



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

David Watkin, 'Architectural Education,
Practice and Patronage in Ancien Regime
France', *Georgian Architectural Practice*,
Georgian Group Symposium, 1991, pp. 18–23

ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION, PRACTICE AND PATRONAGE IN ANCIEN REGIME FRANCE

David Watkin

Probably the most that can be done in a short paper is to point out some of the differences between architectural practice in England and France in the 18th century, and suggest the reasons. These lie, first of all, in the nature of architectural education in France and in the high level of intellectual debate about architecture, and secondly the structure of French society under the Ancien Régime, which led to different patterns of patronage. A man's rank in society was fixed by his relation to the king, the ultimate source of power and dignity. To express the relationship to him of the various ranks in society an elaborate system of etiquette was developed of which the rituals of the *tabouret* and of the *lever* at Versailles, are the best known examples. I want to suggest that this kind of etiquette had an architectural parallel in the rules and conventions known as *convenance*.¹

Blondel, for example, criticised the giant portico of free-standing Corinthian columns at Ledoux's Hôtel d'Uzès of 1769,² built for the Duc d'Uzès, the premier non-royal duke. For Blondel such a feature should be reserved for a church or for the palace of the king: the two being identical, since the King is God's representative on earth. Louis XV, not surprisingly, shared this view; a connoisseur of architecture, he criticised Ledoux's first design for the saltworks at Chaux for its peristyles of columns which he thought inappropriate, lacking in *convenance*, as a setting for artisans.³

These rules were codified and disseminated by the Académie Royale d'Architecture, itself an expression of royal authority, and another reason for the differences between architectural practice in England and France. Founded by Colbert in 1671, the Academy was a response to the fiasco of the competition for the completion of the Louvre in which Bernini had been summoned from Rome and work on his new east front had been abandoned the minute the foundation stone had been laid. By establishing a Royal Academy of Architecture, partly to train architects for the royal building administration, the Bâtiments du Roi, Colbert aimed to control the architectural profession in France.⁴ He determined the standards for the training of architects as well as the awarding of commissions. On election to this Academy, the architect became *architecte du roi*. The title *premier architecte du roi*, should not be seen out of context as an isolated office: the holder was simply the head of all the *architectes du roi*, whose number was fixed in 1756 as 36. The office of *premier architecte du roi*, always resented, was abolished in 1776.

Colbert considered that French architectural education, especially in the theory and aesthetics of architecture, was inadequate. Thus, at its first meeting in 1672, the Academy discussed the definition of good taste in architecture.⁵ Architects trained in such an academy became familiar with the discussion of aesthetic values, unlike architects in England who lacked any comparable institution before the founding of the Royal Academy in 1768, and even lacked coherent articulated pupillage.

As well as attending lectures delivered by the Professor at the French Academy, each student was attached as an apprentice to an architectural office or *agence*. In 1743 J.-F. Blondel set up a school of architecture, the Ecole des Arts, to supplement the teaching of the Academy whose obscure professors from 1730 to 1767, Jossenet, Couronne, and Lorient, offered a conservative teaching which did not take advantage of the freedom implicit in Perrault's theories. However, as early as 1744, the Academy encouraged students to attend Blondel's

classes and in 1762 he became a professor in the Academy himself.⁶ Thus, the leading French 18th century architects, Gabriel, Soufflot, Boullée, Ledoux, Peyre, De Wailly, Brongniart, Belanger, Gondoin, and Louis, were the product of the Academy of Architecture and, in particular, of the teaching of Blondel.

Blondel was not fundamentally interested in technical matters but in aesthetic ones: he trained his pupils' eyes and taught them that beauty was subjective. He also upheld *convenance* and taught that there was a French way of doing things consonant with France's greatness as a nation, and that this French manner was established by the architect François Mansart in the first half of the 17th century. It involved high, rather medieval roofs, considered necessary in the French climate, and a pyramidal method of composition involving a hierarchy of pavilions. This national inheritance, associated with what the French thought of as the *grand siècle* of Louis XIV, was handed down through the great dynasties of architects such as the Mansarts, the Le Vaux and the Gabriels. Again, apart from the Inigo Jones revival, there was nothing comparable to this inherited nationalist style in England. Blondel was worried that its survival was being threatened by the increasingly archaeological nature of the work of his young students such as Peyre.

