

**SAN ROCCO - COLLABORATIONS** 2A+P/A on Memphis \* Sandra Bartoli and Silvan Linden on Eileen Gray and Le Corbusier \* Maria Bergamo on Venetian stonemasons \* Bernardina Borra on Co-op architecture \* Ludovico Centis on Le Corbusier in La Plata \* Benedict Clouette and Marlisa Wise on Venturi and Scott Brown in Baghdad \* Roberto Damiani on pedagogical experiments by Colin Rowe \* Job Floris on Kahn and Venturi \* Fabrizio Gallanti on copyright in architecture \* Francesco Garofalo on De Renzi, Libera and Vaccaro \* Kersten Geers and Andrea Zanderigo explore the double life of the Gallarate project \* Hamed Khosravi on Kahn, Tange and Isozaki in Tehran \* Giovanni La Varra on the same project according to Kahn, Stirling and Ungers \* Markus Lüscher on Boston's Custom House \* Daniele Pisani on the house on the Kundmannngasse \* Valter Scelsi on Casa Malaparte \* Arturo Scheidegger on VKhUTEMAS \* Pier Paolo Tamburelli on McKim, Mead & White \* Oliver Thill on the Neue Wache \* Federico Tranfa on Milan's metro \* with photos by Carlo Cisventi, Bas Princen and Giovanna Silva

**SAN ROCCO - COLLABORATIONS**

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**Giorgione and Titian, *Sleeping Venus (Dresden Venus)*, 1508-10.  
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# SO MUCH DAMNED BAD WORK

Pier Paolo Tamburelli



Partners and office staff of McKim, Mead & White, 1924; from Leland M. Roth, *McKim, Mead & White architects* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), p. 337

## I

In 1889 Joseph Morrill Wells, at the time an employee of the firm McKim, Mead & White (MM&W), refuses to become a partner, arguing that he could not “put his name to so much damned bad work”.<sup>1</sup> In fact, over a twenty-five-year period, from 1879 to 1904, MM&W realizes almost a thousand buildings. This enormous production is not an accident, nor the unpredictable consequence of the lucky career of its three partners. *Quantity* is not by chance; it is a choice, involving a very precise commitment to both city and architecture.

## II

In a letter of 1909 to Lawrence Grant White, the son of Stanford White and at the time a student at the École des Beaux-Arts, Charles McKim

<sup>1</sup> Charles Moore, *The Life and Times of Charles Follen McKim* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1929), 49, n. 1.

writes: "When you get through with your work on the other side and come home ready to build, you will find opportunities awaiting you that no other country has offered in modern times. The scale is Roman and it will have to be sustained."<sup>2</sup>

In this concise statement, McKim clearly implies three things:

1. The opportunities for architects in America, particularly in Chicago and New York, at the end of 19th century are not only different from those typical of contemporary European cities, but are exceptional in modern times;
2. the only possible comparison for this condition is ancient Rome;
3. and there is a very precise duty toward these opportunities (significantly expressed with a grammar that reaches almost Kantian levels of rigidity and contortionism: "it will have to be sustained").

McKim avoids a detailed analysis of this American exception, yet he clearly defines the *scale* of the opportunity, recognizing not only the amount and size of the buildings to be realized, but also the mythical dimension of this quantity. Rome is seen filtered through a very American fascination with dimensions, quantities and numbers. Architecture enters the realm of myth through sheer mass: big becomes colossal, colossal becomes legendary. This fascination for the colossal is quite clear in the bizarre romanticism of this fragment of a letter from McKim to Burnham about the removal of the Chicago Fair:

So much about the Fair. Before you return it will probably be razed to the ground, and indeed it is the ambition of all concerned to have it swept away in the same magical manner in which it appeared, and with the utmost despatch. For economy, as well as for obvious reasons, it has been proposed that the most glorious way would be to blow up the buildings with dynamite. Another scheme is to destroy them with fire. This last would be the easiest and grandest spectacle except for the danger of flying embers in the event of a change of wind from the lake.<sup>3</sup>

MM&W and its few competitors are the pioneers of a new colossal city. They must produce this new city quickly, and starting from scratch: "We have to create an architecture, and we are expected to furnish it readymade. We are not given three or four centuries to develop it . . . academic conservatism we have none, old traditions and standards we have none."<sup>4</sup>

MM&W accepts these conditions of the American city. The office never refuses commissions. It grows from four draughtsmen in 1879 to nearly 120 employees in 1892. Its architectural production reaches

2  
McKim to L. C. White, 18 May 1909, quoted in Leland M. Roth, *McKim, Mead & White, Architects* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 335.

