



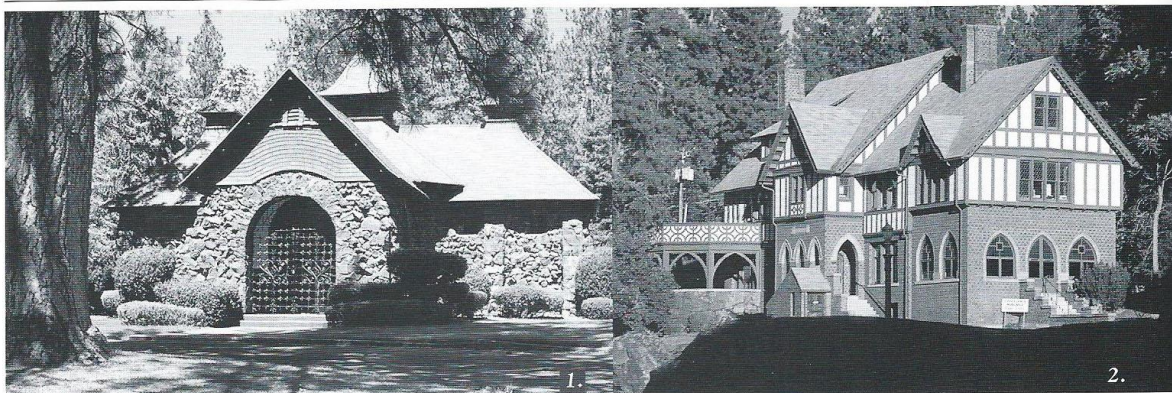
OPULENCE AND SIMPLICITY IN THE
Architecture of
 Kirtland Cutter by Henry Matthews

Few architects have been acclaimed as stars in their own communities, but the city of Spokane offers a fine exception. Sixty years after his death, Kirtland Cutter is embraced there as a folk hero, a dearly loved historical figure who put his stamp upon the place. His name is a household word, evoking the age of elegance, and standing for imagination in design. He is celebrated as the architect of the legendary Davenport Hotel and the opulent mansions of the South Hill and Browne's Addition. I wonder, however, how many of his admirers are aware of his broader significance or the scope of his contribution to American architecture. My main aims in *Kirtland Cutter: Architect in the Land of*

Promise were to fill some gaps in public knowledge and to bring him to a wider audience.

When Kirtland Cutter arrived in Spokane Falls in 1886, he described the settlement as "architecturally savage," and from that moment until he left 35 years later, he devoted himself to civilizing it. The fledgling town certainly offered a clean slate awaiting the designer's ideas. I have tried to imagine him, on his first exploration, walking from the mighty falls through the busy, but somewhat makeshift, downtown to the still wild South Hill. As he looked out from the shady vantage point where he was soon to build his own house, he probably dreamed about his plans to transform the

ABOVE: *Patrick Clark House, Spokane, 1897-98.* The exotic character of this house conveys the wealth of the owner. Rather than emulating the French Châteaux and Beaux Arts mansions of the Vanderbilts and their kind, Cutter designed in an original manner, drawing elements from many sources, including mughal India and Islamic Spain. *Photo courtesy the author.*



pioneer settlement into a beautiful city. His vision would have been colored by his experience in New York, where he attended the Art Students' League, and by his recent travels and studies in Europe. It is clear from his work that he had returned to the United States a confirmed romantic. Years later, recalling his time in Germany, he described Nuremberg as possessing "what American cities lack most, namely the quaint architectural unity and interesting skyline that gives that city an indescribable charm." Through his many designs he tried to endow Spokane with similar character. Several contemporary critics credited him with success in that endeavor. In 1905, Elbert Hubbard, founder of the Roycrofters Arts and Crafts workshops of East Aurora, New York, called Spokane "the model city of America" and identified Cutter as the architect who had "keyed Spokane in an artistic way." Fifteen years later a distinguished jury from the California journal *Architect and Engineer* wrote of Cutter's "rare architectural force and genius for design." As Cutter left Spokane for a new career in California in 1923, Hannah Hinsdale wrote in the *Spokesman Review* "All through the town may be traced the trail of Mr. Cutter's idealism. . . . If ever a man set his seal on a place, Mr. Cutter has on Spokane."

Such professional achievement may seem surprising. Cutter, educated as an artist, never received any architectural training; he was entirely self-taught. But from the beginning of his career it

is clear that he had absorbed ideas from progressive journals and from the buildings he had visited and sketched. The late 80s was a bewildering time in American architecture when the battle of the styles was raging. In the era after the Civil War, great fortunes were made, and the rich took pleasure in displaying their wealth in lavish building. The high Victorian Gothic, the French Second Empire, and Queen Anne styles fitted the mood of the day. Their complex forms and vertical emphasis made houses and public buildings appear pretentiously aloof. Cutter despised such architecture, preferring to use natural, local materials and create relatively simple forms close to the ground. When in the mid 90s the Beaux Arts style began to dominate the urban scene, Cutter turned away from such classical formality and showed his preference for the rambling, irregular character of Tudor houses. His greatest inspiration came from the Arts and Crafts movement and from the ethics of John Ruskin and William Morris. It seems, therefore, that there is an inherent contradiction in Cutter's work: on one hand he is known for opulence, and on the other he strove for simplicity.

