

ADOLF CLUSS, ARCHITECT: FROM GERMANY TO AMERICA

Conference at the GHI, September 30-October 2, 2004. Convener: Christof Mauch (GHI), in collaboration with Joseph L. Browne (Adolf Cluss Project), Cynthia Field (Smithsonian Institution), William Gilcher (Goethe Institut), Alan Lessoff (Illinois State University).

Participants: Tanya Edwards Beauchamp (independent scholar), Kathleen Conzen (University of Chicago), Sabina W. Dugan (Smithsonian Institution), Sabine Freitag (University of Cologne), Richard Longstreth (George Washington University), Laura Schiavo (George Washington University), Helmut Strauss (University of Dresden), Helen Tangires (National Gallery of Art), Peter Wanner (Stadtarchiv Heilbronn), Michael Weissenborn (Stuttgarter Zeitung).

The life and career of Adolf Cluss (1825–1905) was the subject of this symposium, part of a binational effort to mark the one-hundredth anniversary of his death that will include exhibitions and public events in autumn 2005 in Heilbronn, Baden-Württemberg, Cluss's hometown, and Washington, DC, where he made his mark. The commemoration also will involve multimedia and internet projects and an illustrated book of essays, for which the symposium presented preliminary research.

As a youth, Cluss was a member of the Communist League and a leader of the 1848 Revolution in Mainz. He gradually put aside his personal allegiance to Karl Marx and political identification with left-wing socialism after emigrating to the United States. In Washington, he built a career as an architect and civil engineer, responsible for innovative schools, museums, and other public buildings, along with churches, businesses, and residences. The dimensions of Cluss's life and career offer an unusual opportunity for collaboration not only between German and American scholars, but also between scholars of nineteenth-century radical politics, German-American ethnic life, architecture, and urban design and planning. When published, the result will be a memorable story of how for one émigré to the United States, the German radical republicanism of 1848 transformed into a vision of the civic-minded architecture appropriate for the capital of a representative democracy.

Richard Longstreth, an urban and architectural historian and author of numerous works on Washington, DC, began events with an evening keynote speech that examined how Cluss, the first professional architect of stature to make his career mainly in the capital, performed for Wash-

ington the function of “pioneer” architect, the figure who adapted cosmopolitan practices and ideas to the local environment as the city itself entered a phase of rapid development. Most American cities, particularly in the Midwest and West, had a figure equivalent to Cluss, Longstreth explained. Cluss’s dozens of buildings were vulnerable because of their prime locations and because of swings in architectural fashion and building methods. Only eight survive into the twenty-first century. Yet his influence persisted subtly, especially in the expansive neighborhoods of tree-lined streets and red-brick Victorian rowhouses that characterize residential Washington, where contractors followed fashions Cluss helped to set with his highly visible residential and public commissions.

The daylong symposium consisted of three sessions that followed Cluss from his youth in Heilbronn through his foray into revolutionary politics and then through the dimensions of his career in the United States. Peter Wanner began the first session with a paper co-written with Christhard Schrenk, his colleague at the Stadtarchiv Heilbronn. This paper recounted Cluss’s background as part of a family of master builders in the Neckar River port, where rapid economic, social, and political change during Cluss’s youth shaped the future architect’s notions of urban design and of political and material progress. Sabine Freitag followed with a paper that employed, among other sources, Cluss’s essays in radical publications and his correspondence with Karl Marx, Joseph Weydemeyer, and other left-wing figures of the 1840s to explain the young engineer’s activities on behalf of the Communist League during the Revolution of 1848 in Mainz. Freitag speculated about the evidence for Cluss’s early disillusionment with the Frankfurt Parliament and with the prospects for constitutional government in Germany. This disillusionment probably prompted Cluss’s emigration in the summer of 1848, even before the revolution’s full collapse. Sabina Dugan picked up the story upon Cluss’s arrival in New York in September 1848. The correspondence of Marx’s circle of émigré communists in England and the United States supplied raw material for Dugan’s vivid narration of Cluss’s efforts to renew his involvement with radical politics in the republic across the Atlantic, his recognition that the class and ethnic structure of American cities fostered a different political climate from what he knew at home, and his drift away from his youthful radicalism and even his old friendships as he established himself first as a technician for the United States government during the 1850s and then as a private architect after 1862.