3  
McKim to Ross, 24 October 1893, quoted in Moore, *The Life and Times of Charles Follen McKim*, 127.

4  
Henry Van Burnt, quoted in Richard C. Wilson, *McKim, Mead & White Architects* (New York, 1983), 57.

5

Burnham to F. W. McKinney and S. H. Hodge, 8 November 1906, Burnham Papers, Chicago Art Institute Library, quoted in Thomas S. Hines, *Burnham of Chicago* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 309.

6

Aline Saarinen, *The Proud Possessors* (New York: Random House, 1958).

an unprecedented scale. Yet MM&W never transforms into a firm specialized in only one type, or scale, of building. Contrary to Burnham, who “did not care to take a job that will not amount to at least one hundred thousand dollars”,<sup>5</sup> MM&W is busy with all kinds of designs, ranging from big public and commercial buildings to street furniture and single-family houses. This deliberate generalism allows MM&W to address the city at different scales, always considering architecture in its complicated intricacy of levels.

MM&W’s understanding of quantity is completely different from the modernist one of producing buildings for the masses by means of industrial processes. For modernists, quantity implies a completely new architecture, one based on entirely new principles for city-making (for example *Luft, Licht und Öffnung*), yet it does not challenge the traditional size and organization of the architectural firm. Quantity does not affect the romantic figure of the architect; it does not put the private nature of his knowledge in danger. On the contrary, while remaining loyal to a traditional repertoire, and while remaining clearly focused on the needs of the “proud possessors”,<sup>6</sup> MM&W formulates a consistent critique of the traditional office organization and implicitly develops a model for a collective, anonymous architectural production. Quantity, for MM&W, is not only quantity in terms of production, or quantity in terms of customers, but quantity in terms of producers. The architecture of quantity must be collective and open, capable of addressing a wide range of different metropolitan desires.

As such, *classicism* is just a consequence. Indeed, for MM&W classicism is a practical code deprived of any ideological claim. The classicism of MM&W has no counterpart in the contemporary European debate. It is a truly American phenomenon, a precise reaction to the conditions of American cities at the end of the 19th century. Classicism is meant to work in a ruthless context – in New York, as in imperial Rome.

### III

American cities at the end of the 19th century define a very precise set of conditions for architecture as well as very limited possibilities for *public* architecture. The possibility of influencing these cities involves a direct relation with the different individuals that produce them. Their development is no longer carried out in direct connection with a prince or an organized bureaucracy, as in contemporary Paris or Berlin. The only possibility of developing an urban strategy within a radically

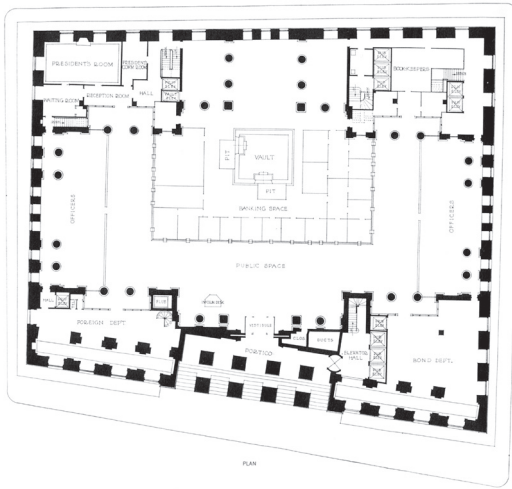
private city is to operate through *quantity*. By producing (almost only) *private* buildings, MM&W defines a *public* city. For MM&W, truly public is truly commercial. (Penn Station is not a public building! And this is also why it has been destroyed.)

7  
*Boston Herald*, 5 April 1888,  
quoted in Roth, *McKim, Mead  
& White*, 119.

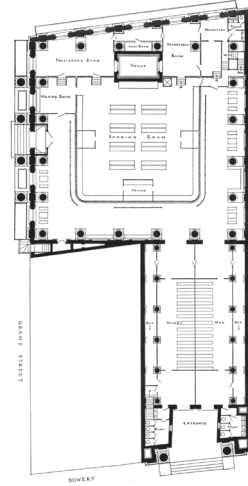
To surrender to *quantity* requires a complex act of submission that is both humble and arrogant. MM&W demands to define an entire city, while at the same time denying the importance of any one particular building. Quantity involves different opportunities and different tasks, as well as different values and different levels of attention. Quantity means accepting the discipline of the background. In the first monumental building realized by MM&W, the Boston Library, the office decides not to add another exception to Copley Square, but instead to produce a building that gives a bit of unity back to the place: “The restful character of its lines will act as a counter and a balance to the already abundant variety of form in the square.”<sup>7</sup>

This commitment to *quantity* involves a very precise attitude toward architecture. For MM&W, it is possible to criticize architecture starting from the city, but it is not possible to criticize the city starting from architecture. The radical realism of MM&W means that architecture cannot oppose the city: if city and architecture do not agree, architecture is wrong. The relationship between city and architecture works just one way. For MM&W, the opposite is out of the question. For MM&W there is no space for critique in architecture: opposition is simply not possible (a position that is both difficult to accept and difficult to criticize).

