THE BEAUX ARTS STYLE

BACKGROUND

Introduction:

It was sometimes loosely called the "American Renaissance"-- that rage for stately Roman architecture that came to the United States under the pervasive influence of *L'Ecole des Beaux Arts*, the French national school of architecture. Seduced by the muscular glory that was Rome, as taught by the French, American architects at the turn of the twentieth century, as one wag has remarked, "put up little Romes everywhere." This style, known as Beaux Arts, after the school of the same name, became the preferred expression for all manner of official buildings – state capitols, courthouses, banks, libraries, even lodge halls. It was what the clients wanted.

If American intellectuals of the day sought to foster a true and fresh, genuinely American art form, the Beaux Arts Style was no doubt their greatest disappointment. Americans became enthralled anew, perhaps more so than ever, with European style and influence. Some have noted America's continuing "cultural inferiority complex" to Europe. And it may fairly be said that Beaux Arts architecture was, perhaps, its most egregious and spectacular symptom.

But the style did provide some rich and compelling ornaments for our cities and towns. In a poetical sense, these often bespeak the importance and/or rock-solid stability of local institutions. In a broader sense, the style brought an element of order and planning to our townscapes. More importantly, it brought a strong measure of learning, venerability and social standing to the American profession of architecture.

L'Ecole des Beaux Arts:

From time immemorial the French nation has regarded itself, on the whole rightly, as a global center of art and culture. In the nineteenth century its *L'Ecole des Beaux Arts* was similar to today's broadly prestigious graduate schools of the fine arts (painting, sculpture and architecture). The *Ecole* traced its origins to the *Academie des Beaux-Arts*, founded in 1648 by Cardinal Mazarin under the patronage of Louis XIV. The *Academie*, as it developed, played a most consequential role in European architecture. Among other things, it introduced scholarly debate on the theory of architecture, and it raised architects from the status of master artisans to that of philosophers. The *Academie* remained a fixture of government throughout the tumultuous years of the French Revolution and beyond. It figured prominently in the early preservation movement in France, beginning in the 1830s. In 1863 it was made independent of the French

government by order of Emperor Napoleon III, wherein it was rechristened *L'Ecole des Beaux Arts.*

As a school, it attracted students from many countries, most notably, the United States. The *Ecole* trained young architects to have an indepth understanding of architectural history and to be able to design in "the manner of" (i.e., in the manner of great architects and styles of the past). Indeed, quotation from well-known landmarks of antiquity was considered a sign of cultivation rather than poverty of invention or originality. Although hundreds upon hundreds took the five-part entrance exam (which was a mark of the *Ecole's* prestige), the school only admitted sixty students per term, 45 French and 15 foreign. Students received broad instruction in painting, sculpture, history, geometry, philosophy and mathematics. Student training at the *Ecole* was uncommonly rigorous. Students were driven with punishing workloads. Projects routinely required dozens of highly detailed architectural drawings accurately produced in a short time – these, then, to be roundly critiqued by elevated faculty or atelier (studio) masters. It could be a humbling experience for many a young man.

Skills were honed at creating architectural renderings that would amaze – rich and heavy with detail, plenty to look at in them, and in color, watercolor being, then as now, a most difficult medium. And there were fiercely selective design competitions, the greatest being the *Prix de Rome* (Prize of Rome), which provided a scholarship to the honored one to study in Rome, then regarded as the fountainhead of classicism. It was that robust, manifestly imperial classicism that the *Ecole* saw as one of the great and eternal truths of architecture.

<u>The *Ecole* Approach Comes to America:</u>

As late as the final third of the nineteenth century, being a professional architect, or for that matter an attorney, did not require a university education. Indeed, as one observer put it, architects were "simply carpenters putting on airs." There were no architects, as we understand the term, in early America. Such designing of buildings as took place was either carried out by 1) gifted builders or carpenters with access to European (generally British) published style guides and pattern books, or 2) gentlemen amateurs who cultivated their exquisite taste, studied the classics, and designed homes for themselves, their friends and social equals. It was a fine hobby for a gentleman but one for which he did not expect to be paid. Thomas Jefferson is the greatest, but by no means the only, example.

