

Samuel G. White and Elizabeth White
**McKim, Mead & White:
The Masterworks**

New York: Rizzoli International Publications,
2003, 304 pp., illus., \$75, ISBN 0-8478-2567-
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Kristen Schaffer

**Daniel H. Burnham: Visionary
Architect and Planner**

New York: Rizzoli International Publications,
2003, 223 pp., 206 illus., \$95, ISBN 0-8478-
2533-7

As any undergraduate knows, architectural history is a relentlessly visual subject. It is not impossible, but exceedingly difficult to make a convincing argument through words alone. Words must talk to pictures, in the absence of buildings, and pictures must join together to form a visual argument that is an analogue of the text. What then are we to do with the big picture books favored by publishers like Rizzoli? These serve a function and have an audience, which includes many historians, some of whom are their authors; but it is not the same function as an academic publication, which rarely graces the tops of coffee tables.

This question specifically concerns two recent publications: Samuel G. White and Elizabeth White's *McKim, Mead & White: The Masterworks* and Kristen Schaffer's *Daniel H. Burnham: Visionary Architect and Planner*. Samuel White is an architect and a descendant of Stanford White, which may explain the hagiographic quality of the book, a companion to his earlier *The Houses of McKim, Mead & White* (New York, 1998). Elizabeth White is a writer, editor, and former publisher, while Schaffer is a professor of architectural history; the difference in their backgrounds may explain the difference in their works. Since *McKim, Mead & White* and *Daniel H. Burnham* are both big picture books, the photographers are given conspicuous credit—Jonathan Wallen for the former and Paul Rocheleau for the latter. They deserve it, too, for the buildings have never looked so good.

The architecture of McKim, Mead & White was originally documented in a four-volume monograph published between 1915 and 1920. Since then, the firm has been the subject of "classic works" by Leland Roth and Richard Guy Wilson, as well as more recent publications by others. White and White acknowledge their debt to all these studies (all, that is, except the original monograph), but the nature and extent of this debt is difficult to gauge, since *McKim, Mead & White* lacks citations—either footnotes or endnotes—making it less than a complete work of scholarship.

In addition to a selected bibliography and index, the book consists of a short introduction followed by twenty-four essays, each devoted to a single building. This strategy is more effective than it might first appear. Although the texts are mostly devoted to formal analysis, they do each provide a window onto the larger history of McKim, Mead & White, situating the subject "masterpiece" within the context of the firm's other works (unfortunately not illustrated). Collectively, the chronologically arranged essays provide a reasonably coherent biography of the firm.

The short introduction gives a brief survey of the firm's history, which includes a recounting of its shifting reputation. This reached a nadir in the 1930s and was revived in the 1950s, beginning with the publication of Vincent Scully's *The Shingle Style* (New Haven, 1955), which, incidentally, is not cited in the bibliography. Since then, the main impediment to the complete rehabilitation of McKim, Mead & White has been, according to White and White, the apparent conflict between the earlier and later work—the Shingle Style and Beaux-Arts classicism. Apparently, a change of heart, shifting fashion, or the architectural indiscretions of youth are inadequate explanations for stylistic inconsistency. The authors demand a "fresh look" that goes "beyond issues of symmetry, novelty, and style." What defines the firm's oeuvre is a "unified set of values." This they define as "urbanism, artistic collaboration, empathy, and

an equal commitment to the traditions of classicism and the opportunities of modern life" (14, 21).

What does all this mean? Well, urbanism translates into a high regard for the street (what one would expect before the advent of Corbusian-style modernism); artistic collaboration, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ambitions of the so-called American Renaissance; empathy, not German *Empfindung* but something between a classical concern for character and an eclectic interest in associations—the ability of the building, through the correct choice of style, to address its circumstances. The equal commitment to classicism and modernity represents the authors' insistence on the ultimately contemporary nature of the firm's buildings in terms of program and building technology—materials and systems. This argument is good as far as it goes, which is not very far. The buildings provided as evidence are far more eclectic than the overwhelmingly classical examples discussed later in the book. And, once established, the argument is never revisited in any of the succeeding chapters.

Schaffer is similarly concerned with "the difference between modern practice and modern style," the confusion between the two having harmed Daniel Burnham's status as a modern architect (204). Her book is similar in format to White and White's *Masterpieces*—hefty, hardcover, and very well illustrated—but it is a better piece of scholarship. For starters, in addition to an index and a brief bibliography, *Daniel H. Burnham* is equipped with endnotes, which function in the usual way to establish the book's credibility but also to expand the author's argument. In addition, the organizational strategy is different: *Burnham* consists of three biographical chapters flanked by the author's introduction and conclusion (along with a preface by the editor, Scott J. Tilden).

Burnham's professional biography has an attractive symmetry, which is reflected in the arrangement of the book's contents. In the middle of his life, he had the experience of directing the

1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which established his reputation as a master organizer. This event and its impact on his architecture and on American urbanism form the subject of the central, second chapter. This section is preceded by a chapter on Burnham's career before the fair—the oeuvre of Burnham & Root preceding the death of John W. Root in 1891. It is followed by a chapter covering Burnham's career after the fair. The balance gives the volume much of its narrative structure and its primary observation, which is that the work of Burnham with Root was very different from what he produced after Root's demise.

