

“A Great Exhibition:” The Pittsburgh Architectural Club Exhibition of 1907

CYNTHIA JARA
University of Minnesota

The history of modern architecture has included a tacit assumption that architectural practices active in the United States at the beginning of this century were, both ideologically and stylistically, too feeble to resist the vigor of the European avant-garde. Yet evidence suggests that, long before 1932, American architects were in fact seeking to modernize and re-define their profession. Such evidence reveals itself in a study of the Exhibition of the Pittsburgh Architectural Club held at the recently endowed Carnegie Institute in the fall of 1907. The largest and most costly architectural exhibit attempted in the United States up to that time, the Pittsburgh exhibition received expansive coverage in a review published on November 30, 1907 by the *American Architect and Building News*.¹ The exhibition included an extensive section of European work and was the first in the country to recognize a category with the title “Modern Movement.”²

In order to understand the significance of the Pittsburgh exhibition, it is important to acknowledge the environment in which this event took place. Generally speaking, the end of the nineteenth century was a period of consolidation for the professions of law, medicine, and architecture. The appearance of professional journals — and support for their continued publication — is one of the guages of this consolidation. In the United States, several architectural journals originated in Boston prior to 1900. Prominent among these was the *American Architect and Building News* which began publishing on a weekly basis in 1876. Following a transfer of ownership in 1909, the title of the journal was shortened to the *American Architect*, the periodicity of the journal became bi-weekly, and its locus of production shifted to New York.³

Along with the professional journals, exhibitions were a means of selectively promoting the work of architects. The appeal of exhibitions lay in their immediacy: the ability to display original material and the celebratory quality of bringing people together to view it. Among the disadvantages of the exhibition as a medium for recognition and publicity was the transitory nature of the event and the fact that only those attending in person were subject to its

influence. To some extent, these drawbacks could be overcome through the publication of a catalog documenting the works represented. A published review, although necessarily reductive, likewise served to enhance the longevity and broaden the impact of a single exhibition.

At the turn of the century, successful exhibitions were most frequently sponsored by local architectural clubs. Generally the largest and best-known was the annual exhibition of the Architectural League of New York, held from 1886 onward. Beginning in 1895, the T-Square Club of Philadelphia also initiated a tradition of prestigious and highly-publicized annual exhibitions.

Although the Pittsburgh Exhibition was officially sponsored by the Pittsburgh Architectural Club, which had been founded in 1901, the size of the exhibition, its high cost, and location at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Schenley Park suggest that the true purpose of the exhibition was to advertise and support the new school endowed by Andrew Carnegie in 1905.⁴

The involvement of the Carnegie Institute brings another element to bear: the incorporation of architectural curricula within traditional institutions of higher learning and the acceptance of a new type of technical school. The architecture course at the Carnegie Institute of Technology was the fourteenth collegiate program established within the United States. Preceding it were: MIT, 1865; Cornell University, 1871; Syracuse University, 1873; Columbia University, 1881; University of Pennsylvania, 1890; George Washington University, 1893; Armour Institute of Technology, 1895; Harvard University, 1895; University of Notre Dame, 1898; Ohio State University, 1899; Washington University, 1904; and the University of California, 1904.⁵

Generally, exhibition committees designated by groups such as New York’s Architectural League or Philadelphia’s T-Square Club owed an allegiance to their membership. In Pittsburgh, the purpose of the exhibition was to draw favorable attention to the newly founded technical college. Stranded in an industrial backwater, the Carnegie Institute could not hope to compete with the urban sophistication of schools located in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Similarly,

the authority of tradition belonging to the older, established universities was not applicable to its status as a newcomer. What the Carnegie Institute could do, aside from flaunting its generous endowment, was present itself as well-informed and, above all, forward-looking.

This is exactly the impression conveyed in the review undertaken for the *American Architect and Building News*. The writer assigned to the task seems in danger of being overwhelmed by sincere enthusiasm, but he also takes care to set the stage for his astounding revelations. In the end, he is quite successful at drawing the reader in:

We have seen the announcement in the papers of an architectural exhibition at Pittsburgh...We may even have had the opportunity of talking with some one who had just seen the exhibition, who, fired with enthusiasm, had given us a glowing account of its marvels. Of the latter we would probably say: "Oh, he has had a pleasant trip, met pleasant friends, had good things to eat. So this unwonted zeal for the exhibition is only a vent for his general exuberance." But let us go to Pittsburgh ourselves. We arrive in the cold damp chill of the early morning. A heavy, black fog shuts us in on every hand. Faces are ashen; everything we touch is black and grimy. We jump into the first car for the Carnegie Institute. We pass block after block of dismal houses, all the more wretched for their shroud of black. We bury ourselves in a local paper, only to be mocked by flagrant headlines on the glory of Greater Pittsburgh...Soon, however, we come out into the more open country, to descend, opposite Schenley Park, in front of the Carnegie Institute. We mount to the top floor, to find ourselves in a great central hall, from which galleries radiate in every direction; in one direction, in particular, a long vista of galleries seems to stretch out interminably, through which we catch a glimpse of *still* other galleries opening beyond on either side. And everywhere the walls are covered; covered with drawings large and small, pencil, pen, water-color, pastel, charcoal, from the sketchiest pencil note to the most elaborate rendering; American, English, French, German, Austrian, Italian...a staggering agglomeration, bewildering in its variety, astonishing in its completeness...And then, all of a sudden, it comes over us how large the exhibition really is; enormous in fact.⁶

Pursuing these remarks, the reviewer refers to "the elimination of that dead wood which covers the valuable wall space of so many exhibitions."⁷ This observation is followed by his discovery of "a most interesting and original feature of the exhibition," a new category entitled the "Modern Movement."⁸ At last he concludes:

And now we begin to realize what all this means...We realize that the discomforts of the journey, the cold reception of the morning, and the depressing effect of

crossing the city were all worth the trouble, for we are actually at one of the most profitable, if not the most profitable, opportunity for analysis and comparison that America has ever afforded. A standard of excellence has been set. A gauntlet has been thrown down. Who will take it up?⁹

Subsequent to this introduction, the review progresses discursively through each of the exhibition's subjective divisions. These include civic improvement, school work, a "foreign exhibit," water colors and sketches, churches, and a "general section." Work chosen to represent the "Modern Movement," which the writer also terms the "New Movement" is left until last.¹⁰ The discussion begins with a challenging declaration:

For the first time we have an opportunity to study and compare side by side the various attempts of American architecture to assert itself as something living, virile, forceful, with a power to think and act for itself, not as a servile adapter of the heritage of previous civilizations, as a mind which has something to say and says it, and not as a mere mimic of the ideas of others.¹¹

The reviewer goes on to claim that the work exhibited "proves that we are not an effete nation in the arts any more than in our industrial life."¹² This statement is doubly revealing. From the standpoint of intellectual history, the nineteenth century had witnessed a separation — linked to the development of technology which had made the industrial revolution possible — between the fields of science and art.¹³ The belief that science was based on experimentation that yielded clear and incontrovertible results was paralleled by a positivism in aesthetic theory that viewed artistic judgment as an absolute.

The division between science and art played itself out in European as well as American societies, but its American manifestations were in many ways distinct. By the turn of the century Americans — no individual more so than Andrew Carnegie in Pittsburgh — had accumulated enormous wealth from manufacturing based on applied technology. Yet Americans perceived themselves as inferior to their European counterparts in matters of culture and aesthetics. The reviewer for the *American Architect and Building News* reflects the prevailing self-image when he laments "how far behind the other phases of our life and growth the arts and architecture have lagged!"¹⁴ Concurrent with this sense of inferiority was a determination — perhaps also typically American — to attack the problem head on. Thus the first page of the *American Architect and Building News* issued on November 30, 1907 reminds its subscribers that "architects are, or should be, before all things artists."¹⁵

The Pittsburgh Exhibition arises from this background. The optimism of the reviewer is revealed in his anticipatory comments:

Here, we have a great bounding of hope, for the impressiveness of this multi-phased collection of works

all striving to one end cannot but convince us that the tide has a last turned and is already setting in strongly in the direction of a real American architecture for the Americans, an architecture which shall present before all the world a picture in permanent materials of those qualities which have in other lines put America in the wonderful position she occupies today.¹⁶

As the review turns toward the exhibit itself, its writer must reconcile the diversity of the work presented. He does so by directing his focus toward the future:

As we look about among these exhibits we try to pick and choose those features that must live and which in the aggregate will at some near future date be incorporated fundamentally in that much-longed-for goal of all Americans, a real American architecture.¹⁷

