BUREAUCRACY
THERE IS NO
BUILDING WITHOUT
REGULATIONS AND
GOOD ARCHITECTURE
DOESN'T ALWAYS
DO IT ON THE RULES.
FOLLOW THE RULES.
“So Much Damned Bad Work”: Notes on the Production of McKim, Mead & White

Pier Paolo Tamburelli argues that the use of classicism of McKim, Mead & White’s architecture denies the value of individual genius to fit unnoticeably into the fabric of New York City. A consequence of modernity, their immense production implies a new set of principles for city making.
Over a twenty-five year period, from 1879 to 1904, the architecture office of McKim, Mead & White realizes almost a thousand buildings. This enormous production is not an accident, or the unpredictable consequence of the lucky career of its three partners. This immense quantity of production is not by chance; it is a choice, involving a very precise commitment towards city and architecture. In 1889 Joseph Morril Wells, at the time an employee of the office, refuses to become a partner, arguing that he could not “put his name to so much damned bad work.”

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

McKim avoids a detailed analysis of this American exception, yet he clearly defines the scale of the opportunity, recognizing not only the quantity and size of buildings to be realized, but also the mythical dimension of quantity. Rome is the obvious reference for this American fascination with dimensions, quantities, and numbers. Architecture enters the realm of myth through sheer mass: big becomes colossal, colossal becomes legendary. He goes on:

...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.

McKim, Mead & White and its few competitors are the pioneers of a new colossal city. They must produce this new city quickly, 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 and standards we have none.”

The partners and office staff of McKim, Mead & White in 1924
The office's understanding of quantity is completely different from the modernist concept of producing buildings for the masses by means of an industrial process. The term quantity implies a completely new architecture, one based on new principles for city-making. Yet, for McKim, Mead & White, quantity does not challenge the traditional size and organization of the typical architectural office. Quantity does not affect the romantic figure of the architect, nor does it endanger the private nature of his knowledge. On the contrary, while remaining loyal to a traditional repertoire, and while remaining clearly focused on the needs of the “proud possessors,” McKim, Mead & White formulates a consistent critique of the traditional office organization and implicitly develops a model for a collective, anonymous architectural production. Quantity, not only in terms of production or in terms of customers, but also in terms of producers. The company recognizes that the new dimension of the city requires a new organization of architectural production. The architecture of quantity must be collective and open, able to accept different desires, as soon as they are disciplined enough to be part of a common metropolitan project.

Classicism is for McKim, Mead & White a practical code, deprived of any ideological claim. Their classicism is particularly tolerant. A classical repertoire is not a way to erase desires from buildings. There is no reductivist attempt in the architecture of McKim, Mead & White: the city retains its dirtiness. Purity is not an aim, yet order and precision are. Desires can invade the buildings, but only if they do not compromise the logical organization of spaces. Poetry is ok if it does not destroy the grammar.

The classicism of McKim, Mead & White has no counterpart in the contemporary European debate. It is a truly American phenomenon, a precise reaction to the condition of American cities at the end of the nineteenth century. For the office, classicism is a consequence of modernity. It is meant to work in a ruthless context; it is Roman. In this respect the only European architect comparable to McKim, Mead & White is Adolf Loos, who was twenty-three years younger than Charles McKim and never had comparable opportunities. The ready-made Doric column of Loos’s project for the Chicago Tribune is, in the end, nothing but a self-destructive and sarcastic European version of McKim, Mead & White’s Roman pragmatism. Loos destroys all of the commercial potential of this architecture by erasing its naivety and making its unconscious nihilism explicit.

3. American cities at the end of the nineteenth century define a very precise set of conditions for architecture as well as very limited possibility for public architecture. The possibility to influence these cities is in relation with the different individuals that produce them. Their development is no longer in direct connection to a prince or an organized bureaucracy, as in contemporary Paris or Berlin. The only possibility to develop an urban strategy inside of a radically private city is to operate through quantity. By producing—almost—only private buildings, the office defines a public city. For McKim, Mead & White, truly public is truly commercial. Penn Station is, in fact, not a public building. It is built, and named, for its original tenant the Pennsylvania Railroad.
To surrender to quantity requires a complex act of submission that is both humble and arrogant. McKim, Mead & White demands to define an entire city, while at the same time denying the relevance 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 McKim, Mead & White, the Boston Library, the office decides not to add another exception to Copley Square, but instead to produce a building that gives back some unity 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.”7

For McKim Mead & White 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 the office means that architecture cannot make a claim against the city: if city and architecture do not agree, architecture is wrong. The relation between city and architecture works just one way—the opposite is simply out of discussion. McKim Mead & White assumes that there is no space for critique inside of architecture: refusal is not possible (a position both difficult to accept and difficult to criticize).

