The Beaux-Arts Atelier in America

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Beginning with Richard Morris Hunt in the mid 1800's, aspiring American architects went to study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, returning home with tremendous enthusiasm and nostalgia for the educational life they had left behind in Paris. These members of an elite group were conscious of their good fortune and eager to provide opportunities for less privileged aspiring American architects to partake of the type of excellent education they had enjoyed. They were inspired by the desire to improve future generations of Americanarchitects, thereby improving the quality of American architecture, a pressing need in the mid nineteenth century for a growing nation in the process of building its institutions.

The first American atelier was opened by Richard Morris Hunt, the first American to study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, in New York in 1857.¹ Two of his early students, William Robert Ware and Henry Van Brunt, established an atelier in their own Boston office seven years later. Henry Hobson Richardson, who returned from the Ecole in 1865, formed a partnership with Charles D. Gambrill, another former pupil of Hunt, in 1867. Their office also functioned as an atelier for their assistant/pupils.² These and other early American ateliers differed from their French models in that they were typically integrated into an architectural practice and the atelier pupils were to varying degrees also the architect's assistants. The French ateliers, while typically nn by practicing architects, occupied separate premises from the Patron's office and educated pupils who were not employed in the Patron's practice.'

Americans continued, in increasing numbers, to attend the Ecole des Beaux Arts. In the spirit of camaraderie fostered by the Parisian ateliers in which they had studied, the Beaux-Arts alumni formed the Beaux-Arts Society of Architects in America. The American organization grew out of a student meeting in Paris in 1889.⁴ The group, incorporated in New York in 1894 as the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects, promoted the development of a centralized American school of architecture, modelled upon the Ecole. As its first step towards this end, the Society began an educational program which was to continue to the present day under varying names: the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design, the National Institute for Architectural Education, and the current Van Alen Institute.

The new Society began to issue student programs on a quarterly system. American architects responded to these new educational opportunities by creating ateliers in which students of architecture could apply themselves to the Society's programs and competitions.

DEFINING THE AMERICAN ATELIER

American ateliers derived rather loosely from the Parisian model. The Beaux-Arts atelier in Paris consisted of a studio run by a practicing architect known as the Patron, in premises separate from his architectural office, in which Ecole students of all levels worked together, the youngest and least experienced learning from and assisting their elders, the most advanced of whom learned from the Patron himself.⁵ The atelier was characterized by lively camaraderie and competitive team spirit. Transplanted to America, the atelier developed in a variety of forms. According to the rules of the Society, an atelier could be constituted by a minimum of five students working under the guidance of a practicing architect.6 Many ateliers were this small, simple, and ephemeral, changing students and patrons from year to year. Some, for example the Atelier Skidmore-Owings, may have existed within firms. The Atelier Hirons was a long standing independent atelier. Other, more highly institutionalized ateliers, existed as functions of the architectural clubs which sprang up around the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet another variation, closest of all to the original Parisian model, was the atelier which worked in conjunction with a school of architecture. The Columbia University Extension Ateliers, for example, provided design education in several studios dispersed throughout downtown New York City for Columbia students.' Some ateliers were hybrids. The "T" Square Club atelier, for example, was associated at different times with the Schools of Industrial Art, the Academy of the Fine Arts, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Philadelphia Chapter of the American Institute of Architects.⁸ Although a few of the ateliers had some affiliation with the AIA, the atelier movement was generally unsupported by the AIA, which came to view the university education as an important element of professionalization. Whereas the early memberships of the AIA and the Society of Beaux-Arts Architectshad overlapped to some extent, with Richard Morris Hunt an important figure in both organizations, the AIA did not promote atelier education?

THE STUDENTS

The students, themselves, were another source of difference between the Ecole atelier and its American counterpart. Whereas the students of the Parisian ateliers were enrolled in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, the American atelier students were a different and mixed lot. The Society of Beaux-Arts Architects never succeeded in its original goal of establishing a centralized school of architecture on the Parisian model. The curriculum of the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects, renamed in 1916 the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design, was followed in both schools and ateliers. Some aspiring architects and draftsmen learned their profession by working in offices by day and pursuing their design studies in the evenings and weekends in ateliers. The term draftsman is, in itself, ambiguous, meaning on the one hand an architectin-training and on the other, a paraprofessional with lesser opportunities or aspirations whose career will be spent working for an architect. There was, in the early twentieth century, an unsuccessful movement to formalize drafting as a profession in its own right, related to architecture as nursing is to medicine or the paralegal profession to law.¹⁰ More research is necessary to determine to what extent the ateliers served to reinforce professional distinctions between draftsmen and architects and economic and/or class distinctions between those privileged to spend the time and money to obtain a university education and those required to enter the work force and obtain their education in the office and in their spare time. The only information I have discovered to date about economics of the ateliers is that in 1927, a student of the T-Square Club atelier was required to pay twenty-five dollars per year in tuition." This figure should be compared to University tuition at that time.