A summary, presumably identifying these foreshadowing characteristics, at last reveals the names of the exhibitors. Louis Sullivan, designated “the father of the modern movement” is first cited for his “charmingly imaginative and decorative treatment.” Next is the “most decorative somewhat Japanese handling” of Frank Lloyd Wright, the “severer work along similar lines” of Dean & Dean, and Hornbostel’s “adaptation of modern *école* tendencies.” Also included is Grosvenor Atterbury for his “straightforward artistic use of materials.” The list concludes with the “German tendencies” of W.B. Griffin and G.W. Maher, the “bald and severe but logical treatment of masses” by D.H. Perkins, and the “personal French *Art Moderne* tendencies” of Herts & Tallant.¹⁸

Following this condensed listing, the writer resumes his theme of gathering criteria:

Each of these and many others besides must contribute to the culmination of that art which cannot be the sole possession of any one personality, however strong, but must be a gradual growth, the accumulation from many minds and individual points of view, all working toward one common end.¹⁹

Preparing for the final, analytic paragraphs of the review, he both reflects and announces: “As we walk about the exhibit we feel a certain responsibility devolving on us to choose wisely...taking to ourselves that which is good and rejecting that which experience proves unfit.”²⁰

Having stated this critical intention, the reviewer bewails the limited scope of Sullivan’s presence, manifest in a single exhibit, but praises “the wonderful creative force and mastery of detail” of the work, a plaster model for a column capital.²¹

Turning at once to the “decorative presentations” of Frank Lloyd Wright, the writer observes “their happy contrasts of big wall surfaces and well-placed and proportioned ornament.” Devoting a lengthy passage to Wright’s work, he goes on to describe: “How well the house nestles into its setting of gardens, lawns, trees, and shrubs. How the hanging vines from

window boxes add the one note of color necessary to break the monotony of the big surfaces and tie them into their setting.” The reviewer also comments on the “home-like and cosy feeling evolved by the use of big simple roofs” belonging to the Little house in Peoria, the “happy grouping of horizontal lines” of the Coonley and Show houses, and the “exceptionally artistic grouping of windows” in the Hardy house. In summarizing the twelve drawings comprising Wright’s exhibit, the writer concludes: “there is a predominant sentiment of hominess, of livableness, worked out most freely and in each case adapted to the peculiar needs of the problem.”²²

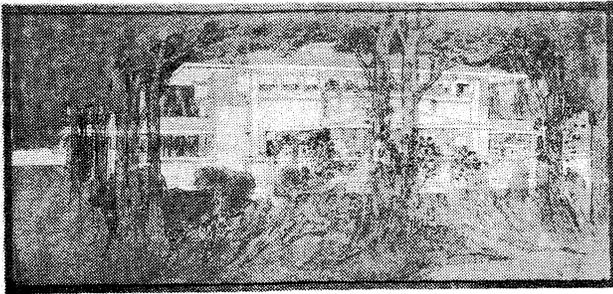
Compared to Wright, the reviewer finds “the Chicago schools of Dwight Perkins” and “the St. Louis schools of William B. Ittner” (newly introduced to the discussion) “similar in the use of horizontal and vertical lines, but quite different in the boldness and frankness of their masses.”²³

But, aside from Wright, the architect most broadly discussed is Grosvenor Atterbury. Among all the exhibitors, Atterbury most obviously represents the established culture of the East Coast. In relation to the previous examples, his work is described as “of quite another character, which has no marked style, but which depends for its effects on a logical and artistic use of materials.” Mentioned are the “colored tile and brick interior” of the Phipps natatorium in Pittsburgh and the “facade and court” of Phipps model tenements in New York. The reviewer’s diminishing interest is evident in his cryptic reference to “several houses and a shooting lodge all quite different, yet each worthy of study, especially a house in Richfield, Conn.”²⁴ Nevertheless, in contrast to Wright’s twelve exhibits, Atterbury was allowed twenty-two.

After briefly noting the work of Aymar Embury, a young architect excluded from his earlier notations, the reviewer turns to the firm of Dean & Dean. Despite their large number of exhibits—twenty—these architects are dealt with summarily: they are said to “show considerable force in their bold, outspoken handling” of a music building at Doane College in Nebraska and “in many features” of a fraternity house at Cornell.²⁵

Discussion finally settles on work “of quite another sort” — the “rather German *Art Moderne* tendencies” of G.W. Maher. A curt evaluation of houses at Kenilworth and Highland Park in Illinois (“Simple lines and big surfaces make these most attractive”) suffices for this exhibit.²⁶ It is Maher’s placement at the end of the analysis that is significant, because for comparison the reviewer now turns to the the German architects whose work, although categorized in the foreign exhibit, “illustrates the modern German movement to solve present day problems in a simple and logical manner, entirely untrammelled by precedent or conventions.”²⁷ Two houses of Professor Bruno Mohring of Berlin are singled out:

What could be simpler and more home-like than his villa a Potsdam, with its roomy loggia nestled between two octagonal bays, the plaster frankly decorated in lines and panels, all grouped under a single square roof,



DWELLING FOR MRS. MARY M. W. ADAMS, HIGHLAND PARK, ILL.
FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT, ARCHITECT

Fig. 1. Frank Lloyd Wright. Dwelling for Mrs. Mary M.W. Adams. Highland Park, Illinois.