London trained Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1764 – 1820) is generally regarded as America's first professional architect. He trained others as he was trained, through apprenticeship. A young man might start as a floor sweeper or general doer of menial tasks, watch, learn to draw the classical orders, be promoted to junior draftsman, hone his skills, make senior draftsman grade, and finally take his place alongside the "great man" as a junior partner in the architectural practice. The finished architects who emerged through this system were essentially job trained businessmen with no higher aspirations. Late in his life, architect George

B. Post wrote somewhat bitterly of architecture as a profession during his mid-nineteenth century youth: “The American painters and sculptors were frankly outspoken in their opinion that there was no art in architecture.”

All this began to change in the decades after the Civil War. Under the influence of the newly founded American Institute of Architects (1857), a handful of established universities began formal academic training programs in architecture. A pivotal event was the founding, in 1893, of the Society of Beaux Arts Architects by mainly American alumni of the famed *Ecole.* What they established and nurtured was essentially a shadow *Ecole des Beaux Arts* in the United States. It was really a collection of mini-academies, some connected with university degree programs in architecture such as MIT and Columbia, others run independently by studio professors or architectural clubs.

All sought to standardize the *Ecole des Beaux Arts* style atelier (studio) teaching system for budding young American architects. They stressed classical proportions, scale, balance, beauty, and a deep understanding of architecture from the ancient world down through the Renaissance. They also shone as centers of lively discussion on all matters of aesthetics, and in a wider sense, civilization. Flush with funding from august figures such as J. Pierpont Morgan and Andrew Carnegie, the Society of Beaux Arts Architects was able to sponsor *Ecole* style design competitions with cash prizes – the greatest being the Paris Prize -- funding to study in France at the *Ecole* itself. It was the American answer to the *Prix de Rome*.

As more and more universities began to offer degrees in architecture, most opted for the *Ecole des Beaux Arts* system as central to training young American architects. This dominance would not be seriously challenged until the tide of European Modernism swept ashore beginning in the 1930s.

<u>The 1893 Columbian Exposition</u>:

To the eye of the cultured young architect, or the mature professional, American downtowns of the late nineteenth century could seem a chaotic unplanned agglomeration of buildings of different sizes and periods, railroads here and there, great brick walls painted with signs advertising parent medicines -- all in all, boisterous, sentimental and messy. Then came the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893, also known as the Columbian Exhibition (to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ epic voyage). One of the fair’s architects, Charles Follen McKim, summed it up in a statement that could have been the fair’s motto, “The scale is Roman, and it will have to be sustained.” Also dubbed the “White City,” the Chicago fair was a convincing show of power for the rising tide of Beaux Arts influence in the United States. It featured monumental and imposing Roman style classical buildings, in white plaster, set in a vast and verdant landscape of parks, lagoons and grand avenues (Photo 1).

Those who attended the fair would remember it for the rest of their lives as a sight to behold. It also cast something of a spell over the country as major cities tried to remake their

downtowns in the fair's image, with classical buildings, grand vistas, Parisian style boulevards, etc. All this is remembered today as the City Beautiful Movement. It is discussed only briefly here because it had little impact in Louisiana.

Character-Defining Features:

The Beaux Arts is a classical style with the full range of Greco-Roman elements: the column, arch, vault and dome. It is the showy, almost operatic, manner in which these elements are composed that gives the style its characteristic flavor. General character-defining elements include:

- Symmetrical articulation
- Lavish and intensive surface decoration
- A single architectural element set as a grand gesture – often an over-scaled archway, triple archway or short but dramatic colonnade as the center of the composition
- Coupled columns
- Facades composed around advancing and receding wall planes. The transition from one plane to another is often highlighted with multiple corner elements.
- Entablatures that advance and recede to mark the locations of columns below
- An active roofline (for a classical style) with dramatic roof-top figure sculpture
- Fully and boldly formed ornamental sculpture employed elsewhere on the facades (as opposed to more subtle bas relief)
- Monumental (sometimes multiple) runs of steps approaching a building's entrance
- Floor plans that culminate in a single grand room
- Axial floor plans that establish vistas through different spaces

Building Materials:

Beaux Arts buildings were designed to make a formal statement. Thus their materials tend to be of the best and most expensive quality. In most the predominant material is light-colored stone, often limestone, and often richly worked with strong bas relief, rooftop sculptural elements, quoins and rustication. Rock-face stone is virtually never used. Sometimes stone is used in combination with light-colored brick (to save money). Sometimes the material is cast stone or, in lesser examples, cast concrete. For lamp standards, fittings and details, glazed terra cotta is sometimes used as well a wrought iron-looking material.

