AFTER YEARS IN THE COLD, A FEISTY CRITIC IS BACK IN STYLE

Henry Hope Reed is speaking passionately about buildings. It is the only way he *ever* speaks about buildings—with the dignified, lucid, educated enthusiasm that befits a leading scholar of architecture. On a rare, exquisite autumn afternoon, the late sun bathing the pale limestone of the East Side's avenues and side streets, Reed, a neatly dressed man in his late 60s, talks rapidly and delightedly about the mansions and the men who built them.

"Look at Billy Delano's building," he says, pointing to the Council on Foreign Relations, built in 1920 by Delano and Aldrich. "Look at what he does here—he has a rounded arched bay, forming a kind of rusticated arcade. Inside the bay he has this kind of flat wall, and then he sticks the window inside of that. And the stone—I've never seen tooling as elaborate as that. The original house has stopped here. The wing was added by Frederick

Long deemed a crank for castigating modernism, Henry Hope Reed is seeing classicism make a comeback.

Photographed by Duane Michals

Rhinelander King; it's so well matched you can't see the difference."

A moment later, crossing the street and stepping out of the sun, Reed is talking about modern architecture. The passion is still in his voice, but the delight has become dismay. "The moderns were determined to reinvent the architectural wheel," Reed says. "It's the perfect example of visual nihilism, the refusal to take the well-worn path. They're a lot of tin geniuses, and they've saddled *us* with their stuff. That's my irritation. . . ."

Henry Hope Reed is a man with a cause, and the cause, in a word, is classicism. An author and a teacher, he was curator of Central Park for six years and is still, in the opinion of Author Tom Wolfe, the man who ought to be put in charge of bringing it back to its former glory. Reed is also a founder and spiritual head of a sort of architectural commando team called Classical America. Above all, in this city's tight-knit community of architects, urban historians and landmark preservationists, Reed is an original. To some he's a bit of an eccentric; to others a prescient hero. But to even the most disdainful modernists, Reed is one of those rare few: a professional amateur whose abiding passion has come back into vogue.

Today, as anyone who has visited an architecture school or exhibit can attest, there is little doubt that classicism has returned in force. From students' drafting boards to the skyscraper headquarters of major corporations in Manhattan's midtown, a profusion of arches, pediments, arcades and moldings has emerged from a half-century's sleep. Exposed steel-and-glass walls have given way, at least in the more fashionable schools and offices, to a new wave of symmetrical, columniated compositions in granite, plaster and even plywood. Innumerable shows and avant-garde publications with titles like "Postmodern Classicism" and "Freestyle Classicism" confirm that the pendulum has indeed swung back. But more than 30 years ago, when Reed first championed the classical, he was greeted with bewilderment and, at times, derision. A return to *classicism*? Simply unthinkable. To the modernists, Reed could only be one of two things: a reactionary or a crank.

It was in 1952 that Reed earned a name for himself when his pro-classicism article appeared in Yale's architecture magazine alongside pro-modernism pieces by Philip Johnson, Paul Rudolph and Buckminster Fuller. New York born and Harvard bred, he had taken a job at Yale teaching city planning. Seven years later Reed published *The Golden City*, whose title was meant to evoke the American classical architecture of the turn of the century. To make his case, Reed performed the then-outrageous act (repeated by numerous authors since) of simply placing comparable modern and classical buildings side by side on facing pages. On the left, the 1950s Port Authority Bus Terminal; on the right, Grand Central Terminal. The argument, Reed thought, was self-evident.

The response to *The Golden City* was typified by the modernist critic Bruno Zevi, who asked "how in the world a scholar with a solid knowledge of history dares to prophesy the coming of the neo-Roman and neo-Renaissance." Even today, when much of that prophecy seems to have materialized, Paul Goldberger finds the attack on modernism "troubling." It is true that Reed's certainty of the utter worthlessness of modernism can be, at the least, unsettling. Even recognized masterpieces by Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier are consigned by him to the dustheap. The nicest thing Reed will say is that he finds some modern buildings "less offensive" than other buildings. But as Harmon Goldstone, former chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, explains it: "Henry is a passionate protagonist, an evangelist to the point of being reckless or far-out . . . but that's part of his charm. He believes in what he says."

Writing about architecture was only one of Reed's ways of expressing those beliefs. Another was the exhibit he staged in 1955 at the University Club called "The Monuments of Manhattan." "It was a big success," Reed remembers. "It had marvelous drawings. I went up to a barn in Connecticut and got the cartoons of Ezra Winter for the Cunard building downtown . . . great big things! I got stuff of George Brown Post [architect of the New York Stock Exchange] from his great-grandson Everett Post—stuff like that. Well, nobody had ever *seen* this sort of thing before. Trouble was, being in a club, it didn't get public attention."

In the late '50s, anxious to bring his concerns to a broader audience, Reed took to the streets, starting the city's first walking-tour programs for the Municipal Art Society and the Museum of the City of New York. "When no one else was interested in old buildings, he was out making people aware of them," says Michael George, a tour guide for Classical America. Reed led onlookers to Pennsylvania Station, trying to raise interest in its preservation. He brought them to Central Park (still under the hand of Robert Moses then), denouncing the changes in the name of "improvement" that were obscuring the grand design of Olmsted and Vaux. Says Goldstone: "We owe a great deal to Henry and his few colleagues. He encouraged a groundswell of public opinion by showing people what they had, and how fast they were losing it."