Confirming the relationship between education and social standing, W.R. Ware observed in 1887 that "...the boys who go for two or three years to a professional school are apt to be a better lot, by birth and breeding, as well as in virtue of the schooling itself, than the ordinary run of draughtsmen."¹² Further research is necessary to explore the significance of the atelier-educated men's contribution to American architecture.¹³

A key difference between the American atelier and its French model was that while the French atelier student was also enrolled at the Ecole, the American atelier student was generally not simultaneouslyenrolled in a school of architecture and might, in fact, never obtain any formal education in subjects outside of design. For some students, however, the atelier experience was a prelude to university study. Success in the B.A.I.D. program might lead to a scholarship enabling an impecunious student to pay tuition to attend a university. Other atelier students were more privileged post-graduates who wished to continue their design educations after graduation from a University, perhaps going on to win the Paris Prize. The atelier offered these students a gradual transition between school and practice. Otto Teegen, Director of the B.A.I.D. Department of Architecture, explained the constituency of the ateliers as follows in 1938: "...it (B.A.I.D.) was started to aid draughtsmen and designers at a time when architectural schools were few and training was acquired chiefly in offices or private ateliers...With easier availability of a university education in recent years the number of draughtsmen trained exclusively in offices and ateliers has appeared to decrease and so our work has been conducted mostly for the benefit of the schools...there still exist a great many young men who are unable to get a university education and a great many others who, having completed their schooling, are at a loss during their apprenticeship in an office to continue their architectural design under proper direction."14

The results of the B.A.I.D. programs indicate a fairly fluid movement of students in between ateliers, offices, and universities. To some extent, ateliers filled in the geographical gaps in the University system, with aspiring architects studying at ateliers in states without schools of architecture. Largely, however, ateliers seemed to have grown up near Universities, for while the first generation of atelierpatrons came from those educated at the ecole, future generations of patrons came increasingly from the ranks of those with formal educations from American schools of **architecture**.¹⁵

Although the circular of information stated that "Students of either sex desiring to follow the course should join one of the ateliers...",¹⁶ women do not appear to have participated in the Beaux-Arts ateliers." This statement is based upon a reading of the results of the B.A.I.D. programs from 1917 through 1954. The Bulletin of the B.A.I.D. seems to have followed the custom of spelling out women's given names and indicating the men's with initials only. The women students appear associated with schools, rather than ateliers. It seems likely that the men's club atmosphere and boyish fun of the ateliers did not encourage women's participation. A Women's Architectural Club existed in Chicago in the early 1930's. Although there does not seem to have been an atelier connected with the club, the members met once a month to work on competitions.¹⁸

THE WORK

Programs written by atelier patrons, university professors, and other distinguished architects were sent out quarterly from the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects, later the B.A.I.D. Student projects were sent back to New York to be evaluated by jurors drawn from participating schools and ateliers. In The Study of Architectural Design, published first as a series of articles in Pencil Points and later in book form,¹⁹ John F. Harbeson, professor at the University of Pennsylvania and formerpatron of the "T" Square Club Atelier, described for students the types of projects they would encounter and provided a wealth of practical advice, some directed specifically to students of ateliers and some to students at universities, about how to work the problems.

First, there is the "analytique" or order problem. "The analytique," wrote Harbeson, "is a study in proportion, and in the elements of architecture - the treatment of walls, doorways, windows, cornices, balustrades, porticos, arcades, etc., and usually requires the use of a particular one of the socalled 'five orders of architecture."

When a student had acquired the necessary competence in the "analytique," he advanced to the Class B "Plan" problems. The elements of architecture, the focus of the analytique, are now incorporated into the design of a complete unit, which is studied primarily in plan and elevation, with sections employed in projects focusing on interior spaces, and perspectives used to impart three dimensionality. An esquisse is made to quickly define the student's solution. History is consulted for design precedents. The plan is developed in intricate detail and rendered skillfully. Typical Class B program would call for a building type such as a library, a yacht club, or a theater.