The office’s working method is organized in order to agree with the city (with money, as a provisional index of possible urbanity), even when the partners do not. Economic concerns force architecture to an extreme discipline: architecture has to get rid of all selfishness and must always sacrifice to the city. Lack of time becomes a welcomed censor; money a persuasive advocate for urban density.

Even though Charles McKim strongly dislikes skyscrapers, the office builds a few before his death. As a rational organization for the production of architecture, the office seems to react to the city better than the partners themselves. The organizational structure of the company forces the partners to produce architecture inside of more submissive machinery. The office imposes a healthy, pragmatic (i.e. urban) criticism to the design attitude of the partners. Consider the architectural advice that Mead gives McKim about the Boston Library in this letter of December 19, 1887:

...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

7 Boston Herald, April 5, 1888, in Leland M. Roth, McKim, Mead & White, Architects (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 119.
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.

The work of McKim, Mead & White 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 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 division of soils, acts as the starting point for urban architecture. The land register is scrutinized with incredible passion. The grid shows 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, McKim, Mead & White develops a specific way of mapping the city by means of architecture, along with critiquing architectural precedents by means of the geography of the city. Architectural members become tools to register nuances in the organization of the city. The placement of columns in the Bowery Savings Bank, the Bank of Montreal, and National City Bank follows a Cartesian geometry, while at the same time the walls follow the casual figure 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 form a Morse code of the context in which they are located. They leave marginal notes on a minor geography to fulfill an erudite and enthusiastic commentary on land exploitation.

Architecture vanishes into the background. McKim, Mead & White deprives the building of any figure by enlarging Penn Station to the dimension of two city blocks. There is no iconography, just performance. The building is confined to its dimensions, to its placement in the city, and to the spatial conditions it offers. The façade is as low as possible, and the mass of the concourse is far enough from the borders of the block to disappear when seen from the street. The passenger-processing machinery touches the city with endless enfilades of columns leaving no suggestion of their possible function. McKim deliberately refuses to add a tower to the complex. The station no longer faces the city, but melts into the metropolitan field. The public value of the monument is reduced to the experience of its spaces. There is no difference made between the interior and exterior. Large-scale street furniture defines the interior of the station as outdoor city space. The city extends everywhere. Penn Station seems to be the only possible public building in the congestion of Manhattan. In a city where vertical icons proliferate in an endless and hopeless competition for supremacy, Penn Station defines the ultimate possibility for a monument: disappearance.
In a city filled with architectural genius, architecture does not emerge anymore. McKim, Mead & White implicitly denies the value of architectural genius and produces architecture that becomes perfectly neutral, easy, submissive, unnoticeable. It is architecture for the background. McKim, Mead & White demonstrates that anyone can make good architecture, as soon as he has nothing to say. Builders of the background do not even need to design, they can solve all architectural problems by coupling the proper precedent with the given program. Penn station is nothing but an enlarged copy of the Baths of Caracalla. The building for Tiffany and Company from 1906 is a copy of a Palazzo Grimani. At its best, McKim, Mead & White is design on automatic pilot. Yet there is a certain surreal skill in the exercise.

The simple copy Caracalla Baths / enlarge / paste operation argues in favor of automatic architecture. Architects seem to be highly irrelevant in front of a common architectural grammar, to which they must submit. Penn Station celebrates the amazing and annihilating (and last) triumph of an architecture with no authors. Individual contributions disappear in a radically public and radically anonymous knowledge. Producers are just asked to display a certain delicacy in coupling given solutions with given areas. Talent is needed only to perform its own extinction. The operation needs a humble architectural science and a silent devotion to the city. No major claims from McKim, Mead & White, the argument seems to be plain. Yet combinations are strangely displacing, almost obvious. Commonsense seems to invade the scene exactly at the moment when it leaves. Why, in the end, make a station in the form of ancient ruins? The simple copy Caracalla Baths / enlarge / paste operation argues in favor of automatic architecture. Architects seem to be highly irrelevant in front of a common architectural grammar, to which they must submit. Penn Station celebrates the amazing and annihilating (and last) triumph of an architecture with no authors. Individual contributions disappear in a radically public and radically anonymous knowledge. Producers are just asked to display a certain delicacy in coupling given solutions with given areas. Talent is needed only to perform its own extinction. The operation needs a humble architectural science and a silent devotion to the city. No major claims from McKim, Mead & White, the argument seems to be plain. Yet combinations are strangely displacing, almost obvious. Commonsense seems to invade the scene exactly at the moment when it leaves. Why, in the end, make a station in the form of ancient baths? Why waste all this knowledge in the complicated transplantation of the frigidarium of the Caracalla Baths to the middle of a major twentieth-century railway station?

