New York, 1960, Municipal Building, Tribune Building, and American Tract Society Building from the Times Building (Photo by Cervin Robinson)

Cervin Robinson reveals himself as a critic in his photographs of the World Trade Center towers. The pictures of glass and steel box-skeletors of the 60s and 70s illustrate his visual adaptability to historical style—in this case, the international. Photographed frontally, using reflections, the plaza and sharp shadows of pedestrians in them seem like models or as an Antonioni film—airy, formal, severe.

In an introductory essay to Skylcraper Style entitled "Buildings and Architects," Robinson writes: "Today when we have had twenty years of the austerities architecture ushered in by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill’s Lever House, it may be refreshing to re-examine an architecture that aims to be popular, entertaining, and urbane." As he writes, so Robinson photographs. His pictures reveal a precise conceptual point of view, telling inclusions of contemporaneous details, and often overly humor (evident in his interior shot of Louis Kahn’s Center for World University exhibits). Unexpected juxtapositions on the street, in the building interiors, or at their heights add liveliness to the scene.

Cervin Robinson lectured for the Rice University School of Architecture on 10 March. He said, "I’m always in a good mood when it’s a sunny day. I wake up, grab my camera, and go." Robinson does often use the strong shadows of a sunny day to etch lines on the building’s surface just as Piranesi created deep blacks with acid; the sharp lines are clean and neat and the mysterious, endless depths remain an exact rendering on the paper. More recently, however, Robinson has been working on grey days. Moving from the powerful photographs and architectural legacy of The Institute of Design, the Bauhaus aesthetic transplanted to the U.S., Robinson is explor- ing what is often described as the new modernism to be more diffuse. The active surface pattern of high contrast, the black-and-white approach to develop atmosphere of a long, monotone grey scale.

Robinson’s current projects include a textbook on architectural photography and an exhibition on the history of architectural photography from 1840 to the present. In the Fashion Gallery exhibition, Robinson instructed the audience as he might his classes in architectural photography at Columbia University, where he teaches at present Robinson persuades; he does not force bold confrontation. Never a simple topographic record of a building, his is an architectural vision. For Roxen, Robinson interprets and reveals the buildings. Robinson offers us not postcards, but portraits.

1 After Robinson and James F. O’Gorman, professor of art history at Wellesley College, and often collaborator with Robinson, both also contributed a study of photographs. Drexel Turner arranged the final groupings.

2 I would like to thank Paul Hester for his insightful discussion of issues facing the architectural photographer.

The most significant figure in the pre-Cret years was unquestionably Cass Gilbert, whose proposal of 1909 for a primarily north-south mall approaching the monumental administration building was in the end executed. Cret admired Gilbert’s completed structures, Battleship Texas, and the Winter Palace in Budapest, Spanish Renaissance manner, and they served as a stylistic basis for his later work. In contrast to the large-scale drawings most often associated with the Beaux-Arts style-designers of the period, the series of small autograph sketches by Cret included in the exhibition remind us of the importance of the initial artistic thought that would later be translated into monumental reality.

Paul Cret’s work for The University of Texas occupied 20 years. His initial conception, a large tower which was tragically cut short by surgery. While he was not a specific practitioner of modernism, Cret’s sensitivity and ability were recognized by Professor William J. Battle, chairman of the Faculty Building Committee, who had been a strong proponent for Cret’s executed work. Cret admired Gilbert’s completed structures, Battleship Texas, and the Winter Palace in Budapest, Spanish Renaissance manner, and they served as a stylistic basis for his later work. In contrast to the large-scale drawings most often associated with the Beaux-Arts style-designers of the period, the series of small autograph sketches by Cret included in the exhibition remind us of the importance of the initial artistic thought that would later be translated into monumental reality.

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While the exhibition itself has been taken down, the generously illustrated catalogue is a permanent record of the renewed interest in Cret's work at Texas. Carol McMichael's text is preceded by an introduction by Professor Drury Biskely Alexander, who ably summarizes the university's building program before Cret's arrival in 1930. Miss McMichael's work is divided into two sections, the first a narrative account of Cret's work with a commentary on his practice prior to receiving the Austin commission. Her research into the work of the Faculty Building Committee provides us with the client's view of what was needed in the construction of a major college campus, a critical factor when one considers the outcome of the design of the library building.

Given the amount of information it contains, the catalogue would perhaps have benefited from the inclusion of an index, but this is a minor criticism considering the overall quality of the work. Carol McMichael's work complements Stephen Fox's monograph on the Rice Institute, although it is limited to events before 1945. Paul Cret at Texas represents an important contribution to the architectural history of the state, and deserves a place in the library of anyone with a serious interest in the field.

