



ALAN LESSOFF AND CHRISTOF MAUCH, EDITORS

ADOLF CLUSS, ARCHITECT: FROM GERMANY TO AMERICA

Born in Heilbronn in the southwestern German state of Württemberg, Adolf Cluss (1825-1905) grew sensitive to the condition of rural and itinerant workers as a journeyman carpenter in the restive atmosphere of Europe in the 1840s. He became a communist and friend of Karl Marx. Germany erupted in revolution in the spring of 1848, but workers did not achieve the rights Cluss and other radicals called for. He thus sailed for New York, and then arrived in Washington in time to see the inauguration of President Zachary Taylor. This event was symbolic, because Cluss subsequently fashioned nearly a fifty-year career as a Washington architect.

This book traces that career through eleven text on Cluss's life and work and the German and Washington contexts that influenced him. Lavished throughout with reprints of paintings, maps, and photographs, it also contains two photography essays on the city of Washington and on Cluss's family.

Edited by Alan Lessoff, a professor of history at Illinois State University, and Christof Mauch, director of the German Historical Institute in Washington, the book contains essays by academic experts in the United States and Germany in the history of architecture, historic preservation, Atlantic immigration, and urban design. The Adolf Cluss Project, directed by the freelance historians Joseph L. Browne and Peter Wanner, supported the book. This project combined the resources of the Charles Sumner School Museum, housed in one of Cluss's two school buildings that still stand, and the archive of the Washington public school system; the German Historical Institute of Washington; the *Goethe-Institut*; the Historical Society of Washington; the Office of Architectural History and Historic Preservation of the Smithsonian Institution; and the *Archiv der Stadt Heilbronn*. The project sponsored exhibitions on Cluss's life and work in Washington and Heilbronn in 2005 (its website is <http://www.adolf-cluss.org/>).

While Marx praised Cluss as "one of our best and most talented men (p. 8)," and Cluss wrote for communist

newspapers and funded publication of Marx's writings in America, by 1852 he was questioning whether American workers were really susceptible to the politics of class warfare. In 1855 he became a U.S. citizen and took a job in the Treasury Department drawing plans for federal buildings, then a position with the U.S. Navy in weapons research and design of a new foundry. Cluss also became active in the brand new Republican Party. Such affiliation would help Cluss gain federal architecture contracts over the next decades, but the Republicans' democratic antislavery program actually appealed to many idealistic German revolutionary refugees. That a reforming communist could hold ostensibly sensitive employment positions within the U.S. government seems highly ironic today, but in Cluss's time communism was only beginning to have the sinister meaning most Americans would give it in the twentieth century.

Throughout his architectural career Cluss occasionally left reminders that he had not abandoned his early political radicalism. He bought a copy of the *Communist Manifesto* in the 1890s. More significantly, however, his work reflected his continuing interest in creating structures of republican dignity, reliable and accessible to ordinary people, be they the working or commercial classes, schoolchildren, or immigrants. Fittingly, in 1875 he wrote, "it ought to be appreciated that the luxurious life of the higher classes depends on the strength and activity of the children of the industrious classes" (p. 77).

Over the rest of the nineteenth century Cluss, either in public service or private practice, would design or renovate more than sixty Washington buildings. Among those still extant today are the Summer School for African American children, the Eastern Market building, the Castle and National Museum (today's Arts and Industries Building) of the Smithsonian Institution, and the White House. In all of these Cluss brought to bear a European influence in the design of America's capital begun by Pierre L'Enfant. As city engineer Cluss supervised modernization of the

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"Buildings for Market-House, Court-House, Offices, etc., Alexandria, Va. as submitted by Adolph Cluss, Architect," ca. 1871. Alexandria Library, Special Collections, p. 164.

National Museum (Arts and Industries building, Smithsonian Institution), Independence Avenue between 8th and 10th streets, SW, Washington, 1879-81, Cluss & Schulze, architects. Photograph by R. Longstreth, 1970, p. 111.

city's building codes, sewage system, and street paving, utilizing the new substance of asphalt. Later as building inspector for the federal government he inspected old and new buildings alike, from the U.S. Capitol to the immigration facilities of Ellis Island. Perhaps America's hospitable image to millions of European immigrants of the age had something to do with Cluss's subtle influence.

But Cluss's story also had tragic elements. He lost three sons and a daughter to illness. Professionally, he witnessed the destruction of his ideas and most of his buildings as Washington moved from his rustic

Victorian or *Rundbogenstil* styles to its current neo-classical appearance today, and as Americans re-evaluated public buildings based on their size and elaborate ornamentation, as in the Beaux Arts style, or their functionality and lack of historicism, as in the International style. Meanwhile, corruption in the city's Board of Public Works, typical of the "gilded age" of American history, compelled him to give whistle-blower's testimony to Congress, whereupon the Board's director had him fired. Near the turn of the century Cluss was removed from U.S. government service when the Republican Party was defeated, and, upon visiting Germany, he saw his native land still was not a united republic, as he had dreamed a half-century earlier. In his creative achievements limited by his accommodation to political realities and experience of setbacks to his aesthetic ideals, was Cluss not something of an exemplary architect?

Adolf Cluss, Architect: From Germany to America, seeks to praise and commemorate Cluss, not to offer any critique of him, and in this it succeeds admirably. It should be of great interest to anyone interested in the history of early American architecture or in the impact on American material culture of the transformation of European political radicalism amid liberal American culture and society.

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