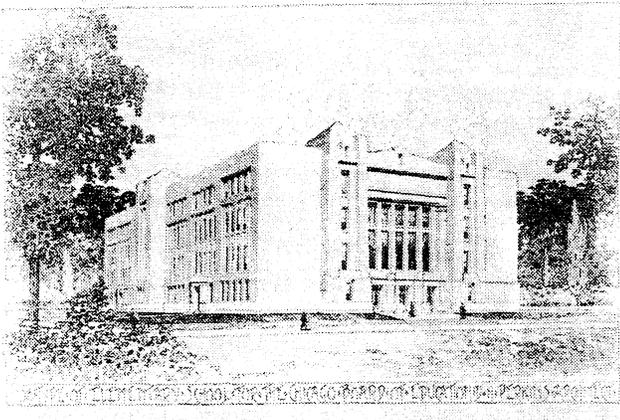
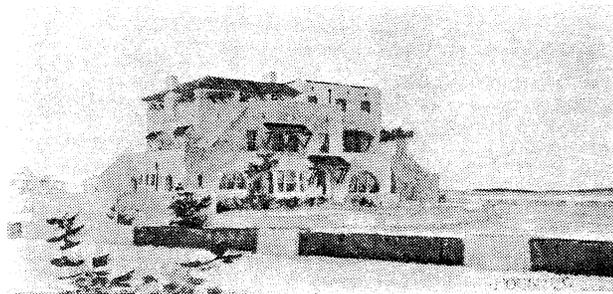


Fig. 2. D.H. Perkins. Elementary School. Chicago, Illinois.



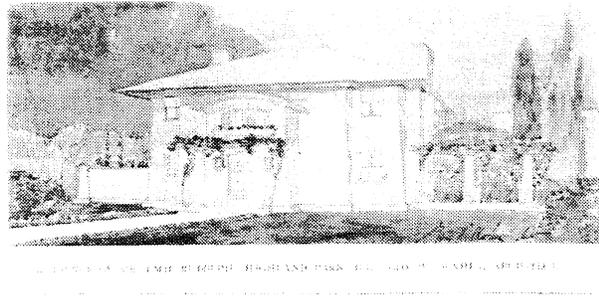
HOUSE AT BAYBERRY POINT, I., GROSVENOR ATTERBURY, ARCHITECT

Fig. 3. Grosvenor Atterbury. House at Bayberry Point, Long Island.

or the broad plaster treatment of the high gabled house at Mosel.²⁸

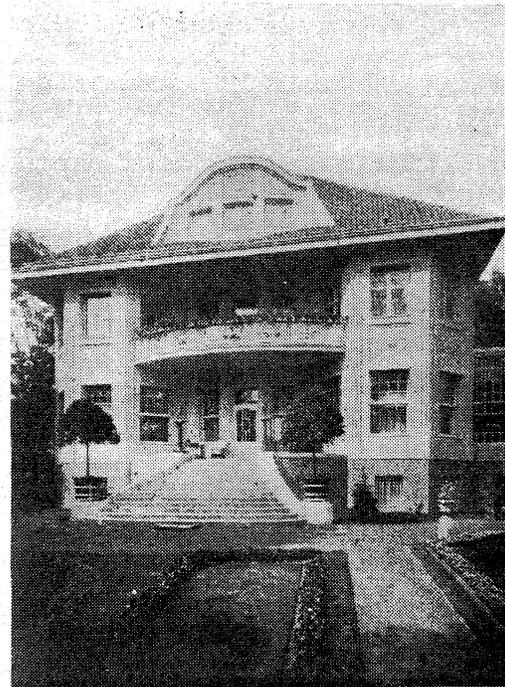
In total, twenty-eight German exhibitors were represented; besides Mohring, the review also cites Schilling & Graebner and “Prof. Oswin Hempel” of Dresden, Curfel and Moser, M.H. Kuhne, Prof. Halmhuber, and Prof. Fritz Schumacher.²⁹

Unlike the reviewer writing for the *American Architect*



RESIDENCE OF MR. EMIL RUDOLPH, HIGHLAND PARK, ILL. GEORGE W. MAHER, ARCHITECT

Fig. 4. George W. Maher, Residence of Mr. Emil Rudolph. Highland Park, Illinois.