The text is illustrated with period photographs of Cret's work at Texas. These are an important adjunct to the drawings, since landscaping and alterations now make it difficult to see the Architecture and Union buildings as Cret intended them to be viewed.

The second half of Miss McMichael's work is the catalogue of the architectural drawings themselves, including those of Cret's predecessors. Her discussion of the multiple plans for the library is particularly helpful, amplifying her text chapter on the building. Fortunately, a large number of the drawings are illustrated, including several full and half-page plates. The design of the catalogue, by Barbara Lezek, is noteworthy in that it captures the appearance of architectural publications of the period.

“Paris-Rome-Athens: Travels in Greece by French Architects in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries”
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Sponsors: Ecole Nationale Superieure des Beaux-Arts; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; L'École Française d'Athènes
1 July - 4 September 1983

Reviewed by Bruce C. Webb

The Modern Movement did its best to put as much distance as possible between itself and the legacy of the Beaux-Arts. When the Beaux-Arts was mentioned at all by the modernists, it was usually as the personification of old-fashioned values—a fading monument away from which progress was to be measured. It is not surprising, then, that the memory of the Beaux-Arts that was passed along to our own time is an incomplete and chimerical picture of a century of institutionally established taxismakers exerting a powerful strongholds over the progress of architecture.

“Paris-Rome-Athens: Travels in Greece by French Architects in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” an exhibition of drawings by winners of the Ecole de Beaux-Arts's traveling scholarship, the Prix de Rome, which was shown at The Museum of Fine Arts (1 July through 4 September), will probably not change that reputation very much. But the first American showing of the 155 large-scale mount drawings of Classical Greek monuments provides a first-rate opportunity to see the evidence first hand. Looked at from the less heated atmosphere of the 1980s, the drawings can be viewed appreciatively as superb examples of draftsmanship and coloration rather than as agents of the Academy.

The exhibition was organized generally in a chronological sequence of five thematic categories, presenting a sense of the expanding interest of the Beaux-Arts's architects as well as the stylistic evolution of the drawings themselves. In this regard, the later drawings, particularly those of Camille Lefebvre (1905), show an increasing interest in mood and at-
moposphere and an impressionist's eye for rendering light were more than the avowedly "cliche" form revealing shadows. But the prevailing attitude that comes across in the drawings is one of academic stiffness, which the conventions of the Ecole encour-

aged as a means of objectification. The polychromatic speculations that enliven the drawings and give them the necessary vitality to comment on the interest to the students than the faculty, who did not see them as anything but an exercise in architectural exer-

But it is the fanciful use of color that provides the primary evidence that a poetic consciousness was at work here, rather than a study of problems, and a critically skilled and careful draftsmanship. The coloration provides a real sense of stillness and isolation that prevails even only black-and-white reproductions of the original drawings.

The engravings were the culminations of a unique form of exploration of the principles described by the rigorous rules that supported the prescriptions and formulas of the Ecole. To win the Prix de Rome, a student had to demonstrate as a tenant and craftsman through his performance on a competi-

tion program where the winner was given a scholarship to study in Rome or Greece, where he spent the next five years making drawings of the Classical monuments.

The Prix architects were required to send back two sets of drawings for exhibition and deposit in the archives. The first was a drawing of the extent of a monument, which was built up of the field research. The second half of the engravings presented the subject, which was the actual action or imagery. They created an idealized reconstruction of the monument. Both kinds of drawings were displayed, side by side, in the Ecole's studios, so that an audience can see the actual evidence from which the imagined scene was composed. The drawings they produced are both reduced to the same genre, perception and conception can in fact be reasoned out in the process of exploring and demonstrating in our present process of using photographs to verify what we hear. These drawings are not considered a part of the photographic is usually filled with too much information, which the design drawings selectively sift away.

To lead students in the Ecole to draw upon this growing mood of restlessness and its response to the ap petites for the Classical models, programs for the competition projects in the Ecole frequently offered themes. For example, the latest work in the Ecole al s is the result of his own interest in the imagery and the practice, as well as in the buildings, the tries to find a visual reconciliation between the objects of the past and the present that compose our urban environment.

The success of Hauss's projects (which are either impo sition, or his interest in the ancient sources, the inter- pendent upon the degree to which he synthesizes the imagery of the old into the new. For instance, his project for the new building for the Palais de l'Armée, an Army building, was the result of his own interest in the images and the history of the old and new, in the decorative arts of the past and invoke a nostalgia for the loss of craftsmanship and rich ornamental design that Hauss's reproductive mode can allow us to never really replace.