The firm’s working method is organized in such a way as to agree with the city (with *money*, as a provisional index of urbanity), even when the partners do not want to. Economic concerns force architecture to become extremely obedient: architecture has to get rid of all selfishness, for it must always follow the superior logic of the city. A lack of time becomes a welcome censor, and money a persuasive advocate for urban density. Even though McKim strongly dislikes skyscrapers, the firm builds a few before his death. As a rational organization for the production of architecture, the firm seems to react to the city better than the individual partners would. The organizational structure of the company forces the partners to produce architecture according to a more submissive approach. The firm imposes a healthy, pragmatic (i.e., urban) criticism on the partners’ attitudes toward design. Consider the *architectural* advice that Mead gives McKim about the Boston Library in this letter of 19 December 1887:

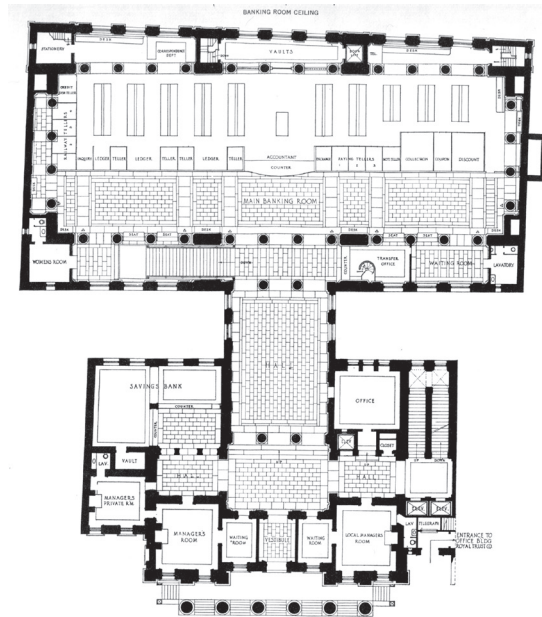


THE NATIONAL CITY BANK, NEW YORK CITY, 1909



BOWERY

From top left:  
 National City Bank, New York, 1909, plan, from Richard C. Wilson, *The Architecture of McKim, Mead & White* (New York: Dover Publications, 1990), pl. 298; Bowery Savings Bank, New York, 1895, plan, from Richard C. Wilson, *The Architecture of McKim, Mead & White* (New York: Dover Publications, 1990), pl. 66; Bank of Montreal, Montreal, 1904, plan, from Richard C. Wilson, *The Architecture of McKim, Mead & White* (New York: Dover Publications, 1990), pl. 215





You have got a design accepted and a design, which as a scheme has had lots of study, and if you leave it, and get under the influence of Doumet or anybody, you will simply come back and knock into fits the accepted design and all the work done in your absence. I know you pretty well and I say this because I do. If the library is to be built or started under this committee you may be sure it had better be started in early spring. Once started it cannot be stopped. It will require all your efforts to get everything ready for a start. It is now nearly the first of January. The three months you would be away would bring you to the first of April, the time you ought to have your contracts signed. I say most firmly – complete your drawings, get your contracts signed and then if it is necessary to go abroad to refine the design in its details, go. I tell you, with your temperament, you are in great danger of getting in doubt about the design and suggesting all manner of changes, even thinking you have an altogether better scheme, if you leave it for a moment. You stand in a good position now, and we are all ready to back you, but nobody but yourself can take care of the Library for the next three months. I do not say anything about the financial condition of the office, and the necessity of pushing all work we have on that account. I say all I have said because I want the Library to be a success, and I know that it cannot be left in other hands without great danger.<sup>8</sup>