Materials of note on interiors include marble (often colorful and richly veined), polished woods (usually dark), alabaster, terrazzo floors, polished brass and bronze (for ornament and

fittings), and, on fine examples, gold leaf. Interiors may also feature painterly effects, fresco (looking) murals and the like.

Beaux Arts Urban Planning:

The Beaux Arts approach to design had a strong urban planning component. In this it was solidly in the tradition of a style of town planning that emerged during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe. It is still known to this day as Baroque city planning. It relies on grand, tree-lined avenues; axial cross streets; and long vistas terminating at carefully placed classical façades. A central feature is the so-called "crow's foot" -- three or more avenues starting at a single central point (on a grand public square) and fanning out in different directions to give dynamic vistas through a city. City plans of this type were sometimes created in the United States, L'Enfant's plan for Washington D. C. for instance. In palace gardens it took the form of immaculately clipped hedge parterres setting off avenues and vistas – nature made to look rather unnatural – sometimes called the French Garden. This is in contrast to the naturalistic English Garden tradition.

THE LOUISIANA STORY

In Louisiana local architects took up the Beaux Arts style as did their counterparts in other states. They were mostly based in New Orleans (historically the state's largest city), with a few in Shreveport (historically the second largest city). While the state has only a modest number of examples, the buildings by their very nature make major architectural statements. Hence their impact upon our city and townscapes is greater than numbers alone would indicate. In some Louisiana communities, the single Beaux Arts style building that might exist is clearly *the* landmark of the town, providing an anchor – a sense of place.

Beaux Arts-inspired city planning, French as it was, made virtually no impact in Louisiana. The only significant exceptions would be Theodore C. Link's original (1922) plan for the Louisiana State University campus in Baton Rouge (since altered) and Barksdale Air Force Base, Bossier City (1931). (For the latter, see Photo 2.)

Property Types:

In Louisiana almost all extant Beaux Arts style buildings are of the following property types:

- courthouses (photos 3 & 4)
- banks (photos 5-8)
- fraternal organization halls (photos 9 & 10)

- libraries

Date Range:

The Beaux Arts Style is seen in Louisiana from about 1895 to about 1915.

Geographical Range:

As a general rule Beaux Arts is, first and foremost, an urban style. In the northeastern United States one does see exceptions, such as Beaux Arts country retreats or great houses on an estate (the Vanderbilt Estate in Hyde Park, New York comes to mind). But in Louisiana the style is confined to established towns and cities. One searches in vain for a Beaux Arts plantation house. The range is therefore statewide, but limited to areas that were relatively well developed during the heyday of the style's popularity.

National Register Guidance:

Local Significance: Beaux Arts buildings were designed to impress. Thus any surviving example will likely be one of the (if not *the*) most distinguished historic buildings in a given community. In all likelihood, it will be easily among the most impressively and elaborately styled works of architecture and hence stand as at least a local landmark. This general argument for National Register eligibility can be expected to hold good in the vast majority of communities in the state.

Exceptions might be larger and old cities in which there is a great deal of competition for local architectural significance. Even then, a building in the Beaux Arts genre may be sufficiently different from the city's other important buildings that it could qualify for the Register as something stylistically distinctive. In short, even the largest and oldest Louisiana cities have few Beaux Arts buildings. In such instances, one could make the dual case that (1) the building was one of few examples of this popular national style in a given place, and (2) that it was a particularly good example of the style – i.e., because it had many character-defining features of the style.

State Significance: Establishing state significance for Beaux Arts buildings can be a challenge. Looking across a state's patrimony, one might confront a roster of roughly comparable examples. Superior standing for one particular example may rest upon 1) comparatively enormous size and/or monumentality (although this alone does not equal architectural significance); 2) pristine integrity (see below); 3) an exceptionally fine interior; and/or 4) particularly notable artistic embellishments (statuary, etc.). Generally speaking, the Beaux Arts buildings in Louisiana that might have a case for state significance are in the larger cities.

National Significance: The authors, based on over 60 years field experience in Louisiana, cannot imagine a Beaux Arts building in the state that would meet the high threshold of national significance.

A major consideration confronting any National Register candidate is architectural integrity. This is typically not a issue for Beaux Arts buildings. They were constructed of materials meant to last (stone, terra-cotta, etc.) and are not as subject to rapid decay and feature replacement as are wooden buildings. (Decay aside, it's harder to knock off or cover Beaux Arts features by definition.)

