Economic Downturns and the Architectural Profession

What happens when

the building stops?

WITOLD RYBCZYNSKI

ACCORDING TO THE FISCAL POLICY INSTITUTE, unemployment among New York City white-collar workers outside the financial industry went up 40 percent in November 2008. Many of these white-collar workers must be architects, for economic slowdowns always hit the profession hard. Functioning buildings always require management and maintenance, but during low points in the business cycle, the design and construction of new buildings—which is what architects do—simply stops. Plans are put on indefinite hold, building expansions are postponed, development projects are cancelled. That is where we are today.

The prevailing sentiment among architects is summed up by Kazys Varnelis of Columbia University, who wrote on the web site Archinect: "Don't expect to build anything in the foreseeable future. Count your lucky stars if you do." The latest statistics are bleak. In November 2008, the Architectural Billings Index, which measures firms' commercial building activity, dropped a massive 30 percent compared to a year earlier, registering the lowest score in its thirteen-year history. The effect on employment was felt immediately: the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that during that same month, 10,000 architects and engineers lost their jobs. Architectural firms are said to be laying off 10 percent to 20 percent of their staffs. The American Institute of Architects expects nonresidential construction activity to decline by 11 percent in 2009.

The construction industry is famously cyclical, and architectural firms regularly deal with slowdowns by downsizing, reducing operating costs, tightening their belts, and holding their collective breaths until the inevitable recovery. This is what happened during the last three construction recessions (defined by the declining value of nonresidential construction starts). The recessions of 1980-1982 and 2000-2004 lasted three years, and the recession of 1989-1993, three and three-quarter years. The current recession is barely one and a half years old, but all indications are that it will last longer, perhaps four years, perhaps five or six. What happens then? Historical parallels are always imperfect, but the Great Depression, which lasted ten years by some counts, offers some instructive answers to that question.

THE PROFESSIONAL COST

Job shrinkage in the 1930s had many consequences for the architectural profession, some obvious, some less so. There are no firm statistics on architectural unemployment during the Depression, but it is estimated that of the five million unemployed in 1935, more than 11 percent—about 600,000—were white-collar workers, among whom architects surely were well represented. Some architects entered government service. Many of those who found related work did so in the short-lived Civil Works Administration, or the Federal Art Project. Others made do with New Deal programs such as the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the Work Progress Administration (WPA), or with whatever work—of whatever sort—was available. Some architects left the profession altogether and took up other occupations. Albert Butts of Poughkeepsie, N.Y., who was laid off in 1931, achieved everlasting fame by inventing Scrabble.

Figure 1: Grand Central Terminal, New York. Warren & Wetmore, architects. 1904-14.

Figure 2: Municipal Building, New York. McKim, Mead & White, architects. 1908.

Even well-established firms faltered as many owners, seeing commissions dry up, simply closed up shop. The large New York firm Warren & Wetmore, for example, which was responsible for such landmarks as the New York Yacht Club and Grand Central Terminal (Figure 1), as well as a string of hotels including the Mayflower in Washington, D.C. and the Royal Hawaiian in Honolulu, effectively ceased operation in 1931 when Whitney Warren, who was the designer (Wetmore was a lawyer), retired. Chester Aldrich, of the leading New York firm, Delano & Aldrich, which was responsible for the Union Club on Park Avenue as well as the Brown Brothers building on Wall Street, retired in 1935 to head the American Academy in Rome. Even McKim, Mead & White, the most prominent firm in the country, was affected. Although the two chief founders, Stanford White and Charles McKim, had died in 1906 and 1909, respectively, the practice had continued unabated, producing such outstanding buildings as the Municipal Building in Lower Manhattan (Figure 2, the U.S. Post Office on Eighth Avenue, and the Racquet and Tennis Club on Park Avenue. This output was severely curtailed by the economic slowdown, and although the firm survived until the 1960s, it lost its premier position during the Great Depression.

When firms downsized, it was younger architects who tended to be laid off—or not hired. This was hard on recent graduates, but it also had a long-lasting effect on the profession. Architecture—then as now—depended to a great extent on a system of apprenticeship. Delano and Aldrich both apprenticed with Carrère and Hastings, who in turn apprenticed with McKim, Mead & White; and both McKim and White apprenticed with the great master, H. H. Richardson. It was assumed that the neophyte would acquire most of the necessary professional skills on the job, and in the early 1900s the larger offices—McKim, Mead & White and Carrère & Hastings in New York, Peabody & Stearns in Boston, Daniel H. Burnham & Co. in Chicago—served as de facto architectural finishing schools, and provided a crucial generational transfer of design and building skills, as the economy boomed.

