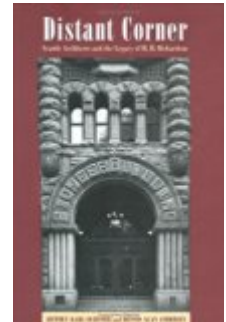


**Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, Dennis Alan Anderson.** *Distant Corner: Seattle Architects and the Legacy of H. H. Richardson*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2003. xii + 409 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-295-98238-0.



**Reviewed by** Kathleen Curran

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In the winter of 1881-82, Edward Augustus Freeman, Regis Professor of modern history at Oxford and expert on medieval architecture, toured the United States. Freeman asked the question, "What ought to be the architecture of the United States? That is to say, what should be the architecture of an English people settled in a country lying in the latitude, though not always the climate, of Italy?"[1] Noticing some examples of Romanesque Revival architecture in New York, Freeman found his answer. He thought that the Romanesque was especially effective in the great commercial streetscapes of America's large cities.

Had Freeman gone to Seattle in the late 1880s, his belief that the modern Romanesque found in America's commercial buildings offered the best potential for a national style of American architecture would have found fulfillment. Here was a vibrant city, recently rebuilt after a devastating fire in 1889, and the Romanesque style was chosen for a great majority of the new office buildings, warehouses, apartment buildings, and hotels. Seattle was an intensified version of late-nineteenth-century Chicago: a city on the move

with a desire to turn tragedy into a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to modernize the city. The Romanesque provided the answer, at least in the few short years between 1889 and 1893.

Ochsner and Anderson's book is a study of one city, Seattle, in a specific time frame, circa 1880 to 1895. This city and time frame provide perhaps a singular example of the confluence of two critical moments in American architecture and urbanism: the formidable influence of Henry Hobson Richardson (1838-86) and the transformation of the American city into an industrial hub. The Romanesque offered architects and builders two advantages: its masonry construction was impervious to fire and thus desirable in dense city blocks, and it presented an appearance of permanence and solidity. By 1893, the moment was over, as construction slowed due to the financial panic. Even so, the authors argue that, in many ways, the 1880s and 1890s became the defining decades of urban Seattle, now considered one of this country's most livable cities.

In eight chapters that take the reader through pre-fire Seattle to the turn of the twentieth century,

ry, Ochsner and Anderson offer a well-balanced blend of the local and the national, as well as a critical, early twenty-first-century analysis of late-nineteenth-century American architecture. The well-written and -organized book, with a variety of themes and methodologies, keeps the reader interested and never confused. The third chapter, which examines the rise of commercial building in Seattle and the technology used in its buildings, is one of the most fascinating. Even though Seattle architects looked to Chicago and the Minneapolis/St. Paul areas for technical and stylistic ideas, they adopted a slow-burning, "fire-resistive" system that was distinct from the Midwest. Indeed, unlike Chicago, Seattle would not see a completely steel-framed building until 1903, when the Alaska building was constructed. The authors provide an interesting account of the rise of the office building and the warehouse as building types, the clearest examination of that subject that I have read. For source material, they mostly rely on newspaper accounts, as many of the architects were of short-lived fame and many of their buildings are now destroyed or altered. There are original black and white photographs, plans, maps, and city views that provide good visual sources to support the text.

Alternating with the authors' discussion of the technological, typological, and urban circumstances that shaped Seattle in the last two decades of the nineteenth century is an examination of the work of H. H. Richardson and the nature of his influence, as well as discussion of the American Romanesque Revival more generally. The authors acknowledge that it is a mistake to view the Romanesque style of the buildings as merely derivative of Richardson. They note that the Romanesque Revival took a variety of directions, some of which predated Richardson. And Richardson himself could be—at least in his biographer Henry-Russell Hitchcock's terms—Victorian, modern, and picturesque. That said, one weakness of the book is that there is not a specific analysis of earlier Romanesque Revival architecture in cities

like New York and Washington, D.C. For example, in the latter city, one finds examples of pre-Richardsonian Romanesque by the prolific firm of Cluss & Schulze, who designed public buildings (the U.S. National Museum; now the Arts and Industries Building of the Smithsonian), industrial structures and many school buildings in a version of Romanesque that was more Central European in stylistic and theoretical origin. The authors recognize that there were earlier examples but do not attempt to tease apart the various strains. As a result, Richardson's brand of Romanesque becomes *de facto* the exclusive influence. Whatever the stylistic strains, it is intriguing that the Romanesque was the most popular choice for commercial structures in Seattle in the last decades of the nineteenth century. There did not seem to be a significant body of theory as to why this was the case, but it probably had to do with the fact that the Romanesque was viewed at the time as more promising of development than the Gothic or other styles. After the 1889 fire, Seattle needed public buildings like county courthouses, as did other Washington cities during that era, and the Romanesque was a frequent choice.

Interestingly, Ochsner and Anderson argue that there were limitations to Richardson's influence when it came to other building types in urban neighborhoods, where wood construction was preferred for institutional and residential architecture. So, for example, buildings like fire stations, schools, and houses tended to partake more of the Gothic, Queen Anne, and Shingle styles.

Due to its thorough scholarship and readability, Ochsner and Anderson's account is an excellent model for a city's architectural and urban history at a key moment in its development. This book is a fascinating case-study of an important American city that is comparable to Chicago in its reinvention after fire, but that was built in a very different way. Seattle's buildings are perhaps not as brilliant as those by Richardson and Sullivan, but they constitute the kind of good background

building that makes American cities like Seattle so appealing to the modern eye. There is an excellent discussion of the architectural profession, and the reader really understands how the vagaries of the real estate market deeply affected the lives of many talented individuals. Architects like Elmer H. Fisher, and Saunders and Houghton found their practices severely curtailed after the panic of 1889. In one telling statistic, the authors relate how Seattle directories listed thirty architectural firms in 1890; by 1897, the number was reduced to only eleven. Nevertheless, their splendid legacy is still visible in modern Seattle. An appendix of buildings by architect is useful for quick reference.

Note

[1]. Edward A. Freeman, *Some Impressions of the United States* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1883), pp. 246-247.

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