In L'architettura dell'Umanesimo, Manfredo Tafuri analyzes Michelangelo's intervention for the transformation of Diocletian Baths (one of the very few works of architecture by Michelangelo appreciated by Charles McKim): 9

The adaptation of Diocletian Baths as the new Basilica degli Angeli can be interpreted as an act of anti-architecture. ...[T]he ancient archeological ruins are nothing but a “container,” ready to host a new function without any other intervention except for a few adjustments to the walls and to the sources of light. The intellectual ascendancy of form is destroyed in an astonishing revival—completely subjective and certainly hermetic for his contemporaries—of an evangelical humbleness that borders with complete renouncement to action. 10

McKim, Mead & White’s design for Penn Station seems to be a similar anti-architectural act. Humbleness reaches the point of impoliteness.

The talent of McKim, Mead & White is deliberately hidden: L’arte che tutto fa nulla si scopre. If Michelangelo’s negative artistic thinking radically questions the cultural value of architecture, the less polemic McKim, Mead & White just imagines a silent, colossal architecture for a quite improbable capitalism without individualism. 11 Architecture vanishes

This operation is not limited to the work of McKim, Mead & White. Architects have often reused early projects, quoted others, or found combinations of previous designs for the simple sake of speed. The variable of this “automatic architecture” is in the scale of translation. In the case of Penn Station, McKim, Mead & White scaled down the ancient plan for the Baths of Caracalla from 90,000 square meters to 30,000 square meters. It should be noted that the ancient baths took only four years to build, as opposed to the six years of construction on Penn Station, despite the fact that the building is three times the size. Another well-known example is the translation of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture’s Y2K house from 1998 into the Casa da Musica competition design in 1999. The plans are roughly the same shape and both are organized with a large central chamber flanked by smaller rooms. The only difference is that the plan for the Casa da Musica is scaled up by 350 percent from 62,000 square meters to 222,000 square meters.

In some cases, architects may repeat an earlier project with no change in scale. In 1994 the city of Zengzhou commissioned a series of exact replicas of famous works of architecture including Le Corbusier’s Ronchamp, the Erechtheion temple in Athens, and the Basilica San Marco in Venice. A visitor to the site in 2008 remarked that Ronchamp had already been torn down and replaced with a barbeque restaurant.


in front of the city, and personality disappears in front of public knowledge: “In architecture, individuality of style is at best a doubtful merit, and in a great majority of cases a positive (if not fatal) defect or weakness.”

As a large architectural office, McKim, Mead & White has the need to control architectural production without the partners being involved in every design. This situation requires the development of an internally used set of principles that are able to provide employees with a reliable design method. These principles do not form an explicit architectural theory, yet they are decipherable in the everyday activity of the practice. The office develops a plural architecture by using a system of principles that are extremely reliable and practical, that are easy to learn and easy to be taught, that are refined enough to evolve. The development of such an architecture becomes an everyday effort in the construction of the conditions for the production of agreement. Agreement is basically 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, first of all, agreement with the producers of the past.

Classicism is, for McKim, Mead & White, nothing but the foundation for a plural, shared work on architecture. Classicism is the grammar of quantity that allows McKim, Mead & White to collect personal and arbitrary contributions without compromising the openness of a rational and critical production. Starting from its multiple production, their architecture is inherently urban. Plural and open in the production means plural and open in use: the city is produced through an urban design method. “No member of our firm is ever individually responsible for any design which goes out from it.”

Classicism is not a choice about forms, but about a method. It is the logical formal code for a practice with no style—the organization of an office with no secrets. In 1878, McKim and Mead, who had collaborated since 1872, seem to recognize the possibility to start working at another scale. This moment coincides with the definition of a new learning method and corresponds with a New England trip in search of colonial architecture. This happens much before a clear stylistic option starts to appear. William Mead’s account of McKim, Mead & White’s history clearly identifies the organization of a solid company with the definition of a rational process of learning, able to define viable formal solutions for the everyday business of the office.