VILLA WERNER, NEAR POTSDAM, GERMANY.
Professor Bruno Mohring, Architect.

Fig. 5. Professor Bruno Mohring. Villa Werner near Potsdam, Germany.

and *Building News* in 1907, we cannot go to Pittsburgh, see the exhibit, and eat a good dinner. What, if anything, can be gleaned from this vicarious trip?

The mid-nineteenth-century poet, Walt Whitman, had endowed the Midwest with attributes of romanticism and strength that co-ordinated well with the idea of “a real American architecture for Americans.”³⁰ By the end of the century regional trends in Chicago and other areas of the central states inclined toward a new style; besides Sullivan and Wright many of the architects who participated in the Pittsburgh exhibition—W.B. Griffin, G.W. Maher, W.B. Ittner, George Dean, and Dwight Perkins—could be considered part of this movement. Within the exhibition, the clash

between Atterbury and Wright served to point up differences between the established culture of the East Coast and the bluntness of the recently settled frontier.

The recognition that the exhibition accorded Louis Sullivan and, particularly, Frank Lloyd Wright may be deemed prescient; however, the reviewer had also shown foresight in warning that the task of defining a modern movement could not be "the sole possession of any one personality, however strong." Throughout the following decades the work of the architects featured in the exhibit would continue to appear in professional journals; from an economic standpoint, their firms were successful. Excluding Wright, none would be significantly recorded in history; no "New Movement" in American architecture was forthcoming.

The study of the exhibition and its review, combined with an awareness of the professional consolidation that was occurring in post-nineteenth-century America, yields two observations. The first is that most of the architects who exhibited were technically innovative in their use of materials and methods of construction. The separation of technology and art, mandated by professional authorities ("architects are, or should be, before all things artists"), operated in direct opposition to this impulse. Secondly, insecurity concerning matters of aesthetics prevalent within American culture resulted in a stubborn conservatism about how art should be judged. One of the most striking features about the published review is the writer's skill in crafting a narrative; yet as soon as he attempts to analyze the work represented in the exhibits, his words become stupid, their expression banal.

In reaction to these observations, I would argue that the task that American architects felt unable to address, the reintegration of technology and art, was in fact the defining task for architecture in the twentieth century. Perhaps even more important is the recognition that criticism plays a role in formulating a movement: without clear criticism there can be no explanation and, consequently, no creation.³¹

NOTES

¹ G.B. Ford, "A Great Exhibition" in *American Architect and Building News* 102, no. 1666 (Saturday, November 30, 1907), p. 175-81, 4 plates addended; the allusion to size and cost occurs on p. 175.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 175, 179.

³ *The American Architect* merged with another Boston journal, the *Architectural Review*, in 1921; the new *American Architect and Architectural Review* ceased publication in 1924, ending a fifty-year history.

⁴ Arthur Clason Weatherhead, *The History of Collegiate Education in Architecture in the United States* (Los Angeles, 1941), p. 236.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 235-36.

⁶ "A Great Exhibition," p. 175; the passage has been edited to shorten its length within the text.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, the author alludes to "the so-called 'Modern Movement' or 'New Movement,'" p. 179.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 179-80.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 180.

¹³ For further discussion of this issue, see Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

¹⁴ "A Great Exhibition." p. 180.

¹⁵ *American Architect and Building News* 102, no. 1666 (Saturday, November 30, 1907), p. 173.

¹⁶ "A Great Exhibition." p. 180.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 180-81.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.* Dwight Heald Perkins held the position of architect for the Chicago Board of Education from 1905 until 1910; his work is reviewed in "Dwight H. Perkins—Father of Today's 'New' School Ideas," *Architectural Form* 97 (October 1952), pp. 119-25; D.H. Perkins was also the father of Lawrence Perkins, founder of the corporate architectural firm, Perkins and Will.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.* Maher's work is discussed by H. Allen Brooks, Jr., "The Early Work of the Prairie Architects," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 19 (March 1960), pp. 2-10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ I am referring to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860-61).

³¹ This is the view proposed by T.S. Eliot in "The Perfect Critic," *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1920), pp. 15-16.