One British architect was, it seems, trained at Blondel's Ecole des Arts, Sir William Chambers. He remained close to the French students he had met there and doubtless envisaged the Royal Academy in London, which he helped found in 1768, as providing a similar educational system. He saw himself as a kind of *premier architecte du roi* with a grave and conservative style which paralleled the inherited French manner maintained by architects such as Gabriel. The first Professor of Architecture at the Academy was Thomas Sandby who, like Blondel, provided aesthetic, rather than practical, education. This was based on the sensationalist approach of Burke.⁷ However, Chambers did not introduce to the Royal Academy the French apprenticeship system which was a survival of a vigorous medieval practice. A parallel to the teaching of architecture at the French Academy might be the relation between the university and the colleges at Oxford and Cambridge. Each of these universities is a lecturing and examining body, like any other university, but what makes Oxford and Cambridge unique is the combination of this with the private teaching conducted in the colleges. This, corresponding to the apprenticeship or *agence* system at the French Academy,⁸ was not only not followed in our Royal Academy but was also neglected in all subsequent schools of architecture. This is one of the reasons why they have been almost universally baneful.

So the parameters of French architectural practice were different from English in terms of education, patronage and style. The entire output of Ange-Jacques Gabriel, including palaces, churches, theatres, town planning, and the Ecole Militaire, was determined by his role as *premier architecte du roi* to Louis XV for over 30 years from 1742. Jealous of his position, he tried to keep the other *architectes du roi*, such as Soufflot and De Wailly, out of his domain, just as Le Brun had earlier tried to keep out Mignard. Gabriel had a large team under his direction consisting of senior officers provided by the Bâtiments du Roi: these were an *architecte ordinaire*, three *contrôleurs généraux*, and three *intendants*. In addition he employed numerous *dessinateurs* in his office who worked up finished drawings from his initial sketches.⁹ They provided these in alternative forms for Gabriel to choose between, a practice which went back to Louis XIV who insisted on being offered alternatives for every design, whether for a chair cover or a palace. Gabriel had an apartment in each of the royal palaces, all of which he remodelled or extended; and he normally accompanied the king on his progresses from one to another.

Gabriel's powerful design machine, which had its origin in the control established by Le Brun, had no parallel in contemporary England. Lesser French architects than Gabriel had to prepare their own drawings, and because the tradition had grown up, as in England, of the architect designing all features of interiors, including decoration and furnishings, this could be a

huge task. Boullée, for example, made 200 drawings for a set of rooms he remodelled in 1774-78 in the Hôtel d'Evreux.¹⁰ Of course, a major architect like Ledoux at the height of his career could afford to pay a supervising architect, Trosson, to go every day and all day to a major building such as the Hôtel de Thélusson. Here Trosson settled the amount of materials needed with the quantity surveyor, supervised the workmen, and drew details for the craftsmen to follow.¹¹

Ledoux's Hôtel de Thélusson of 1778 was a product of the boom in property speculation in Paris in the last decades before the Revolution.¹² Architects such as Belanger, De Wailly, Brongniart and Ledoux, all became actively involved in this speculation, thus acquiring sufficient fortunes to build themselves large town houses in these fashionable areas in the 1770s and '80s.¹³ These were grander than any of the residences of English 18th century architects.

It was also at this time that the method of payment switched from the old-established system where the architect charged on the basis of the number of visits he made, to one of a payment of 5% on the total of all accounts, once they were settled and audited.¹⁴ A prestigious architect like Ledoux could claim *more* than 5%, and boasted of ruining his clients. The financial battles he had with a number of his clients were, in fact, part of his determination to see the relation of architect and client put on a fairer, more dignified and professional footing. In this process, payment by percentage, not by number of visits, was clearly important to him, for we find him complaining that Mme de Gourges sent him on errands, "as if I were a doctor from who one expects a cure when one is very ill".¹⁵ This was somewhat cruel because Mme de Gourges was, in fact, an invalid who spent her life on a silken couch.

