Romanesque Revival Style

Gradually, between the late 18th and mid-19th centuries, perceptions about history shifted. No longer was the past seen as a rational progression towards ever greater heights of civilization. Revolutions in the English colonies and France and the chaos of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe spawned trends of thought that broke the hold of Classicism on artists and philosophers and allowed each era to be appreciated for its own aesthetic. This led to a proliferation of architectural styles and, ultimately, the evolution of a truly American style — H. H. Richardson’s interpretation of the Romanesque.

Romanesque Revival buildings are identifiable by their semi-circular window arches. There is another architectural style called “Italianate” (think Rome again) that also uses this type of arch, but an Italianate building usually has brackets under the overhanging eaves and is more likely residential. Americans traveling abroad may notice that Italianate and Romanesque buildings in the United States bear little resemblance to actual buildings in Italy; the naming of architectural styles has more to do with persuasive writing by architects and architectural historians than the exact representation of another country’s architecture.

Most architectural historians break the Romanesque Revival style into two parts: an earlier, 1840s version (as seen in the James Renwick, Jr.-designed portions of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.) and the later, 1880s Richardsonian version (as seen in Richardson’s Allegheny County Courthouse and Jail). In Pittsburgh, the former style lasted into the late 1850s and is best represented by St. Michael the Archangel Roman Catholic Church (1857–1861) designed by Charles Bartberger for a precipitous site on the South Side Slopes.

Pittsburgh has two textbook examples of the 1880s Romanesque — one actually by Richardson himself, his 1883–1886 Courthouse and Jail. On his deathbed, Richardson remarked: “If they honor me for the pigmy things I have already done, what will they say when they see Pittsburgh finished?” The other is Shadyside Presbyterian Church, designed by Richardson’s successor firm Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge (1889). Both use rusticated granite exterior walls to express the massing of the building and eschew extraneous detailing, making their impact through the interplay of voids and solids. These are monumental buildings, yet with a warmth and contextualism one would never expect

Former St. Michael the Archangel Roman Catholic Church, 1857–1861, Charles Bartberger, architect. This church at Brosville Street on the South Side Slopes is being converted to condominiums called “Angel’s Arms.” Lu Donnelly

The courtyard of the Allegheny County Courthouse presents a “symphony of arches.” History Center Library & Archives, James Benney III Collection, PSS #30

Shadyside Presbyterian Church, 1889, Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge, architects. Lu Donnelly

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from such massive structures. The Church, for example, sits in a residential neighborhood, but does not dominate it.

The Romanesque Revival style proliferated quickly across the country, especially in Pennsylvania, where eight courthouses were designed between 1885 and 1894. And, for the first time, an American architectural style leapt back over the ocean, emulated in England and throughout Europe through the circulation of architectural journals with their detailed photographs and floor plans.

In Pittsburgh, commercial buildings took up the style with a fervor formerly reserved for the Greek Revival, using it on storefronts and warehouses. The 1892 Times Building at 346 Fourth Avenue was designed by one of the finest local purveyors of the style, Frederick J. Osterling. His 1890-1893 house for Charles Schwab on Jones Avenue in Braddock is a testament to the superintendent of the nearby Edgar Thomson Works and an excellent example of a Romanesque Revival residence.

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania, a forthcoming book in the 58-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled Buildings of the United States. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and is organizing an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at Carnegie Museum of Art opening February 2006.