The Measured Drawing was required by the B.A.I.D., says Harbeson, because "It is a connecting link between design, creation and execution..." As a long time was given for the Measured Drawing, the composition of the sheet was expected to receive special attention, with lettering incorporated into the graphic design, excellent rendering, and care given to historical accuracy of period details.

The Archeology Project required that a student combine research providing parti and style with imagination providing picturesque embellishment in completing designs for romantic projects such as "A Studio in the Russian Style" or "A Spanish Renaissance Loggia." The time allotted for the "Archeo" was twice that given for the "Plan" problem. In an article in the Bulletin titled "Why Archaeology," L. Bancel

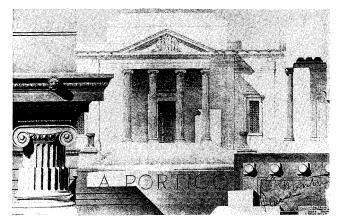


Fig. 1. Fourth Analytique "A Portico with a Pediment" R.E. Nelson, Cleveland School of Architecture 1929²⁰

La Farge justified the historicist focus thus: "To enable him to project himself into the great periods of the past and to understand their very essence is a preparation for entering eventually into the spirit of modem life, and capturing its expression. To follow the logic in ingenious solutions of ancient problems is preparing to solve the riddles of the future. To become an adept in the appropriate use of ancient materials is to become a wizard with those of the future. To recognize honesty and truth in ancient work is to preserve one's integrity in modern design."²¹

The student who successfully mastered the Analytique, the Class B Plan, the Archeological Projet and the Measured Drawing was qualified to progress to the Class A Problem. Class A problems were classified as Plan, Decorative or Sketch problems. The plan problems were more complex than those in Class B, involving a larger scale or more intricate building type such as an opera house, a museum of fine arts, a college administration building.

The Sketch problem, known as the *Esquisse-Esquisse*, started in Class B with simple problems and continued in Class A with more complex problems. The Esquisse-Esquisse was done in a brief period of time, generally nine hours, in which the student began by searching for a parti and finished by rendering the solution. The competition for the Paris Prize was based upon a problem of great magnitude and complexity. The subject of the eighteenth Paris Prize, won by Percival Goodman in 1925, was "A Summer Capitol."²² In order to enter the Final Competition for the Paris Prize, a student was required to pass the First and Second preliminary Competitions, both grueling sketch problems, the second of twenty-four hour duration. Harbeson recommended going into training, for "just one twenty-four hour sketch problem is a severe strain on one's stamina because

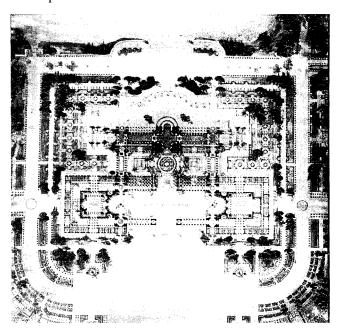


Fig. 2. 18th Paris Prize in Architecture **1925** "A Summer Capitol" (**plan**) Percival Goodman, Atelier Licht

of the intense nervous effort required, to say nothing of the loss of sleep and lack of regularity in eating..."²³

The subjects of the programs changed over time. The authors of the programs appear to have attempted some degree of social relevance. It must have been difficult, in times of war and depression, for students to have focussed their attention on subjects drawn from extravagant historical fantasies.²⁴ For example, although there were still some lighter subjects dealt with in 1942 - 1943, the programs did include many such titles as "An Army Chapel," A Navy Mess Hall,""Transient Workers Housing,""An Induction Receiving Center," and "An Evacuation Camp,"²⁵ programs which addressed current societal realities.

The program authors also appear to have attempted to respond to the challenge of modernism by replacing historicist themes with more modem subjects. The failure of the Beaux-Arts architects to recognize the overwhelming influence of the Bauhaus as a revolution in educational method, rather than just a stylistic change concerning theme and appearance, seems to have been an important factor in the demise of the Beaux-Arts system of education. The Beaux-Arts architects imagined a smooth passage between past, present and future. The history of architecture, however, has

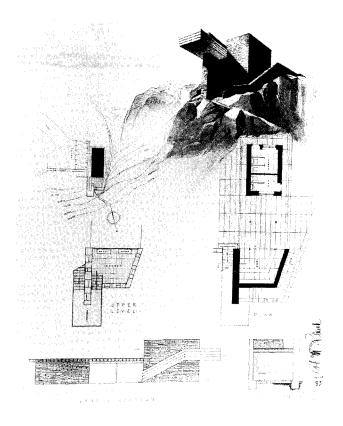


Fig. 3. Class C Problem 3 1947-48 "A Lookout Station" Jack Cavanaugh, T-Square Club Atelier²⁶

been characterized by a series of shifting tides. The introduction of Bauhaus theories into American architectural education and practice produced a rift with the past. The modernist orientation towards present and future caused the Beaux-Arts past to slip rapidly from the profession's consciousness.

