

# Urbanities

## American Architecture's Classical Revival

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Striking new buildings evoke our national heritage.

Why, in 2015, would anyone want to build a classical building? The answer: to reconnect present-day architecture and city building with American political ideals, history, and culture. This impulse, more common today than in several generations, reflects an irony of the architectural world: the avant-garde is now composed of classical architects, while the establishment, and especially the academy, is the fiefdom of modernists. But the buildings that most Americans know best and cherish reflect the ideas and values of the classical tradition, and its revival is cause for celebration.

In the mid-1970s, coauthor Allan Greenberg changed the direction of his architectural work after becoming entranced by the lives of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Our first and third presidents not only helped found our nation but also helped forge a uniquely American form of classical architecture. With this new form, they sought to embody the new country's democratic ideals, as seen most powerfully in America's capital, Washington, D.C. The

beautiful domed Capitol building still forms the center of the city—and of America's political life. Smaller buildings, both public and private, though typically built of wood, were self-consciously classical. The citizen's house was the origin and building block of early American architecture. Even before the Revolution, our houses were the basis for our public buildings: the schoolhouse, courthouse, jailhouse, and so on. Later, through the architecture of Washington and Jefferson, this vision evolved into a more classical foundation of ancient Roman—the first Republic—and Palladian precedents. Until World War II, our dominant architectural style, especially for public buildings, continued in this tradition, as exemplified by the National Gallery of Art (1941) and the Jefferson Memorial (1943).

America's huge postwar building output, however, expressed a different, modernistic spirit, which ignored both the context of the building site and the national architectural tradition. In order to make history in architecture, one now



Right: Duncan Stroik's Thomas Aquinas College chapel, in Santa Paula, California; above: interior

had to divorce oneself from the history of architecture. "To do what has never been done before" was now equated with the cutting edge. The pursuit of the new and different became the focus of the academy. Symbolism, precedent, human scale, and context were all jettisoned as baggage from the past.

The roots of this transition date from the 1930s, when elite American university architecture departments sought faculty who believed in the ethos of Germany's Bauhaus school. Harvard led the way by hiring Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus, to head its Graduate School of Design. After World War II, the dominant American architectural style was typified by the use of steel or concrete frame buildings with an independent skin of metal and glass-curtain walls. The use of





**Thomas H. Beeby's federal courthouse, in Tuscaloosa, Alabama**

repetitive forms, with a lack of ornamentation and hierarchy, suggested the antibourgeois sentiments imported from the Bauhaus. In Europe, this took the form of a Marxist approach to design, “an almost moral movement,” as Philip Johnson once described it. In

the United States, the style took a softer left-leaning orientation.

The European avant-garde produced only a few buildings between the two world wars, yet its influence was so great that it completely changed the character of American postwar

architecture. From the United States, this Harvard-Bauhaus style has spread to almost every country in the world. The new approach, combined with the sculptural liberation introduced by building materials such as structural steel and reinforced concrete, exploded

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architectural conventions, paving the way for architects to become the philosopher kings of our physical surroundings. The architect became the star—the “starchitect.”

This transformation explains why contemporary buildings in Denver, San Francisco, New

York, and other American cities seem so divorced from local culture and history. Most of the newer buildings in such cities could be lifted by skyhook and dropped into Moscow, Jidda, Rio de Janeiro, or London, and fit easily alongside recent construction. We are left with

a legacy of increasingly characterless city streets and the new parts of our university campuses; a worldwide sameness is the result.

The last decade, however, has seen the reemergence of architects who have studied classical architecture, and

new classical buildings are once again being constructed. Steeped in the study of classical architecture, the four architects whose work we present here—which ranges from a U.S. courthouse in Alabama to a college library in Illinois to a church in California to a New York apartment building—are leading representatives of this movement. Their growing body of work is driven by client and marketplace demands, not the ideology propounded by the academy. Their buildings represent not so much a reaction to modernism as a re-embrace of our uniquely American democratic ideals of architecture and urbanism.

**W**hat happened to the once-beautiful American courthouse? Before 1950, such buildings, built of brick or limestone, with eloquent classical temple fronts and noble interiors, were prominent in our cities and towns. Seeing or entering one, citizens knew intuitively that this was a physical embodiment of the majesty of the law. But the contemporary American courthouse usually looks like a mundane office building, with banal interiors and no suggestion of the importance of the courts to our democratic system.

