

Seeing Double: Stories from the Theater of Practice

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This paper describes an approach to the history of U.S. architectural practice that takes into account unresolved tensions that still abide from formative episodes in the process of professionalization issuing from the first quarter of the twentieth century. The ongoing project proposes to “unpack” *The Handbook of Architectural Practice*, first published in 1920, as an index of controversies and disputes then at the fore. It is suggested that attempts to ameliorate those conflicts have only provided provisional remedies and that ongoing shifts in models of architectural practice are as indicative of those unresolved tensions as they are reflections of revolutionizing technologies.

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing revolution in architectural practice cannot simply be explained by the ascendancy of new design technologies. Dynamic relationships that intertwine public and private interests, academic and vocational knowledge, and dialectics of means and ends have long been at work in shaping the destiny of architecture culture, both as discursive field and material process. The archetypal actors on the stage of architectural production – owners, architects, builders – have ever been fluid characters, each redefining their own agency and identity with respect to all the others in the shifting shadow-play of prevailing practices. New digital information technologies may reveal or further mask the terms of these relationships, and they may accelerate or retard their transformation; but instability in the historical framework of architectural practice is arguably as much a precipitating *cause* of the digital dialectic as it is a resulting *effect*.

A mere century ago, many of the defining traits of modern professionalism that we take for granted today were only then beginning to take shape. The architecture profession in the United States back then was a heterogeneous mix of socially positioned gentleman architects, office apprenticed drafters, business-savvy labor contractors, self-assumed designing builders, engineers, mechanics, and a small but growing number of academically polished designers often lacking adequate construction knowledge. By 1900, only one of the 45 U.S. states then existing had adopted architect registration laws,¹ the role of the general contractor was still a novelty, general conditions of contracts were inconsistent,

competitive bidding was decried as an evil, local customs frustrated consensus about national norms, and the agency of the architect was unsettled law. Relations between and among architects, general contractors, sub-contractors, and clients were ambiguous, unclear. Construction was often shoddy, a magnet for fire; and in journalistic tabloids and novels of popular culture, the motivations of the building trades and professions were often portrayed in unflattering terms.²

The increasing complexity and disputatiousness of the design and construction fields during this period is particularly noteworthy.³ Such tensions precipitated the restructuring of basic relationships among the parties and propelled the systemization of office operating procedures out of the ad hoc local conventions that mostly prevailed. Emergent legal, business, and administrative protocols were codified in the series of standardized contractual documents drafted by members of the American Institute of Architects and their construction industry counterparts; and in the period of 1917-1920, these efforts were further extended in the publication of the AIA's very first *Handbook of Architectural Practice*.

Over the intervening century, *The Architect's Handbook* has expanded its scope and grown in bulk in a perennial effort to encompass the ever-growing complexity of the design and construction industry and to chart the incrementally changing norms and conventions of practice. Yet in that very first handbook from 1920 we can recognize a concerted effort to ameliorate the stresses that were even then unsettling architectural discourse and practice in a manner not unlike the disruptions we are now experiencing. Like today, the forces fomenting change were not merely technological, though the technological transformation of the construction industry in the aftermath of World War I—new materials, national standards, manufacturing processes, distribution networks—was certainly profound. Both in answer to those changes and calling them forth, a shifting order of responsibility within the construction industry was being negotiated and contested. The old social hierarchies that had set rank and status among the principle actors—owners, builders, architects—were being reshuffled by exigencies of capital and labor, production and consumption, commerce and communication, knowledge and skill. New performance expectations were being set.

The conflicts driving reform of architecture practice a century ago may seem like quaint relics from a receding past; yet, an effort to reconstruct some aspects of that change may be instructive for us today. The tools

and technologies of architectural production—compasses, contracts, capital—are all mutable. They are implicated as both causes and effects of a whole network of social relations to which they give fleeting form. The aim of this emerging field of study is to stoke historical consciousness about architectural practice by mapping some of its terrain, by unraveling some of the knots of conflicting interest that once objectified as professional tools became subject to the same controversies they were meant to mediate or defuse. The challenge is to see beyond architects' own professional mythologies of dominance and control in order to recognize and better understand the unresolved and perhaps unresolvable tensions at play even now in the pursuit of some new digitally mediated social ideals.