The work of MM&W seems to be nothing but the proper exploitation of the richness of the city. No part of the city has to be wasted. Many of their best buildings, such as the Bowery Savings Bank, the Knickerbocker Trust Company, the Bank of Montreal and the National City Bank, expose the brutal interaction between a closed, fixed, autonomous composition and the casual dimensions of a given plot of land. The plot, as an episode of the project implicit in the subdivision of soils, acts as the starting point for urban architecture. The land register is scrutinized with incredible passion. The grid reveals an unsuspected richness and variety. Realism about the capitalistic organization of the city defines a specific starting point for architecture. Plots become the pretext for spatial invention. The almost religious respect for private property becomes a source of metropolitan energy. By carefully measuring given solutions on given plots, MM&W develops a specific way of mapping the urban landscape by means of architecture, as well as critiquing architectural precedents by means of the geography of the contemporary city. Architectural members become tools for registering nuances in the organization of the city. The placement of columns in the Bowery Savings Bank, the Bank of Montreal and the National City Bank follows a Cartesian geometry, while at the same time the walls



**Bowery Savings Bank, New York, 1895, elevation.**  
From Richard C. Wilson, *The Architecture of McKim, Mead & White* (New York: Dover Publications, 1990), pl. 66

<sup>8</sup> Mead to McKim, 19 December 1887, quoted in Moore, *The Life and Times of Charles Follen McKim*, 65–66.



Tiffany & Co., New York, 1906.

From Richard C. Wilson, *The Architecture of McKim, Mead & White* (New York: Dover Publications, 1990), pl. 261

follow the casual outline of the plot. The distance between columns and the corresponding pilasters changes, recording the gap between an ideal geometry and the reality of the city. Columns and pillars produce a Morse-code transcript of the context in which they are located. They leave marginal notes on a minor geography to fulfil an erudite and enthusiastic commentary on land exploitation.

MM&W demonstrates that anyone can make good architecture as soon as he has nothing to say. The *builders of the background* do not even need to design things; rather, they can solve all architectural problems by coupling the proper precedent with the given programme. Penn Station is nothing but an enlarged copy of the Baths of Caracalla. Tiffany and Co. (1906) is a copy of the Palazzo Grimani. At its best, MM&W engages in automatic-pilot design. Yet there is a certain surreal skill involved in the exercise. The simple “copy Caracalla Baths, enlarge 20%, then paste” operation argues in favour of automatic architecture. Architects seem to be highly irrelevant before a common architectural grammar, to which they must submit. Penn Station celebrates the amazing, annihilating (and, so far, final) triumph of an architecture without authors. Individual contributions disappear in a radically public and radically anonymous knowledge. Producers are just requested to display a certain delicacy in coupling given solutions with given areas. Talent serves only to bring about its own extinction.

#### IV

As a large architectural firm, MM&W needs to control its architectural production without the partners being involved in every design. This situation requires the development of an internally used set of guidelines capable of providing employees with a reliable design method, one that is easy to learn and easy to teach and that is solid enough to evolve without too many complications. These guidelines do not constitute an explicit architectural theory, yet they are decipherable within the everyday activity of the practice. Work at MM&W is a daily effort in the creation of the conditions for the production of agreement. Agreement is to be understood basically as agreement among the different professionals involved in the design work, and it is systematically based on agreement with precedents coming from a classic tradition. Agreement among producers can only be based on agreement about the rational interpretation of a given set of precedents. Agreement among producers is, in the end, agreement with the producers of the past. For MM&W, classicism is nothing but the foundation for a plural,

shared work on architecture. Classicism is the *grammar of quantity* that allows the collection of personal and arbitrary contributions without compromising the openness of a rational and critical production. Starting from its multiple production, the architecture of MW&W is inherently urban. Plurality and openness in the production means use that is plural and open: the city is produced through an *urban* design method. In White's words, "No member of our firm is ever individually responsible for any design which goes out from it."<sup>9</sup>

*Classicism* is simply the logical formal code for a *practice with no style*. The reason for the classical architecture of MM&W is just the organization of an architecture firm *without secrets*. In 1878, McKim and Mead, who have been collaborating since 1872, seem to recognize the possibility of starting to work on another scale. This moment coincides with the definition of a new learning method (corresponding with a trip to New England in search of Colonial architecture). This happens long before a clear stylistic option starts to appear. Mead's account of MM&W's history clearly identifies the organization of a solid company with the definition of a rational process of learning, capable of defining viable formal solutions for the everyday business of the office: "I think the leaning of the office towards the classic form dates from this trip". It is important to note that on the New England trip, Mead and the others do not visit any classical buildings. Mead relates the leaning of the office toward classical form not to the style of the buildings visited during the trip, but to the clarity of the method applied for the first time during the trip: "We made sketches and measured drawings." The shift toward classicism is a slow process, and it is interesting to note that it takes a long time for McKim to arrive at the consciously classical approach of his mature years; classical architecture is definitely not McKim's first love, and Mead has noted: "After his sojourn in Paris, [McKim] returned with a bias for the picturesque, and his sketch-books from abroad were full of châteaux, round towers and 'pepper-pot extinguishers'."<sup>10</sup>

