

A Remembrance and an Affront

By Richard Guy Wilson



Taste changes and so do our perception of history and the past. More than 225 years ago, the future president of the United States and arguably one of our most important architects wrote about the buildings of his native Virginia: “It is impossible to devise things more ugly, uncomfortable, and happily more perishable.”

Happily also, we no longer follow what Thomas Jefferson proposed. A little more than a hundred years ago the architecture that we now call Victorian was dismissed as an “architectural nightmare,” but now we love the buildings of Frank Furness and H. H. Richardson. Fifty years ago the Pennsylvania Railroad Station in New York designed by the eminent firm of McKim, Mead & White fell to the wrecker’s ball, and the remains, including statues, wound up in the garbage pits of New Jersey. As several critics noted, one originally entered New York like a Roman general marching into the Baths of Diocletian in Rome, which served as the source for the main waiting room. Now you entered New York like a rat in a hole.

The huge “urban renewal” of the 1960s and 1970s led a reign of terror as downtowns were flattened in the name of “progress.” Other shifts of perception have occurred, such as Art Deco or the decorative Modernism of the 1920s and 1930s, which, once condemned, is now revered, whether in South Miami Beach or the 1938 shopping center and theater in Silver Spring that serves as a hub of downtown. These various incidents—and many more could be cited—indicate not just how taste changes, but that nothing is more blind than the present.

Today we are faced with determining what is important among the buildings created in what might be called the heyday of American Modernism: the 1940s to 1960s. This is the period in which the U.S. emerged as the dominant power and artistically we threw off our usual reliance on foreign precedent and created a unique modern architecture and art. New American design from chairs by the Eames to embassies around the world, and Abstract Expressionism dominated the scene. Major buildings that helped define this new American architectural eminence are threatened or already destroyed. Gone are the Lustron prefabricated houses of the Marine Base at Quantico and destroyed is Paul Rudolph’s Riverview High School in Sarasota. Threatened are ... Boston City Hall, Harry Weiss’s Prentice Towers in Chicago, and many more.



An exquisite restoration of the mid-century Modern Lafayette River Residence by Pentecost Deal & Associates. Photo by Lauren L. Keim.



Elevations of the Cyclorama

Perhaps the most notorious example is the Cyclorama at the Gettysburg Battlefield in Pennsylvania designed by Richard Neutra. Neutra was one of the great American architects widely celebrated both in the U.S. and abroad; his buildings appear in almost any book written on Modern and/or American architecture. The Cyclorama, designed in 1961 by Neutra with Robert Alexander, was part of “Mission 66” program, an attempt to put Modern architecture in the national parks across the U.S. And yet, the current National Park Service (NPS) will not listen

from the Historic American
Building Survey.

and, in one of the most scandalous of incidents, removed the murals in the building and let it rot with no maintenance. In spite of outspoken protest, the NPS is going to tear down Neutra's building. Supposedly, the Cyclorama marred the site at

Gettysburg where Pickett's famous charge took place and the battlefield will be returned to its original look. That means all of the statuary and memorials in one of the country's largest sculpture parks will be removed and the ground cut up? Of course not!!!

The point is this: let's try not to be as blind and ignorant as our predecessors. We can nostalgically return to red brick and white trim in the new visitors' center at Gettysburg, but this is fiction! American architects created a great landscape in the post-war years, and we need to understand it, appreciate it, and save it.

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