As epitomized by the Rookery in Chicago (1885–88), the designs Burnham produced with Root were tied to the expressive masonry tradition of Henry Hobson Richardson's Romanesque. Burnham's solo efforts are epitomized for Schaffer by his last building, across the street from the Rookery—the Continental and Commercial National Bank (1912–14). The design of this building reflected the experience of the fair and, in particular, Burnham's own epiphany: his discovery (under the tutelage of Charles McKim) of the neo-classical tradition of architecture and urbanism associated with the École des Beaux-Arts. At the same time, there was an essential continuity in both structures, which was Burnham's preference for the courtyard-type tall office building. (The exceptions are conspicuous: the Monadnock, Reliance, and Flatiron Buildings.) This preference reflected the continuing need for natural light and air, but it also provided the architect with an opportunity to create at the heart of the edifice a clean, well-lit, protected public space that was a continuation of the space of the city outside.

Also central to the book is an argument concerning the nature of Burnham's talents as an architect. Conventional wisdom has it that Burnham was a great leader and manager, as evidenced by his direction of the Chicago fair and the growth of his own office, but that he was not a great

designer. Schaffer revises this assessment by emphasizing the collaborative nature of Burnham's relationship with Root. As she notes at the beginning of the first chapter, "the synergy of Burnham and Root's partnership was the source of their success, as they reinforced, balanced, and encouraged each other" (21). They were partners in the design of their buildings, with Burnham tending to be responsible for the plan and Root for the façade and ornamentation. In a flash of insight, Schaffer argues for a connection between Burnham's facility as an architectural planner and his later career as a city planner, a connection that extends even to the primacy of the plan in the City Beautiful Movement.

That said, it must be observed that much of the book's argument resides in the introduction and conclusion, and the three chapters consist primarily of formal analysis of building façades. This is probably inevitable, given the nature of the work, but it is also ironic as Schaffer insists that Burnham's achievements cannot be sufficiently appreciated from the standpoint of aesthetics. The tall office buildings designed by his firm were not merely works of art; they were status markers and "revenue producing machines" (201)—a point that tends to be undercut here by the abundance of glossy photographs.

Schaffer is also given to making big claims. "For nearly half a century," we are told, "Burnham was the head of one of the world's most prominent architectural practices [for the whole fifty years?], and was recognized as the pre-eminent urban planner of his generation [in both Europe and the United States?]" (13). In considering the development of the tall office building, she writes that "Burnham and Root achieved success by exploring and pioneering both the appearance and the requirements of this new building type" (14), as if they were alone in this pursuit.

The reliance on formal analysis, the lack of appropriate context, and the tendency to make overly sweeping pronouncements are also characteristic of White and White's *McKim, Mead &*

White. The partnership was established in 1879 and lasted over thirty years. During that time, the authors write, it "grew from a small atelier to the largest and most famous architecture office in the world" (9). No qualification. About the Boston Public Library, White and White state: "No facility of this scale and degree of access had ever been built before, and there were no precedents for references" (71). Ironically, they go on to cite several formal precedents: Henri Labrouste's Bibliothèque Ste.-Geneviève, the Colosseum in Rome, Leon Battista Alberti's church of San Francesco in Mantua, and the Palazzo della Cancelleria in Rome (for the courtyard). One can imagine the circumstances under which this claim might still stand (they could argue that the Peabody Library in Baltimore may have been as public but not as large; the library of the British Museum may have been as large but not as public), but, lacking the authors' due diligence in making their case, readers may remain unconvinced.

Both books suffer from a certain myopia. They are largely unconcerned about the world outside that of the architects in question and their work, which is a pity. In the case of *Burnham*, for instance, there is no sense of what other people were doing in Chicago, let alone in New York. In relation to *McKim, Mead & White*, one would imagine that this firm alone bore the burden of reviving the classical tradition in the United States. Lacking context, it is difficult for readers to test the authors' claims.

These are publications in which the admittedly fine illustrations take on a life of their own. The monographic nature of the essays in *McKim, Mead & White* is enforced graphically; only the subject building is reproduced, even when others enter into the conversation. In *Burnham*, the figures that are included in the introduction appear to be afterthoughts only loosely related to the text; the same can be said for the conclusion. The same images are repeated elsewhere in the volume. Some buildings are discussed but not illustrated; others are illustrated

but not discussed. Burnham's Pennsylvania Station (1898–1903) in Pittsburgh, a handsome neo-Baroque design masquerading as an office building, merits five full pages of illustrations plus the cover, but only a passing text reference. This is not necessarily the fault of the author, but it is a shortcoming of the book nevertheless, and it brings us back to the original question, What are we to do with such books? Enjoy them, appreciate them for what they are, but regard them with a degree of wariness.

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