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THE ARCHITECTURE OF JOSEPH LYMAN SILSBEE

Early Work in Syracuse, New York

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本論は THE ARCHITECTURE OF JOSEPH LYMAN SILSBEE—Personal Background and Historical Context (昭和56年度日本建築学会近畿支部研究報告集) に続くニューヨーク州シラキュースでの初期の作の研究報告で、シルスビーの設計による二つの建物の検討と相互比較および他の建築家の設計例との比較を含み、昭和55年5月に Yale University で Vincent Scully 教授に提出された拙論の一部に同年11月の現地調査の結果を加えて書き改めたものである。

The commission for the Syracuse Savings Bank building was awarded to Joseph Lyman Silsbee, over other entries to the design competition including one by Cummings and Sears, an acknowledged architectural office in Boston.¹ Planned with a frontage of 60 feet on Salina Street and 127 feet on both James Street and the Erie Canal, in the heart of downtown Syracuse, the new building for Syracuse Savings Bank was one of the first of Silsbee's major commissions. A perspective drawing of his design for the bank (Fig. 1) can be found in the January 1876 issue of *The Architectural Sketch Book*, while another by Cummings and Sears (Fig. 2) is in the April issue of the previous year. Though the two designs may look dissimilar in the published drawings, partly because of their different viewpoints, they bore a remarkable resemblance. Silsbee as well as Cummings and Sears proposed a symmetrical and considerably tall building incorporated with Gothic details and a soaring tower. The symmetrical design was not only a formalistic solution but also the result of planning on the relatively narrow site facing Salina Street between James Street and the canal, which has since been buried to make Erie Boulevard. The tall structure must have aimed at a two-fold economic value; the allocation of as much office space as possible in the center of the city, and the use of height as a symbol of business prestige. Placing a tower atop the business structure was the cheapest way to attain the prestigious height. In the design by Cummings and Sears, the somewhat top-heavy building with a slender, machicolated tower on the front facade, recalls the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. It might also have been suggested by R. M. Hunt's New York Tribune Building, one of the first skyscrapers, formally opened in 1875. The building designed by Silsbee can be roughly regarded as a seven-story structure composed of a lofty banking story which was connected with the basement, three office stories, which have since been converted into four stories, and a two-story tower. The design by Cummings and Sears is a five-story structure with a tower. In Silsbee's scheme, the big tower and the main body were integrated into one building, while the clock tower and the pinnacles by Cummings and Sears were mere appendages. Silsbee's tower contained the bank vaults, an observation platform which people could visit by a passenger elevator, and his architectural office at the top.² In terms of architectural contour, the executed building resembled Trinity Church by H. H. Richardson, though this was under construction in Boston when the bank was completed. The resemblance is particularly strong when each of them is viewed from the west. As for the exterior finish, Silsbee used a kind of buff sandstone with bands of reddish gray stone along the sill line and impost course. The equilateral arches were made up of alternating voussoirs of the same two types of stone. This kind of polychromatic finish was done mainly in the 1850's and 1860's in England, and well beyond that in the United States. Cummings and Sears, for example, had already used it in their antiquarian design for Hotel Boylston (1870) in Boston, and in 1875 they were going to show two more polychromatic buildings in Boston: the Bedford Building downtown, and New Old South Church at a corner of Copley Square.

The White Memorial Building (Fig. 3), dedicated in 1876, is another example of Silsbee's involvement in polychromy. In this case, he used red brick with bands of whitish-colored brick and stone, and a small amount of black brick to make ornamental patterns. Although the five-

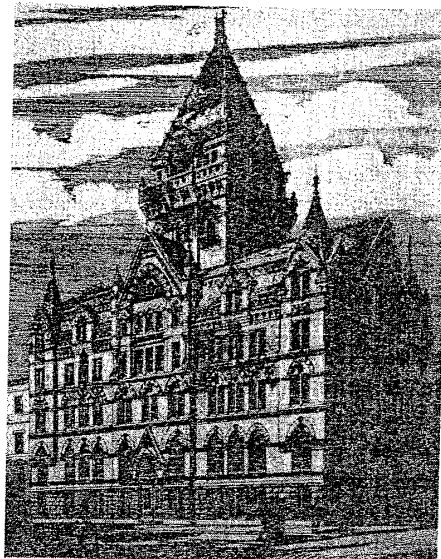


Fig. 1
J. L. Silsbee:
Design for Syracuse Savings Bank.
From *The Architectural Sketch Book*, Vol. III, No. VII (January, 1876).

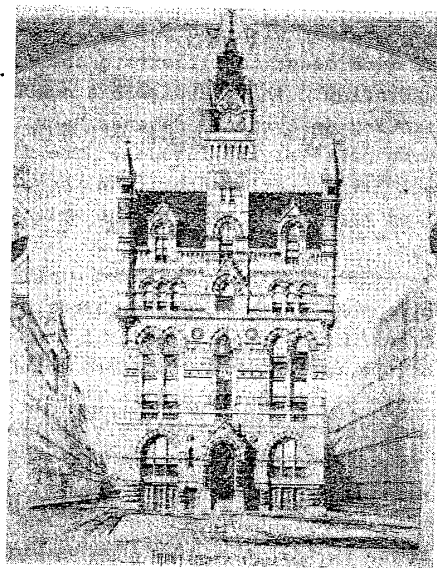


Fig. 2
Cummings and Sears:
Design for a Banking Building, Syracuse, N. Y. (Syracuse Savings Bank).
From *The Architectural Sketch Book*, Vol. II, No. X (April, 1875).

