III. ARCHITECTS

Eclecticism

Reflecting Victorian taste for nostalgia and sentiment, American builders at first deliberately resurrected a variety of old architectural forms to arouse symbolic and spiritual associations; soul elevating requirements tended to supersede considerations of practicality and taste. Because edifices were meant to convey a sense of timelessness and permanence, the nineteenth century saw a continuing succession of historical styles—many unintentionally parodying their original models. Roman rotundas were followed by Greek temples,
and by about 1850, both classical types were displaced by medieval assemblages called Victorian-Gothic.

Eclecticism became an American standard. A point had been reached, Lewis Mumford thought, "at which disorder had resulted in almost physical brutality, and ugliness conducted a constant assault and battery wherever one turned one's eye."¹ That may be true, but Alan Gowans reminds us that High Victorian tastemakers called themselves eclectics² and were proud of it. When McGuffy titled his most famous work _The Eclectic Reader_, for instance, he meant it as an advertisement; he meant that he had 'drawn from the best'--literature in this case--of the past, and made something modern, something recognizably belonging to his own time, out of it.³

American architecture was to take still another direction under the leadership of Henry Hobson Richardson. After graduating from Harvard in 1859, Richardson traveled in Europe and for five years studied at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris. He wrote his fiancée that he preferred to stay that long rather than "return to America a second rate architect. Our country is overrun with them just now. I will never practice until I can do my art justice."³

¹ Lewis Mumford, _The South in Architecture_ (New York, 1941), 92.
³ Wayne Andrews, _Architecture, Ambition and Americans_ (New York, 1955), 159.
Richardson established the prototype for Romanesque revival architecture in the United States in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In using older models—not merely as an archeologist or copyist—he transformed them into intelligent and personal adaptations (ills. 29-30); his approach was both scholarly and aesthetic. Oliver Larkin has written that this influential architect derived from a deeper source: "He was a child of the age of masonry and he used masonry to symbolize the strength and self-reliance which were in his grain and in the American grain... He was a craftsman who responded to the texture of brick and the color of sandstone as he responded to food and drink." While many domestic dwellings tended to cling to the jigsawed and shingled Queen Anne style, it was not long before grandly conceived Romanesque edifices multiplied and quickly dominated the South, New England (with the exception of New York City), and the Midwest for some fifteen years; Chicago especially favored the style and architects adapted its forms to fulfill the requirements of commercial buildings.

At the time of Richardson's death in 1886, knowledgeable Americans were tiring of the fashionable and often badly designed, remotely-Romanesque; they seemed ready for a change. The invention of the high speed elevator and then the skeleton iron frame in 1887 revolutionized architecture by making the skyscraper possible. An emphasis

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on rugged stone was the essence of Romanesque, but with the new skeleton steel construction, heavy solid masonry walls were unnecessary. The time had come for worn counterfeit modes to be replaced by fresh forms.

Probably responsible for another decade of the derivative and imitative was the huge World's Columbian Exposition that dominated Chicago in 1893; Frank Lloyd Wright observed that it became the occasion of modern architecture's grand relapse. The nature of man was there reduced to the level of a clever trained animal. Architecture contrived as a hackneyed ruse to cheat modern life of its divine due instead of serving to glorify it.

At any rate, after 1893, as more universities established schools of architecture and travel to Europe became more commonplace, the Beaux Arts influence continued, affecting buildings such as the "Italian Renaissance" Boston Public Library, and the "Classical Roman" New York Public Library. Through it all, the Romanesque tenaciously persisted.

Ricker and White

Mid-nineteenth century architects—practical constructors—probably would have difficulty obtaining a license to practice now; the first president of the American Institute of Architects, founded

1 Frank L. Wright, Writings and Buildings (Cleveland, 1960), 33.
in 1857, never went to college. ¹ Few builders travelled abroad or had access to great reference libraries, and styles and details were obtained mostly from pattern books, architectural journals and building manuals. The first schools of architecture in the United States were established after the Civil War: at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1865, and at the University of Illinois in 1868. ² Illinois' architectural students were expected to be masters of practical problems. In a speech delivered in 1885, Selim Peabody observed that "their lessons are the work of the carpenter, the joiner, the cabinet maker, the turner and all the practical details of the Builder's art. Precision of measurement, accuracy of fit, perfection in detail, are all points insisted on. Complete mastery of the tools is demanded and secured."³

Nathan C. Ricker headed Illinois' architecture department from 1873 to 1910 and was Dean of the College of Engineering from 1878 to 1906; several University buildings were designed by him as well, but his contribution to the development of architecture extended beyond Urbana. Ricker's career ought "not be allowed to fall into oblivion.