A new federal courthouse in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, rejects this facelessness. The General Services Administration (GSA), which serves as “client” for federal buildings, including courthouses, initially re-

tained the services of a modernist architectural office for the project. The firm’s design, however, was firmly rejected by the judges of the 11th circuit court, who sit in Tuscaloosa, as well as by Alabama’s senior senator, Richard Shelby, and local officials. The judges demanded that they preside in a traditionally designed courthouse. They prevailed, and the GSA eventually hired the firm Hammond Beeby Rupert Ainge for the project; partner Thomas H. Beeby, a former dean of the Yale School of Architecture, a classicist, and a student of the most classical modernist, Mies van der Rohe, had the right credentials for the job.

After considering three designs, the judges picked a Greek Revival-inspired approach—a fitting choice, since the American South has a long history with Greek Revival-inspired architecture. In 2011, the 127,000-square-foot, two-story limestone courthouse was completed, with a dominant center structure and two smaller side wings. Its bold temple front is inspired by the ancient Temple of Zeus at Nemea. Murals depicting Alabama history line the center atrium of the building’s main public space. The new courthouse projects an appropriately powerful presence on a public square facing Tuscaloosa’s main boulevard.

The courthouse isn’t Beeby’s first successful classical public building. In the mid-1980s, he designed the Rice Wing at the Art Institute of Chicago, which stands in stark contrast to modernist Renzo Piano’s

more recent contemporary addition. In Chicago, too, Beeby’s work harmonized with the building typology. Everything from the echo-producing openness of the space to the top-lit, two-story sculpture gallery, which fills the museum with light (even as Beeby’s design protects paintings from the destructive aspects of natural light in adjoining galleries), connects the Rice Wing with America’s most prominent art institutions—such as the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Frick Collection. Visitors move through Beeby’s sculpture court before arriving at more flexible galleries. The experience is serene and seamless, ideal for a weekend afternoon.

**S**anta Paula, in Southern California, is home to another exemplary new classical building, on the campus of Thomas Aquinas College. In 1971, when the school was founded, American architects were arguing the merits of brutalist concrete buildings versus postmodernism and neo-modernism. The college instead looked to Thomas Jefferson’s “academical village” at the University of Virginia for inspiration. It was a bravely unfashionable choice. Thomas Aquinas’s first set of campus buildings, situated around a central lawn and lined with arcades, were designed in a simple Mission style, evoking California’s early Spanish churches.

When it came time to build the campus's crowning feature, a church, the college president asked architect Duncan Stroik to design a structure with room enough for the entire student body and faculty. The president wanted a traditional cruciform church with an interior of columns and arches and a dome. He also suggested that it reflect the school's "great books" liberal arts program, and so be a kind of survey of great architecture: early Christian, Renaissance, Romanesque, Baroque, Spanish, and so on.

Part of the challenge, as Stroik describes it, was to develop "ideas based on what we've seen in the past 500 years, to make it a complex building." Stroik sought to learn from the masters and evolve the tradition. Inspired by the early Florentine Renaissance churches of Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) and by the classicist architecture of Californian Arthur Brown (1874–1975), the \$23 million Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Chapel, dedicated in March 2009, elegantly complements the surrounding Mission-style buildings. It also establishes a classical architectural presence that enriches the entire campus. Stroik's design centers on a cruciform plan, with a dome above the intersection of nave and transept; the exterior is carefully designed to focus attention on the entrance and side tower. Inside, a columnar arcade supports a barrel-vaulted ceiling and separates the nave from the side aisles.



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### **Beeby's Rice Wing at the Art Institute of Chicago**

The reaction to the church has been overwhelmingly positive. It has become the center of campus life for this Catholic college, a welcoming place in which to pray or ponder the

mysteries and challenges of life. Partly as a result of its success, Stroik made it to the second round in a competition to design the new Greek Orthodox church at Ground Zero in



New York, a project ultimately awarded to Santiago Calatrava. Twenty years ago, a classicist such as Stroik wouldn't have been considered for such a prestigious commission. Congregations "really do want clas-

sical or traditional churches today," Stroik observes.

