

The AIA Issues Database: Education of Architects – The Grand Central School of Architecture

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Of all the issues that inspired the founding of the American Institute of Architects, perhaps none was as pressing or important as the education and training of architects. The organization's founders felt that the most expedient path to the improvement of architecture in America, and to elevating the esteem in which the profession was held by the public, was to improve education. The limitations of the traditional paths into the profession, particularly craft apprenticeships and office training, increasingly were evident to many. Architectural training needed its own independent institutions as it had in many countries in Europe or, failing that, needed to be moved into the university system where other professionals - lawyers, engineers, physicians, the clergy - were already being trained.

At the time of the founding of the AIA, there was little doubt as to the superiority of European architecture education over American especially that offered by the French Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the polytechnic institutes of German-speaking Europe. New York architects of the mid-nineteenth century who formed the initial core of the AIA were largely a group of European émigrés of British and German backgrounds. Several of these men were educated in European institutions, and not surprisingly, they recalled their experiences in these schools when thinking about how architectural education should be organized in America. Among the men who founded the AIA, arguably the two most influential on the question of architectural education were the Prague-born, Austria-educated Leopold Eidlitz and the American-born, French-educated Richard Morris Hunt. Eidlitz and Hunt, two of the leading American architects of the mid-nineteenth century, embodied the fairly distinct traditions of architectural training in Europe – one Germanic, the other French. To paint the differences between the two traditions with the broadest brush: the Germanic polytechnics offered an education that emphasized the practicalities of construction and building engineering, the French approach focused on history, design, and art-oriented instruction. In modernizing architecture education in America, architects would ultimately borrow from both of these traditions as well as the British system which was marked by early attempts to integrate architecture training into the university curriculum.

Eidlitz, the prime proponent of the polytechnic approach, was educated at the Vienna Polytechnical Institute and shortly thereafter (around 1843) immigrated to America where he joined Richard Upjohn's large office in New York at the time it was engaged in the design and construction of Trinity Church. Eidlitz would have a long professional association with Upjohn, and it was Upjohn who invited him to participate in the founding meeting of the AIA. While Eidlitz proffered opinions on many of the professional issues with which the new organization grappled, it was clear that he had a particular interest in education and would take an early leadership role in this area. It was upon his motion in January of 1860 that the AIA first created a committee that had as its objective the establishment of a "library and a college for the education of architects." What work, if any, this committee accomplished is unclear, and the

coming of the American Civil War inevitably would halt its efforts altogether. When the issue resurfaced in 1867, Eidlitz was appointed chair of the newly reconstituted Committee on Education. And it was he who was largely responsible for the fairly extensive plan presented to the membership at the Institute's first annual convention that recommended the AIA establish a "grand central school of architecture." Not surprisingly, the proposal favored the practical (polytechnic) approach which Eidlitz had trained under and which he felt would best serve the profession.

Richard Morris Hunt, the man who first popularized Beaux-Arts style training in the United States, had a unique educational background among the founders of the AIA as the first American architect to attend the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Only in his twenties when the Institute was formed, Hunt had little practical construction experience, but he was already seen as a leader within the profession because of his family's social standing and his association with the Ecole. Around the time of the founding of the AIA, Hunt began to train students out of his studio in New York, relying on the modes of instruction he learned in Paris. He had a strong belief in the French system with its emphasis on drawing exercises and design competitions. He commanded his students to "draw, draw, sketch, sketch, sketch," insisting that "if you can't draw anything else, draw your boots, it doesn't matter, it will ultimately give you a control of your pencil so that you can the more rapidly express on paper your thoughts in designing." Near the end of his career, on the occasion of his being honored by the Royal Institute of British Architects, he told the audience he "owed everything" to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Despite his interest and background, Hunt - perhaps in deference to the elder Eidlitz - never served on the AIA's Committee on Education. His influence, however, did not go unfelt, as one of his students and foremost protégés, Robert Ware, sat on the committee and would become its chair in 1871. It would be through Ware that Hunt's ideas about architectural education were most successfully manifested both in the professional society and in the academy.

While Eidlitz and Hunt had the impressive European pedigrees, it was Ware, an architect without any appreciable international training, who would become the leading figure in American architectural education in nineteenth century. He received a general liberal arts education at Harvard University and then went on to serve an apprenticeship in Hunt's office. Ware considered Hunt his lifelong mentor, and it was through him that he was first exposed to the techniques of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Upon leaving Hunt's studio, Ware opened up an office in Boston with fellow Harvard graduate and fellow Hunt protégé, Henry Van Brunt, where they began to win important commissions and train architects. Ware's reputation grew quickly, and the newly created Massachusetts Institute of Technology approached him about forming a school of architecture. Ware accepted the offer, becoming the first American professor of architecture and leaving his practice in the hands of Van Brunt.

