architecture and urbanism whose careers were destroyed, derailed, displaced, or at the very least long delayed by the Dozen-Year Reich were two gentiles: Ernst May, impresario of Frankfurt's phenomenal social-housing campaign of the 1920s and early 1930s, and one of his chief collaborators, the Viennese architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky.

Even before Hitler took power, the global economic depression prompted May, Schütte-Lihotzky, and many other Modernists to work for the Soviet government, one of the world's few large-scale architecture patrons during Stalin's initial Five-Year Plan of 1928–1932. This association alone disqualified the leftist May and the Communist Schütte-Lihotzky from work under the Nazis, yet they fared little better with the Soviets. Members of the "May Brigade" who stayed on in the USSR after their boss left in 1933 in some cases faced imprisonment, and their Russian colleagues were executed. May, who was publicly denounced by the Nazi propaganda minister, first found refuge in British-controlled Kenya, but during the Mau Mau uprising of the early 1950s returned to Germany where he finally resumed his role as a city planner during his homeland's massive postwar reconstruction. On the other hand, Schütte-Lihotzky, who joined the anti-Nazi resistance following the Anschluss, found it difficult to find work in Austria after the war because of her continued allegiance to communism in nominally neutral Austria.

Recent research has also shed a harsher light on the attitudes and activities during World War II of the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier, who turns out to have been more avid and successful in trying to gain work from France's Nazi-puppet Vichy government than had been previously known. On the other hand, Le Corbusier's younger Brazilian contemporary and admirer Oscar Niemeyer saw his professional prospects in the United States effectively wrecked by his membership in the Communist Party, which he joined in 1945, just in time for the advent of McCarthyism and the denial of American
entry visas to artists with leftist affiliations or even sympathies.

Economic shifts and downturns can displace architects just as surely as putsches, coups, revolutions, and rebellions. In fulfillment of Daniel Burnham’s irrefutable exhortation “first, get the job”—rule number one in an artistic medium that demands a patron before the creative act can begin in earnest—architects have always had to go where the work is. Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s arduous 1665 transalpine carriage journey from Rome to Paris was prompted by the prospect of expanding the Palais du Louvre for Louis XIV, which, despite the ample papal patronage this artistic polymath enjoyed back home, seemed to be an offer he could not refuse. Arguably the first international architectural celebrity, Bernini was greeted along the way by crowds that sporadically lined his route. But his flamboyantly Baroque project was ultimately rejected—Claude Perrault’s more reserved Classical design would be executed instead—and this futile experience proved that even the greatest architects are not immune from the humiliations of the supplicant artist.

Closer to our own time, during the recession and “stagflation” of the early 1970s, out-of-work American architects flocked to Iran, where the shah sponsored vast public works schemes that came to an abrupt halt with his overthrow at the end of that decade. Similarly, the global economic meltdown of 2008, which initially left China relatively unscathed, sent countless American architects in search of the lucrative commissions that have abounded in Beijing and the ninety other Chinese cities (many of them whose names are unknown to foreigners) with populations over a million.

The first volume of *Makers of Modern Architecture* was faulted by some commentators for the relatively few women it contains—Ray Eames and Denise Scott Brown are the only female subjects among the book’s seventeen chapters. This second selection will likely elicit a similar response, there being but four women discussed here in detail: Schütte-Lihotzky, Billie Tsien, Kazuyo Sejima, and Elizabeth Diller.

The only possible justification for this imbalance is that in any general study of the building art, women are still bound to be in a minority, given that female enrollment in architecture schools did not begin to approach parity with men until at least the 1970s, and only now are women practitioners receiving major commissions in any significant numbers. One review of the Spanish-language edition of *Makers of Modern Architecture* was titled “Los machos alfa de la arquitectura del siglo XX” (The Alpha Machos of Twentieth-Century Architecture), a fairly accurate characterization of the male-dominated profession in that period.