THE PLAY

The French atelier balanced the stress and hard work of the charrette with plenty of fun and games when deadlines were not pressing. This playful camaraderie was imported to America along with the educational program.

The architecture clubs institutionalized the fun of the ateliers for the enjoyment of older members as well as the novitiates. The more successful of the clubs included dining facilities, smoking rooms, and card-playing rooms, fielded bowling and baseball teams, and held dinners, dances, and smokers. It is interesting to note that in the Boston Architectural Center, descended from the Boston Architectural Club, the Atelier survives as the student social organization.

Architects appear to have had more fun in this earlier period. Nowadays, many architects' evenings are occupied by overtime work. The AIA has taken over some of the social function of the earlier architectural clubs. The boisterous fun, imported from Parisian atelier life, which gave architects relief from the stresses of study and practice has been lost in these more serious times.

THE SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The American ateliers existed for a century, from the mid 1800's and to the mid 1900's. When Richard Morris Hunt returned from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1855, he returned to a growing nation. The United States doubled its population between 1860 and 1890, going from a nation of 31.5 million to a nation of 63 million in a period of thirty years. The nation was in the process of fulfilling what was considered its manifest destiny, to stretch from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts.²⁸ When the Society of Beaux-Arts architects was founded, its mission was to provide America with enough well-educated architects to design the buildings for this expanding nation. The early ateliers were providing urgently needed training for responsible professionals essential to society.

Setting standards for the education of architects was one aspect of a process which Magali Sarfatti Larson has termed the professional **project**.²⁹ The mid nineteenth century was the time when the professions as we know them in America came into being. Professional societies were created, professional schools founded, codes of ethics written, regulations for practice enacted. Some institutions, such as the A.I.A. and the university-based schools of architecture survived the test of time to define the profession as we know it today. Other institutions, such as the architectural clubs and ateliers were left behind by history. The few ateliers which have continued, transformed, revived, or come into being in recent years exist as alternate models outside the norm.



SINTEENTH ANNUAL "RIOT" OF ATELIER HIRONS-MORGAN, NEW YORK

Hirons; 2. D'Amato; 3. Bacon; 4. Mellor; 5. Euston; 6. Gambaro; 7. Delamarre; 8. Swensen; 9. Beeston; 10. Angilly;
Gregson; 12. Sapienza; 13. Hautman; 14. Dyer; 15. Johnson; 16. Spencer; 17. Garrison; 18. Ellis; 19. Gonzales;
Simonson; 21. Rowe; 22. Skidmore; 23. Gauthier; 24. Feldman; 25. Harrison; 26. Munizaga; 27. Yersin; 28. Condit;
Knebel; 30. Lewis; 31. Arnone; 32. Rustay; 33. Dymock 34. Judge; 35. Sullivan; 36. Anderson; 37. Sommer;
Baum; 39. Schillinger; 40. Correa; 41. Bradley; 42. Jansson; 43. Waldorf; 44. Gnerre; 45. De Rocco.

Fig. 4. Sixteenth Annual "Riot" of Atelier Hirons-Morgan, New York 1927²⁷

These include the Boston Architectural Center, probably the only survivor from the Beaux-Arts system, the Talieson Fellowship, a long-standing atelier never affiliated with the B.A.I.D., and the studios of teacher/practitioners such as Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, and Michael Rotondi which exist in a middle ground between education and practice. The current controversy over intern abuse reflects the profession's desire for clarification of the boundaries in a system where work and learning may be indistinguishable.

