

These Architects Designed A Nation

January 1, 2011 10:07 AM ET
5:00

JACKI LYDEN, host:

There's a reason so many 19th century American buildings share a certain grandeur, a certain look. They were designed or inspired by the architecture firm of McKim, Mead and White.

Charles McKim, William Mead and Stanford White designed the New York Municipal Building, the original Penn Station. They worked on the Gilded Age mansions of Newport, Rhode Island. They were even hired to renovate the White House in 1903.

These days, Stanford White may be better known for the scandal associated with his murder. He was shot by the enraged husband of a former lover. But 100 years ago, White and his partners were creating the look of a booming young nation.

Architecture professor Momette Broderick has written a new book about the famous firm. It's called "Triumvirate: McKim, Mead and White Art Architecture, Scandal and Class in America's Gilded Age." She says that this quintessentially American firm derived much of its inspiration from Europe at a time when taking a boat to Paris was no easy thing.

Ms. MOSETTE BRODERICK (Author, "Triumvirate: McKim, Mead and White Art Architecture, Scandal and Class in America's Gilded Age"): Through the 1860s and '70s, it was an ordeal to cross the Atlantic. Later on, the crossing gets much safer. Mm-hmm. And much more comfortable. And you can even start to bring big stuff back from Europe because you're not in a little boat anymore. And Europe becomes an awakening for a new nation. We were basically - when McKim, Mead and White were getting going - we were basically a rural nation with little wooden houses in the country - not country houses.

LYDEN: Yeah.

Ms. BRODERICK: Simple brownstones. And they go to Paris and they see the First World, they see the old world. They see things that are medieval, things that are baroque, things that - Roman Amphitheater in Arles. And all this patrimony comes down on their heads. And McKim and White - and to some degree even Mead - see themselves as a huge Santa Claus with a backpack. And they put the buildings and the style and the things that they can buy in this backpack and bring it to the Americans who feel by the end of the 19th century that they're ready to become a first world nation. And they become the bridge between the old world and the new.

LYDEN: Once they were done touring the continent, these three young upstarts had to make a name for themselves in New York society.

Ms. BRODERICK: How in the world did three guys who are basically losers from families that were not well-off or well connected, how did they make it? And that's what's so amazing. It was - some of it is blind luck, and some of it was the social friends they made in the clubs. The clubs were in those days -University Club, initially later, Century Club. They were the conduit. When you look at the jobs they have, the members...

LYDEN: They're networkers, terrific networkers.

Ms. BRODERICK: Exactly.

LYDEN: And, of course, Stanford White is perhaps the best networker of them all.

Ms. BRODERICK: He was a - that is true. He was a man who could literally be in four places at once.

LYDEN: Tell us about White, I mean, he's just a remarkable character. He's so talented. He brings in so many clients, which is we're talking about...

Ms. BRODERICK: Yeah.

LYDEN: ...is the original networker because...

Ms. BRODERICK: Yes, he was. He was ubiquitous, as they said.

LYDEN: And we should also say, amongst these men, his best friend, Augustus Saint-Gaudens...

Ms. BRODERICK: Gaudens.

LYDEN: ...there's a lot of bisexuality.

Ms. BRODERICK: There is. There's no question that when they were touring in Italy, something was going on.

LYDEN: Mm-hmm.

Ms. BRODERICK: Whether it actually happened - and later on, I think it did happen. In the 1880s, White was...

LYDEN: Well, they'd write each other and say, I send you a thousand kisses.

Ms. BRODERICK: Kisses.

LYDEN: Most men don't.

Ms. BRODERICK: If you see those letters...

LYDEN: Yeah.

Ms. BRODERICK: ...they're very clear.

LYDEN: And I raise it because it is simply a fascinating part of their character and creativity.

Ms. BRODERICK: Well, the story about White was he was a child. He's Peter Pan of the "Peter Pan principle." In his early years in the 1880s, he still had some architectural flair. I think he loses this.

Later on, he becomes a decorative specialist. It's all about interiors, and then he discovers the booty of Greater Europe. But he doesn't know anything. He never endured an art history course. He never took a connoisseur class at Christie's or Sotheby's. He really didn't know what he was doing. It was all enthusiasm.

LYDEN: What is their legacy today, Momette Broderick?

Ms. BRODERICK: I'll tell you what it is, I think. They were working for the new money. They didn't do very well with the Edith Wharton set.

LYDEN: Mm-hmm.

Ms. BRODERICK: They worked for new money. And the new money wanted to be barons, and these buildings made them barons.

And I wanted to call the book - the title was the editor's decision, and a good one. But what I wanted to call it was "When Architecture Could Fashion A Nation." And that's what McKim, Mead and White thought they were doing.

LYDEN: We are going to go today to the old post office...

Ms. BRODERICK: Wonderful.

LYDEN: ...the Farley Post Office...

Ms. BRODERICK: Yes.

LYDEN: ...34th Street on 8th Avenue.

Ms. BRODERICK: Yup.

LYDEN: And that's one of their commissions.

Ms. BRODERICK: Yes, it is.

LYDEN: We're going to explore unused parts of that building.

Ms. BRODERICK: Good.

LYDEN: Can you tell us anything about it?

Ms. BRODERICK: That was done by a man who was known as McKim's right-hand man, a man called William Mitchell Kendall, a Boston architect of very dull quality, and an extremely mean man.

LYDEN: And, of course, the motto - who comes up with this? - neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds. Whose is that?

Ms. BRODERICK: That's William Mitchell Kendall, is said to have defined that motto and put it on the post office.

LYDEN: That's Momette Broderick. Her new book is "Triumvirate: McKim, Mead & White - Art, Architecture, Scandal, and Class In America's Gilded Age."

NPR transcripts are created on a rush deadline by a contractor for NPR, and accuracy and availability may vary. This text may not be in its final form and may be updated or revised in the future. Please be aware that the authoritative record of NPR's programming is the audio.