The marginalized role of women even at the Bauhaus, which was otherwise among the most forward-thinking, not to say radical, of twentieth-century educational institutions, gives some indication of the ingrained prejudices that had to be overcome, and still do. The three aforementioned female architects currently at work all have a male partner or partners (in two instances their husbands), a pattern established in earlier generations by Charles and Ray
Eames, Alison and Peter Smithson, and Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi. That tendency has been continued more recently by such distinguished American spousal teams as Craig Hodgetts and Hsin Ming Fung, Diana Agrest and Mario Gandelsonas, Laurie Hawkinson and Henry Smith-Miller, and Marion Weiss and Michael Manfredi. In other pairings, Richard Fernau and Laura Hartman, professional partners since 1980, were once romantically involved but have long been married to others, whereas Thomas Hanrahan and Victoria Myers continue to practice together after their divorce. Deborah Berke, Winka Dubbeldam, Jeanne Gang, Zaha Hadid, Maya Lin, and Toshiko Mori are among the most notable high-style practitioners who head offices without a principal male partner.

The burgeoning presence of women in the highest echelons of architecture has hardly been the biggest change in the profession in recent decades, however. Certainly computer technology has had the greatest impact on the conception, planning, and execution of buildings since the adaptation of new industrial methods of construction during the first half of the nineteenth century. Digital techniques for drafting and rendering designs now allow for prospective depictions of projects as lifelike as photographs of completed buildings. Yet this seems a mere sleight of hand compared to the astounding new engineering and fabrication capabilities opened by unprecedented advances in architecturally applicable software. As had often occurred during earlier periods of technological breakthrough, there were fears that computers would somehow fundamentally alter, not to say pervert, the very nature of the creative act, rather than becoming just another tool in the arsenal of human artistry. Without question, the new architectural possibilities enabled by computerization have had an immense effect on the look of contemporary design, but as with all comparably epochal advances before it—printing, photography, and telecommunications, to name but a few—what emerges is only equal to the intelligence and imagination of those whose master them.

Another signal phenomenon of our times has been the cult of the celebrity architect. To be sure, more than a century ago the scandalous private lives of Stanford White and Frank Lloyd Wright—two showboating public personages who thrived on popular attention—provided ample fodder for the sensationalist press. For his sins White was gunned down at the age of fifty-two; Wright died (of natural causes) a few months shy of ninety-two, and used those four extra decades of life to transform his image from that of cheating husband, deadbeat dad, and outspoken advocate of free love by morphing into a benign dispenser of heartland American verities, a veritable Carl Sandburg of architecture. Wright’s instinctive mastery of new forms of mass publicity—from newspaper interviews in the 1910s, to newsreel bits in the 1930s, to television talk- and game-show appearances in the 1950s—obliterated popular recall of his lurid past and helped burnish his image as a beloved national cultural treasure quite apart from his stupendous body of work.

There is no question that public recognition has always helped architects to
win further clients, and increasingly so since the celebrity industry has metastasized in its variety and reach. However, not until the 1980s did the international celebrity architect fully emerge. This phenomenon paralleled the contemporaneous rise of the “name” fashion designer, promoted by luxury-goods conglomerates to spur sales of scent, accessories, and other ancillary items bearing the names of couturiers whose bespoke garments were far beyond the means of average people. Even though Wright, with his budget-priced Usonian houses of 1936 onward (and his earlier, wholly unsuccessful attempts at prefabrication), tried to bring his revolutionary concepts to a wider public than his costly one-off commissions, by the late twentieth century an architect-built house could be afforded by only a small economic elite. Thus the retailing of all sorts of architect-designed household goods allowed those priced out of the custom residential market to participate in the aura of high-style architecture with an Alessi teakettle by Michael Graves or a Swid Powell coffee mug by Robert Venturi.

Architect-endorsed “branding” soon extended from useful or decorative objects to buildings themselves, especially luxury developments in large urban centers where apartment buildings, hotels, and boutiques have lately been marketed as much for the designer’s imprimatur as for any intrinsic aesthetic quality. Yet very few of the many high-style architects who built condominiums in New York City before the global market crash in 2008 rethought the basics of the high-density multiunit dwelling. Instead, they concentrated on clever surface effects that would set their efforts apart from the competition’s. This sort of superficial decoration was little different from that pursued by Philip Johnson during his corporate skyscraper phase of the 1980s, when he freely admitted that in working with property developers who presented him with a predetermined high-rise building envelope calibrated to maximize profits, there was little he could do beyond gussying up the curtain walls in one eye-catching mode or another.