Likely because of his new position at M.I.T., the AIA Board placed Ware on the Institute's education committee in 1867. Ware, however, had little to do with authoring the proposal for a "grand central school of architecture," as when the committee produced its recommendations, he was in Europe on a study tour to develop further his ideas about the structure of the new M.I.T. program. Hunt too was abroad during most of 1867, touring the Paris Exposition among other things. This left Eidlitz, more or less, unchecked to author the AIA's education proposal as he saw fit.

M.I.T.'s hiring of Ware predated the AIA's reconvening of its education committee by at least a year and, in part, may have spurred the AIA to action, as there was a feeling on the part of Eidlitz and other members that the Institute, and not universities, should manage and control architecture education. Placing architecture training within a university setting was something the British had been experimenting with but was not done in other parts of Europe. AIA members felt practicing architects might lose control of the training and development of aspiring professionals to university administrators. Eidlitz was especially adamant on this point. He insisted that architecture would be best taught in a school "under the immediate supervision of the Institute, among whose members would be ... the most competent professors." Richard Upjohn was less concerned than Eidlitz that practitioners would be unable to make their influence felt if architecture training were moved into the university. Over the objection of Eidlitz and others, he suggested that the AIA support establishing a school of architecture at Columbia College in New York.

Under Eidlitz's education plan, practicing architects were to hold all the administrative power. He envisioned that the AIA would secure land in upstate New York for the school, raise all the money for its endowment, and provide the instructors. Students would travel from around the country to receive training. While the course of study that Eidlitz laid out drew upon both the French and Germanic traditions, it favored the polytechnic curriculum that he had trained under in Vienna. That is a curriculum based on immersion into the more technical aspects of the profession and emphasizing "hands on" learning in laboratories and workshops.

Eidlitz's sympathy for a polytechnic approach was not merely a matter of his understandable tendency to favor the educational system under which he was trained. His pedagogical beliefs were also in line with his deeply held philosophical notions about the nature of the creation of art and architecture. He shared with Thomas U. Walter and other contemporaries a belief that architecture needed to lean more toward the technical and scientific. For him, early technical training and a career engaged with contemporary technical developments was the path to better architects as well as an effective way to achieve a contemporary architecture fitting for its era. He was opposed to architecture based on "taste." A preoccupation with "taste," Eidlitz felt, kept architects tied to the past, looking only to historical precedent to develop an aesthetic sense. In contrast, Richard Morris Hunt and others associated with the Ecole were quite comfortable with the notion that training should cultivate "taste" within an aspiring architect (indeed, this was a tenet of the Ecole pedagogy).

Ultimately, the fate of Edilitz's plan did not hinge on philosophical or pedagogical debates within the profession, although they did play a role. At the time, some AIA members felt the "grand central school" plan was too ambitious a project for the small and still relatively new Institute to carry out. Moreover, many were skeptical that one central school could serve the entire country. This might have been a more realistic arrangement in smaller European countries but not in a country as vast as the United States. Yet, the scope of the effort and the issue of the location were elements of the plan that might have been adjusted given time. What ultimately doomed Edilitz's plan more than anything else was the successful establishment, under the Morrill Act of 1862, of land grant colleges which had as part of their central mission providing training in agriculture and mechanical arts.

Arguably, there was no more significant ingredient to the remarkable advancements that architectural education made in the United States during the last half of the nineteenth century than passage of the Morrill Act which granted states large tracts of federal land upon which to build - and which could also be sold to finance - colleges dedicated to agriculture and the mechanical arts. These new institutions became natural homes for departments of architecture. In fact, the first three collegiate schools of architecture in America were all located in land-grant colleges founded under the Morrill Act: MIT, Cornell and the University of Illinois. As similar colleges began to spring up throughout the country, architecture departments grew up in this virgin soil, and Eidlitz's plan for a "grand central school" became obsolete. AIA's Committee on Education, which was initially tasked with figuring out how to build a school, became a venue for bringing together the increasing number of heads of architecture programs. Indeed, the education committee provided the central venue for information exchange among architects in the academy until the founding of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture in 1912.

Eidlitz resigned in disappointment from the AIA shortly after it became clear that the organization would not support his proposal. Eidlitz biographer, Kenneth Franklin Jacobs, suggests that George Post, another of Hunt's protégés, delayed what might have been a vote of approval for the plan by moving successfully that Eidlitz's report be printed and sent to every member for input before taking a final vote. This effectively gave Ware and Hunt more time (another year) to move their educational agenda forward within the professional society.

If it were not for the Morrill Act, one could imagine a very different kind of architecture education taking hold in the United States, perhaps even the development of a central school administered by practitioners as Eidlitz proposed. The huge public investment in vocational training that the Morrill Act represented, however, made Eidlitz's plan obsolete nearly before he put it to paper. Ware and Hunt understood that the future of architecture education lay within the burgeoning American university system while Eidlitz resisted this inevitability. Although his plan died, Eidlitz's pedagogical beliefs lived on, and the question of the balance between technical and artistic training would be long standing within the profession. Time would also reveal that Eidlitz was right to worry about practitioners losing influence to career educators once architecture training became ensconced in the university.