

Introductory Remarks and Presentation; Chair of the session, “Learning from and with Labrouste” in “Revisiting Henri Labrouste in the Digital Age: A Symposium” at the Museum of Modern Art, 28 March 2013, in association with the exhibition, “Henri Labrouste: Structure Brought to Light”.

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Thank you Barry and, before proceeding any further, on behalf of everyone assembled here, let me thank you and your colleagues for this remarkable show, which, in the intelligence of its organization and the elegance of its presentation, sets a standard that MoMA will have to work very hard to maintain in the future.

As Barry’s discussion of the historiography shows, one measure of Labrouste’s greatness is the number and diversity of the lessons we can take from his work. Historically these have included a new truth in the use of materials and a redefined relationship between form and structure; a precocious modernity that, depending on our bias, either strips away past accretions of meaningless decoration or proposes a new vocabulary with which to decorate; and a rigorous deconstruction of program, which allows its parts to be reconfigured to discover new interpretations of type. In the three presentations that follow I think you will hear intimations of all this and more, as we examine the question of learning with and from Labrouste.

I’m joined this morning by Martin Bressani, an architect and architectural historian who teaches history and theory at McGill University’s School of Architecture, and who has contributed to this wonderful show, and by Michael Bell, a practicing architect and a Professor of Architecture at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning & Preservation. Their biographies are printed in the program, so I won’t recite the full list of their research, writings and achievements, which would leave us very little time to talk about anything else. Instead, each of us will make a short presentation of some of the ways in which we engage Labrouste in our teaching, after which we’ll start a conversation around what is presented, a conversation that we’ll open to your questions and comments for the last half hour or so.

ANALYZING LABROUSTE PROJECTIVELY: THREE LESSONS

For the past decade I’ve taught the third year ‘integral’ studio at Cooper Union with an excellent group of colleagues; each year we spend a semester on an analysis of historical typologies to prepare students for a design exploration of a contemporary institutional building. Typology in this context is understood in both programmatic and formal terms, and also as an interrelated set of constructive techniques and their material consequences. The key idea is to instrumentalize historical analysis, not to provide formal or programmatic models to emulate, but to find moments and mechanisms that redefine the design problem and open it to new possibilities for exploration. Our subjects have included the museum, the theater and the school but we have frequently assigned the library and thus have been drawn, inevitably, to Labrouste.

1 Books as Program

Numbers in [] refer to images in accompanying (Illustrations) tab

Before Labrouste’s project for the Bibliothèque Nationale, all European libraries look more or less like this. [1] Or this. [2]

In the planning of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Labrouste reinvents the architectural program of the Library by clearly dividing it into distinct and separate zones for reading, storage and service. [3] This fundamental division determines both the form of the spaces and the ways in which Labrouste envisions their functions for distinct groups of users. Labrouste’s plan overturns all previous French models, including in many respects his own Ste. Geneviève, as well as Boullée’s project(s) for the Bibliothèque Royale on same site of a generation earlier. [4] With Boullée the entire program is conceived as a single room for books and readers – what Professor Neil Levine has called the gallery type – and the implicit principle of growth over time is the endless extension of the section to the perspectival vanishing point. [5] In Labrouste’s project, the library is reconceived as two principal spaces, one for books [6] and one for readers [7], and a third intermediate (or mediating) space for the librarians who serve both [8].

The fact that this reinvention is not original with Labrouste, that Panizzi and Smirke had followed a similar logic in London five years earlier, or that such a programmatic rethinking had been theorized by della Santa as early as 1816 [9], in no way detracts from the strength of Labrouste's plan as the most convincing and elegant statement of a new idea, one that will become the new typology for almost all major library projects thereafter. By separating these three spaces [10], Labrouste gives each of them an independent structural system, decorative program, lighting strategy and principle of growth. The larger compositional problem of the library now becomes the formal integration of its autonomous parts; Labrouste is free to develop new programmatic and architectural mechanisms to make these three spaces work together while allowing them complete independence as functional entities and formal expressions. Here, already, is a lesson with contemporary relevance. But by redefining the library's program, Labrouste also opens its architectural design to a new set of metaphors with great resonance.

2 Books as Structure

At Ste. Geneviève [11] Labrouste conceives the façade as a wall made of books and the sober decorative scheme of 810 authors' names is, in a very real sense, intended as the master catalogue of the collection. [12] These two metaphors – of books as the structure of the architectural project and of the physical representation of the collection as an advertisement for itself – are design ideas that continue to echo in library projects down to this day. For example, the broad, day-lit volume of the reading room at Carrière and Hastings' NYPL stands upon the foundation of its dense, dark stacks. [13] Or consider OMA's competition entry for the Très Grande Bibliothèque, where the spaces of reading are literally carved out of the cubic mass of books become building [14,15]; or the same firm's Seattle Library where the central book spiral is taken as the main pillar of the structure and the trunk from which the other spaces 'branch off' [16,17]. Or Sui Fujimoto's Musashino Library in Tokyo, where the building appears to be made entirely of bookshelves, while its actual columnar supports are artfully concealed [18]. The minimal glazed enclosure both protects the massive shelf-walls and, as at Ste. Geneviève, projects outward the names of the authors of a future ideal collection, still to be assembled. The illusion continues inside as the full-height shelves create a polygonal labyrinth that recalls the infinite succession of hexagonal chambers in Borges' Library of Babel. [19]

3 Books Beneath the Bough – the Library in the Garden

Finally, both Ste. Geneviève and BN develop the space of reading as a metaphorical garden. While this trope has a long literary history, Labrouste imbues it with new meaning in the decoration of the architectural space of both his libraries. The mural panels in the entry vestibule at Ste. Geneviève [20] propose a "grove of Academe" as David van Zanten puts it, where the sculpted busts of the assembled great minds are framed by complimentary species of trees. [21] At the Bibliothèque Nationale, the large, north-facing windows that illuminate the reading room look out on a courtyard originally planted with tall trees [22], and the side lunettes are painted at a trompe l'oeil angle that brings the seated reader not a picture of a generic garden but actual views of the treetops that might have surrounded this space of reading on its ideal site. [23] The enclosing walls are thus rendered transparent and the illusion of the room as a garden pavilion is complete.

This trope, of course, is with us still: one need only think of D. Perrault's quite literal use of a sunken garden at the Très Grand Bibliothèque [24] and, perhaps more successfully, A. Kalach's Bibliotequo Vasconcelos, [25, 26] where the design of the accessible garden indexes the organization of the stacks, and the two together – books and plants – create a meta-catalogue, which anchors the library in the natural world.

In sum, with these two buildings, but most especially the Bibliothèque Nationale, Labrouste resets the typology of the modern library by radically redefining the architectural program and proposing a potent series of metaphors with which to explore it. He creates a new paradigm from which we are still learning today. [26]