

## Louis Sullivan: Influence and Innovation

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Architect Louis Sullivan (1856-1924) disrupted continuity and tradition, striving to create and define an architectural style unique to America. His contribution to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, the Transportation Building, boasted evidence of the scientific and technological innovation and progress reached by Americans up to that point in history (Fig. 1). The exterior of this building reflected these accomplishments through Sullivan's inventive architectural approach that contrasted dramatically with the surrounding buildings comprised of the stylistically classical, white buildings also built for the Fair.

Over the course of his career, Sullivan accomplished his goal of creating a new style of American architecture and is accepted by scholars as well as the general public as the father of modern American architecture—his innovative genius cannot be denied. However, through formal and historical examination of the Transportation Building, traces of Sullivan's studies of classical architecture, either directly from the ancient past or its translations in the Renaissance, can be found. The Transportation Building, which is thought to be a typically groundbreaking piece of new American architecture, can also be seen as a culmination of Sullivan's studies of classical architecture in terms of its plan, its use of classical vocabulary (columns, arches, domes and entablatures), its specific relationships with classical and Renaissance architecture, and Sullivan's conscious attempt to evoke the spirit of Michelangelo. As such, it will be demonstrat-

ed that the foundation of Sullivan's innovative approach rested on a melding of the old and the new.

Sullivan's Transportation Building was a rectangular block pierced in the center with a raised rectangular roof (Fig. 1). The building stood at over one hundred feet tall, higher at the roofline. Behind the rectangular block was an expanding trapezoidal annex with the dimensions of 425 by 900 feet.<sup>1</sup> The dome and the doorway were pulled out from the flatness of the massing (Fig. 2). These two features punctuated the middle of the building's façade. A dome, consisting of a hexagon rested on top of another hexagon and capped with a hemisphere, sat on top of the Transportation Building marking the center of the Golden Doorway. The doorway began as an arch over the entrance to the Transportation Building. Five additional arches were layered on top of the preliminary arch creating a massive archway supporting an entablature, a decorative tympanum and surrounded on three sides by a decorative frame. The entrance of the Transportation Building rose 70 feet tall and was 100 feet wide. Reticulated across the façade of the Transportation Building was an attached colonnade of thirteen columns, arches and windows on each side of the doorway. This pattern continued around the sides of the structure.

The roof and general massing of the Transportation Building were simple in form, especially compared to the highly ornate decoration of the surface of the structure. Architecturally, the Transportation Building was erected from a traditional plan utilized throughout history for the construction of various buildings ranging from classical basilicas<sup>2</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century French train sheds<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 3). It did not employ a completely innovative approach but rather relied on the past for stability. The interior of the building relayed this point as it consisted of a long, wide and tall center lane (Fig. 4). To each side of this was a narrow, short aisle. The building was two stories, supported by columns on the first floor and arches on the

1 Hugh Morrison, *Louis Sullivan: Prophet of Modern Architecture*. New York: Museum of Modern Art and W.W. Norton, 1935. 274

2 Robert Twombly, *Louis Sullivan: His Life and Work*. New York: Viking, 1986. 263

3 Twombly, 260

second.

Though he did not comment on it, Sullivan must have experienced, or at the very least learned about, the Crystal Palace while he was in London (Fig. 5). The Crystal Palace was in the Beaux-Arts style that demonstrated the neoclassical approach taught at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, but was merged with innovative cast-iron and plate-glass materials. It was erected to house the 1851 Great Exhibition in London. Sullivan was instructed by Daniel Burnham, who was in charge of the design, erection and management of the World's Fair, to use this building as a means of inspiration and measure with which to create his own piece of architecture. Furthermore, the marriage of old and new connects the two.<sup>4</sup>

Sullivan's experiences in Europe had a heavy influence on his approach to architecture. Before he set out for Europe, he had already established himself in Chicago. He returned to the city from his travels with the promise of work by architect John Edelmänn. While working for Edelmänn, Sullivan was commissioned to paint a fresco within the Moody Church.<sup>5</sup> The completed work, a smashing success, relied heavily on Michelangesque musculature and dynamic movement of the human body. Sullivan learned these painting techniques through his studies at the École des Beaux-Arts. His skills as an artist accounted for his great interest in the surface ornamentation of the Transportation Building. Chicago was left in shambles in the wake of the Great Fire of 1871, making it a hotbed of architectural activity. In 1882, Sullivan's work with the Moody Tabernacle and finally with his own firm, Adler & Sullivan, catapulted him into the spotlight.