1. The Syracuse University School of Architecture and the New York State Council on the Arts, *Architecture Worth Saving in Onondaga County*, 1964, p. 71.
2. Ibid., pp. 71-72. Syracuse Savings Bank was the first office building in the city to be built with a passenger elevator.

story commercial building has its longer front facing Washington Street on the north and the shorter side facing Salina Street on the west, it still lends a warm and vivid atmosphere to the streets of the northern city due to the rich exterior materials and good maintenance. This building is also basically symmetrical and subtly Gothic, but is more elaborate in detail and more human in scale than Syracuse Savings Bank. Large show windows at street level surmounted by long-span segmental arches permit a positive interaction between the shopping streets and the first floor where a number of stores were originally planned. On the middle stories, narrow sash-windows, which are straight-headed on the second story and surmounted with pointed segmental arches on the third story, modulate the office environment. The vertical lines created by shafts of red brick and narrow bays are juxtaposed with horizontal lines of whitish brick and stone to yield a clear but rich visual effect. Articulated by a molded belt course between the third and fourth stories, the upper stories have a complex design with slight recesses of some walls on the Washington Street side. The Salina Street facade is relatively simple even on the upper stories, though it incorporates a peculiar feature. On the second story of the west facade, there is a stubby polished column symbolically supporting a three-story pavilion (Fig. 4). Fitted into a bay, or in a sense two bays, the pavilion is expressed only by the depth of the brick on the upper stories. On the other hand, there is a discrepancy in the expression of the bays between the upper and lower stories. Therefore, the pavilion looks merely like a panel of brick which is fitted on the surface of the brick wall, though at the same time, it is expressed as something heavy by the inclusion of the stubby column. This manipulation of brick might have been derived from the so-called "Panel Brick style" of Boston which can be traced back, at least, to Ware and Van Brunt.³ The connection between the pavilion and the supporting column is also peculiar. Though it looks like a kind of two-way bracket, it can also be seen as a spandrel between two arches or, with the column, a unit of an arcade. Above all, the design of the element has a visual association with the pointed segmental arch of the third story, as if it were meant to illustrate the origin of the modern but stylistic fenestration. There are also a number of curved stone beasts, which were lacking in Syracuse Savings Bank, in addition to foliated ornaments on some parts of the facades. The slightly polychromatic slate roofs are not higher but steeper than those of Syracuse Savings Bank. Viewed from Washington Street, the White Memorial Building shows basically the same composition as Syracuse Savings Bank, though most of the elements were interestingly modified within the symmetrical setting. The small pyramidal roofs atop the corner pavilions of Syracuse Savings Bank were transformed into the ends of the gable roofs, while the gabled dormers of the banking building were metamorphosed into the tiny pyramidal roofs and slightly projected pavilions at the top story of the White Memorial Building. The big central tower of Syracuse Savings Bank was reduced and turned into the French hip roof with iron cresting, still serving as the center of the White Memorial Building.

Both Syracuse Savings Bank and the White Memorial Building show that, at that time, Silsbee was greatly affected by the European architecture of the third quarter of the century, particularly that of England. At the same time, they suggest that he might have owed much of his early work to Boston and Cambridge, where he had studied, more than to abroad. He used such High Victorian manners as constructional polychromy, however, in appropriate ways in the two buildings which had different programs. Both of these buildings, though referential, were imaginative and had vigorous character, though neither was as aggressively expressive and personal as the contemporary buildings of a similar type designed by Frank Furness such as the Guarantee Trust and Safe Deposit Company, and the Centennial National Bank of Philadelphia.

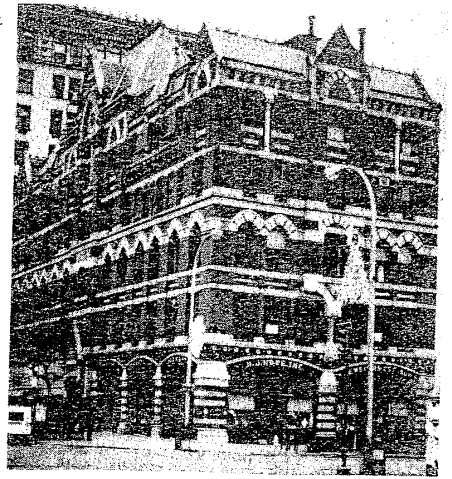


Fig. 3
J. L. Silsbee:
The White Memorial Building.
1876.
From the northwest.

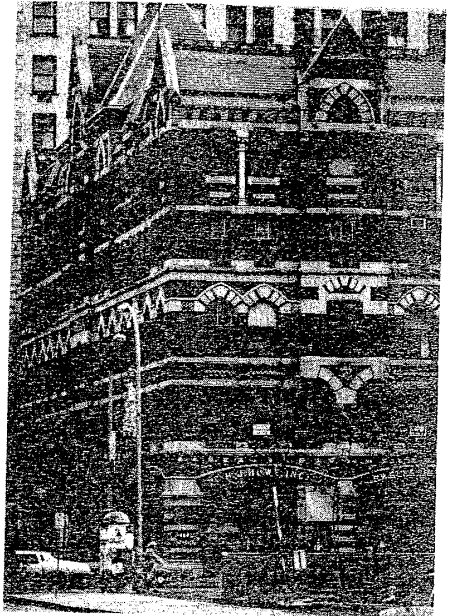


Fig. 4
J. L. Silsbee:
The White Memorial Building.
Detail of the west (Salina Street)
facade and the north-west corner.

3. Bainbridge Bunting, *Houses of Boston's Back Bay*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1967. pp. 188-195. R. M. Hunt's Studio Building (1857-58) of the West 10th Street, New York, was a precedent for the "Panel Brick style".

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