

Henry Matthews

Kirtland Cutter: Architect in the Land of Promise

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In 1889, following a disastrous fire, but bolstered by a gold rush and a thriving agriculturally based economy, Spokane, Washington, was growing. Its business elite were anxious to rebuild in a way that could boost the town's reputation and prominence, and a whole group of enterprising builders and architects were ready to respond to Spokane's booming industrialized and mercantile needs.

Into this promising context came Kirtland Kelsey Cutter (1860-1939), an architect who was descended from two well-educated and well-placed families in Cleveland. Using his innate talents and art training, he began an architecture firm and developed it into one of the foremost offices in the Pacific Northwest. By the end of his career (which ultimately carried him to southern California), Cutter had designed several hundred buildings that helped establish Spokane as a place to rival Seattle and Portland in the quality of its architecture.

Henry Matthews, an architect and architectural historian who teaches at Washington State University in Pullman, has brought together archival material from Cutter's office, along with interviews with clients and associates, to produce this solid book about Cutter's life and work. Organized chronologically, and well illustrated, the story begins with an account of Cutter's ancestors-explorers, naturalists, and business people-and continues through his own education as a painter. He seems to have begun his study of art in Cleveland and later continued it at the New York Art Students' League working under Carroll Beckwith and perhaps Kenyon Cox. Travel and study in Europe were obligatory for those aspiring to be serious artists at the time, and Cutter was no exception. While it is not exactly clear where he went, he certainly spent time in Dresden, Paris, and Italy.

In 1886, on his return from Europe and having decided on architecture as a career, Cutter moved to Spokane Falls in the Washington Territory. It was a good place to settle since Spokane Falls was by then providing supplies for gold mines in the Coeur d'Alene Valley and was beginning to develop other industries including flour mills. The economic expansion of the late nineteenth century coupled with a late-Victorian stylistic eclecticism made the situation ripe for a young and ambitious architect like Cutter, who was prepared to serve the varied tastes of the leaders of Spokane's business and industrial community.

Cutter's skills of observation, combined with his ability to quickly sketch a set of building plans and perspectives, allowed him to respond effectively to his clients, who as a group were familiar with a wide variety of styles. Although he could give clients whatever style they wanted, Cutter's real love was for Arts and Crafts buildings and for interpretations of the Shingle Style.

Most of Matthews's book is devoted to the buildings of Cutter's career in eastern Washington: these include his contributions to the rebuilding of Spokane after the fire, the erection of hotels and other commercial buildings, the design of summer camps, and the construction of mansions and many houses in Spokane and elsewhere. Perhaps his most important commission in Spokane was the Davenport Hotel, a building "intended to evoke a magical world of fantasy and the latest in American technology" (249). It presented in happy juxtaposition an atrium with Spanish influence, a Marie Antoinette-style ballroom, and a Chinese buffet complete with "two sinuous dragons 'from the shrine of an old Chinese family of rank.'" The opening of the hotel in 1914 was a great event for Spokane, and no doubt for its architect as well.

Despite this and similar triumphs, Cutter went bankrupt in the 1920s, and began a new career in southern California, where he worked on the design of the new city of Palos Verdes. This allowed him to build on his growing appreciation of Mediterranean architecture, and to engage in the large-scale planning of development projects. Cutter won a competition for a new village center which, although never built, was admired by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and Myron Hunt. He began a series of residential commissions based on the architecture of southern and Mediterranean Europe that carried him through the rest of his career.

Although Cutter was a master at observing and designing within a variety of architectural styles, he also understood how

buildings needed to adapt in function and plan in order to meet changing lifestyles. Matthews describes a series of innovations-including improvements in spaces for servants, strong relationships between inside and outside space, and breaking down the scale of office buildings-that demonstrate Cutter's understanding of the relationship between buildings and everyday life. These design innovations, which continued after Cutter's move to southern California, included the provision of covered outdoor rooms, garages integrated with houses, and finally house plans that were quite modern in their openness and informality.

Cutter's ability to be as flexible as he was may have been connected to the fact that he was always a romantic, and never subscribed to the principles of the Beaux-Arts. Although Matthews writes that Cutter "never accepted the central doctrines of modernism, or embraced the International Style" (381), his later California buildings, done in the 1920s and 1930s, brought him to the edge of Modernism with their informal plans and strong indoor-outdoor relationships. The Honeyman House and Victor Fleming beach house, both on Balboa Island, are premonitions of William Wurster in their extremely careful yet ordinary and informal design.

Cutter died in California ten years after the onset of the Great Depression, ending a career that had begun in the expansive decades after the Civil War. His was a genuinely American story-not of "rags to riches," but of failure and rebirth; his success rested on his talent, on the power of strong associations, and on being in the right place at the right time.

The book is strongest in its many descriptions of individual buildings, in its biographies of Cutter and his clients and associates, and in its overall sense of the progress of Cutter's career. One is left with questions that have to do with Cutter's working methods and his ability to be as responsive to clients as he appears to have been. In the introduction, Matthews admits that these questions were not easy to answer. Still, one wishes we could know more about how such a prolific architect was able to work. What was the nature of his relationships with contractors and craftsmen? Did Cutter himself take a strong role in the progress of buildings during construction, or did he leave that to his draftsmen? To what extent did he allow or encourage involvement by the client during the course of design?

These are questions Matthews was unable to answer. With a few exceptions, including the correspondence pertaining to Cutter's move to California, Matthews relied mostly on evidence of the buildings and drawings to tell the story. That led to moments of conjecture: Cutter "must have been aware of" one or another architect or building. Sometimes the conjecture is convincing, as in the comparison between Cutter's F. Lewis Clark lodge gate and Richardson's Ames Gate Lodge ("which Cutter could have seen illustrated on his return from Europe" [75])-but there is, too often, too little hard evidence of actual influence.

Yet, despite these questions, the book leaves the reader with a vivid story of the life and work of Kirtland Cutter, who rose to success at a time when sheer talent combined with a good pedigree and connections with prominent people-rather than formal education and training-were enough. What seems remarkable about Cutter was true for many architects of his generation-the ability to decide to be an architect without any architectural training and without a background in the building trades.

Matthews quotes Cutter as saying about his early career: "Some of my first house sketches came into the hands of practical builders who seemed pleased with their appearance and buildings were modeled after them" (41); of his later career, he said, "My work in designing is confined to small scale, usually free hand, sketch plans, elevations and perspectives, which are developed by a clever all around man that I have had with me for the past fourteen years" (320). Cutter's was perhaps the last generation in which it was possible to see the design of major buildings as coming so completely from the hand of a single individual and this book is an admirable account of one such individual.

Henry Matthews has done an important service to those interested in the architecture of the Pacific Northwest and its relationship to American architecture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Howard Davis University of Oregon