The pinnacle of success for the firm of Adler & Sullivan was its Auditorium Building completed in 1889 (Fig. 6). This structure was innovative in its composition. It was a mixed building complex comprised of a theater, hotel, office building and numerous shops, the complexity of which America had not seen before.<sup>6</sup> Sul-

livan transferred onto his structure strong, solid and simple exterior qualities. Sullivan designed the interior of the Auditorium Building as per his personal style of detailed ornamentation (Fig. 7). The multifaceted makeup of the Auditorium Building was groundbreaking not only in the field of architecture but also for the city of Chicago. By erecting such an innovative and complex structure, Adler & Sullivan put Chicago on the cultural map. It was largely thanks to them that in 1890 Chicago was chosen to host the World's Fair.

The Fair celebrated the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christopher Columbus' triumphant voyage to America and the great accomplishments of Americans. Daniel Burnham assembled an ambitious team. Based on Adler & Sullivan's then famous name, the firm was selected to assist in designing the dazzling array of architectural wonders that Burnham dreamt of for the project. His vision for the Fair was to have an entire city, all uniform and tidy white, constructed in Jackson Park at the city center of Chicago.<sup>7</sup> The "White City," as it was called, would consist of ten separate buildings housing and exhibiting various genres of American achievements. Unfortunately for Daniel Burnham, Sullivan was not one to follow direction. After much dispute, Burnham allowed Sullivan to create his own building plan, and the resulting design was a building that deviated boldly from Burnham's intention.

Sullivan's justification for his renegade design was that because the building was nonpermanent, the construction materials were not stable enough to manipulate into the white marble buildings Burnham expected. All of the Fair's other architects had been able to generate the impression of white marble buildings, but on this, Sullivan took a stand. Sullivan made an honest attempt at temporary architecture by sticking to a basic design plan using commercial materials while giving the building an artistically rich polychrome façade.<sup>8</sup> Sullivan's approach to architecture was to treat each of his buildings as a personal project and give every one its own

4 Morrison, 181

5 Twombly, 70

6 Twombly, 140

7 Norm Bolotin and Christine Laing, *The World's Columbian Exposition: The Chicago World's Fair of 1893*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2002. 31

8 Twombly, 263

sense of dignity in design.

Aside from the building's extraordinary exterior decoration, the Transportation Building was reminiscent of an enormous train shed both inside and out, such as those built in Paris in the 1860s (Fig. 3).<sup>9</sup> The train shed was a relatively new form of architecture, and was a particularly apt form for a fair building that celebrated means of transportation. Moreover, it may be assumed that Sullivan, during his year spent in Paris, utilized the city's public train system; the Gare du Nord, Paris' north train station, has strikingly similar qualities to Sullivan's design.

Beginning with the exterior, both façades consisted of a great wall erected through the use of columns, entablatures and enormous, gaping windows. On the inside (Fig. 4), much like the train shed, the Transportation Building was long, narrow and divided into three sections consisting of a broad middle lane with an aisle running along each side of it. The broad central aisle rose higher than the outlying aisles, like a nave. So while one might be tempted to credit the Gare for inspiring the interior of the Transportation Building, Sullivan was clear about his source—it was ancient: “[the interior] is treated much after the manner of a Roman basilica, with broad nave and aisles. The roof is therefore in three divisions. The middle one rising much higher. . . and its walls are pierced to form a beautiful arcaded clerestory.”<sup>10</sup> The presence of his transparent motives makes it evident that Sullivan did, in fact, utilize a classical approach during the structural design of his building.

The entrance to the Transportation Building is possibly the most well known component of the building and also of Sullivan's career. It earned its own name, the Golden Doorway, largely because of its coloring but also because of its grandeur (Fig. 2). The Golden Doorway was a monumental declaration of Sullivan's individuality. Standing broad, tall and bold, the Golden Doorway greeted visitors at the main entrance of the building. The colors of the façade, along with the doorway of the Transportation Building,

caused quite a stir and ultimately lead to the assessment that Sullivan's design was the most forward-looking of all buildings at the Fair.

