

Teaching the History of Architecture at McGill, 1896-1903

Introduction

One hundred years ago—and with the blessing of the Province of Quebec Association of Architects (PQAA)—a Department of Architecture in McGill University's Faculty of Applied Science (Engineering) was established to provide a professional studies program in architecture. After a brief apprenticeship, and passing the "Professional Practice" exam, graduates were accepted by the PQAA, the B.Sc. Arch. being considered the equivalent to passing the compulsory architectural examinations taken by tutorship candidates seeking admission to the profession. This paper outlines the teaching of one particular field, architectural history, during the first years of McGill's architecture program.

In 1896, Stewart Henbest Capper (1859-1925) was appointed Macdonald Professor of Architecture, head the new architectural program. A graduate of the University of Edinburgh with a Master of Arts degree, Capper had spent one session at Heidelberg University and studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris before apprenticing with Sir George Washington Browne (1854-1939) in Edinburgh. In 1891, Capper became an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects, and immediately commenced an architectural practice; he also undertook a teaching assignment at his alma mater in Edinburgh.

In addition to being a capable architect, Capper was an acknowledged scholar and a good teacher and administrator. He was well-travelled and, besides having a good knowledge of classical Greek and Latin, was also fluent in French, Portuguese, Spanish, and German, knew some Italian, and mastered Arabic toward the end of his life.

After arriving at McGill, Capper organized a four-year course in architecture. The first year was preparatory, with all science and drawing courses taken jointly with engineering students. Architectural courses were introduced only in the second year, including "History of Architecture" ("from the Heroic age to the reign of Queen Anne") and "Theory of Architecture," a complementary course to History in which students learned composition, the orders of architecture, and elements of architectural effects. Many civil engineering students enrolled in History of Architecture, and for a while it was a mandatory course for them.

History of Architecture (mainly Italian, Spanish, French, and English Renaissance) continued in third year, and in the fourth year "History of Art" was introduced. In the final year students took "Domestic, Public and Ecclesiastical Architecture," a course dealing with the historic evolution of architectural styles, complemented by requirements and problems of a contemporary nature. "Building Construction and Design," "Drawing," "Modelling," and several engineering and service courses rounded out the curriculum.¹

At the outset there were only two full-time teachers, Capper, the director, and Henry F. Armstrong, a lecturer. With few students enrolled full-time, all architectural subjects, including History of Architecture, were the responsibility of Capper. Armstrong taught "Descriptive Geometry," drawing, lettering, and modelling. The arrangement of having history taught by the director, usually a professional architect who designed and built buildings, continued for more than five decades; in fact, several of these teachers, including Capper, became renowned historians in their own right. Appointed in the 1950s, Peter Collins was the first architectural historian hired at the school with the main responsibility of lecturing on architectural history.

by Norbert Schoenauer

Capper's "History of Architecture"

Capper delivered his inaugural address at McGill shortly after his arrival in Montréal. In it, he underlined the importance old buildings have in the study of history:

Architecture is the great "object lesson" of history. Without its eloquence of storied stone, history would be shorn of its most poetic, its most impressive and often times its only witness; it would sink to the dull prose of the half forgotten chronicler.²

Today, the scope of Capper's history lectures at the School of Architecture can only be assessed from the text and reference books he selected for his courses and from the exam questions listed in the annual calendar of the Faculty of Applied Science. Although enrollment in the school was small, with the addition of engineering and part-time students, as well as several tutorship candidates who registered for exams held by the profession, Capper's lectures had a sizeable audience. However, the small number of students in studio courses such as "Design" ensured a close contact between teacher and students, an ideal pattern for studio training.

The textbooks for Capper's history courses were T. Roger Smith and John Slater, *Architecture, Classic and Early Christian* (1882); T. Roger Smith and E.J. Poynter, *Architecture, Gothic and Renaissance* (1888); T.C. Hamlin, *History of Architecture* (1898); William J. Anderson, *The Architecture of the Renaissance in Italy* (1895), and Reginald T. Blomfield, *A Short History of Renaissance Architecture in England* (1900). His reference books were James Fergusson, *History of Architecture* (1893) and *History of Modern Architecture* (1891), Russel Sturgis, *European Architecture* (1896), John A. Gotch, *Early Renaissance Architecture in England* (1901), and Reginald T. Blomfield, *A History of Renaissance Architecture in England* (1897). The textbook for "History of Art" was G. Baldwin Brown, *The Fine Arts* (1891).³

For 1899—the year the first students graduated from McGill's architecture program—a sense of the curriculum can be derived from examinations in some of the courses. In Capper's History of Architecture, for example, second-year students had to answer five out of seven questions:

1. Give some account generally (without detailed descriptions of special buildings) of ancient Roman Architecture, both as regards construction and decorative elements.
2. Compare and contrast an Egyptian temple with a Greek temple, and both with a Gothic cathedral, adding a note as to their historical dates.
3. How did the Cistercian Order arise? and what was its influence on the development of medieval architecture? Add to your answer a sketch plan of a typical Cistercian Abbey, naming the various buildings included.
4. What do you understand by "Byzantine" architecture? and what by "Romanesque"? Mention characteristic construction features of either style, with reference to important buildings in the style adding their approximate dates.
5. Trace the development of Gothic architecture as regards the forms of window tracery and vaulting.

