

Nesting Paradigms in the Narrative of Newly-Modern America: Reconciling Henry Hobson Richardson's So-Called Juvenilia

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It is difficult to grasp the scope of change that transpired in the nineteenth century. In mere decades, empires rose and fell. Individual fortunes acted in much the same way; being both the products and victims of unimaginable risk. Emerging industries injected vast wealth into varied social classes, social mobility is hopeful and all consuming— that which was once reserved only for an oligarch or a plutocrat suddenly became the domain of the newly minted 'industrialist.' As such, a triumphantly 'gilded' age emerges over the latter decades of the century. Such an era's dynamism and energy necessitated a distinct and lavish architecture to properly document its contours.

Simultaneously, the late century sees an architectural language emerge for each of the major European empires. In North America none are more dominantly articulated than those of the perpetually dichotomous English and French. It is here where the last great empire, that of the Americans, emerges. Although ultimately derivative of imported European traditions, American settlers hold a high degree of cultural flexibility when compared to their European contemporaries, thanks in large part to their geographic isolation. To carve out their own national identity, settlers turn culture inward: towards the so-called 'American' landscape.¹

This emerging cultural paradigm is manifested and nurtured by now-celebrated paragons of American architectural culture. The influence of Louis Sullivan, of Frank Lloyd Wright and of Henry Hobson Richardson spread rapidly across the United States and Canada. Argued by many to be the first articulation of a style that is uniquely American, the work of Henry Hobson Richardson enabled that of Sullivan and Wright. An investigation into the career of Richardson and the emergence of his Romanesque style will hence be undertaken. Such will be conducted in order to illustrate the transition in Richardson's own work that solidified his style and enabled those of his successors. This investigation will argue that, by the end of his career, Richardson successfully integrated the principals and the motifs of the radically modern American romantics into an architecture that from the outset was uniquely his own. These ends will be achieved through an examination of two works: the Church of the Unity in Springfield, Massachusetts of 1867 and the Ames Gate Lodge of 1881.

The career of H.H. Richardson is decidedly short. Born 1838, Richardson only practices between 1866 and his death in 1886.² He is educated through the 1850s at Harvard University and subsequently the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, where he studies classi-

cal French style and method with the likes of Richard Morris Hunt.³ He returns to America in 1865 and begins work.⁴ Astoundingly, by the end of his twenty-year career, Richardson had developed a succinct, recognizable style. Furthermore, his style is so well loved that it is propagated as popular aesthetic from the 1880s into the next century. The likes of Bruce Price, designer of many late-century icons in Canada, emulates the 'Richardsonian Romanesque.' Price's Windsor Station in Montreal, completed in 1889, is a worthwhile example. Elsewhere, Richard Waite builds the Ontario Legislature in Richardson's style circa 1893.⁵ Countless other public buildings are built in his style, notably the Old Toronto City Hall by Edward J Lennox circa 1899 and the Cambridge City Hall, completed in 1889. Design proposals for Richardsonian Romanesque churches, especially, are lobbied during the reconstruction of Saint John, New Brunswick following its devastating fire in June of 1877. Richardson's style refreshes a deeply historicist architectural scene in the late stages of the era of great revivals.

As argued in most current discourses, Richardson's style is most clearly articulated following his completion of Boston's Trinity Church in 1877. Asserted by James O'Gorman in his book, *Three American Architects* such an eclectic structure is, ironically, the product of his rigidly-

classicist Beaux-Arts training. Writing, “[one] can judge from his mature works, in which he eschewed classical details, that knowledge of the *esquisse* process and the rational analysis of building program far outweighed the trappings of classical style in the aspiring architect’s homeward baggage,” O’Gorman roots Richardson firmly in an old methodological tradition based in the narrowed focus on the programmatic needs of a structure.⁶ As such, O’Gorman sets Richardson to be the methodological foil of someone like Frank Furness.⁷ Richardson rejects eclecticism in favour of a personal *mélange* of contemporary aesthetics, argues O’Gorman.⁸ Although it is impossible to separate any aesthetic of the century from its roots in history, O’Gorman raises a key point of Richardson’s early career: the distillation of a deeply-personal aesthetic from a fusion of contemporary thought and tested method.

The very same contemporary relevance will define the mature style developed by Richardson nearer the end of his life. The example of the Ames Gate Lodge, completed in 1881 provides a clear example of the kind of rhetoric that Richardson would Renderling inseparable from his ever-popular aesthetic. Inescapably rugged, the structure employs powerful statements of purpose through heavily rusticated stonework to communicate both the current trends in American picturesque individualism and to predict future trends in popular American thought. Typologically, the building is remarkably simple; the road that runs through its side betrays its primary function. Yet, the building seems resolute in its presentation of its gate. Note the power with which Richardson denotes the transition across the space: his heavy rusticated portals would later be seen as staples of his work. Inherently, focus is drawn away from the wings at either side— contained within are rooms that accommodates the estate’s

gardeners and bachelor guests.⁹ Instead, the building uses negative space— the void in its side— to order the viewer through its arch and into the property beyond. In the same way, it appears— low-slung and in line with the horizon— as though it were some eighteenth century fortification, protecting the estate beyond. Deliberately, then, Richardson is emphasizing the importance of privacy to the family that occupies this insular property. One might situate such a statement within larger narratives of post-industrial environmentalist anxiety which one still experiences today. In many ways, then, Richardson’s response maintains relevancy. This becomes important when the structure is reconciled with the emergence of American nationalism and American exceptionalism.

