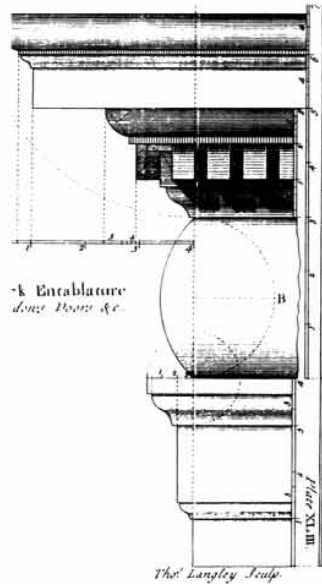


Classical Comeback

by Wendy Moonan



Every Thursday for twelve weeks last fall, six architects and I rushed from work to a 6:30 pm class at the Institute for the Study of Classical Architecture, located in a nondescript industrial building at 111 Franklin Street in Tribeca. There, in a fifth-floor loft, we sat on rickety folding chairs at sawhorse tables beneath the harsh fluorescent lights in a studio reeking of paint. For three hours we listened spellbound as the professor, Steve Bass, lectured to us on Pythagorean geometry, Plato's theories, the numbers in musical intervals, ancient astronomy, Vitruvius, and the Renaissance — without a single note.

Armed with compasses and rulers, we mastered the first steps of how to draw the classical orders, Greek temples, Gothic cathedrals, and Palladian villas. We made geometric constructions by folding paper, without tools. "It has changed how I approach things. It allows me to do what I want to do better," said Chuck Hilton, a young architect with his own firm in Greenwich, Connecticut. His previous education was deconstructivist. "Once you understand how the orders work, you can combine them in a way that communicates."

Another young architect with Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer, Manuel Mergal, part of the team that just built the new addition to the Dance Theater of Harlem, said he wished he could start all over again. After the course, he would have done it differently.

"The brilliant thing about studying this tradition is that by simply going through the exercises, the underlying logic and principles on which the work is based are revealed. Classical architecture almost teaches itself," said Taisto Makela, a student at the Institute last summer.

"Theory and Practice of Proportion in Architecture" is only one of several courses offered at the Institute for the Study of Classical Architecture (570-7374), a four-year-old, unaccredited school affiliated with the New York Academy of Art, an accredited fine arts school founded in New York City in 1982. About 35 students of all ages enroll at one time, according to founder Donald M. Rattner, an architect with Ferguson, Murray & Shamanian. Dozens of outsiders attend occasional weekend seminars, and about 15 participants, including students from architecture schools all over the world, attend the intensive summer program.

The Institute recently published the first annual issue of *The Classicist* (96 pages, 118 black-and-white illustrations, 9 3/4 x 11 1/4, \$35.00). The journal has essays on historic and current works of classical architecture (like Robert A. M. Stern's Brooklyn Law School Tower), landscape design, and interiors (such as the new Nineteenth-Century Galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art). James Howard Kunstler, author of *The Geography of Nowhere*, contributed an article on "The Public Realm and the Common Good," and novelist and *Wall Street Journal* columnist Mark Helprin wrote about the artist Edward Schmidt.

Classical architecture is turning up everywhere these days, from the stunning models in the "Italian Renaissance Architecture" exhibition this winter at the National Gallery of Art, to the Virtual Reality Convention at the New York Hilton in December, where a computer-generated, three-dimensional virtual

tour of St. Peter's in Rome was the hit of the show. The National Academy of Design is offering lectures on the classical tradition and its first course on drawing the classical orders to high school students. Sir John Soane's Museum Foundation has an ambitious series of programs at the Union Club on the legacy, vision, and architecture of Thomas Jefferson and Sir John Soane. Classical America produced a videotape on how to draw a classical cornice. And Academy Editions is publishing three books, *Allan Greenberg, Acropolis Restoration*, and *Education Architects*, on the ideological debates raging in architectural schools today.

What is going on? Clearly, classical architectural education is starting to make a comeback. Courses are being offered at the universities of Notre Dame, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Miami, and Syracuse. Besides *The Classicist*,

Urban Center Books now stocks *Perspectives in Architecture*, a new monthly magazine published in association with the Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture.

"Modern architecture is passé," posits J. François Gabriel, a French architect with the right name to teach a classical studio at Syracuse. "We get tired of things. There's a pendulum of history. You can't tell the same story over and over again." A graduate of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris (which hasn't taught classical architecture since the student revolts of 1968), Gabriel was recruited to join Le Corbusier's atelier. He refused but understood the master's appeal: "World War I was a traumatic experience. People wanted something new and fresh and innocent."

"I taught with Gropius at Harvard for seven years, and I never once heard him mention classical architecture or the name of any architect or existing building," another French Beaux Arts alumnus, Jean-Paul Carlhian, recalled.

And whatever Harvard did, the other schools followed. "At Pratt, I was taught by people who studied with Gropius and felt that classical architecture didn't exist," Steve Bass said. "It was virtually unmentionable."

Then, in 1959, a *New Yorker* by the name of Henry Hope Reed got mad. He wrote a polemical book, *The Golden City*: juxtaposing modern buildings with Beaux Arts landmarks to prove how modern architecture was destroying the look of American cities. He predicted that the modern movement would self-destruct and the classical style would return. Classical America sponsors a journal, lectures, walking tours (which Reed still conducts), and the reprinting of classical texts like William R. Ware's *The America Vignola*, which is being used as a textbook in the new college courses now.

Many regarded him as an eccentric. Then, in 1963, Pennsylvania Station was pulled down, and angry citizens formed a grass-roots preservation movement that began to value some of the city's Beaux Arts buildings. Suddenly, Reed seemed to be on the side of reason.

Classical America was sponsoring Alvin Holm's popular course on drawing the classical orders at the National Academy of Design at just the time Prince Charles denounced contemporary architecture in his famous speech to the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1984, and completed a BBC documentary and a book, *A Vision of Britain*. Suddenly, the classical movement had a world-famous spokesman.

The Prince wrote, "I do believe that if we are going to come up with an architecture we might actually take pleasure in, we have to strip away some of the nonsensical dogma of the day and think about fundamental principles once again." Then he founded his school.

In 1983, young Don Rattner, a graduate of Columbia and Princeton, took a course on classical composition and perspective at the New Haven Historical Society. He went on to study at the National Academy of Design, won its first design prize, and was hooked.

Four years after he opened the Institute with professors like Bass who had attended the Prince's school, University of Pennsylvania professor John Blatteau, and practicing classical architects like Stephen Falatko, it has become an "if you build it, they will come" story. "The profession at large is still 98 percent opposed to this kind of education," said Rattner. The school survives on tuition, foundation grants, and his own continuous fund-raising.

But unlike Henry Hope Reed, Rattner does not want to sell classicism as the only correct style. "We're teaching a point of view that isn't taught elsewhere, an attitude toward civilization based on humanity, not gizmos and gadgets."

All I know is that one short course has altered my experience of the streetscape. I'm now reading Plato in my spare time, thinking about Palladio, and drawing Chartres — for fun.