Colin Forbes, Saul Bass, and Ivan Chermayeff are all graphic designers and very successful business men, but they are also graphic designers, as is Colin Bass (one artist, two architects, and three graphic design-

ers) — represented the truly confusing contemporary range of definitions. This was a rare opportunity to compare the different graphic designers, since they are normally somewhat isolated from one another.

Ironically, the two theorists who epitomized current design practice, who questioned the existence of design, minimalism, and the tenets of orthodox modernism, were architects first and designers by default (by the theme of the lecture series). Stanley Tigerman and James Wines do not produce similar work, but they are both known for their provocative rejections. For instance, Wines praised the ideas of Le Corbusier as "fine for 1930" but dead for today; Tigerman harbors similar sentiments toward Mies van der Rohe. But their artistic exploration and personal expression in an effort to create "architecture of the 1970s" (as opposed to meaning). James Wines and his partners in SITE have pushed this exploration with undeniable success in their buildings for Best Products. Stanley Tigerman also plays with the contrast between personal and professional in his handling of public scale, ritual, and context in his recent Knoll Showroom in Houston.

Variations of these ideas, particularly the relationship between art, design, and the cultural context, are af-
fected profoundly by the work of the most well-known architects, as well as the writers in Design and Communication hardly seemed to be touched by these recent developments in design theory. Wines and Tigerman represent the further advance of the ideas of old and new graphic design theory. Hauss's works have been affected by it indirectly, and Bass and Chermayeff are also influenced by it, and find it irrelevant to current design trends.

If design is "problem solving," then Richard Hauss's problems are almost always ugly blank walls, and his solutions are almost always trompe-l'oeil architectural models. Hauss has an affinity for models, for the relationships between what he represents and what is represented is the result of his own interest in the imagery and the history of the old and new, in the decorative arts of the past and invoke a nostalgia for the loss of craftsmanship and rich ornamental design that Hauss's reproductive mode can allow us to never really replace.

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Even if every idea in every poster that Chermayeff showed was his own (which is unlikely), it took him a five-second glance to draw the famous five pieces. Why do so many graphic designers obscure the talent of the creators, whether the poster is an ad, a mate, or more like art, if each claims to be the sole creator of his work?

Most of the work that Chermayeff showed was very well known to the audience, of course. But it is still an effort to display a decept combination of words and images with the illusion of cleverness. For example, a poster for the television series between the Wars depicts two military helmets separated by a civilian bowler; the similarity of the two-somehow translated the subject of the poster in a surprising and graceful manner.

"Design isn't too interesting, but it can be funny," Chermeyeff informed the audience. He displayed his pre-
dilection for the absurdity of life in the United States, that Houston should spray-paint its billboards a nice shade of beige. He also offered a bushel of platitudes on the nature of design, "design is...," which is to show only while drinking on airplanes, and which consisted of nothing more than a collection of generalities, while your ideas are still fresh ... design is less ... design is clean ... design is simple ... design is meaningful..." Design is not a thing you are told to do ... design is not fashion ... design is not knowing when to stop." Whether this little essay was necessary or useless is impossible to tell, perhaps to Chermayeff, lectur-

ing in Las Vegas is the price of Manhattan rents never having to say you're sorry.

It should be noted that Design and Communication was a resounding success. The lectures were all well attended and packed, and there were many people new to RDA-sponsored programs. One hopes that the series, or something like it, continues. As Oscar WInds (and Art Directors) would say, "It is only shallow people who do not judge by ap-

pearance." One would have to be very shallow to see nothing different after being exposed to the ideas and attitudes of those responsible for our visual corporate world. He offered vivid recollections of the complexities involved in the production of the film work (with its own many co-workers inevitably involved in as complex a medium as film) to those in the designer's community, some of his famous film sequences, such as the titles for Grand Prix and Walk on the Wild Side, and saved his most thought-provoking comments for his lecture at the Fine Arts, a partnership of this better part of his own at the River Oaks Theater or on late-night television.

Ivan Chermayeff referred to his work as "ubiquitous," which it is, and "obnoxious," which is very much so, except for the "culturally correct" kind, like the Saturday Night Live video-taped in London. He is a superb graphic designer and a somewhat crude assessing. He was speaking above all about the success of his commission, but he was talking about the work of his part-

ners and dozens of his employees in his New York office, which is a reflection of what he does for himself (though he surely profits by their efforts). He treated the subject as if he were a member of the "real world" of his friends, if it put, "I do stuff on Sundays when I'm away from the telephone." This turned out to be high-falutin' academic stuff, not very graphic designer. He made the comparison of the decept combination of words and images with the illusion of cleverness. For example, a poster for the television series between the Wars depicts two military helmets separated by a civilian bowler; the similarity of the two-somehow translated the subject of the poster in a surprising and graceful manner.

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