Situated near Eaton, Massachusetts, the Ames Gate Lodge marks the entrance to a larger estate property. Stonework that commands any viewer’s attention has a clear objective at Ames Gate: making allusion to the storied relation dependency of culture on place. Seen hence, another birthing ground for American ideologies. Pleasantly situated in one of the oldest states of the Republic, Richardson draws on American history when materializing his design. Massive fieldstones, strewn across the expanse of New England, assemble the structure. Theorized by Francis R. Kowsky in his article “H.H. Richardson’s Ames Gate Lodge and the Romantic Landscape Tradition,” Richardson deliberately chooses these “large cobbles” and arranges them thus to draw on the popular landscape trends of the day.¹⁰ These landscapes ultimately make New England a distinct facet of the ever-so-patriotic ‘great American landscape.’¹¹

Kowsky situates Richardson’s design choices in

context. Over the nineteenth century, ideas in landscape architecture trend towards the picturesque. Painterly composition formed the majority of worked landscape designs over the course of the century. Imported from the great estate-homes of Britain and Ireland, the picturesque garden takes on a different role in American architectural discourse.¹² The likes of Frederick Law Olmstead transform what was a decadent feature of a gentleman’s estate into a public good at the forefront of modernity. Kowsky highlights the connection between Olmstead and Richardson: “Richardson moved to the Boston suburb of Brookline in 1874; seven years later Olmstead became his neighbour.”¹³ The two would later work together on commissions near the end of Richardson’s life.¹⁴ Discussions between the two men lead Richardson to visit Central Park in New York. A project of Olmstead’s, the park remains a masterwork of principled nineteenth century park architecture.¹⁵ Kowsky asserts that it is on one of these trips that Richardson finds his inspiration for the heavy arches of the Ames Gate Lodge. The bridges constructed by Calvert Vaux, notably the Huddleston Arch, the Rustic Arch in the Ramble, and the Springbank Arch, provide Richardson with his model.¹⁶

Kowsky asserts a primary feature of Vaux’s designs: the subordination of architecture to landscape inherent.¹⁷ One can easily read such subordination into the Ames Gate Lodge, where structure appears most obviously on the roofline that, in a way, merely caps-off what could be a cairn of fieldstones. Correspondence between Olmstead and Richardson further develops the importance of the cairn as a typology to the two architects.¹⁸ Richardson would later memorialize transcontinental unity using a cairn at the Ames Monument, near Sherman, Wyoming.¹⁹ Ultimately, these simple stone structures reflect values of cooperation and community unseen, ac-

ording to these architects, for centuries.²⁰ Such values are inseparable from popular articulations of American idealism at the turn of the century. Effectively, through the example provided by the Ames Gate Lodge, one can see the incorporation of the rhetoric of the romantic landscapes into Richardson's mature works. This ideology would lead to the further development of unique American design by those directly influenced by Richardson: Sullivan and Wright. Effectively, the late career of H. H. Richardson is of major import to the radical transformation of American identity between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

However, such narratives of individual genius and radical deviation are muted when confronted with contemporary interpretations of Richardson's earliest works. Aesthetically, they are argued to be wholly derivative of the same European traditions Richardson would later circumvent. An examination of Richardson's earliest work reconciles two facets of architecture, revival and progression, to better articulate the actual nature of shifting societal and artistic paradigms. Biographers of Richardson remain contentious as to what reconciles these conflicted narratives. Henry-Russell Hitchcock writes, in both his 1936 edition and in his widely revised 1966 edition, a portrait of Richardson's individualized approach to architecture. Asserts Hitchcock, Richardson's rampant originality is seen in all— even the most derivative— of his works. On the Church of the Unity, Hitchcock argues that the boldness of the design could never have been built in Europe, given its more rigid expectations and its different access to building stone.²¹ As such, the Church of the Unity is presented as a watershed commission through which Richardson differentiates himself from those other Eastern architects that “[conformed] much more closely to English Victorian standards ... [and were successful

when they best emulated] the achievement of the best contemporary English architects.”²²

Although now destroyed, formal analysis of surviving images yields something of a similar conclusion: the structure presents an extensively modified Victorian Gothic church. Basic composition, of a gabled nave fronted by a porch and complimented by a tower off to a side, is maintained. Yet, decoratively, Richardson takes liberty: a rose window is comprised of a series of lancets, the tower is clad not in shingles but in dressed stone, and the porch appears more like one side of a cloister than a true porch. Obvious attempts to deviate from English tradition are seen. Further, the exterior stone is one not only particular to the region, but also to Richardson's most famous method of construction: hammer dressing. Explained by Hitchcock, the stone used by Richardson at the Church of the Unity is one that should not, sensibly, be cut in ashlar for fear of premature wear.²³ As such, the deliberateness of Richardson's design is further highlighted, rendering the Church of the Unity much more original than thought of currently.