MR. DAY'S HANDBOOK

In 1914, Philadelphia architect and former AIA President Frank Miles Day (1861-1918) assumed the chairmanship of the AIA's Committee on Contracts and Specifications of which he had been a member since 1908. Over preceding years, Day had been especially interested in matters pertaining to the establishment of a code of ethics, the conduct of design competitions, competitive bidding procedures, and the standardization of contracts between and among owners, architects, and builders. His aim as a progressive member of the profession's self-selecting elite was to build up the profession, to elevate the architect's status to its rightful position alongside that of doctor or lawyer.⁴

In a letter to the executive board of the AIA, Day described the changing environment of his own firm that was requiring extra measures to ensure consistency and clarity of his office affairs in the face of an expanding practice over which it was increasingly difficult to exercise personal control:

Of late it has been necessary for me to delegate to others a considerable proportion of the administrative detail of this office, and I have found that many procedures which seemed to me of an elementary sort presented certain difficulties to those now in charge. I therefore thought it advisable to prepare memoranda of procedure which would state in the order of their occurrence those administrative acts which the architect has usually to perform, or the performing of which he must at least consider in carrying to completion any given piece of work entrusted to him. I found that such memoranda afforded an opportunity for keeping a record of the dates on which various administrative acts were performed, and I found that the work was rapidly developing into a code of good practice, in which well accepted methods for performing these acts were carefully described. The number of such acts greatly exceeded my expectation. I found that various letters in form suited for sundry occasions might well be included, and that various forms, such as applications of payment, certificates of payment, etc., naturally found their way into this work.⁵

Day inductively extended his own experience into a compelling vision for a new tool of practice, one that he then magnanimously offered to the profession as a whole without any apparent concern for personal economic gain:

At this point it occurred to me that I was engaged in writing a handbook of business administration; that it was entirely based on my personal experience, and that it would be far better if it expressed the consensus of opinion of a number of men interested in such work. After discussing the matter..., I have determined to offer it to the Institute, since I believe that improved and extended as alone the Institute can improve and extend it, the work will be of great value to the profession. It will be of value to the young man untrained in good business methods; it will be of value to the experienced practitioner who looks after his own administrative detail, but whose work would be lightened by having forms suited to many occasions and whose memory would be refreshed by following the sequence of events set down. It would be of service to architects of large practice who have to delegate their administrative details to others, who perhaps do not always fully realize the significance of each act.⁶

Day's insight and proposal, that from the seeds of his own architectural firm's office manual a consensual handbook of architectural practice could be shaped, set in motion a series of discussions, deliberations, and debates nationwide that would help propel the standardization of the terms and assumptions of American architectural practice. Day's project for a "code of good practice" drew upon the network of connections and associations that he had built across the country as president of the nation's premier professional organization of architects.⁷ First shaping a draft document and then distributing it widely, he invited feedback that elicited a range of regional and often parochial viewpoints. The biases and professional predispositions thus conveyed to him reveal some of the anxieties besetting practitioners in those days: the bounds of the architect's authority as owner's agent, the emergence of the general contractor, changes in the architect's relationship to the trades, the precision of specifications, the corrupting potential of the bid process, the calculation of overhead and fees, virtues of the quantity survey system, the architect's role as final arbiter of the contract. Working alone with modest support from his committee, Day received these written responses, sifted them and endeavored to synthesize them into a paper consensus.

The early editions of the AIA's *Handbook of Architectural Practice* from the 1920s are thus sub-texts of the profession-in-formation. The dry prose embedded in the office procedures and contractual templates gathered there are residues of common law and convention along with emergent problems that foreshadow and resonate with contemporary concerns. Recurrent dialectics of art and science were reframed within new imperatives of business logic and economic optimization, of legal strictures and an evolving standard of care. The issues comprising the contents of "Mr. Day's Handbook" chart a map of controversies and disputes that were actively shaping the terrain of increasingly business-oriented architectural practice while the relationships between and among architects, owners, buildings, contractors, and their publics were congealing into historically understandable yet nonetheless paradoxical forms.