Reed became curator of Central Park in the late '60s, and during his six-year tenure he produced the first comprehensive guidebook and history of the park. His goal was simple: to make the public and city officials understand that Central Park was not some leftover piece of natural terrain but an 840-acre work of art—one of America's national treasures. Reed wanted people to see that the so-called improvements (many of which, he acknowledged, were well intentioned) were rapidly eroding the original architectural and landscape conception of the park. Today the Central Park Conservancy and the Parks Department keep close watch on the park and are engaged in a series of ambitious restorations, most of them grounded firmly in the idea of being as faithful as possible to Olmsted and Vaux' intentions. These groups are a direct outgrowth of Reed's research

and the convictions he expressed so forcefully nearly 20 years ago.

But Reed didn't stop with Central Park. In 1968 he founded Classical America with Artist Pierce Rice, Architect John Barrington Bayley and others. The organization exists to promote classical ideals in art, architecture and civic design. With branches in Philadelphia and Milwaukee, the group sponsors tours, holds lectures, offers courses in architecture with the National Academy of Design and the University of Pennsylvania, publishes a newsletter and a handsomely illustrated magazine and reprints important texts on architecture. This year Classical America, in conjunction with W.W. Norton, will bring out a new book by Reed entitled *The New York Public Library: Its Architecture and Decoration.*

For Reed, all these efforts have been but steps on the way to the ultimate goal: the restoration of the "Golden City," the return of an architecture for America based on ornament, decoration, fine materials and traditional forms. Having watched his ideas move from the fringe of architecture to its center has still not satisfied Reed. Recently he received a letter from Nathan Glazer, who had criticized *The Golden City* in *The New Leader* years before. "He wrote a very nice letter of apology, saying that now he realized I was right all along." But Reed is reluctant to admit that architecture has truly changed. "Yes, there's a lot more interest," he says, "but we've got so far to go. If there's a banana peel, the postmodernists will step on it, and they're stepping on it now."

The real problem, Reed suggests, is that the move back to the traditional models does not proceed from a true understanding of classicism, which was the essence of the rigorous Beaux-Arts architectural education system in Paris and the United States. An example is the new AT&T building. Reed is unimpressed by the massive classical arcade, the stonework and pediment. "You see," he grumbles, "there's no ornament. You have such good examples of classical skyscrapers in New York: you can turn to 230 Park Avenue [the old New York Central building, now the Helmsley building]. *That's* the real thing. *That's* what I call a classical skyscraper. The early-20th-century architects built with knowledge. They weren't afraid of books. At AT&T there's something wrong with the scale. It is a form of progress, I suppose, but it shows how far we have to go."

In short, after decades in the wilderness, Henry Hope Reed remains adamant, perhaps even a little bitter. When it comes to the lonely years past when modernism was all-powerful and classicism declining, Reed's memory can be very long indeed. Like a general who has suffered defeats, he recalls the precise years that the leading architectural schools went modern: Columbia in 1937, Harvard in 1938. In conversation he rankles when mentioning *Vanity Fair* magazine—the old *Vanity Fair*. "They supported modernism," he says. "So did *The New Yorker*. All the magazines did."

In the early evening Reed strolls up Fifth Avenue to the National Academy of Design at Ninetieth Street. There Alvin Holm, a Philadelphia architect and a director of Classical America, will proceed with his course in the drawing of the five orders of classical architecture. Tonight the class is supposed to draw the baluster, the shapely stone railing supports found along staircases and at the tops of classical buildings.

Holm, a lucid teacher with an ample reserve of witty asides, begins the class, drawing on the blackboard. The measuring marks go in, dividing the page into 12 parts. From the bottom up, he lays in the plinth, the torus, the scotia—the height of each element and its diameter precisely located in space by a set of rules and proportions handed down from generation to generation. Now Holm is up to the bulging belly, laid in with a circle that, at a precise point of "contrary flexure," becomes the sleeve, and so on up through the astragal, necking and, at the very top, the abacus. On Reed's page and on every student's in the class, a set of very passable balusters is coming into view.

One's mind drifts from the delineation of pencil balusters on paper to the real ones back on Fifth Avenue, their softly rounded forms gently modeled by the low, late afternoon sun. One can suddenly see the process from start to finish: the class' drawing become a template; the template guiding a diamond saw in Indiana as it cuts a block of limestone; the finished baluster, back in New York, set in place with mortar, ready to catch the morning light.

And one must grant Reed a major point. Classicism does condense a sum total of experience in the making of beautiful things into a set of rules that pretty much anyone can follow with reasonably good results. Our modern sensibilities may rankle at the loss of originality in what might seem classicism's straitjacket of rules, but the fact remains that no one has yet come up with a way to make a city, or even a city district, of modern, "original" buildings that is a fraction as pleasant or humane as those built routinely under classicism—the Upper East Side, Brooklyn Heights, Greenwich Village. Because classicism *is* a set of rules, it can achieve a high standard when embraced by a wide variety of people, from talented architects to mediocre ones to carpenters with a good rule book. And so it results in a set of buildings that, because they speak the common language of classicism, not only maintain a certain level of quality but relate to one another in a manner of friendly association, making for attractive, varied but coherent streetscapes.

Reed's whole effort has been to make us remember that these buildings, which we tend to take as givens, as objects handed down from a misty past or as natural phenomena, were in fact built by people—people much like ourselves, whose chief difference from us was in having the knowledge and the will to build classically.

"Our instinct is for ornament. Our instinct is to admire skill and decoration. That is our instinct," Reed says. If the "Golden City" makes a triumphant return to a land of modernism, it will, for Henry Hope Reed, have been worth the wait.

—James Sanders