Yet, James O'Gorman, in *Three American Architects*, refutes such deliberate design. Published in 1991, O'Gorman highlights Richardson's early work as a counterpoint to that of Frank Furness. While doing justice to Furness through an exploration of his bombastic eclecticism, O'Gorman summarily compartmentalizes Richardson's early work. Stating it to be “juvenilia,”²⁴ Richardson is made out to be a “Harvard ‘old boy’ shifting between English and French models.”²⁵ O'Gorman highlights a fair point, asserting that Richardson drew heavily from ecclesiastical sources in England.²⁶ However, O'Gorman asserts Richardson's indi-

vidual style only emerges with the construction of Trinity Church in 1877, a decade after the construction of the Church of the Unity.

Although difficult to accept in present circumstances, the gleaming biography presented by Hitchcock does better to address formal characteristics of Richardson's early work. As such, one cannot but conclude that Richardson's individual style does not, in fact, emerge only after the construction of Trinity Church, but rather from his first commission upon his return to America in the late 1860s. That is not to say, however, that one should blindly accept narratives of an architect's life that detail only the originality of their works, for, even on the simplest typological grounds, all works of architecture are preceded by others. As such, one is left to conclude that in the most contemporary sense, Richardson brought a degree of originality to architecture in America that enabled future developments— like those of Louis Sullivan and of Frank Lloyd Wright— which are oftentimes more widely celebrated than the innovations of Richardson.

The architecture of the ‘Three Americans’— to play off of O'Gorman— is fundamentally one of transition. Over the course of the century, immense change was wrought at the hands of a frantically changing society. The uptake of new technology meant catastrophic failure for the West's antiquated social orders. Industrial manufacturing meant the explosive growth of cities to the point of overcrowding. To combat these social ills, the creation of benevolent societies lead to greater, more widespread interest in charity and public health. Infrastructure that one may take for granted today was a direct result of the plight of many hundreds of thousands of displaced, disadvantaged, and desperately poor people. Yet, from the friction of change, new national identity was founded. As

statements of power in the most rudimentary sense, the built environments of cities and suburbs moulded history like never before. In America, national identity breaks free, in large part, from its European roots. A new, American, empire emerges, which will dominate the twentieth century and one whose fallout is only now coming to light.

Architecturally, American empire was forged in landscape by the like of Henry Hobson Richardson. His style is the first of many distinctly American styles. Remarkably, the style of Richardson emerges over a comparatively short career. As has been demonstrated, Richardson begins to sew the seeds of change immediately after beginning his career. Although not instantaneous in its effect, Richardson's Romanesque greatly influences the future of American architecture. His response to the onslaught of modernity— increasing in scale and in speed everyday— adapts contemporary trends with new ideology and in doing so precipitated the thematic guide of the subsequent half-century.

Notes

1. Morgan Currie, "Alternatives to Modernity: Ruskin and the Arts and Crafts Movement," Lecture, Carleton University, Ottawa, March 22, 2017.
2. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *The architecture of H.H. Richardson and his times*, 2nd ed, Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T., 1966. 3, 53.
3. James F. O'Gorman, *Three American architects: Richardson, Sullivan, and Wright, 1865-1915*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 9.
4. Hitchcock. 53.
5. Gary K. Hughes, *Music of the eye: architectural drawings of Canada's first city, 1822-1914*, Saint John, N.B.: New Brunswick Museum and the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, 1992.
6. O'Gorman. 12.
7. Ibid. 14.
8. Ibid. 12.
9. Francis R. Kowsky, "H. H. Richardson's Ames Gate Lodge and the Romantic Landscape Tradition," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 50, no. 2 (June 1991): 181-88, JSTOR, 181.
10. Ibid. 181.

11. Paul Kariouk, "Landscape and Architecture: Urban and Architectural Extensions of the Landscape," Lecture, Carleton University, Ottawa, March 16, 2017.
12. Ibid.
13. Kowsky. 184.
14. Floyd, Margaret Henderson. "H. H. Richardson, Frederick Law Olmsted, and the House for Robert Treat Paine." *Winterthur Portfolio* 18, no. 4 (1983): 228.
15. Ibid. 234-235.
16. Kowsky 186.
17. Ibid. 185.
18. Ibid. 187.
19. Ibid. 187.
20. Ibid. 187.
21. Hitchcock. 67.
22. Ibid. 66.
23. Ibid. 65.
24. O'Gorman. 19.
25. Ibid. 19.
26. Ibid. 19.

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