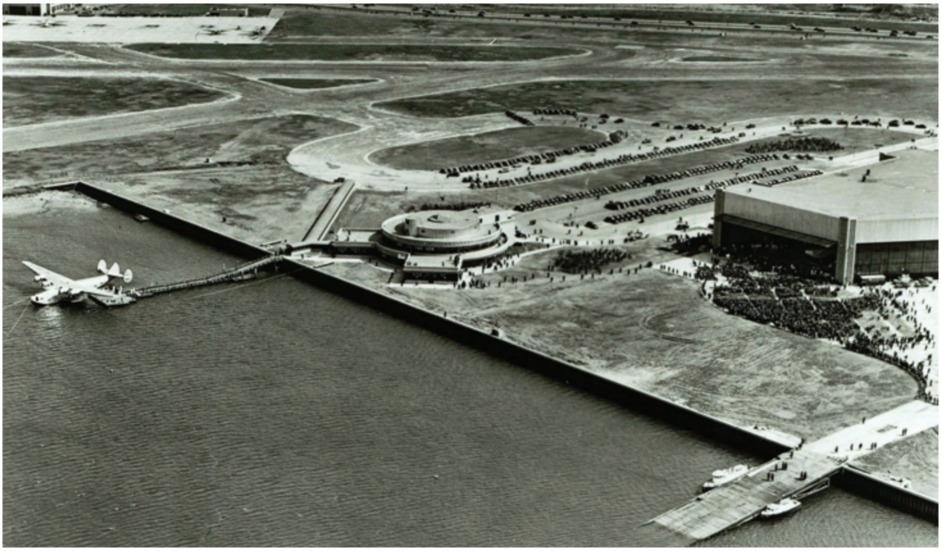
Architecture is not created through theories and formulas, but in the imagination. And the institutional memory of the architectural profession exists not in textbooks and educational institutions, but in the collective expertise of practicing architects and the firms they lead. But without the opportunity to build, professional skills quickly wither and practical lore tends to disappear. The networks of manufacturers, contractors, and craftsmen on which architects depended likewise unravel. Thus, the effects on the profession of a prolonged construction slowdown are widespread and severe.

CHANGING COMMISSIONS

What about the architects who continued to practice—what did they do? With the notable exception of Rockefeller Center in New York (Figure 3), which was funded by a stunning family fortune and went up during 1932-1940, most commercial con-

Figure 3: Rockefeller Center, New York. Raymond Hood et al., architects. 1932-40.

Figure 4: New York Municipal Airport, LaGuardia Field. Delano & Aldrich, architects. 1937-42.



struction stopped during the Depression. But other construction continued. The programs of the federal WPA built a variety of buildings, including post offices and other government offices. In Washington, D.C., the 1930s saw the construction of the National Archives, the Justice Department, and the Federal Triangle, as well as the Jefferson Memorial and the National Gallery. Two freshly minted young architects, Louis Skidmore and Nathaniel Owings (who would soon found one of the most successful firms in the country), found themselves in charge of the design of the Century of Progress, Chicago's world's fair.

Institutional facilities continued to be built during economic slowdowns. A major source of work for some architects in the 1930s was privately endowed educational institutions, including schools and universities, which took advantage of lower construction costs to expand their campuses. The project list of Delano & Aldrich from 1930 until 1935 (when Aldrich retired) contains few of the country houses that had been the bread and butter of the firm in the previous two decades. Instead, there are academic buildings (for Yale, Princeton, the Hotchkiss School, and Lawrenceville School), a U.S. post office, the Japanese embassy in Washington, D.C., and a terminal for Pan American Airways in Miami. The last building led to a major WPA-funded commission for New York's first airport at what would become known as LaGuardia Field (Figure 4).

Delano and Aldrich were able to adapt to the changed conditions of work because of their excellent educations (both had studied at Columbia University and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts), their creative talents, and their wide networks of social contacts (both were from well-established East Coast families). They also had taken the trouble to develop a diverse practice that included not only residences but also college buildings, private clubs, schools, and churches. So, when the market changed, they shifted their practice from opulent Norman chateaus, such as Oheka, the 500-acre estate they had built for the industrialist Otto H. Kahn, to practical school dormitories.