THE WISDOM OF TOM THUMTACK

Besides tracing the internal dialectics compelling the profession to codify its practices and to standardize its procedures, it is important to set Day's efforts in a broader context. The controversies shaping and surrounding architectural practice of the time are also evident in the discourses and diatribes that whetted partisan debate at professional conferences and that were recorded in the editorials and letters in architecture and construction industry trade journals of the day. Within a wider public sphere, architectural criticism and social commentary published in periodicals as well as genres of satire and literary fiction engaged new levels of popular interest.⁸ While architects worried about their diminishing status and project authority, they competed against increasingly emboldened builders for public approbation and support.

One little book crystallizes these historical circumstances particularly well in its portrayal of a wily old architect whose self-deprecating persona and wry observations level withering critiques of the motivations of owners, architects, and builders alike. Based largely upon a series of essays from the New York-based professional journal *Architecture and Building*, the book, *Architec-Tonics: The Tales of Tom Thumtack, Architect*, was published in 1914, the same year that Frank Miles Day began blazing the trail toward the Handbook of Architectural Practice.⁹ *Architec-Tonics* is a particularly idiosyncratic example of architecture culture in the inter-war period; yet, this little satirical tome reflects seriously nonetheless upon the prevailing practices of the day, the inter-relationships between and among architects and clients and contractors, the legal instruments of practice, and the role of human foibles in shaping the character of this "noble" art. The author of the book, in the theatrical guise of our fictional architect, describes the purpose of the book in this way:

I'll sign my name with 'Tom Thumtack', the thumbtack which held your earliest order; and then your first commission; and now your greatest competition. Many of you already know me and those who don't, know many like me. I'm old, and I have been through the mill. I've built little and I've built big. I've won out and I've lost out. I've seen good execution count for nothing and I've trapped big jobs by choosing paint for little ones. I've used influence and I've encountered it. I've drawn lines, and I've hired line-makers. I know clients, public, private, feminine, and am known by them. I know contractors, I make them and I break them. I've built with adobe and concrete, with scantling and steel, with brick and paint and silk and flowers. I've been and known and done all these and so have you. We know each other; blind-folded I can touch your medals and your scars, and you can mine. I know the tricks of our trade and so do you. I know her power and her eternity. I know her artifice and inconsistency. Many have sung her praises. Why has no one pricked her bubbles?¹⁰

Tom Thumtack manages to prick the bubbles of the profession through humorous devices highlighting social pretensions, professional stereotypes, mistaken identities, and chicaneries unmasked. In so doing, a knowingly authentic portrait of architectural practice is sketched, one that magnifies the well-intentioned and good-humored fallibility that lies behind an institutional facade of self-serious professionalism. Tom Thumtack opens a crack through which we can peek at the professional

identity of the modern American architect under construction, not the social revolutionary of a contemporaneous European avant garde, but rather the business-oriented professional seeking to cement a social standing. Whether it concerns the relationship between architect and client, the conduct and organization of the architect's office, or the dictates of a code of ethics, Tom Thumtack's essays satirize customs of architectural practice on the way to becoming standards of professional conduct, ones uncannily mirroring those to be codified in Mr. Day's Handbook.

The narrator's self-awareness of this meta-critique of the architectural profession is signaled in the book's frontispiece with Tom Thumtack's introductory portrait. There he stands at center-stage. The curtains are drawn on a distant scene of ancient Greece, classical temples on an acropolis, an assemblage of actors poised upon their plinths. He stands with hands in the pockets of pants striped like fluted columns, with buttoned vest, morning coat, and bowtie; his hairline receding, his ears protruding, eyebrow arched, an Ionic scroll of drawings tucked beneath his arm, an ironic expression upon his face. This, we presume, is a portrait of the author. The book – his memoirs after a fashion, a veritable theater of practice.

