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### Exhibition: 'Henri Labrouste: Structure Brought to Light'

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# Book, exhibition and film reviews

Exhibition: 'Henri Labrouste: Structure Brought to Light'  
(10<sup>th</sup> March–24<sup>th</sup> June, 2013, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA)

The identification of the French architect Henri Labrouste as one of the original 'modern' architects has a long history at the Museum of Modern Art, dating back to 1929, the year of the Museum's founding, when the historian and frequent MoMA curator Henry-Russell Hitchcock established a genealogy linking the industrially inspired architecture of the European avant-garde to nineteenth-century rationalism and engineering innovation in France.<sup>1</sup> Hitchcock described Labrouste's two famous libraries, the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève (1850) and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (1868), as key monuments in this genealogy because of their volumetric simplicity and frank expression of cast-iron structure. His evolutionary model of modern architecture, canonised in the museum's famous 1932 show, 'Modern Architecture: International Exhibition', necessarily downplayed Labrouste's biography as a star pupil of the École des Beaux Arts, the elite centre for arts instruction in France, and winner of the Prix de Rome.

In the Autumn of 1975, the centennial year of Labrouste's death, MoMA mounted an exhibition on 'The Architecture of the École des beaux-arts', a provocative show that argued for the continuing importance of Labrouste and his fellow 'Neo-Grecs' on completely different terms.<sup>2</sup> Supported by the work of scholars including Neil Levine,

Robin Middleton and David Van Zanten, this exhibition presented the work of Labrouste as a significant step in the evolution of *architecture parlante* ('speaking architecture') from the French revolutionary period to the post-modernism of Robert Venturi *et al.*<sup>3</sup> Providing an architecture rich with linguistic symbolism, the Bibliothèque Nationale played a central position here too, one in which the ornamental schema of the façade was at least as important as the tectonic innovation of the interior. Now MoMA has revived Labrouste a third time, once again seeking to connect his work to a current obsession of the architectural profession, this time that of the 'affect'.

The packaging of Labrouste through glowing digital animations for easy consumption by a fashion-conscious audience was perhaps intended as a sweetener for a more deeply considered scholarly reassessment, one dependent on dry examples of Beaux Arts draftsmanship that the curators feared would be otherwise difficult to digest. However, judging by the fascinated reception the series of nearly two-hundred-year-old drawings on display have received, it seems that fear was unwarranted. 'Henri Labrouste: Structure Brought to Light', was staged in collaboration with the Bibliothèque Nationale and originally mounted at the Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine in Paris in 2012. In part it celebrates an ambitious project on the part of the Bibliothèque Nationale to restore and digitise a great deal of the Labrouste archive, which is now available online.<sup>4</sup> The exhibition and accompanying catalogue are divided into three sections tracking Labrouste's career and influence: the first displaying

student work made in Italy and Greece (largely measured drawings of antique ruins); the second focusing on the two Parisian library projects; the third on his influence in France, the Netherlands and the United States. The third section aside, the aim of the show was to demonstrate the connections between the innovative archaeological work Labrouste did as a student and the subsequent work he carried out in Paris, illustrating the marriage of theory and practice, and the basis of his radically contemporary work in historical investigation.

Labrouste, the curators argue, must be seen as a member of the early-nineteenth-century literary and artistic avant-garde, a contemporary of Eugène Delacroix and Victor Hugo, 'committed to experimentation and the creation of new forms for art in response to new social, economic, and cultural conditions'. This attitude is evident, they claim convincingly, in both his controversial archaeological renderings, and in the work he executed for the French state on his return to Paris. Labrouste won the Prix de Rome in 1824 and spent the years 1825–30 in Italy and Greece. The intricate drawings he made at the Villa Medici during that time, many made using the relatively new technology of the *camera lucida* for purposes of close observation, are evidence of an entirely new attitude towards the classical models long revered by French architects. They capture in meticulous detail the early-nineteenth-century material reality of ancient monuments such as Trajan's Column and the Colosseum, as well as recreating ephemeral aspects long invisible, such as the coloured murals and temporary decorations of the ancient city of Paestum. Focusing on the layers of coloured material applied to clad

ancient monuments, and on monuments representing hybrids between cultures and styles, Labrouste challenged the prevailing belief in the timelessness and stability of classical architecture, positing instead its social and historical contingency.

