McKim, Mead and White:

Architecture and Tribulation

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McKim Mead and White

Over the course of our time in this class, we have learned so much more than I ever thought possible. We’ve been introduced to many a figure, politician, designer and architect. One architectural firm in particular seemed to keep coming up in our discussions as we walked through the streets of New York. I believe we mentioned the names McKim, Mead and White at least one or two times each day we were together. It seemed to me that no matter where we went, this firm had left their thumbprint in one way or another. Prior to taking this class, I had never so much as heard the names of these three men, and for that reason, I decided to do a little investigating to find out more about the history of each of these men, their firm, and the importance of their mark on New York City.

McKim, Mead & White was a highly regarded American architectural firm, made up of partners Charles Follen McKim (1847–1909), William Rutherford Mead (1846–1928) and Stanford White (1853–1906) (Broderick, 2010). This firm flourished at the turn of the twentieth century, and are credited with the design of a long list of New York’s finest buildings. Some buildings and structures we noted throughout our course include: The Washington Arch (Washington Square Park, est. 1892), Philosophy Hall (Columbia University, est. 1910), the original Pennsylvania Station (est. 1910) and the Manhattan Municipal Building (est. 1915) (Roth, 1978). One look at any of these buildings will be enough to tell you that these three were no ordinary men. Let’s take a closer look at who they were, and how they came to become among the most notable of New York City’s architects.

Charles McKim was born in 1847 in Chester County, Pennsylvania. He later died in 1909, leaving behind a legacy that would immortalize him for centuries to come. Before establishing the firm, McKim, Mead & White, McKim formed his own firm in partnership with William Rutherford Mead. It wasn’t until later in 1877 that the two were joined by Stanford White (Baker, 1989). McKim is best known as a proponent of Beaux-Arts architecture in styles that exemplified the American Renaissance. According to Klein, this style of architecture, “expresses the academic neoclassical architectural style taught at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris” (1986). The Beaux-Arts style heavily influenced the architecture of the United States in the period from 1880 to 1920, and is seen clearly in McKim, Mead & White’s aforementioned New York City works.

McKim was instrumental in the formation of the American School of Architecture in Rome in 1894, which would later become known as the American Academy in Rome. Broderick notes that, “the American School of Architecture was McKim’s favorite project and his most notable legacy” (2010). This academy is a research and arts institution located on the Gianicolo Hill in Rome.

Our next architect, William Mead, was born August 20, 1846 in Brattleboro, Vermont, and died in June of 1928 at age 81. Like McKim, his work was also profoundly partial to the Beaux-Arts architecture movement. According to Baker, “of the three, Mead was the partner who ‘hired and fired’, ‘steered the ship’, and spent his time ‘trying to keep the partners from making damn fools of themselves’" (1989). Although less interesting, than his counterparts, Mead’s later life held some events worthy of discussion. As Baker notes in his work, Mead married Olga Kilyeni and traveled with her to Rome, where he was heavily involved in the American Academy in Rome until his death. He was, “an AAR charter member, as was McKim, a Trustee from 1905–1928, and its President from 1910–1928” (1989).

The last of the architects, Stanford White, has arguably the most interesting story of the three. After joining the firm in 1877, White was quick to make a name for himself. Known by those close to him as “Stanny” and by others as a "masterful," "intense," and "burly” fellow, White’s great architectural legacy was matched by his intriguing persona. Throughout his career, his design principles were said to have “embodied the American Renaissance” (Baker, 1989). He worked with McKim and Mead for a number of decades, designing and bringing to life masterpiece after masterpiece. His personal life, however, is remembered with less admiration than his professional one. Marked by many an affair with many a young lady, White had a reputation as a seductive womanizer, using his charm and social status to woo a notable number of unsuspecting women. According to Baker, he maintained a multi-story apartment on 24th street in Manhattan with a rear entrance, “its interior design intended to fulfill one primary purpose, to function as an opulent, seductive lair where White and his female conquests could ‘wine and dine’ in seclusion” (1989).

The most notable of affairs White became tangled in involved rising model and turn-of-the-century superstar Evelyn Nesbit, who, at the time of her affair with White, was a mere sixteen years old (Uruburu, 2008). This affair involved the seduction and rape of the young Miss Nesbit, and was, in fact, the ultimate cause of White’s untimely demise at age fifty-two (Uruburu, 2008). Nesbit’s late husband, Harry Kendall Thaw, had suffered from mental insanity for his entire life. After holding a burdenous grudge against White, Thaw met him by pure coincidence at the roof garden theatre of Madison Square Garden, where he, standing two feet away, shot White point blank, killing him instantly. Uruburu states that, “part of White’s face was torn away and the rest of his features were unrecognizable, blackened by gunpowder” (2008).

The events that transpired between Thaw and White on the Roof Garden Theatre went down in tabloid history as “The Crime of the Century”, as it involved three prominent members of New York’s early high society. A trial was held soon after the incident, which determined that Thaw was found not guilty by reason of insanity (Uruburu, 2008). This interesting notoriety that follows White has certainly added to the story behind the McKim Mead & White legacy. Now, not only are they recognized and known as a superb architectural firm, but their name also carries a certain level of association to the White ordeal, which one might say lends a certain air of notoriety and intrigue to the firm.

To this day, the structures that McKim, Mead & White brought to life still play a huge role in New York and its architectural landscape. The famous Washington Arch greets Washington Square Park’s patrons with the likeness of George Washington, on the left depicted as president, and on the right depicted as the leader of America’s army at war. The arch stands, casting a shadow of protection upon those who linger in the park, its intricate detail work beckoning anyone with an eye for minutia in for a closer look. The building of Philosophy Hall that stands on Columbia University’s historic campus offers a place of dwelling and reasoning for those undertaking the study of philosophy and the great thinkers. The original Pennsylvania Station was a house of commerce, a strikingly handsome place of travel and a symbol of our connectedness. People from all corners of the world would come to marvel in the midst of its grandeur before it was so prematurely taken from our City.

These iconic landmarks have been preserved throughout the past century, and for a very good reason! They stand as a tribute to the capabilities of man; what he can accomplish and with what attention to finesse and detail he can accomplish it with. McKim, Mead & White did not merely construct buildings, they painted New York’s landscape with images inspired by the most beautiful places in the world. Their beauty is so remarkable that to this day, there are groups who serve the purpose of conserving and protecting them from deterioration and demolition.

It is true that in its day, the names McKim, Mead & White carried a somewhat mottled reputation. However, let that not retract you from allowing yourself to experience the grandness and awesomeness of their work. The buildings they designed were meant to inspire and spellbind you, so let them do just that. Today, McKim, Mead & White are known throughout New York City for a reason; their work has stood the test of time. The next time you find yourself traipsing about the city, take a look at the structures that surround you; there is a very good chance that you could be within a few block’s distance of one of the firm’s celebrated buildings. Explore the landscape, feel the beauty, and investigate its history. Every building has its own unique history, its own story waiting to be told. The next time you encounter a building or structure that particularly strikes you, do yourself a favor and jot down its name. When you have time, go back and crack open that book to see exactly what that place is waiting to tell you.

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