Behind the scenes, just out of view, other actors and contractors are at work to sustain this theatrical illusion. It is a morality play and a farce intended to expose the tensions and pretensions of our dramatic personae – architects, their clients, builders, all – as they work at odds and grudgingly together to shape the spatial and social terrains of the fledgling twentieth century American metropolis. The book unfolds in scenes and sketches, illustrated chapters in the history of the architectural profession itself under construction where the aims of art, science, and business collide and coincide on the way to an indeterminate destination: progress.

Who was Tom Thumtack? Compared side-by-side, Thumtack's portrait bears an uncanny resemblance to a photographic portrait published in an architecture journal five years before of Frederick Squires of New York, one the journal designates along with his then partner as "Architects of To-Day." Squires strikes Thumtack's same pose: hands in pockets, jacket slightly askew, high collar shirt, and tightly buttoned vest. But while his visage shares with Thumtack's the same prominence of ears and brow, his darkly handsome face is fresh, unfurrowed, non-ironic, but rather, serious and sincere. In fact, this image dates from an even earlier time. It is Squires' senior portrait from Columbia University.

Tom Thumtack is the nom de guerre of our real protagonist, architect and author Frederick Squires. Squires' architectural training had begun at Williams College and continued at Columbia University where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1904, thereafter immediately launching his career as a partner in the firm Squires & Wynkoop. By the time of the publication of *Architec-Tonics* in 1914, Squires was ten years in practice and already an accomplished architect having built numerous residential and commercial projects in New York, city and state. Among these were two twelve story loft buildings in Manhattan, the Mercantile Building at Seventh Avenue and 24th Street and another on East 16th Street. He had published extensively on the subject of hollow tile construction in a

treatise that reviewed both the historical precedents and the technical requirements for this durable, fireproof building method.

Squires distilled his own experience through the wizened old voice of Tom Thumtack to add gravitas to his tales. The stories convey a perspective at once sage and sardonic: the vanities of clients, the inanities of builders, and the comedies of the architect's own self deceptions. Each account is accompanied by charming vignettes, illustrations that capture in pen and ink the wit of Thumtack's themes, setting the stage, so to speak, and augmenting the narratives by visualizing their tropes and double entendres. The drawings, including the introductory portrait of Tom Thumtack, are unsigned and unattributed, though we know them to be the work of Squires' architecture classmate Rockwell Kent, an emerging artist and peripatetic draftsman and architectural renderer of note.¹¹

In line with the Squires' own pseudonymous practice, we can detect in Tom Thumtack's tales an architectonic pattern of dualities, doublings, and impersonations, of identities both veiled and mistaken. Indeed, Squires reveals his own method of disguise, of composing his stories out of his own experiences when he writes, "I can take half fact and add to it but half of my own construction."¹² In his role as architect Tom Thumtack must be adept as an actor, called upon to play many parts, to improvise on a moment's notice; but he must also be a detective. He must be wary of the ploys and motivations of others, be they clients or builders or even other architects, and he must be ready to ferret out and expose their every deception.

Pursuing his inductive approach to causal relations, Tom Thumtack observes for example that "the most fascinating thing about building is demolition." He is able to read the clues revealed by the wrecker's ball like tea leaves, an archaeologist finding forensic evidence, for example, of substandard materials, of walls built with "lies for bricks and knavery for mortar." In one case, an incautious demolition results in shifting foundations on an adjacent property with collateral effects. With the owners being absent, our hero-architect-detective rushes to inspect the damage. The property consists of two adjoining houses for a pair of brothers, identical twins. One brother is a rector and the other an actor, a study in contrasts despite their uncanny physical resemblance. Their contrasting public personae, one a saint and one a sinner, are well-reflected, Thumtack finds, in the monastic and bacchanalian décors inside their respective abodes. Detective Thumtack finds that a crack has opened in their shared party wall to reveal a hidden door in the wainscoat of the rector's study where it connects directly to the actor's den. The "twin brothers" are thus unmasked; rector and actor are one in the same!¹³