**T**he American Colonial Revival-style campus of the University of Saint Mary of the

Lake, in Mundelein, Illinois, evokes the political values of the nation's founding. Also known as Mundelein Seminary, the school serves as the principal seminary of the Archdiocese of Chicago. Notable



**Left: James McCrery's McEssy Theological Resource Center, an addition to the original library at Mundelein Seminary in Illinois; above: the Center's reading alcove**

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campus buildings include a church with a steeple patterned after one of the first Congregational churches in Old Lyme, Connecticut, and a residence modeled after Mount Vernon. The campus core, built between

1921 and 1934, consists of a terraced topography denoting a hierarchy of buildings. The founder chose an architectural language that recalled that of a New England town, where American self-government was

born. Walking the grounds, one is reminded of Leon Battista Alberti's definition of architectural beauty as "a reasoned harmony of parts . . . so that nothing may be added, taken away, or altered but for the worse."

In 2005, the seminary built an addition to the neo-Georgian Feehan Memorial Library. The McEssy Theological Resource Center would be





**Left: artist's rendering of Peter Pennoyer's design for an apartment building on East 78th Street, Manhattan; above: a terrace**

the first new building on the campus in 70 years. After a proposal for a contemporary, underground building met with an unenthusiastic response, the university retained Franck Lohsen McCrery Architects to design the new library wing. James McCrery, the partner in charge of the project, says that his clients "wanted a transparency that wasn't available in the other buildings on the campus. So it's traditional, yet entirely new." The McEssy

Center functions as an extension of the older, adjacent library building. It boasts a two-story reading room flooded with light, thanks to the large windows overlooking lawns and gardens, and an exterior façade made of limestone and brick. Five arched doorways open onto a manicured courtyard framed by two long covered walkways.

**W**hile the classical tradition is enjoying a civic and institutional revival, the style has long held appeal in the single-family residential market. In New York, prewar apartment buildings remain coveted. New condominiums of steel and glass, while modern and sleek, are too often built to mediocre standards and resemble the office buildings in which many residents already spend much of their days. There is something about the idea of a home rooted in the past but designed for living in the present that attracts people raising a family. They enjoy returning home to time-tested architectural forms and spaces with a sense of memory. Yet developers have only recently made the transition to constructing new ground-up classical apartment buildings. Perhaps the turning point was the success of Robert Stern's 15 Central Park West, completed in 2008, which proved that a new classical apartment house is not only relevant on today's architectural scene but could also become the most successful apartment building in the

world. With its success, we will likely see many more opportunities for classically minded apartment buildings.

For their new building at 151 East 78th Street, Spruce Capital Partners hired architect Peter Pennoyer, former president of the Institute of Classical Architecture and author of several important books on New York architecture. His design improves on traditional Upper East Side apartments, in which valuable square footage is tied up in water closets off the kitchen and narrow maid's rooms (many times represented in real estate listings as an extra bedroom located off a service entrance). Because of advancements in heating and air-conditioning systems, the windows are considerably larger than in most prewar apartments. Instead of isolated kitchens and formal dining rooms, layouts feature open kitchen and dining areas to accommodate modern family dynamics. Setbacks, required by code, provide luxurious garden spaces for residents of the top floors and give the building a romantic silhouette. According to Pennoyer, "this isn't much more expensive than making a glass building. . . . Limestone is actually not frightfully expensive, and building in this economy where prices are high, it's completely feasible to make a specially designed and carved limestone base for an apartment house. It does not damage the business model of these buildings."

Pennoyer's firm produced both the design and construc-

tion documents for the building. Today, most developers get design drawings from one firm and the construction documents from another, but Pennoyer saw an opportunity to ensure the type of quality control that has become signature to his residential practice. For Pennoyer, the commission was also a chance to put some ornamentation back into the New York City landscape—in contrast with many buildings in New York, which are being stripped of theirs.

**W**hile the contagion of "global architecture" today dilutes the individual character of our cities, turning them into bland collections of interchangeable buildings, we now have voices offering a fresh choice: classical architecture based on local traditions and ideals. In Alabama, judges want to hear cases in buildings that embody the virtues of justice; in California and Illinois, colleges want buildings that reflect their founding principles; and in New York City, luxurious new classical apartment buildings offer residents "modern-traditional" living. Classical architecture is not just about history; it's also about light, color, and human proportions, all of which help us understand it and relate to it so naturally. "People will not look forward to prosperity," Edmund Burke once said, "who never look backwards to their ancestors." In politics, as in architecture, tastes evolve. But lasting institutions can be built only on strong foundations. ■