The kind of alterations Beaux Arts buildings might receive typically would be bad window replacement or subdivided interiors – neither of which are generally severe enough to make a building ineligible due to loss of integrity. In the aforementioned scenario, the surviving original exterior features (grand columns, arches, etc) are generally of sufficient architectural prominence to "carry the day" so-to-speak. In other words, the strong Beaux Arts character visually dominates the window replacements.

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PHOTO GALLERY

Photo 1. Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893.

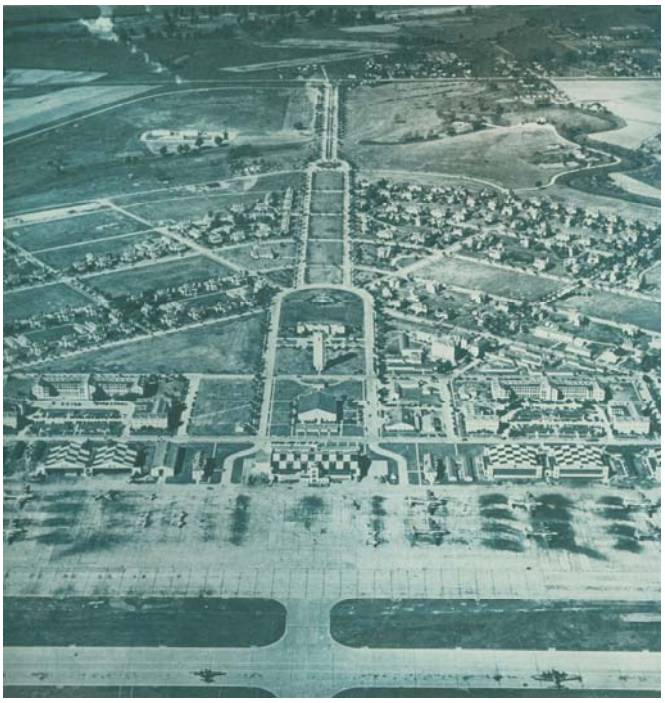

Photo 2. Beaux Arts planning at Barksdale Air Force Base, 1931, Bossier City, Louisiana. Courtesy LSU-Shreveport Archives.

Photo 3. The Louisiana Supreme Court building (1908-1910), in New Orleans, is easily the state's largest Beaux Arts building. Note the advancing and receding wall planes, the colossal coupled pilasters, and the great round arch openings marking the entrance.

Photo 4. The DeSoto Parish Courthouse in Mansfield, one of several Beaux Arts style courthouses in the state. (1911, Favrot and Livaudais, architects, New Orleans)

Photos 5-6. Beaux Arts banks in Opelousas (above) and Donaldsonville (below).

Photo 7. The richly detailed Ruston State Bank (1910), complete with a central Roman triumphal arch.

Photo 8. This bank in the small town of Hessmer is a fairly restrained example of the Beaux Arts taste.

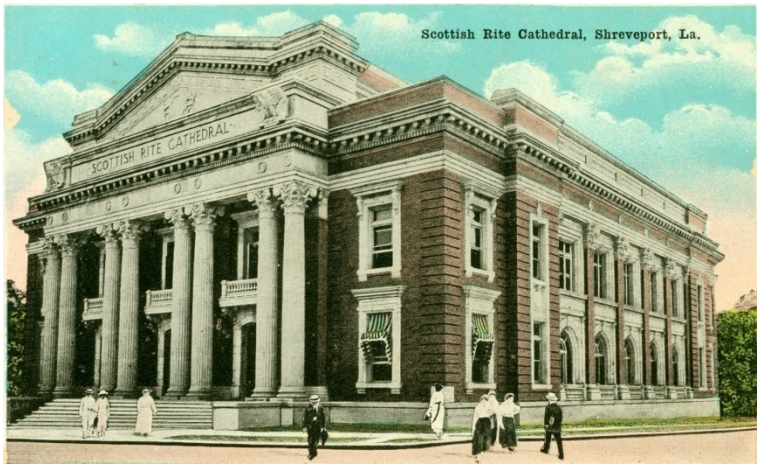

Photo 9. Scottish Rite Cathedral, Shreveport, Louisiana's most flamboyant surviving Beaux Arts building (1915, Edward F. Neild, architect, Shreveport). Courtesy LSU-Shreveport Archives.

Photo 10. B'Nai Zion Temple, Shreveport. 1915, Edward F. Neild & Clarence Olschner, architects, Shreveport.