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Boy-face genius

by [Michael J. Lewis](#)

Strange as it seems, the quiet, classical architects of the last century have come to look fresh and vital again. And not just for their kitsch value, or as fodder for postmodernist appropriation, but for their splendidly imaginative, well-planned, and deeply humane buildings. To be sure, they always commanded respect as the makers of our museums, libraries, and capitols, but it was respect of a frosty, honorific sort; you might admire a nimble paraphrase of a Renaissance portico without wanting to try it yourself. Yet there are other indignities besides being forced to imitate Palladio—such as being forced, for example, to imitate Rem Koolhaas—and so it has come about that the generation of Stanford White, Cass Gilbert, and John Russell Pope has come in for a long and careful second look. In this reconsideration, few have accomplished as much as Peter Pennoyer and Anne Walker, who have published pioneering monographs on Delano and Aldrich (2003) and Warren and Wetmore (2006) and who now turn their attention to Grosvenor Atterbury, that dapper, diminutive genius whose Yale classmates knew him as “boy-face.”

Atterbury (1869–1956) was the son of a wealthy New York corporate lawyer who summered with his family at Shinnecock Hills. There he met William Merritt Chase, who ran Shinnecock’s influential art colony, which he attended between summers at Yale, practicing plein-air painting. After graduation in 1892, he shifted to architecture, spending two years in the office of McKim, Mead & White and another studying in Paris. His apprenticeship was short: in 1894, the Adirondack Club asked him to design a rustic summer camp on Mohegan Lake. The club was founded by his father and his associates, and soon they were giving Atterbury their custom in lavish summer houses on Long Island. These were cozy, ground-hugging, shingled affairs, remarkable primarily for their gentle good taste and for their gracious planning.

Atterbury may have enjoyed providing New York’s corporate set with the architectural upholstery for their summers of leisure, but he was capable of more. He was stirred to more challenging fare by his father’s friend Robert Weeks de Forest, a high-minded lawyer for a variety of charitable organizations, such as the Russell Sage Foundation. De Forest brought Atterbury into philanthropic circles, and in short order he was designing model tenement houses and industrial housing, including Indian Hill in Worcester, Massachusetts, a model town that was to provide affordable housing to 3,700 workers and their families. To do this as efficiently as possible, he devised improvements in prefabricated concrete construction, filing ten patents in the 1910s. But his greatest work was Forest Hills Garden, the 142-acre planned community (subsequently enlarged) in Queens, New York, built by the Russell Sage Foundation as the first example of the Garden City Movement in America—a counterpart to England’s Letchworth and Hampstead Garden Suburb.

As massive as was Atterbury’s practice, it was oddly impersonal, even self-effacing. His most

conspicuous work, the American wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is so competently organized that one is scarcely aware of it as a work of conscious design. The same is true of his restoration of New York's original City Hall, which, except for its external walls, is almost entirely a creation of Atterbury. Of course, if decorum and good taste are the point, there is no place for a quirky design sensibility. Atterbury was not one of those signature artists like Richardson, Furness, or Sullivan—those great Victorian form-givers—whose buildings were the physical projections of the trembling lines they drew on the page. In fact, few of Atterbury's lines ever made their way into stone, if indeed he drew any at all. Pennoyer and Walker show that virtually everything the firm did was developed in detail and drawn by his assistant John Almy Tompkins, an abstemious bachelor who lived with his sister, and who took over each project after Atterbury handed over his notes from his interview with his clients.

In this, Atterbury was typical of his generation. Contemporaries such as Daniel Burnham in Chicago or Horace Trumbauer in Philadelphia were also famous for never picking up a pencil, delegating the actual work of design to their assistants. In contrast to their Victorian predecessors, they were more like impresarios putting on an opera: organizational and executive ability counted far more than an idiosyncratic sense of form. If anything, the process of delegation and coordination lent itself to the making of serene and psychologically unobjectionable ensembles. Of course, executive talent is a category of creativity, too, if an underappreciated one.

Walker and Pennoyer have written a book as elegant and tasteful as their subject. It concludes with several useful features: a catalogue raisonné, a roster of Atterbury's two dozen or so assistants, and a list of his buildings that are open to the public. It is terrifically illustrated and, in proportion to the number of architects who fix it on their desktops, it might even do some good.

Michael J. Lewis's latest book is *American Art & Architecture* (Thames & Hudson).

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