Note from the Editor

The graduate intern for the journal this year, Mike Mitchell, is also working with me in my other capacity as an urban and public historian. Mike has been tracing the unfolding drama in Chicago over Prentice Hospital, an odd-shaped building from 1975, a multi-story, concrete clover atop a truncated Mies-style glass box that Northwestern University intends to replace with a medical research center attuned to present-day uses and tastes. On account of its architect, Bertrand Goldberg—designer of the Chicago landmarks Marina City and River City—and because of the centrality of Chicago to both modernism and preservationism, the demolition proposal set off an archetypal episode in the accelerating battle over preservation standards for modernist buildings. To anyone willing to listen, Mike has patiently explained that the term "brutalism," commonly applied to the variant of modernism represented by this building, derives from the French for unfinished, exposed concrete and did not initially allude to the confrontational rawness of the style. Prentice Hospital is the type of building that urban affairs writers have in mind when they wonder how hard to fight to register historically significant buildings that normal urban dwellers regard as ugly.

The wretchedly overused word "irony" certainly fits this situation. Modernism in architecture and urban design thrived on the rejection—at times impetuous and uncomprehending—of previous urban forms. The preservationist and historic district movements took hold as popular and professional responses to imperious modernism. I am at the right age to have sympathy with all three sides of this argument: the mindset that saw in modernism new possibilities for beauty and urbanity; the excessively broad repudiation of modernist design and of urban renewal as dreary and oppressive; and the struggle, which Mike is working through, to develop standards and make distinctions.

One suspects that Mayor Rahm Emanuel was reflecting his city's overall judgment of Prentice Hospital when, after many months of whirling studies and accusations back and forth, he maneuvered a denial of protection through the city's Landmarks Commission. This opened the way for Northwestern's demolition plan (as of this writing, still tied up in court). When public history students first encounter preservationism, their impulse is the high-minded one of *protect everything*. If we have learned anything from the

shortcomings of modernist urban design and urban renewal, it is that while cities do need their grandiosities—both visionary modernism and unyielding preservationism—they need even more inconsistencies and judgment calls, such as Emanuel had to make. With luck, letting go of Prentice will strengthen the rationale for fighting for a Marina City or River City at some obscure moment decades from now. Maybe that is a naïve wish.

In any case, the mindset of the present—with its studied abhorrence for the hobgoblin of consistency—means that we are unlikely to do unto the modernists what they did unto the Beaux-Arts and what the Beaux-Arts did unto the romantics and Victorians. Thirty years ago, an undercurrent of apology may have marred the exquisite illustrated essay by Isabelle Gournay and Marie-Laure Crosnier Leconte on the education of American architects at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Why spend so much time learning how a generation of architects and urban planners became imbued with such a contrived, effete movement, a movement dismissed by two generations of critics and historians as having sidetracked American architecture and urbanism from robust inventiveness into snobbish artifice?

In retrospect, the result of a well-absorbed, Beaux-Arts education was admirable adaptability and not stifling stylishness. Students learned techniques for producing a huge variety of solid buildings, along with a magnificent range of design principles to make those buildings appropriate and attractive in different circumstances. Northwestern University's basic argument for tearing down Prentice was not that Goldberg's building lacks historical interest; it was that it could not be adapted to any plausible new use at a justifiable price. Fewer people would have believed the same argument made about a building by a Beaux-Arts architect of equal stature. Even though the Beaux-Arts movement unjustly denigrated the Victorians nearly as much as the modernists stupidly deplored the Beaux-Arts, the pre-World War I generation trained in Beaux-Arts principles did have a point when insisting that overall they had a superior grounding in construction methods, materials, and building functions than the often self-taught, trial-and-error engineers and designers who first professionalized American architecture in the mid-nineteenth century.

Beaux-Arts training gained a reputation as formulaic. Yet architectural and urban historians will be fascinated by student exercises from figures later known for inventiveness, such as city planners Edward Bennett and George Ford. This feature offers a hint of the resources to be contained in the online biographical dictionary of

Ecole des Beaux-Arts architects that is appearing at http://agorha.inha.fr under the sponsorship of the Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art. The illustration captions presented here are, in fact, only summaries; over the coming months, the journal will make available comprehensive explanations of each drawing at www.jgape.org.

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