In other stories, Tom Thumtack portrays the architect and the contractor in a card game where the bid process sets the stakes of their bluff and gamble. Pitched later into the boxing ring, they vie for the client's favor in a knockout match over extra charges.¹⁴ In a courtroom, itself just another theater of practice, the architect mounts evidence to turn the tables on his client in defense of his professional honor against accusations of impracticality.¹⁵ These vignettes, a total in all of twenty-one stories plus prefatory and concluding remarks, suggest some of the all too human qualities by which the relationships intertwining builders,

clients, architects, and the buildings and spaces they create could become complicated or complicitous. And while the tales may at first seem far-fetched, a kernel of truth resides in them for they dramatize formative episodes of the American architectural profession undergoing the messy process of its assembly.

ANOTHER KIND OF ARCHITECTS' HANDBOOK

Squires wrote at a time when debates and controversies swirled in the pages of architectural journals and no doubt in the drafting rooms, ateliers, salons, and saloons of cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. In Frank Miles Day's concurrent efforts to collect the strictures of the profession into the pages of a definitive tome, some of the conflicts were leveled, some buried or suppressed, and some elevated into far greater prominence than perhaps deserved. One hundred years later, however, when so many *a priori* assumptions about the forms and frames of architectural practice are being challenged apace, contemporary experience suggests that very few of the controversies being tackled back then were settled once and for all. Despite any illusion about a profession being some pre-ordained and unchanging social category, the field of architectural practice is still very much in play. Its terms are not set in stone; rather, they are malleable and in constant state of reassembly. Day's *Handbook of Architectural Practice* and Squires' *Architect-Tonics* must be understood, like the rector and the actor in Tom Thumtack's tale, as mirror reflections of one and the same phenomenon.

Day's *Handbook* and Squires' *Architect-Tonics* comprise distinct yet complementary manifestations of American architecture culture in the first quarter of the 20th century. Each text illuminates and is illuminated by the other to suggest an intertwined web of social interactions and shared professional concerns. That network encompasses, yet extends well beyond, the stereotypical triad of owner, builder, and architect to include an entourage of legal, economic, and technological agents. The two texts work in tandem to corroborate certain historically persistent characteristics of architectural practice germane to our own contemporary concerns. They are indices of an ongoing, dynamic process of profession-formation.

Informed by Tom Thumtack's ironic ruses, the modus operandi of this ongoing study is to cast the architect as both actor and detective, as both agent and critic of an unfolding process of the profession's own social production. We enter Frank Miles Day's archive of personal correspondence, miscellaneous procedural documents, contracts, and marked-up handbook manuscripts thus prepared to trace the overlapping circles of influence and acquaintance embedded there. Searching for clues in the literary residue of popular culture and the ephemera of architectural journalism, we can reconstruct the narrative of social ferment then shaping a burgeoning building culture. By paying close attention to an eclectic range of evidence, we gauge the insistent and resistant forces at play in the structural transformation of architects' practices. And finally, we pose the question: Are not architects still wrestling with these same forces today?

This ongoing project proposes another kind of architect's handbook, one organized as a critical guide to the historical practices and relationships that its very existence is meant to clarify and to interrogate. The

fundamental relations of architectural practice comprise the topics of inquiry and are the gist of the ongoing study. How did the character of the American architecture profession unfold and by what means was the architect's social position fashioned? What interests and irritants were roiling relationships and inter-relationships among owners, architects, builders, and the changing retinues of other actors, contractors, and subs? And what key contractual and managerial tools were contrived to mediate the forces of change. Such tools, then as now, facilitated the intricate web of social and technological interactions conjoining people – their ideas, materials, capital, and labor – into any project for any purpose at any place. Like Day's originary efforts, the aim here is to provide a curated distillation of shared experience to inform future practices and procedures. But like Tom Thumtack's more ironic efforts, the aim is to leaven experience with a germ of critical awareness about the self-perpetuating tendencies of practitioners' own practices. The anecdotal evidence of history may serve as cautionary tale; once recognized as tragedy, or even comedy, it need not repeat as farce.