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... [his] appreciation for the history and literature of architecture as well as its ethical and informed practice helped to set the standard for architectural education in the Middle West. "1

In the planning of the Library, Ricker wrote that he had associated James McLaren White with himself as "equal partner," and that they had employed several students and graduates for "designing and superintending its erection. So that with the sole exception of the mosaics in the entrance hall, the entire work is the product of the Department of Architecture."2 White was only twenty-eight then and had just returned from a year of study abroad; he could not have been an "equal" partner; it would be more accurate to say that they divided the work. He seemed to have been occupied with the decorative aspects of the design, issuing informative progress reports to the public, and corresponding with the artist, Newton A. Wells.

Another young architectural graduate, Grant C. Miller '94, was probably responsible for some of the ornamental motifs. His long and scholarly article, "Romanesque Architecture," had just been published

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1 Mark L. Peisch, The Chicago School of Architecture: Early Followers of Richardson and Wright (New York, 1964), 16. Additional notes on Ricker are contained in Appendix C.

2 Nathan C. Ricker, "The Story of a Life," typewritten MS autobiography (Urbana, 1922), 28. Architects Loring H. Provine, professor emeritus, and Ernest L. Stouffer, retired University architect, worked with both Ricker and White and are of the opinion that Ricker designed the building, and that White carried on the day-to-day details. In interviews, Dec., 1963.
in the University journal Technograph. The illustrative material was taken from architectural reference books, and several details are very close to those used in the new Library.  

There is no doubt that the architects borrowed ideas from a variety of sources. It was an American custom, and they were rushed for time. In his "Story of a Life," Ricker tells us that he had a "deep knowledge" of architectural styles, especially the Medieval French, from having seen them in Europe and by the many articles he translated, dealing for example with ornamental ironwork, joinery, mural painting and medieval construction.  

Apparently Ricker had gathered data and given thought to the architectural possibilities of the Library.

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1 Grant C. Miller, "Romanesque Architecture," Technograph, X (1895-96), 118-140.

2 Ricker, 28.

3 Before Ricker ever submitted his ideas for the Library Building, he had obviously had his share of frustrations. Referring to a recent communication from Burnham, Ricker wrote Draper that there was not going to be "anything crooked in this matter, so far as I am concerned. But, if you approve, I have no objection to furnishing to Mr. Burnham all the data I have collected, including that used by the Committee in making out its report upon the designs submitted in the Library competition. This would be done for the benefit of the University and as a personal favor to Mr. Burnham. I wish to disclaim any desire to influence the design of the Library [emphasis mine] or the execution of the work in any manner, having no such intention, only wishing to devote my work to its legitimate course in the Engineering College." Ricker to Draper, Oct. 18, 1895.

And in January, an obviously agitated Ricker informed Draper of a letter that had just come from a Chicago architectural firm: "They are
and, when charged with producing designs, he and White furnished several choices to the Board of Trustees for consideration.

exceedingly persistent, not to say pestilent, in the matter of the library. . . . The Architectural department will either carry out this work without a consulting architect, or must decline to have anything to do with it, since this would be a suggestion of inability to do the work, which I am not willing to accept. Should I advise consultation with an expert in case of unforeseen difficulty, I should certainly not suggest the name of a persistent seeker after the job." Ricker to Draper, Jan. 9, 1896.

Only three weeks after Ricker's plans were accepted, the Governor was still taking an active interest. We get an inkling of this from Morgan's attempts to humor Altgeld about the site chosen for the Library: "I fully agree with you that it could be a disaster to erect the building there. Mr. McLean and I strenuously opposed the location and advocated the one which you so earnestly recommended afterwards. . . . I have directed Prof. Ricker to have both sites staked out so that the Trustees can clearly see the merits and demerits of each." Morgan to Altgeld, Feb. 29, 1896.
5. Altgeld Hall, tower
6. H. H. Richardson, Pittsburgh County Courthouse, tower

IV. LIBRARY HALL: DETAILS AND SOURCES

All four of Ricker and White's projects seem vaguely familiar, yet not immediately identifiable. The first is a French palace-type of structure utilizing delicate embellishment (Ill. 23); the second, a scheme dominated by two awkwardly placed towers (Ill. 24); and the third building has a badly proportioned clock tower set into an

1 Comparisons serve to indicate the variety of sources readily available to the architects and artist; while not necessarily meant to identify specific antecedents, close relationships are to be noted in a number of instances.

2 The nineteenth century, Strassburg University buildings (Ills. 27-28) were also based on French palace architecture. It is not unlikely that Ricker was inspired by such suitable German monuments.