Books

Grand Central to All Points

The Architecture of Warren & Wetmore, by Peter Pennoyer '80CC, '84APP and Anne Walker '00APP. (Norton, 256 Pages, $60)

By
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In July 1921, Nicholas Murray Butler laid the cornerstone to a great university library that would not bear his name. It was in Louvain, Belgium, where in the opening days of World War I the Germans had burned the historic city and pillaged the ancient university and its library. As president of Columbia and of the Carnegie Endowment, Butler led the American fundraising effort to build a new library, demonstrating his interest in benevolent internationalism and his nose for good publicity. To the project's architect, Whitney Warren (1864–1943), the creative partner of the firm Warren & Wetmore, the rebuilding was not just a coup but a moral achievement. He had found his artistic vision some 40 years earlier at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris (after an unhappy year at Columbia's new School of Architecture) and felt that "rebuilding the devastated regions of Belgium and France," as he wrote to his wife, "would be by all odds the greatest undertaking of the age."

The building, as described by Peter Pennoyer and Anne Walker in their book *The Architecture of Warren & Wetmore*, was of Flemish and Renaissance design but "clearly more American in inspiration." The library, dedicated in 1928, and the 1929 New York Central Building (now the Helmsley Building) on Park Avenue were "the crowning achievements of the architect's career . . . singularly successful in their interpretation of historical styles, bold sculptural details, and creative artistry."

That career was indeed singularly successful. Warren had won a few commissions after his return to New York from Paris, including the design of the New York Yacht Club in 1898, when the young lawyer Charles D. Wetmore asked him to design a

house. Worldly, artistic, and the products of aristocratic families, the architect and client clicked — and formed a partnership, with Wetmore handling the business and legal side of the firm. Within a very few years, Warren & Wetmore was the firm of choice for wealthy clients looking to build distinctive estates, town houses, or mansions, although the firm was also beginning to design apartment buildings, office buildings, and even train stations. Today, it is, of course, on a railroad station that Warren & Wetmore's reputation rests.

Grand Central Terminal (GCT) is one of New York's favorite buildings not only for its massive beauty but equally for the way it works. It is a remarkably efficient building, easy to move through, pleasant to be in. Building the New York Central's station was part of a ten-year undertaking that involved a world of underground infrastructure and the electrification of the railroad to permit the smoky trench north of the terminal to be covered and turned into Park Avenue.

GCT's story has been told well elsewhere, especially since the completion of its fabulous restoration in 1998, but Pennoyer and Walker are good at untangling the confusion of competing claims for design credit. The firm of Reed & Stem had actually won the initial design competition in 1903, and Warren & Wetmore was asked to join the project in 1904. Reed & Stem was responsible for many of the practical elements of the station — the layout, ramps, and viaducts, for example — while Warren & Wetmore gave the building its aesthetic face. After GCT opened in 1914, write the authors, "Warren & Wetmore was more assertive in taking credit for the design and claiming the honors." No matter how ugly the fight, those honors shouldn't be diminished for either side, since the collaboration, however apportioned, gave us one of the best public spaces in the city.

Grand Central catapulted Warren & Wetmore into architecture's highest sphere. The commissions that followed — including dozens along the newly created Park Avenue — were for splendid hotels, luxurious apartment houses, and proud headquarters for magnificently profitable companies. All told, the firm designed more than 300 major buildings by the time Warren retired in 1931. He stepped down just in time for the International Style to tell the world how backward-looking the dignified, if sometimes flamboyant, old Beaux-Arts buildings were.

Pennoyer and Walker's monograph is a tribute to an architect they admire and a useful guide to the scope of his work. The book is handsomely illustrated with archival material (much of it drawn from Columbia's Avery Library) and enlivened by new photographs by Jonathan Wallen, many in color.

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