Expansionism and the professional project fostered the growth of the ateliers in the latter half of the 1800's and the early 1900's. The two world wars and depression of the twentieth century dealt the ateliers blows from which they were ultimately never to recover. Far less institutionalized than the University, the atelier was more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of a nation facing war and depression. The atelier was, in essence, its students and when the students disappeared, so did the atelier. In the first and second world wars, the young men of the ateliers, students and patrons alike, left their jobs and studies for military service. During the depression, many young draftsmen whose daytime employment afforded them the resources to pursue evening atelier study lost their jobs. The minutes of the T-Square Club noted in 1930 that "Many of the boys found themselves out of work before the end of the year".³⁰ The academic year of 1928 - 1929 appears to have been the peak year for atelier activity associated with the B.A.I.D., with students from forty nine different ateliers mentioned in the Bulletin. The stock market crashed in 1929 and the number of ateliers declined steadily thereafter throughout the depression. There were only 18 ateliers active at the depth of the depression in 1933 and the number of ateliers continued to decline.³¹

When the United States entered World War II, there were seven or eight ateliers. Only two ateliers were active during World War II and of these, one seems to have been associated with the war effort as it was located in a drafting department of the navy in San Diego. The year after the war's end, there were five active ateliers and numbers rose slightly to a postwar peak of nine ateliers in 1948 - 1950. The G.I. Bill, which made a university education affordable for the generation of men who had gone to war, probably had something to do with the fact that the ateliers had no very significant resurgence after war's end.

The B.A.I.D. continued its activities primarily for the benefit of the schools, scaling back its curriculum after 1954. The former National Institute for Architectural Education and the present Van Alen Institute, successor organizations to the B.A.I.D., have continued the Paris Prize competition.

THE RISE OF THE BAUHAUS, THE DECLINE OF THE BEAUX-ARTS

It is clear that the rise and fall of the ateliers was linked to events in Americanhistory. The ateliers were also a **function** of the Beaux-Arts system of education. The historic event which led to the demise of Beaux-Artseducation in America was the arrival at Harvard of Walter Gropius in 1936.³² It was noted in the AIA Journal that 1929 was the peak year for B.A.I.D. activity.³³ From this time until 1937, the number of schools participating in B.A.I.D. programs remained constant around sixty. In the academic year 1937 - 1938, the number of participating schools dropped sharply to thirtyseven and never rose significantly during the remaining years of the B.A.I.D. Bauhaus educational theory, brought from Germany by Gropius, caught on rapidly in American university departments of architecture. Mies van der Rohe explained the rapid change as follows: "The Bauhaus was not an institution with a clear program; it was an idea, and Gropius formulated this idea with great precision. Only an idea spreads so far."³⁴ Beaux-arts trained faculty either changed with the times or were discredited. An important result of this sweeping change in the dominant theory was that the architecture school was firmly established as the site of architectural education. Whereas the Beaux-Arts design education could be had in school or atelier alike, a Bauhaus education was only available in architecture school.³⁵ The B.A.I.D. programs appearing regularly each quarter and the centralized juries enabled those who practiced by day to teach in the evenings without spending hours composing programs and evaluating student work. Theoretically, there was no reason why the ateliers could not offer a Bauhaus education, but functionally, teaching is a demanding job, and no new institution arose to share the burden with teaching practitioners of the Bauhaus as the B.A.I.D. had done for the Beaux-Arts. Ironically, the atelier situated in the realm of practice would have been a more appropriate locus than the isolated university for the Bauhaus education which stressed the interrelationship of design and production.

THE MOVEMENT OF ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN EDUCATION FROM THE PROFESSIONAL COM-MUNITY INTO THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

The roots of the American atelier were in Paris, where the life of the student was balanced between academic studies centralized within the ecole and design education dispersed out in the professional commurity. Except for a few schools like Columbia which experimented briefly with ateliers exterior to the university, the American architecture school brought the design education within the academic boundaries. The American atelier existed as an opportunity to gain a design education, as distinct from office training, within the professional community. When practitioners join university faculties, they almost inescapably become academics, as the demands of the university sap the time and energy that practice requires. The trouble with learning design in an office apprenticeship is that architects are generally overwhelmed by the demands of their practices, leaving little time and energy to devote to educating young assistants. The atelier offered an opportunity for practitioners to teach design in a setting unencumbered by the demands of university or practice.

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- ³² Bannister, op. cit. p.106.
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- ³⁴ Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, remarks at a Chicago dinner in honor of Gropius, quoted by Harold Bush-Brown, *Beaux-Arts* to Bauhaus and Beyond op. cit. p.39.
- ³⁵ Whereas the ateliers in general did not appear to function in the development of modern architecture in America, the T-Square Club of Philadelphia did appear to have fostered the discourse of modernism. The T-Square Club was a-typical in that it was located in one of the most important American cities and included the majority of the influential architects of its city and hence developed an agenda of its own, rather than depending on the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects, later the B.A.I.D., for its sole direction. See Mitchell, op. cit., for a discussion of the T-Square Club and the development of modern architecture.