The answer must surely be found in the opportunities he was offered and the nature of the society to which his patrons belonged. When rich capitalists and rugged individualists commissioned mansions, he had to fulfill their expectations. He understood the needs of wealthy people and believed that he

was expressing their personalities as he dreamed up opulent mansions in a variety of styles. The results can be seen in Spokane's Browne's Addition. For the self-made man Amasa Campbell he designed an irregularly planned Tudoresque mansion with half-timbered walls, but he presented Campbell's partner, John Finch, with a formal, white columned neoclassical residence that implies a patrician origin. On a site between the two mansions the architect chose for W.J.C. Wakefield a Mission Revival house, and round the corner, facing Coeur d'Alene Park, he created a home for Patrick Clark that defies all stylistic classification. Clark, who had come penniless from Ireland and climbed to fortune as a mine owner, demanded the finest house west of the Mississippi. Cutter rose to the occasion with a design drawing from many sources, including India and Islamic Spain. All the evidence suggests that he had reveled in the process of designing a provocatively exotic mansion. But, only two years earlier, Cutter had dissuaded Charles and Alicia Conrad in Kalispell from building either a southern plantation house—his choice—or a Tudor design—her preference—and instead conceived for them a rambling, informal house covered with humble cedar shingles.

In his designs for the enterprising Louis Davenport of Spokane, he allowed full rein to his imagination, creating places in which people could forget about the mundane settings of normal life. The Hall of the Doges ball-



room evoked the richness of the Gothic Palace of the Dukes of Venice. Each of the rooms he built over the course of 15 years in Davenport's restaurant and hotel expressed escapist themes. The Peacock room, the Orange Bower, the Gothic room, The Elizabethan room, and the Isabella dining room all conjured up distinctive images. Similarly, in his remodeling of the Tacoma Hotel he brought to life dreams of the sea. The columns in the lobby burgeon into exuberant capitals with writhing mermaids and sea creatures, while wooden ships adorn the capitals in the Room of the Vikings.

But there were occasions to return to nature. For his Idaho Building at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, Cutter transformed a European vernacular type, the Swiss chalet, into a symbol for the wild and mountainous state. Constructed of massive timbers on a base of rough basalt, this evocation of the mountains and forests of the Northwest inspired thousands of visitors and won him a prize for best "expressing the character" of a state. Such rustic work celebrating nature became a recurring theme in his practice, appearing, for example, in 1898 in a church on Lake Chelan and in 1913 in the Lake McDonald Lodge in Glacier National Park. The work not only links Cutter with progressive trends in late-19th century architecture, it makes him a pioneer of the National Park style that has produced so many inspiring lodges.

Cutter's designs might be described as the architecture of opposing desires. His deepest convictions were based on the ethics of the Arts and Crafts movement, which sought inspiration in vernacular traditions. From his faltering beginnings in the late 1880s to the zenith of his career at Palos Verdes, California in the mid 1920s, his unpretentious houses, appearing to grow naturally out of hillsides, show his desire for simplicity. Equally, his rustic architecture attempts to express reverence for the wildness of nature. In total opposition, the mansions he built for mining magnates, as well as his sumptuous restaurants and grand hotels, speak of a desire for luxury and his attempt to transport the public into a dream world. Critics of modern architecture have made a virtue out of consistency in design. However, I question whether consistency is a necessary virtue in the arts. Do we not admire serious people if they sometimes exhibit a zany sense of humor? Can we not appreciate, in a single day, the stillness of a rural scene and the clamor of a theatrical performance? By designing in an amazing selection of styles, Cutter celebrated the complexity of human life and expressed a diverse range of desires. In many respects he was the quintessential American architect of his time, but he surpassed most of his contemporaries in the range of his expression. He speaks eloquently of opposing forces in the American psyche, the deep love of nature, and a passion for make-believe. ■

ABOVE:

1. Fairmont Cemetery Chapel, Spokane, 1890-91. Built of rugged basalt found on the site and shingles split from local cedar, this building expresses a belief, central to Arts and Crafts philosophy, in the inherent beauty of natural materials and simple building methods.
Photo courtesy the author.

2. Lewis Clark House, Spokane, 1899-1900. Placed on the steep slope of the South Hill, this rambling Tudoresque house fits informally into the landscape between two outcroppings of basalt. A spacious, shaded outdoor room with an open balcony above offers extra living space with a view through the trees over the city below. *Photo courtesy the author.*

3. Idaho Building, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893. Cutter celebrated the mountains and forests of Idaho in this structure of vast logs on a base of rough basalt. He gave the Swiss Châlet a heroic scale and recreated it for the American West. It was much praised by critics and won a prize for best "expressing the character" of a state.
Glen Cloninger Collection.

4. Buchanan House, Palos Verdes, California, 1927. Cutter responded to the rugged landscape of the peninsula overlooking the Pacific Ocean with simple houses of white stucco and red tiles. He built 16 houses here that seem to echo the forms of unpretentious old farmhouses in Andalusia and Tuscany.
Photo courtesy the author.

Henry Matthews studied architecture at Cambridge University and historic preservation at the Architectural Association in London. He has practiced architecture and taught on both sides of the Atlantic. He has been the architectural historian at the WSU School of Architecture for the past 20 years. His recent book, Kirtland Cutter: Architect in the Land of Promise, was published by the University of Washington Press.