Both Frémin and Le Camus de Mézières, in books on architecture published respectively in 1702 and 1787, insisted that architects of the highest standing should not pay contractors' bills which should be left to the client.¹⁶ One reason was that in the French legal system the contractor alone was responsible: the force of medieval tradition was so strong that contemporary legislation virtually ignored the architect. The intermediary in disputes were the *experts*, legal valuers, who were also involved in the negotiations between clients and contractors before building began. It was not difficult to become an *expert*, many builders and architects doubling in this role, though an *architecte du roi* would not act as an *expert*. In his *Cours d'Architecture*, published in 1771-77 as a record of the record of the teaching he gave in his Ecole des Arts, Blondel gave no hints as to how an architect's office should be run, but he did list the Parisian building laws with which an architect should be familiar if he were to avoid legislation involving an *expert*.¹⁷

Let us consider the practice of Alexandre-Théodore Brongniart (1739-1813), a pupil of Blondel and of Boullée.¹⁸ Born into a medical family with connections in the royal service, his father was a professor at the Collège de pharmacie, and his brother became *premier apothecaire du roi*, Brongniart's career was determined by two factors: property speculation and princely patronage. As a property developer, he is obviously a close parallel to English architects, but there is no real parallel in this country to his patrons.

In 1769 Brongniart entered an alliance with Jean-François Le Tellier, a financier and building contractor in the Bâtiments du Roi, who bought building lots in the Chaussée d'Antin, a favourite site for investment on the rapidly developing north side of Paris. Brongniart and Le Tellier sold land here to the Marquise de Montesson, a rich widow who was mistress to the Duc d'Orléans. She employed Brongniart to build her an hôtel on this property, and in 1773 she married morganatically the Duc d'Orléans, first prince of the blood and head of the house of Orléans which was in traditional rivalry with that of the king. However, as a member of the lesser nobility she could not enjoy the title and privileges of this ambitious marriage. Louis XV would not receive her at court and, as a result, the Duc d'Orléans made over the Palais-Royal to his son, and instead commissioned Brongniart to build him an extravagant hôtel next to the one just

built from Brongniart's design for Mme de Montesson. This remarkable palace reflected his princely status and, surrounded by trees and gardens as in the country, also emphasised the fact that he was forced to live in virtual isolation. So the way in which the commission arose was related to the etiquette of the Ancien Régime.

Brongniart's major ecclesiastical work, the Capuchin Convent of 1779, also in the Chaussée d'Antin, was due to the pious initiative of Mme de Montesson who wanted to provide a parish church in the new street. Brongniart designed the building in the revolutionary baseless Tuscan Doric order which reflects the doctrine of *convenance* preached by Blondel at the Academy. According to this, each building type had a character of its own. It would offend the laws of propriety to endow the monastery of an austere order like the Capuchins with a rich order like the Corinthian; hence the primitive Tuscan.

Jacques Gondoin (1773-1818) also reflects the very different nature of French architectural practice. The son of a royal gardener, he was educated under Blondel and won a prize for a design for a public building in the Prix de Rome at the Academy in 1759. His only major work was, indeed, a public building, the Ecole de Chirurgie in Paris, completed in 1774 in which year he was elected a member of the Academy. It seems that he received the commission, a royal one, through a meeting with the king's doctor. Architectural training at the Academy implied that architecture was a public service, and it is striking that the career of many architects who received this training, right into the 19th century, was essentially that of involvement with a single major public building such as a law courts, opera house, or, in Gondoin's case, school of surgery.

In 1780 Gondoin published a sumptuous polemical book on the Ecole de Chirurgie in which he attached importance to the conceptual role of the building. This was a product of his theoretical training under Blondel, and no English architect would have been able to conceptualise in this way.¹⁹ He claims that architecture does not seem at first sight to resemble the other arts, but that its capacity to imitate nature, less apparent than that of painting or poetry, is only perceptible to the eye of the trained beholder.

Claiming that he sought to give his building appropriate character, he wrote, "A monument of the beneficence of our kings must bear the character of magnificence relative to its function, a school whose celebrity will attract a great crowd of students from the nations, must appear open and of easy access". He argued with a poetic French logic that, "The absolute necessity of columns to fulfil these two objectives is alone sufficient to protect me from the reproach of having multiplied them unduly".²⁰ Columns are not only a mark of royal authority and magnificence, but, disposed in open screens, create a welcoming approach to visiting foreigners.

The Ecole de Chirurgie was compared to a temple to Aesculapius by contemporaries whose admiration for it is a tribute to the level of architectural understanding. As an object of admiration it was only exceeded by the theatre at Bordeaux, built in 1773-80 from designs by Victor Louis. He was trained at the Academy where his design for a public gallery gained him an award in the Prix de Rome competition of 1753. He later became architect to the Duc de Richelieu, a great-nephew of the cardinal, a courtier who was First Gentleman of the King's Bedchamber, and a close ally of the king's mistress, Mme du Barry. Richelieu was Governor of the Province of Guyenne with a residence at Bordeaux and obtained the commission for the new theatre for Louis.