MM&W's final shift to classical repertoire, which occurs with the Villard houses (1882–85), is probably due to a design by an employee, Joseph Morrill Wells (1853–90). Wells was an extraordinarily talented and educated architect and a good friend of the three partners. While he was supposed to become a partner himself,<sup>11</sup> it is nevertheless remarkable that the defining stylistic decision in the history of the firm is made by an employee. The partners do not produce the design, but they recognize its potential and are able to learn from it and to

9  
Stanford White, in *Art Age*,  
no. 3 (January 1886), 100;  
cited in Roth, *McKim, Mead &  
White*, 65, n. 29.

10  
Mead, "Reminiscences", in  
Moore, *The Life and Times of  
Charles Follen McKim*, 40.

11  
See n. 1 above.



develop all of the future activity of the company on the basis of it. The office proves capable of recognizing the possibilities of a formal grammar that can be studied and applied in the long term. Once again, the office is a better architect than the individual partners.

12

Roth, McKim, Mead & White,  
58.

## V

Some details of the organization of MM&W have a role in the success of the office. First, the partners (except White) do not draw things on their own; they do not use their private cubicles, but rather work mainly in the large drafting room together with their employees. Secondly, criticism is open (it is a public performance, experienced by all of the firm's members) and production is based on explicit models that are available for further inspection by the employees. McKim stops making renderings of his own work in 1877. Employing professional renderers, he establishes a very precise, self-imposed distance from his own designs. This distance is crucial to allowing collaborators to participate in the work.

Working in the same space, employees are taught by the partners every day. McKim criticizes the work of the employees aloud. As H. Van Buren Magonigle reports, “[McKim] liked to sit down at draftsman’s table, usually in his hat and immaculate shirt sleeves, and design out loud . . . the room reverberated with architectural terms . . . Cyma Recta; Cyma Reversa; Fillet above; Fillet below; Dentils; Modillions: and so on . . .”<sup>12</sup> The selection of terms is already a decision about the organization of the office. *Pas de géométrie sans la parole*. The definition of a precise common language is crucial to activating the multiple intelligence at work at MM&W. The language of McKim is not private; it is a productive device. It is immediately intended as the public language of the office, defining the logical space for architectural production: *the room reverberated*. If the loud list of somewhat esoteric terms seems to be a showing off of erudition, a purely hierarchical ritual to state the principal’s different position in the firm, it is nevertheless a public exposition of knowledge – it is the affirmation of the prevalence of a universal discipline, it is a way to detach the architect from the project in order to let other people contribute to the design.

Facing page:  
Burnham and McKim (back  
seat) on a hunting trip in  
Wisconsin

Choosing Letarouilly’s *Vues de Rome moderne* as a kind of constitutional chart for the office, MM&W defines a foundation for the work of the office that is clear, open and public. Letarouilly becomes an interpretational guide to all architectural literature. Seen from Letarouilly’s point of view, all architecture becomes a possible source for MM&W

designs. The “classical” repertoire (as a formal system in which the elements are precisely defined and consciously understood as composing a system of relations) becomes the tool for understanding and applying all other *styles*. As the only *style* that claims to be universal, the classical is necessarily open to the rest. And as such, the *classical* is not a *style*. The classical is the *code* that allows the understanding of all different *styles*. A *classical* attitude toward architecture requires a fundamental *stylistic indifference*. In McKim’s words, “[B]y conscientious study of the best examples of classic periods, including those of antiquity, it is possible to conceive of a perfect result suggestive of a particular period, if you please, but inspired by the study of them all.”<sup>13</sup> Preference for a certain style is just a nuance inside of a more general responsibility toward architecture as a whole. Given this fundamental loyalty to the architecture of the past as a whole, then buildings can even be suggestive (“if you please!”), but only provided that the overall logic of the discipline is not endangered by personal ambitions. In its absolute lack of ideological claims and in its easy – maybe too easy – organization of collective production, MM&W defines a possible model for contemporary architecture. MM&W demonstrates the possibility of dealing with the overabundant supply of creativity that characterizes our epoch. MM&W’s work provides a humble example of an architecture of the general intellect, an anonymous, open knowledge wherein the critical de-coding of the architecture of the past corresponds to a logical and open encoding of contemporary architecture. Hidden among hyper-rigid (and, for contemporary society, inscrutable) disciplinary boundaries, protected by perfect conformism, MM&W cultivates its quiet, unsuspected, unsung utopia of formal collectivism.

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