Celebrity architects also became more familiar to the general public through such rare events as the televised presentation in 2002 of the semifinalists’ designs in the competition for the reconstruction of the World Trade Center site. On a more regular basis, The Charlie Rose Show, which was first broadcast by PBS in 1991, has offered an upper-middlebrow forum in which scores of high-profile master builders have attempted to elucidate their work to an informed general audience. Whether these designers succeeded in demystifying their creative process for laymen remains debatable. Given the strong emphasis that avant-garde practitioners have placed on theoretical concerns during the past several decades, the more pretentious among them often add to the obfuscation. Apart from a few indefatigable press-friendly performers like Wright and Fuller, the predominant twentieth-century notion of the architect was that of an aloof, hyperrational engineer rather than that of an approachable, intuitive artist.

Before the professionalization of architecture in the nineteenth century, it was standard procedure for an aspiring mason or carpenter to begin his
apprenticeship at fourteen and to become a master builder by his early twenties. But with today’s protracted educational adolescence and a much longer life expectancy, architects now finish schooling in their mid- to late twenties, work for an established firm during their thirties, and then, if sufficiently talented, embark on independent practice at around forty.

Designing a house for one’s parents is an almost cliché rite of passage—Le Corbusier and Robert Venturi are prime twentieth-century examples of helpful familial patronage—followed by more residential work and nondomestic renovations or additions. Only after two decades of sustained experience do big jobs generally start to arrive, although by the age of fifty typecasting also sets in. If one is fortunate enough to bring off several well-received projects, a Pritzker Prize might come during one’s sixties, depending on that coveted award’s shifting and often inscrutable notions of artistic excellence and geopolitical distribution. Winning the Pritzker assures a flood of work in one’s seventies and eighties, commissions necessarily carried out by assistants as the demands of modern-day cultural stardom and the inevitable waning of physical capacities prevent many architects from attaining the transcendent final phase more easily achieved by artists in other mediums. Architecture is not a profession for the fainthearted, the weak-willed, or the short-lived.

The self-identification of architects as artists, which began to reassert itself in the architectural avant-garde around the mid-1970s, was intensified by the increase in the numbers of what would become the most conspicuous public building category of the late twentieth century, the art museum, which was superseded around the turn of the millennium by a comparable increase in the construction of performing arts halls. To win commissions in either format, architects found it to their advantage to posit themselves as artists, and in many cases have validated that comparison, as demonstrated most notably by Frank Gehry, of whose Guggenheim Museum Bilbao it has been said (as had earlier been claimed of Wright’s original Guggenheim) that the building itself is the institution’s greatest work of art, and whose Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles might be said to be a composition equal to some of the greatest of those played within its billowing walls.

Writing in the very first issue of The New York Review of Books in 1963, Robert Lowell wisely observed, “The arts do not progress but move along by surges and sags.” This is particularly true of architecture. Although today it is more than ever a highly collaborative process, it is still driven forward by the vision of relatively few practitioners—some well-known to the public, others familiar only to specialists—whose work is closely watched by their peers and thus has a disproportionate effect on the direction of the discipline. All the same, my emphasis on personality and character ought not to be misinterpreted as an endorsement of a Great Man (or Great Woman) Theory of architecture. Rather, it reflects my belief that the human element, both individual and collective, in the creation and the habitation of the built environment is central to any understanding of the universal impulse we all share: to make ourselves a sheltering home on earth.
CHARLES McKIM, WILLIAM MEAD, AND STANFORD WHITE

It may seem odd to begin a book about modern architecture with a firm now generally considered to be historical revivalists, but a strong case can be made that McKim, Mead & White was a proto-modern partnership not only in its corporate organization but also in its audacious address of new building forms engendered by the machine age. Changing attitudes toward historically inspired architecture, and Classicism in particular, have led to reassessments of buildings that were long dismissed by proponents of the Modern Movement as retrogressive but that now are widely regarded as advanced despite their outwardly traditional appearance. There is no better example of this reversal of posthumous fortune than New York City’s Pennsylvania Station of 1905–1910 (see Illustration 1b), still keenly mourned as the lost masterpiece of Charles Follen McKim, one of the triumvirate—along with William Rutherford Mead and Stanford White—who gave their surnames to the most prolific and celebrated high-style American architectural practice during the half-century between the Civil War and World War I.

