



American Architects and the Mechanics of Fame

Roxanne Kuter Williamson

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Why does one talented individual win lasting recognition in a particular field, while another equally talented person does not? While there are many possible reasons, one obvious answer is that something more than talent is requisite to produce fame. The "something more" in the field of architecture, asserts Roxanne Williamson, is the association with a "famous" architect at the moment he or she first receives major publicity or designs the building for which he or she will eventually be celebrated.

In this study of more than six hundred American architects who have achieved a place in architectural histories, Williamson finds that only a small minority do not fit the "right person–right time" pattern. She traces the apprenticeship connection in case studies of Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, Henry Hobson Richardson, the firm of McKim, Mead & White, Latrobe and his descendants, the Bulfinch and Renwick Lines, the European immigrant masters, and Louis Kahn.

Although she acknowledges and discusses the importance of family connections, the right schools, self-promotion, scholarships, design competition awards, and promotion by important journals, Williamson maintains that the apprenticeship connection is the single most important predictor of architectural fame. She offers the intriguing hypothesis that what is transferred in the relationship is not a particular style or approach but rather the courage and self-confidence to be true to one's own vision. Perhaps, she says, this is the case in all the arts.

American Architects and the Mechanics of Fame is sure to provoke thought and comment in architecture and other creative fields.



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