6. Explain with illustrative sketches (where necessary) the following terms: Pylon; peristyle; sexpartite-vaulting; pendentive; clerestory; flying-buttress; cloister; and chevet.
7. Describe briefly, with sketches of plan, etc., mentioning their dates, any two of the following buildings: The Great Pyramid; the Erechtheum; the Pantheon; Westminster Abbey; St. Peter's (Rome); any building (important architecturally) not otherwise included in your answers.⁴

Capper's third-year exam questions in "History of Renaissance" required the students to provide:

1. a comparison of churches and palazzi in Florence, Venice and Rome (adding architects and dates, and pointing out divergences of style characteristic of these cities);
2. the influence of sculpture and painting upon Italian architecture during the 15th and 16th centuries;
3. a brief account of Brunelleschi and Michael Angelo;
4. the rise of Renaissance Architecture in Italy with the adoption of the style in France and in England;
5. a comparison of the architecture of Francis I with that of Louis XIV in France;
6. a description of the Escorial (mentioning its architect and date);

1. *Annual Calendar of McGill College and University: Session 1899-1900* (Montréal, 1899), 117-18.

2. "Architecture in the University," *Canadian Architect and Builder* 9, no. 11 (November 1896): 179.

3. *Annual Calendar of McGill College and University: Session 1903-1904* (Montréal, 1903), 160-61. Scholarly books acquired for the library by Capper in 1898 included Claude Sauvegeot, *Palais, châteaux, hôtels et maisons de France du XV^e au XVIII^e siècle*, 4 vols. (1867), Karl J.F. Schnaase, *Geschichte der Bildenden Künste*, 7 vols. (1843-64), Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten*, 2 vols. (1860-63), Karl Boetticher, *Tektonik der Hellenen* (1844-52), Viollet le Duc, *Dictionnaire raisonné du mobilier français de l'époque carolingienne à la renaissance*, 6 vols. (1854-75), J.C. Murphy, *Arabian Antiquities of Spain* (1728), R. Wood, *The Ruins of Palmyra and Baalbec* (1753-57), Lewis N. Cottingham, *Monograph on King Henry VII's Chapel at Westminster*, 2 vols. (1822-29), and C. Texier and R.P. Pullan, *Byzantine Architecture* (1864). See "Collection of Architectural Books," *Canadian Architect and Builder* 11, no. 12 (December 1898): x.

4. *Annual Calendar of McGill College and University: Session 1899-1900* (Montréal, 1899), 345-46.

7. a comparison of 16th century architecture in England with that of France;
8. a brief account of Inigo Jones, estimating his influence upon architectural development in England;
9. an account of St. Paul's Cathedral (London);
10. a brief comment upon the "Old Colonial" style of architecture in America, noting any specially characteristic features and discussing its adaptability for modern domestic work.⁵

Capper also lectured on the evolution of housing: an Arts-and-Crafts domestic architect prior to coming to McGill, he designed a "Model Workmen's Dwelling" in Blairhoyle, Perthshire, restored several historic buildings in Old Edinburgh, and built Ramsay Garden on the steep slope of Castle Hill in Old Edinburgh (see figure 4, p. 62). In a fourth-year exam, identified as "Architecture," students had to answer four of these six questions:

1. Contrast the requirements of modern domestic planning with those accepted in the "Palladian" style of last century, pointing out the resulting characteristics in external architecture.
2. The Elizabethan mansion is generally held to be the earliest Renaissance Architecture of England. Consider the truth of this view as respects planning.
3. Sketch the ground plan of a Pompeian house of the more important class, and note how far the type may be held to survive in modern times.
4. Write a note upon the "Old Colonial" style, its historical derivation, and its suitability to modern requirements.
5. Trace the history of the "hall" in domestic architecture, and discuss its applicability to modern planning.
6. Estimate the influence of Inigo Jones on English domestic architecture, mentioning some of his works.⁶

On Thursday morning, 30 April 1899, George Taylor Hyde and Norman M. McLeod passed the above fourth-year three-and-a-half-hour exam given by Capper, a test that also entailed the submission of sketch plans for a five- to six-bedroom suburban house. Both Hyde and McLeod graduated that year. (Years later, Hyde entered into a long-lasting professional partnership with Percy Erskine Nobbs (1875-1964), who succeeded Capper as director of the school in 1903; Nobbs and Hyde came to be known for their beautiful Arts-and-Crafts-inspired homes in the Montréal area.)

Early students in architecture at McGill received a thorough education in the architectural history of "the great eras of European civilization," but—as was customary at the time—had little exposure to indigenous buildings of the Orient or Africa, let alone the Americas. Buildings and architectural details of the classical period, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance era were studiously memorized. It is doubtful whether many of today's students would pass Capper's exams of nearly hundred years ago. Today, such detailed knowledge of historic buildings is no longer considered important, but at a time when architectural practice often entailed design in the so-called "revivalist styles," it was essential.

Conclusion

While knowledge in all fields has increased at a phenomenal rate during the 20th century, the length of time allocated to formal education has unfortunately not kept pace. Indeed, the opposite has often been true. For example, with the introduction of Cégep (Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel) education in Québec in 1967, the two first years were lopped off McGill's then-six-year course in architecture, to be given at the Cégep level. In my opinion, the two Cégep years seem not to be academically equivalent to those previously taught at the university level.

In addition to the reduction of the full curriculum from six to four years, "History of Architecture" was further short-changed over the decades in order to free up time for such essential new subjects as Computer Aided Design (CAD). At present only two history courses are mandatory, though students are also required to take one of the several optional history courses. Theoretically, it is possible for architecture students to take history in only three terms out of eight. Capper's admonishment that "Architecture is the great 'object lesson' of history" does not seem to carry much weight a hundred years after these words were first uttered at McGill University.

5. *Ibid.*, 346-47.

6. *Ibid.*, 349-50.

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