In the second session, immigration and ethnic historian Kathleen Conzen examined Washington, DC’s small German community, which during Cluss’s early years in town Germans jokingly labeled a *Residenzstadt*, similar in grandiosity and provincial atmosphere to the capitals of their homeland’s duchies and petty kingdoms. Like Darmstadt and Kas-

sel, Washington provided opportunities for emigrants such as Cluss who possessed technical or professional skills. Yet until after the Civil War, *die Residenzler*, as Washington Germans mockingly called themselves, complained that the capital was more of a cultural backwater than even the most provincial German *Residenz*. As in his architecture and civil engineering, Cluss set out to help make Washington appear and function as a real *Hauptstadt*, so through participation in the city's *Turner*, *Sängerbund*, and other aspects of Washington's *Vereinsleben*, Cluss and his compatriots endeavored to enliven a sleepy town. The session's second essay, by Alan Lessoff, dealt with Cluss's role in Washington's non-ethnic civic affairs, which culminated in the most controversial episode of his American career: his service as chief engineer to the Board of Public Works, an agency created by Congress in 1871 to oversee an ambitious effort to quickly upgrade Washington's public works and beautify its appearance. In May 1874, Cluss made newspaper headlines across the United States by revealing to a congressional investigating committee the financial machinations and influence peddling that had riddled this improvement effort and bankrupted the city, leading to a federal takeover of the municipal government that would last until the 1970s. Lessoff argued that the technical and political problems that plagued the sewer- and street-paving programs that Cluss oversaw were on a grander scale but not different in kind from problems that plagued urban infrastructure projects throughout the Americas and Europe in these years of unprecedented urbanization and rapid technological change.

The final three papers focused on genres of public architecture for which Cluss won acclaim in his lifetime and for which he remains best known. Cynthia Field, architectural historian at the Smithsonian Institution, used Cluss's most prominent surviving building, the National Museum on the Mall (now known as the Arts and Industries Building), to illustrate how the architect drew upon and experimented with contemporary theories about design, construction, and lighting. Although on the surface his designs and those of other Victorian architects were idiosyncratic, consistent principles lay behind them that later critics of Victorian eclecticism failed to appreciate. The final two papers dealt with architectural forms into which Cluss poured the civic idealism he had once devoted to radical politics. Like many German 1848ers an advocate of universal education as the linchpin of social and political progress, Cluss became Washington's leading designer of public schools at a time when school design generated enormous interest in Europe and the United States. As Tanya Edwards Beauchamp explained, Cluss's "prototypical" schools, such as the surviving Franklin and Sumner schools, exemplified contemporary ideas of education and its place in urban life. Similarly, as Helen Tangires recounted, Cluss's public markets, such as the Center

Market, an enormous facility on the site of the current National Archives, and the Eastern Market, still popular with residents of Washington's Capitol Hill neighborhoods, drew upon discussions on two continents about the cheap and convenient provisioning of food to modern, urban populations.

Discussions during the sessions and in a summary session held the following day focused on the challenges of addressing the varied audiences to which Cluss's story will appeal: South Germans and Washingtonians interested in their own local histories, scholars of the ideas and events of 1848, students of the German-American experience, and urban studies experts with an interest in capital cities and in nineteenth-century urban design. Cluss's dramatic life crossed political and professional boundaries that later came to seem rigid. The scholars who now wish to present him to contemporary audiences have found that they must above all recapture and convey the fluid, mid-nineteenth-century sensibility evident in Cluss and his work: the feeling that the modern city and modern civic life were as yet unformed and full of possibilities.

Alan Lessoff