The period between 1900 and 1929 had been the heyday of the American country estate, but few people built sprawling mansions during the Depression, and the rare private house that was built was much more modest. Architects who adapted to the new budgetary reality designed houses that were not only smaller, but also simpler, with cheaper materials, less demanding craftsmanship, and more straightforward details. But some architects were unwilling—or unable—to change. For example, the great Philadelphia architect Horace Trumbauer, who had built dozens of magnificent mansions in Philadelphia, New York, and Newport, had trouble finding clients after the Crash, taking refuge in drink and dying of cirrhosis of the liver in 1938.

Some architects sought new markets for their skills. Robert L. Stevenson published a compilation of modest house plans titled *Homes of Character*. The American Institute of Architects organized the non-profit Small House Service Bureau, which employed out-of-work architects to prepare designs of small, affordable houses. The collection of plans was published as *Small Homes of Architectural Distinction* in 1929. A set of construction blueprints for a typical three-bedroom house cost as little as thirty dollars. Royal Barry Wills, who opened his office in 1925, specialized in designing small houses and popularized the Cape Cod cottage. Wills went on to a successful career as a residential architect, not of mansions but of houses for the middle class. In 1932 he received a gold medal from President Hoover for the best small home of the year. Wills's designs, practical and resolutely traditional, were featured in his book, *Houses for Good Living* (1940).

CHANGING DESIGN

The Great Depression not only changed what architects did, it also changed how they did it. This was the direct result of reduced construction budgets that mandated simpler and less elaborate buildings.

Figure 5: Federal Reserve Board Building, Washington, D.C. Paul Cret, architect. 1935.

That meant less expensive materials and less hand-crafted ornamental work such as carved stone, wrought iron, and complicated cabinetwork. The country houses that Delano & Aldrich built during the 1930s, for example, continue to look traditional but they are considerably less decorated than what the firm had built in the 1920s. Classicist architects such as Paul Cret and Bertram Goodhue developed a stripped Classical style, which used traditional composition but dispensed with traditional ornament. Many Depression-era buildings, such as Cret's Federal Reserve Board Building in Washington, D.C., incorporated this approach (Figure 5). Art Deco, another geometrical but lightly ornamented style that appeared during the late 1920s and shows up in several skyscrapers begun just before the Depression—the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building—was ideally suited to the new economic conditions. So was streamlining, which originated in industrial design, and substituted machine-made ornament for traditional craftsmanship.

Stripped Classicism, Art Deco, and streamlining were motivated more by pragmatism than any profound ideology, but there was an ideological thrust to another, more lasting stylistic change. After the Gilded Age, the Roaring Twenties—which were, to some extent, blamed for the Crash—and the harrowing Great Depression, the public was ready for something different. Extravagant architecture was not just too expensive, it also appeared tasteless; something simpler seemed more appropriate. That something turned out to be the so-called International Style, an architectural movement that originated in Europe in the 1920s. Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in Germany, Gerrit Rietveld in Holland, and Le Corbusier in France called for a revolutionary new architecture—functionalistic, plain, severe—that would suit the new post-Depression age.

After 1949, when the economy revived and construction restarted on a large scale, Modernism entered the mainstream. This architectural sea-change was greatly facilitated by the destruction of generational continuity that had occurred during the Depression. The old established firms were either closed down or no longer dominant. The old ways of doing things were soon dead and gone—or at least forgotten—leaving the way clear for the young Modernist firebrands. These new up-and-coming architects, such as Philip Johnson, Paul Rudolph, and I. M. Pei, who had all studied architecture at Harvard under Walter Gropius (who proscribed the teaching of history), had no ties to the prewar profession. When the system of architectural apprenticeship reappeared, it was Modernist firms such as Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Harrison & Abramovitz, and Eero Saarinen that dominated the scene.

CONCLUSION

It is, of course, as yet unclear whether the downturn that began in 2008 portends two or three years of economic recession, or a full-blown depression. In the former case, one could expect downsizing of firms, early retirements, some closures, and architects extending their services into new fields. If the downturn is longer, it might have an effect on architecture itself. The kind of immoderate, iconic architecture that characterized the most recent Age of Excess will likely lose favor, in part for economic reasons, in part because the public will demand buildings that are calmer and simpler. Sober steel-and-glass shoeboxes replaced the Art Deco skyscrapers of the Jazz Age; will there be a similar change in 2012? Is there another architecture waiting in the wings, as there was in 1949? Perhaps green building will enter the mainstream; perhaps traditional styles will grow in popularity; perhaps a more frugal Bauhaus Modernism will make a comeback. A lot will depend on the length—and depth—of the economic downturn.