Labrouste returned to Paris at a time of dramatic historical change, on the eve of the July Revolution of 1830. His earliest works were festivals and celebrations commemorating that Revolution, involving temporary lighting and décor for the streets and buildings of Paris. Far from trivial, these pageants created 'a language for a modern civic furniture that drew on what he had seen of the quest for communal meaning in ancient tombs'.<sup>5</sup> Labrouste's concern with the social role of public architecture reached its peak in the design for the two libraries, his only major built works. In a 1975 essay, the architectural historian Neil Levine famously argued that the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève represents an entirely new form for the library, one designed for use by a new category of reading public, members of the modern 'public sphere', rather than elite institutions created for wealthy, book-collecting connoisseurs. In this interpretation, Labrouste's libraries are valued not so much as monuments of structural expressionism but as revolutionary public spaces akin to the arcade and the railway station.<sup>6</sup>

'Henri Labrouste: Structure Brought to Light' builds on Levine's argument using contemporary methods of representation and analysis. Just as Labrouste used the *camera lucida* to recall the everyday life of ancient monuments, the curators and their collaborators drew on computer software to recreate the lived environment of the library interiors. Labrouste was one of the first architects to introduce

interior gas lighting, using it to produce specific sensory effects: in the Exhibition newly-created animations of the reading room of the Bibliothèque Sainte-Genève built on the evidence available in historical photographs to illustrate those effects. The aim of the animations was to show us something of what Labrouste intended with this new technology: they turned our attention downward, away from the dramatic roof structure, toward the lower half of the room where readers were enveloped in warm, glowing, flickering gas light. Created using research by Martin Bressani and Marc Grignon, these animations gave us a different understanding of Labrouste, one in which he is concerned just as much with the quality of interior space produced by the structure as with the structure itself. Further, they were presented as a nineteenth-century paradigm for our present-day fascination with the concept of 'atmosphere' as a special mode of perception, and with the creation of 'immersive environments' in which the spatial and the virtual are blended into an apparently seamless whole.

Besides this new analytical approach, the Exhibition also brought to light some lesser-known examples of Labrouste's work, including a series of drawings for utopian projects inspired by the philosophy of Saint-Simon, including prisons, asylums and agricultural camps, projects which place Labrouste in the revolutionary tradition of Boullée and Ledoux; his drawings echo theirs in scale, simplicity and geometric rigour. Although these projects might be seen as proto-functionalist in their dedication to the idea of architectural form as a shaper of social behaviour, the exhibition also included works that are much more nuanced in their understanding of the relation-

ship between architecture and society, most notably a catafalque designed to honour the repatriation of the Emperor Napoleon's body from Saint Helena in 1840. Together these projects illustrate the possibility of modern civic architecture that is both rationalist and at the same time evocative of the cultural memory residing in ancient mythological traditions.

It is testament to the aims of the Exhibition that the first two sections, those on Labrouste's student work and his two library projects, seemed fresher than the final one on his nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century legacy. Next to their graphic and virtual riches, the third feels almost redundant. Here the promised focus on Labrouste as a modern architect in his own right yielded to the simultaneously more familiar and less interesting story of Labrouste as a pioneer of modern design. However, there were some arresting images here too, especially the startling French Art Nouveau experiments in iron structure and ornament by Louis-Ernest Lheureux, and Auguste and Gustav Perret's beautifully severe neo-classical interiors of the 1920s and 30s. The commentary by Sigrid de Jong and David Van Zanten on Labrouste's influence in the Netherlands through his pupils Anthony Willem van Dam and Johannes Leliman, and on American architecture by way of Charles Follen McKim and Louis Sullivan, though only briefly sketched out, is sure to prompt further investigation. Such scholarship will service and expand the historiography of modern architecture begun by Hitchcock in the early twentieth century. But, finally, what seems to matter less than genealogical connections between the mid-nineteenth-century and today, is the effort to promote Labrouste as eternally contemporary.

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## Notes and references

1. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration* (New York, Payson and Clark, 1929).
2. 'The Architecture of the École des beaux-arts', was presented at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 29<sup>th</sup> October, 1975–4<sup>th</sup> January, 1976. A revised version of the show's Catalogue was published as: *The Architecture of the École des beaux-arts*, Arthur Drexler, ed. (New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1977). See, in particular, Neil Levine, 'The Romantic Idea of Architectural Legibility: Henri Labrouste and the Neo-Grec', pp. 325–416.
3. The narrative of Labrouste as a master semiotician is presented in: Neil Levine, 'The Book and the Building: Hugo's Theory of Architecture and Labrouste's Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève', in, Robin Middleton, ed., *The Beaux-Arts and Nineteenth-Century French Architecture* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1982) and David Van Zanten, *Designing Paris: The Architecture of Duban, Labrouste, Duc, and Vaudoyer* (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1987).
4. <http://gallica.bnf.fr>
5. Barry Bergdoll, 'Labrouste and Italy', in *Henri Labrouste: Structure Brought to Light*, eds, Corinne Béliet, Barry Bergdoll, Marc Le Coeur (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2013), p. 80. This book serves as the catalogue to the exhibition reviewed here.
6. Levine updates this argument in his contribution to the Catalogue cited above, 'The Public Library at the Dawn of the New Library Science: Labrouste's Two Major Works and Their Typological Underpinnings', pp. 164–179.