

Henri Labrouste: Structure Brought to Light

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Barry Bergdoll, Corinne Bélier, and Marc LeCœur. *Henri Labrouste: Structure Brought to Light*. With essays by Martin Bressani et al. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012, in association with the Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine and the Bibliothèque nationale de France, with the special participation of the Académie d'architecture and the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève. 272pp., ill. ISBN 978-0-87070-839-8. US \$55. Also available in a French version, *non vide*. References below are to the English version.

Henri Labrouste (1801–1875) made library history—aside from being one of the most important French Romantic architects. In the lofty reading rooms of the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève (BSG, opened to the public in 1851) and the Bibliothèque nationale at the site Richelieu (BNF, opened to the public in 1868), Labrouste ingeniously employed some of the most recent technological inventions, in particular cast iron, plate glass, central heating, and gas lighting, to create humane public spaces where men, and later also women, would read books during any time of the day, in every season. In the accompanying book, Neil Levine's essay includes two illustrations which were published by the contemporary French press after the libraries' respective openings (p. 167). Both show book-lined halls with tables, as well as much empty space where men wander around, or mingle and chat; the BSG's large windows are even equipped with heavy curtains. The BSG was a project of the July Monarchy (1832–1848), though completed only after the Revolution of 1848. In 1838, the BSG in the Latin Quarter had been the first public library in Paris to admit patrons, primarily students, during nighttime hours to a heated and lit reading room. Since its quarters in the Collège Henri-IV were not well suited to these upgrades, a new building at the Place du Panthéon became necessary. In contrast, Labrouste designed his BNF buildings as the Bibliothèque impériale of the Second Empire (1852–1870). When the government commissioned the new buildings because the national depository was running out of storage space, Labrouste was asked to study Panizzi's Library of the British Museum (pp. 136, 164) before designing a library housing the intellectual capital of the *Grande Nation*.

The Labrouste exhibition was a Franco-American project that accompanied the recent renovation of his BNF buildings. Labrouste's libraries have served as a touchstone of the twentieth-century debate on architecture (pp. 24–42), and in 1975 MoMA exhibited some of Labrouste's work in its seminal beaux-arts architecture show. The current curators combined drawings with architectural models, photographs, digital media, and ephemera, such as Labrouste's traveling drawing kit from the 1820s and the laurel wreath of his Rome Prize. The digital media comprised photo montages, audio files, the BSG scene

from Martin Scorsese's movie *Hugo* (2011) in the 3D version, and a small digital database of buildings that share structural characteristics with Labrouste's masterworks.

At MoMA, the exhibition was divided into four chapters. The hallway leading into the gallery explored Labrouste's drawings until 1840, while the gallery was divided into three sections, dedicated to the BSG, the BNF, and the impact of Labrouste's work. Since the small boxy gallery space on the third floor was an uncongenial backdrop for the soaring reading rooms of grand public buildings, the exhibition cases were arranged as echoes of their respective floor plans, providing the visitor with at least one physical experience: two rows for the long double-vaulted "salle de lecture" of the BSG, and a perfect square for the nine half-domes of the "salle de travail" of the BNF. The BSG was described as a first-floor entrance and a second-floor reading room which provided access to most of its holdings; there was more information about the central heating in the basement and its stunning roof construction with its exposed iron beams than about the uses of the ground floor for special collections and storage. But Labrouste's inventive use of a cast-iron skeleton for the BNF's central stacks was explored in some detail, because effective storage and retrieval is of crucial importance to a depository library. The curators celebrated Labrouste's libraries as a rational, and therefore modern, architecture which combines form with function so that decoration is never an end in itself. For example, the garden frescoes in the entrance to the BSG and in the reading room of the BNF were interpreted as a realization of Labrouste's concept of a "healing architecture." The curators were much less at ease with Labrouste's beaux-arts eclecticism, which extended, beyond Etruscan references, to his Orientalist appropriation of the hypostyle mosque with half domes in the BNF's reading room (p. 163).

The construction of public libraries is a political decision, but the curators were reticent about politics. Labrouste was born during Napoléon's Consulate (1799-1804) and died during the early years of the Third Republic (1870-1914). He came of age during the Bourbon Restoration (1814-1830), and witnessed the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, and the Paris Commune of 1871. From 1832 until his death, the architect served successive governments in a range of offices; one of these was his contribution to the planning of Napoléon's funeral in 1840. Labrouste's commitment to a socially conscious architecture, associated with Fourierism, is repeatedly mentioned, though it is stressed that Labrouste himself was not a Fourierist (p. 101). Labrouste's historical studies in Italy, culminating in the 1829 controversy about his interpretation of the Temple of Paestum, were presented as the foundation of his later masterworks. The curators understood this controversy as a Romantic disagreement about progress in history (p. 93). Aside from the surprising dismissal of any connection with the "querelle des anciens et des modernes" of the seventeenth century, their approach did not address the fact that during the Bourbon Restoration France was continually confronted with the legacy of the French Revolution. Arguably, this tension also informed the visceral responses to Labrouste's reconstruction of ancient Greek history on the basis of architectural remains.

The English version of the accompanying book is not a scholarly catalog. The individual essays are informative, but the volume provides nothing even remotely resembling a checklist of the exhibited artifacts; moreover, it lacks indices and a timeline of Labrouste's life. The list of Labrouste's major projects and buildings does not include the BSG and BNF (pp. 256–259), and the reader has to create her own marginalia tracking their construction history across the different essays. The reproduced drawings, plans, and photographs are not considered artwork that merits close viewing. The pale green captions are inconsistent with regard to the provided information (e.g. the original size of artwork is sometimes missing), hard on the eye, and difficult to match with their images. Labrouste's large drawings and construction plans are mostly reproduced on such a small scale that details are invisible. Recent color photographs are treated like cellphone snapshots for which technical details would be pretentious. Two of Candida Höfer's large-scale photographs of the reading rooms open the MoMA exhibition, and three of her BNF photographs (pp. 12-13, 254, 255) visually separate the text from paratexts and appendices. While she is mentioned in passing in the introduction (p. 20), her work can only be verified by consulting the Photography Credits (p. 271). The economic rationale of producing a modestly prized book about the exhibition is understandable, but in the age of web-publishing and e-books, what is the point of a poorly designed printed book useless to specialists and condescending to lay readers?

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For photographs of how the exhibition was displayed in Paris, see the website of its designer Manuelle Gautrand: < <http://www.manuelle-gautrand.com/projects/labrouste-exhibition/> >.

Two audio files and a free excerpt from the book can be found on MoMA's website: < <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1319> >.

Labrouste's archives are dispersed among several institutions in Paris (pp. 268–270).

The BSG website provides a page with resources about Henri Labrouste and the construction of the BSG; available at: < <http://www-bsg.univ-paris1.fr/mieux-connaître-la-bsg/henri-labrouste> >.

The Department of Art History and Archeology at Columbia University offers a virtual exploration of the BSG in the nineteenth-century section of its digital teaching resource *REAL? VIRTUAL:*

Representing Architectural Time and Space, available at:

< <http://www.learn.columbia.edu/ha/html/19c.html> >.

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