Mead often states that the office’s leaning toward the use of a classical style dates from a trip to New England. It is important to note that particular trip, Mead and the others do not visit any classical buildings. Mead does not relate the leaning of the office towards the classic form to the style of the buildings visited during the New England trip, but to the clarity of the method applied for the first time. The shift towards classicism is a slow process, and it is interesting to know that it takes a long time for McKim to reach the conscious classical position of his mature years; classical architecture is definitely not McKim’s first love:
“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.’”

The final switch of McKim, Mead & White to classical repertoire, the Villard houses (1882–85), is probably due to a design by an employee (Joseph Moril Wells, 1853–90). Wells was an extraordinarily talented and educated architect and a good friend of the three partners, and he was supposed to become a partner; nevertheless, it is remarkable that the main stylistic decision in the history of the office 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 develop all of the future activity of the company starting from this design. The office is able to recognize 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 partners.

Some details of the organization of McKim, Mead & White have a role in the success of the office: the partners (except Stanford White) do not draw things on their own, they do not use their private cabinets, but work mainly in the large drafting room, together with employees. Criticism is open (it is a public performance, with respect to the office members); production is based on explicit models that are available for further inspection by the employees. Charles McKim stops making renderings of his own work in 1877. Employing professional renderers, McKim establishes a very precise distance from his own designs. This distance is crucial to allow collaborators to participate in the work. Working in the same space, employees are faced with the everyday teaching by the partners. McKim criticizes aloud the work of the employees. 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...  

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 language is a condition to activate the multiple intelligence at work at McKim, Mead & White. 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 somehow esoteric terms seems to be a show off of erudition, a purely hierarchical ritual to state the difference in position of the principal, it is nevertheless a public exposition of an open 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 enter into the plain, explicit logic of its design.

Choosing Letarouilly’s *Vues de Rome Moderne* as a kind of constitutional charter for the office, McKim, Mead & White defines a foundation for the work of the office that is clear, open, and public. Letarouilly becomes an interpretation guide to all possible architectural literature. Seen from the Letarouilly point of view, all possible architecture becomes a source...
for McKim, Mead & White designs. Classical repertoire, as the formal system in which elements are better defined and more consciously understood as composing a system of relations, provides the tools to understand and to apply all other styles. As the only style that claims to be universal, classicism is necessarily open to the rest. And as such, classicism is not a style. It is the code that allows the understanding of the different styles. A classical attitude towards architecture requires such fundamental stylistic indifference (this being so evident in the work of Bramante, of Bernini, of Schinkel):

By 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.  

Preference for a certain style is just a detail inside of a precise responsibility towards architecture 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.

Choosing in which style to build not a problem for McKim, Mead & White. The problem is how to secure the effectiveness of a public formal repertoire. Seen from this point of view, McKim, Mead & White is anything but an eclectic practice. If we consider eclecticism as a literary attitude towards architecture, in which different values can be suggested through the smart application of the proper styles (an understanding of architecture in which Gothic is more religious than classical, Renaissance contains more civic values than baroque, rococo is happier than Doric), we can find no traces of eclecticism in the architecture of McKim, Mead & White. For eclecticism, there is a specific nature in the buildings, and this character has to be expressed through style. For eclecticism, style is a message, not a grammar: it is altogether parole, not langue. The eclecticist argues as follows: “I like to develop a subject in the style which seems best adapted to the purpose.”

Classicism is nothing but the protection of the abstraction of architecture against the childish desire for character: “I am, in fact, completely opposed to the idea that a specific building should have an individual character.”

In its absolute lack of ideological claims and in its easy—maybe too easy—organization of collective production, McKim, Mead & White defines a possible model for contemporary architecture. The office shows a possibility to deal with the overabundant supply of creativity that characterizes our epoch. McKim, Mead & White defines a humble example for an architecture of the general intellect: an anonymous, open knowledge where critical decoding of the architecture of the past corresponds to logical and open encoding of contemporary architecture. Hidden among hyperrigid (and, for contemporary society, inscrutable) disciplinary boundaries, protected by perfect conformism, McKim, Mead & White cultivates its quiet, unsuspected, unsung program for formal collectivism.

Daniel H. Burnham and Charles F. McKim sitting in rear of carriage on a hunting trip to Wisconsin
McKim, Mead & White, Bowery Savings Bank, New York, 1895.
Elevation and ground plan