More than an innovative or idiosyncratic element, the completed Golden Doorway was an obvious polychromatic criticism of the uniformity of Burnham's World's Fair. Sullivan worked purposely against Daniel Burnham's guideline of designing structures reminiscent of the pure, white, neoclassical buildings of the past. Nonetheless, the doorway still evoked the classical past. In its most basic and general form (a large arch) Sullivan worked with classical vocabulary, even as he made it his own. Similarly, to top the building off with an entablature made it clear that Sullivan was prepared to use recontextualized classical language.

The dome that sat atop the Transportation Building is a further classical reference. Sullivan was well aware of the great popularity and long tradition of the form of the dome, especially in Rome and Florence where he had spent much time.<sup>8</sup> Sullivan, therefore, erected a dome atop the Transportation Building but made it smaller and more modern-looking. This dome is a perfect example of Sullivan's appropriation and adaptation of the classical past to his own aesthetic. Its scale, rigid sides, and abutment of geometry gave the impression of innovation. However, Sullivan's dome seemingly had its foundation in classicism, similar to the rest of his building.

During his stay in Florence, Sullivan must have come into contact with the Medici Palace (1445–60); for the colonnade that existed on the façade of the Transportation Building was a near replica of the Medici Palace. However, the structure itself could not be more different from Sullivan's plan for the Transportation Building. Designed as a cube, the palace is the prime example of Renaissance architecture and spirit, emphasizing the importance of methodic thought and sensibility in design. Built during a time of classical revival, the Medici Palace contains replications of ancient Roman architectural elements. Upon entering the Medici Palace,

9 Twombly, 260

10 Louis Sullivan, *The Autobiography of an Idea*. New York: Dover Publications, 1956. 184

11 Twombly, 73



Figure 1: The Transportation Building, Chicago, Illinois, 1893 (Destroyed)

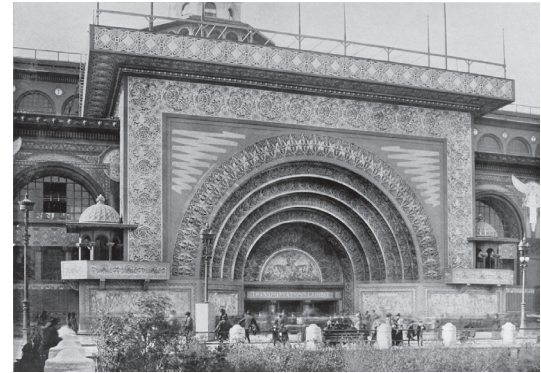


Figure 2: The Golden Doorway, the Transportation Building, Chicago, Illinois, 1893, (Destroyed)



Figure 3: Jacques Hittorff, Gare du Nord, Paris, 1864



Figure 4: Interior of the Transportation Building, Chicago, Illinois, 1893, (Destroyed)

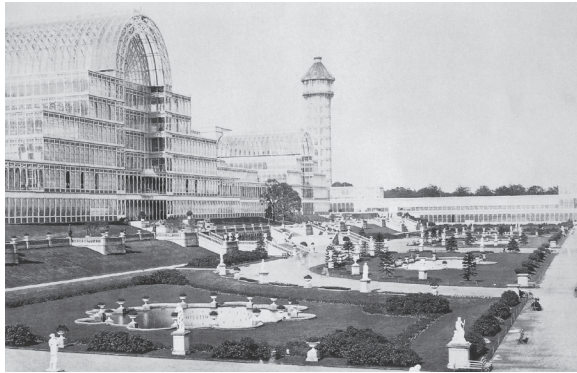


Figure 5: Joseph Paxton, the Crystal Palace, London, 1851



Figure 6: Adler and Sullivan, the Auditorium Building, Chicago, Illinois, 1889



Figure 7: Interior of the Auditorium Building, Chicago, Illinois, 1889



Figure 8: Detail of the Transportation Building, Chicago, Illinois, 1893, (Destroyed)

one is greeted by an interior open courtyard that extends vertically for all three stories of the building. An airy colonnade lines the perimeter of the courtyard. Columns topped with Corinthian capitals support the arches to complete the walls. A continuing frieze fills in the empty spaces between arches and unites them as a square. Resting atop this element is another frieze, which is much more ornately designed. On this row above each arch exists a circle containing a symbol of the Medici family. A wreath that follows around the track of the frieze then connects the circles. Elementally classical, the courtyard of the Medici Palace boasts the importance of classical Renaissance detail in surface ornamentation as well as basic vocabulary.