Louis created a new public building type, the civic theatre, in which circulation spaces equalled in size the stage and auditorium. Like Gondoin, he published a book on his building, partly in self-advertisement and perhaps partly to answer to anyone who might question its size and extravagance.²¹ In 1776 the Duc de Chartres, who succeeded his father in 1785 as Duc d'Orléans and became known as Philippe-Egalité, paid an ostentatious visit to Bordeaux. Louis

designed the decorations for his triumphal entry into the town in accordance with the tradition of Renaissance festival decorations.²² After this, the duc laid the foundation stone of the theatre, accompanied by a large company of freemasons. He had become Grand Master of the Grand Orient in 1772; Victor Louis was also a freemason; and freemasonry provided an important and, as yet, little explored network of patronage in France during these years.²³ The Duc de Chartres now took over from Richelieu, for reasons which have not yet been established, as Louis' principal patron. Like his father, patron of Brongniart, this duc was also out of sympathy with the King, his uncle, Louis XVI. His liberalism, anglomania and freemasonry, were unacceptable to the King. Short of money, the duc decided to commercialise the grounds of the Palais-Royal with colonnaded shops and theatre inspired by that at Bordeaux.

Finally, let us return to Ledoux who owed his career to the same network of royal and princely patronage, beginning with education at Blondel's school. He was adopted by Louis XV's powerful mistress, Mme de Barry, who used him in her cultural power struggle against the supporters of her predecessor, Mme de Pompadour. She was so delighted with the Pavillon de Louveciennes which Ledoux designed for her that, on its completion in 1771, she obtained for him the lucrative post of inspector of saltworks in the Franche-Comté, as well as election to the Royal Academy two years later in 1773.

Instead of ending with another example of the differences between French and English architectural practices, let us note that Ledoux would not have been selected by Mme du Barry to design Louveciennes if he had not already proved himself as the architect of luxurious houses for private patrons. In this, his career was no different from that of, say, Adam: indeed, there are obvious parallels with Adam's rash venture in property speculation at the Adelphi. In the end, an architectural practice is a commercial business, and to understand the way in which architects like Adam and Ledoux operated, we need to be economic and social historians as much as architectural historians.

NOTES

I am indebted to Professor Robin Middleton, Dr Robert Oresko, and Dr Giles Worsley, for their helpful comments on the first draft of this paper.

1. See H. Brocher, *A la cour de Louis XIV, le rang et l'étiquette sous l'ancien régime*, Paris, 1934. It should be noted, however, that just as etiquette was not as rigid as is implied by Brocher, being the subject of constant disputes, so *convenance* in architecture was also a matter for debate. Patronage networks operating outside the *Bâtiments du roi* included the *princes du sang* Orléans, Condé, and later Provence and Artois; the official *princes étrangers*, who built the Hôtels de Soubise, de Rohan, and de Bouillon; *princes étrangers* lacking official recognition, who built the Hôtels de Valennois, de Monaco, and de Salm; and the highest level of ducal families, e.g. Richelieu, Noailles, and Montmorency, who lived on a princely level.
2. J.-F. Blondel & J.-F. Bastide, *Les Amours rivaux, ou l'Homme du monde éclairé par les arts*, Amsterdam, Paris, 2 vols, 1774, I, 255-6.
3. C.-N. Ledoux, *L'Architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'art, des moeurs et de la législation*, I, Paris, 1804, 40.
4. See L. Courajod, *Histoire de l'école des Beaux-Arts au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, 1874; R. Middleton, "The Beaux-Arts Tradition in France", *RIBA Transactions*, I, 1982, 62-72; and N. M. Rosenfeld, "The Royal Building Administration in France from Charles V to Louis XIV", in S. Kostof, ed., *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession*, New York, 1977, 173 & 176.
5. H. Lemonnier, ed., *Procès-Verbaux de l'Académie royale d'architecture, 1671-1793*, Paris, 1911-26, I, 4.
6. See R. D. Middleton, "Jacques-François Blondel and the *Cours d'architecture*", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, December 1959, 140-48, and D. Rabreau & M. Mosser, "L'Académie Royale d'Architecture et l'enseignement de l'architecture au XVIIIe siècle", *Archives de l'Architecture Moderne*, 25, 1983, 47-67.
7. The unpublished text of Sandby's six Royal Academy lectures, first delivered in 1770, survives at the RIBA Library, and, as transcribed by Soane and his assistants, at Sir John Soane's Museum. Notes made by