It had long been commonplace to emphasize McKim, Mead & White’s dependence on Old World prototypes. For example, White based his Renaissance Revival New York Herald Building of 1890–1895, which fronted Herald Square, on Fra Giovanni Giocondo’s Palazzo del Consiglio of 1476–1492 in Verona, and he modeled the Mozarabic tower of his Madison Square Garden of 1887–1891 (once the third-tallest structure in the city, after the Brooklyn Bridge and the Statue of Liberty) on the Giralda of 1184–1198 in Seville. Similarly, McKim’s Beaux Arts–inspired Boston Public Library of 1888–1892 owes an obvious debt to Henri Labrouste’s Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève of 1843–1851 in Paris, whereas his Pennsylvania Station followed a conjectural reconstruction of Imperial Rome’s Baths of Caracalla of 212–216 AD.

Though McKim, Mead & White’s historical eclecticism almost never attains the quality of its sources, and on occasion appears little more than a skillfully executed precursor of the touristic landmarks we now see replicated at Las Vegas theme hotels, the best of the firm’s work, however derivative in outward expression, on occasion comes close to that of the foremost American
master builder of the generation before it: H. H. Richardson, in whose employ McKim and White first met. Yet despite McKim, Mead & White’s current critical esteem—considerably higher than it was half a century ago—in order to find the true muscle and sinew of advanced American architecture during the heyday of this arch-establishment partnership we must look instead to the mystically inclined but commercially aware Louis Sullivan, spiritual father of the tall office building, and to his spiritual son, Frank Lloyd Wright, the apostle of organic design derived from the native soil. Their heroic quest for an authentically American architecture set them in diametric opposition to what they saw as the deadening hand of Classicism, so powerfully wielded by McKim, Mead & White (however much Sullivan and Wright may have absorbed and subsumed historical models themselves).

The American public was rudely reawakened to the significance of McKim, Mead & White by the demolition of Pennsylvania Station, which began in October 1963 but took nearly three years to accomplish because of the huge building’s extraordinarily solid and deep construction. By the time the vast site was cleared and ready to receive the crowning indignity of Charles Luckman’s ticky-tacky Madison Square Garden, completed in 1968, the historic-preservation movement had gathered to prevent comparable acts of cultural vandalism. New York’s only other equivalent landmark, Grand Central Terminal of 1904–1913 (a collaboration between the firms of Reed & Stem and Warren & Wetmore), was spared a similar fate when opponents derailed a disastrous redevelopment scheme by Marcel Breuer for its site during the 1970s thanks to the shameful precedent of Penn Station (though the creation of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1965 was too late to stop the vast, ugly Pan Am Building from going up next to the terminal).

McKim’s design marked a significant departure from earlier railway depots because it was built to accommodate the newly electrified trains of the Pennsylvania Railroad, which freed him from the standard arrangement of a train shed attached to a shelter for ticket sales and passenger waiting areas, all at street level or only somewhat recessed (as was the case at the steam-driven New York Central Railroad’s Grand Central Terminal). Electrified trains emit no noxious fumes, so they could run through tunnels rather than on viaducts or in open trenches and thus remain deep underground once they reached their destinations, which enabled McKim to submerge components that previously needed to be above ground.

The new possibilities provided by electrification afforded McKim the freedom to make his ground plan for Pennsylvania Station a marvel of modern efficiency. In choosing the Baths of Caracalla as his model for its exterior, the architect found an ideal scheme that allowed him to encompass the entire eight-acre site—which covered two full city blocks from West 33rd to 31st Streets and from Seventh to Eighth Avenues—in one immense but cohesive whole, united by a colossal order of granite columns that formed a monumental colonnade on its principal façade along Seventh Avenue and