As linearity orchestrated the colonnade of the Transportation Building, it is almost as if the Medici arches had been taken from the Palace and inserted directly onto the façade of Sullivan's building. However, acknowledging the similarities between the two buildings does not preclude their organizational differences. The dimensions of Sullivan's arches were much larger, stretching nearly to the top of his one hundred-foot high building. Above these arches was a decorative scene extending the length of the building. Similar to the placement of the Medici seal, between each arch is either an angel or a circle containing the name of a great American inventor. Instead of providing support, as they do in the Medici Palace, the columns existed within the umbrella of the giant arch and were half its height. Corinthian capitals did not top these arches; instead, they were finished off with a stunted, undecorated capital immediately met with an entablature. As in the Medici Palace, the entablature was a decoratively adorned frieze. Thus, Sullivan modernized and re-ordered the elements of the Medici Palace courtyard and incorporated them onto the façade of his building for the Fair.

Without question, Sullivan's most enlightening experience abroad was in Rome where he went to study the work of Michel-

angelo. Upon entering the Sistine Chapel, Sullivan fell in love with Michelangelo's art and persona. Here he "...came face to face with his first great Adventurer... the first mighty man of Courage. The first man with a Great Voice."<sup>12</sup> Sullivan spent only three days in Rome, two of which were consumed completely by time spent in the Sistine Chapel. *The Last Judgment* possessed him, and he believed himself to be having a personal experience with the spirit of Michelangelo. He was convinced, wrongly, that the great artist had completed this work freehand without prior planning.<sup>13</sup> Attempting to be the Michelangelo of American architecture, he sought to channel inspiration from his understanding of artistic originality, unapologetic courage, and triumph into the Transportation Building.<sup>14</sup>

Evidence of Sullivan's deep respect for Michelangelo as an artist was apparent in the most innovative component of his Transportation Building: the façade. Contrasting with the simplicity of the interior, the exterior boasted dazzlingly painted walls and three-dimensional sculptures. Flanking the main entrance on each side were the thirteen connected arches surrounded by highly decorated and detailed murals. To enliven it further, Sullivan ornamented the exterior of the Transportation Building with molded low reliefs and bold coloring (Fig. 8). Using the façade of a building as if it were a blank canvas was not common in architecture of the late 1800s. Sullivan, however, utilized the principle of merging his innovative genius with classical Renaissance inspiration to design an overpoweringly ornate external surface.

The Transportation Building sprung up from the ground in multicolored wonder. Made of polychrome, it boasted the boldest reds, greens and yellows. Something of this can be attributed to the interest in Islamic design that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially its highly patterned, abstract designs. However, the surface of Sullivan's building maintained a theme that referenced the Renaissance. The Transportation Building displayed images of angels,

12 Sullivan, 118

13 Twombly, 71

14 Twombly writes: "But most important of all, he realized [in Rome] his life's purpose: to be another Michelangelo, to develop his own Power—now an operative concept—and from it his art" (Twombly, 73)

wreaths and seals. He created images that Michelangelo and other Renaissance architects might have impressed upon a building had they ever painted a building's exterior.

Sullivan's Transportation Building was designed at a time in his life when he had made a name for himself as a great innovator. Through his work with the firm Adler & Sullivan, he had reached his goal of creating a new American architecture that had no obvious architectural dependence on the past. The Transportation Building, designed for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, was widely regarded as revolutionary in its architecture. The building, and the man who created it, exemplified in the New World the invention of a new and unique type of architecture that was nevertheless reliant on traditional influences. Sullivan's work with the World's Fair is a symbol of his merging of the old and the new. The Transportation Building represented a marriage of classical architecture and new American architecture, in which each individual element of the building revealed itself to be deeply rooted in the past and imaginatively adapted to the present. It is in these terms that Sullivan's great creative genius can be redefined.

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