- Chambers for lectures which he intended delivering at the Royal Academy survive at the RIBA and at the Royal Academy.
8. The *atelier* system, for which the Ecole des Beaux-Arts was, perhaps, best known, was not set up till about 1800 by J.-D. Le Roy and A.-T.-L. Vaudoyer. It was only partially echoed in the schools of architecture founded outside France.
 9. C. Tadgell, *Ange-Jacques Gabriel*, London, 1978, 15.
 10. J.-M. Pérouse de Montclos, *Etienne-Louis Boullée 1728-1799: de l'architecture classique à l'architecture révolutionnaire* Paris, 1969, 99-104.
 11. M Gallet, *Claude-Nicolas Ledoux 1736-1806*, Paris, 1980, 168.
 12. At one point, Ledoux owned no less than six houses in Paris, while Brongniart was involved in at least six property speculations between 1769 and 1783. See also, P. Pinon, "Lotissements spéculatifs, formes urbaines et architecture à la fin de l'Ancien Régime", in Actes du Colloque, *Soufflot et l'architecture des lumières*, Paris, 1986, 178-91, and J.-L. Baritou & D. Foussard, *Chevotet, Contant, Chaussard: un cabinet d'architectes au siècle des lumières*, Paris, 1987. An area of Paris in which property speculation and urbanisation combined effectively was between the new Quai Conti and the Invalides, involving the creation of the Rue de Varenne, Rue de l'Université and Rue S. Dominique.
 13. In the following list of houses built by architects for themselves in Paris, those now destroyed are marked with an asterisk: J. H. Mansart, in the Rue des Tournelles (c. 1674); Servandoni, in the Place S. Sulpice (1754); Trouard, in the Rue de Faubourg Poissonnière (1758); De Wailly, in the Rue de la Pépinière* (1776); Ledoux, in the Rue des Petites-Ecuries* (1780); Brongniart, in the Boulevard des Invalides (1781); and Belanger, in the Rue Joubert (c. 1787). To these should be added the magnificent houses by De Wailly for the sculptor, Pajou, in the Rue de la Pépinière* (1776), and by Raymond for the painter, Mme Vigée Lebrun, in the Rue de Sentier* (1785). Architects' houses in both Britain and France is a subject which would repay study.
 14. Payment by percentage was, however, already known in the 17th century. For information on building regulations and the role of contractors, see M. Gallet, *Paris Domestic Architecture of the 18th century*, London, 1972, 9-25.
 15. Quoted in A. Vidler, *Claude-Nicolas Ledoux: Architecture and Social Reform at the End of the Ancien Régime*, Cambridge, Mass, 1990, 24-25.
 16. M. Frémin, *Mémoires critiques d'architecture* Paris, 1702, and N. Le Camus de Mézières, *Le Guide de ceux qui veulent bâtir* Paris, 1786, I, 43.
 17. J.-F. Blondel, *Cours d'architecture*, Paris, 1771-77, V, 1777, 438-64.
 18. *Alexandre-Théodore Brongniart 1739-1813: architecture et décor*, Musée Carnavalet, Paris, exhibition catalogue, 1986.
 19. The only British architect who was fully aware of the French conceptual tradition from Cordemoy (1706) to Durand (1800 etc.) was Sir John Soane. On this topic, see my forthcoming book, *The Mind of Soane* (Cambridge University Press).
 20. J. Gondoin, *Description des Ecoles de Chirurgie*, Paris, 1780, 7. The translation is mine. See also, A.-C. Quatremère de Quincy, "Notice historique sur M. Gondoin", Académie des Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1821.
 21. V. Louis, *Salle de spectacle de Bordeaux*, Paris, 1782. A precedent for such a book was that published by Benedetto Alfieri on the theatre he designed in Turin, *Teatro Regio in Torino*, 1761.
 22. In 1789, Louis designed the Château of Bouilh, near Bordeaux, for the Marquis de la Tour du Pin, who was a friend of the Duc d'Orléans. It was never fully executed, but the surviving ranges are impressive today.
 23. But see now, J. S. Curl, *The Art and Architecture of Freemasonry*, London, 1991.