ENDNOTES

1. In 1897, Illinois was first state to regulate to architectural practice. See "Regulation of Architecture: Chronological List of Initial Enactment of Architectural Registration," National Council of Architectural Registration Boards, <http://www.ncarb.org/About-NCARB/Regulation-of-Architecture.aspx>.
2. Historical treatment of U.S. architectural practice, as distinguished from the history of architectural form and design, is arguably a field of study still in its infancy. The challenge, put in the terms suggested by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, is to shift attention from the opus operatum of architectural form to the modus operandi of architectural production in order to better gauge the structuring causes and effects of the culture of architecture practice. My own work in this area, exemplified by *Drafting Culture: A Social History of Architectural Graphic Standards* (MIT Press, 2008), is informed by approaches to social thought, history and sociology professions, and material culture studies. Ongoing research focuses upon the tools, processes, and agendas shaping the productive force of the architectural bureau in the first half of the 20th Century. The present essay serves as prolegomenon to a larger study concerned with the process of differentiation among roles of client, architect, and builder, especially as evident in the emergence of formal contractual instruments as well as the *Handbook of Architectural Practice* discussed here. General histories of architectural practice that provide an important foundation for work in this area include Martin S. Briggs, *The Architect in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927); Spiro Kostof, ed. *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Andrew Saint, *The Image of the Architect* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Mary N. Woods, *From Craft to Profession: The Practice of Architecture in Nineteenth Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Ulrich Pfammatter, *The Making of the Modern Architect and Engineer: The Origins and Development of a Scientific and Industrially Oriented Education* (Basel ; Boston: Birkhauser-Publishers for Architecture, 2000); Andrew Saint, *Architect and Engineer: A Study in Sibling Rivalry* (New Haven Conn. ; London: Yale University Press, 2007).
3. The period from the end of the Civil War to the advent of the Great Depression was a particularly fertile one for trade and professional journalism, and many debates played out in those pages.
4. As a leading and very active member of the architecture profession, Day's correspondence and papers provide significant insights to the pressures shaping U.S. architectural practice in the period between the Civil War and World War I. Of note as repositories of Day's materials are the manuscript collections the Architecture Archives of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and the American Institute of Architects Archives in Washington, D.C. While focused primarily upon the work issuing from Day's architectural practice, Keebler's Ph.D. dissertation is a notable contribution. See Patricia Lawson Heintzelman Keebler, "The Life and Work of Frank Miles Day" (Ph.D., University of Delaware, 1980).
5. Frank Miles Day, "Business Correspondence from Frank Miles Day to J. Lawrence Mauran, Et Al.," in *AIA Office Files Autograph: Waid, Dan Everett (1864-1939)*, ed. American Institute of Architects (Washington, DC: Archives of the American Institute of Architects, 1917).
6. *Ibid.*

7. Day served a two-year term as President of the AIA from 1906-1907.
8. A range of such turn-of-the-century literary representations are reviewed in Herbert Croly, "The Architect in Recent Fiction," *Architectural Record* 17, no. 2 (1905): 137-39.
9. Frederick Squires, *Architec-Tonics: The Adventures of Tom Thumtack, Architect* (New York: Comstock, 1914). *Architecture and Building* was published in New York by William T. Comstock from 1911-1932. It was a continuation of several other journals including *Architects' and Builders' Magazine* (1899-1911) "devoted to the interests of architects, engineers, builders, woodworkers and persons contemplating building."
10. *Ibid.*, 13.
11. Squires' path crossed that of his future collaborator Rockwell Kent at Columbia in contexts both academic and extra-curricular. Both had been track stars and humorists, and both contributors to the *Jester*, a student-run publication. Kent's career, like Squires' own, would lead much farther afield – in Kent's case to exotic places like Alaska and Newfoundland, to renown as an artist and a much-in-demand illustrator, to Moscow as a winner of the Lenin Peace Prize, and to the attention of the Senator Joseph McCarthy. Through a surprising turn of events, Squires would ultimately leave the profession as well.
12. Squires, 29.
13. *Ibid.*, 25-33.
14. *Ibid.*, 55-63.
15. *Ibid.*, 15-24.