



WAS OUR MAN IN HAVANA? CASS GILBERT NOT ARCHITECT FOR CUBA'S NATIONAL CAPITOL

By Dewey Berscheid

A photo illustration for an article that appeared in the January 25 edition of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* sent Cass Gilbert Society members and officers scurrying to their reference books and files. The photograph, reproduced on page 2 with *Pioneer Press* permission, shows an older car on a street in Havana, Cuba, and a capitol dome in the background.

The information under the picture says: "The Cass Gilbert - designed Cuban national Capitol serves as a backdrop for a 1953 Buick, one of the vintage taxis in Havana."

Pioneer Press photographer John Doman, contacted after his return from Cuba, said reporters who had accompanied the University of St. Thomas baseball team to Havana, where they played a Cuban national team, were discussing the building and Cass Gilbert's involvement in its design.

Doug Grow, columnist for the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis, who also made the trip to Cuba, said he, too, had heard that Gilbert was the architect for the Capitol. "We looked around for a plaque or anything that would have his name on it," Grow said. But the search was futile.

Tom Blanck, a St. Paul architect who is working on a survey of Cass Gilbert's work in Minnesota, did some preliminary digging, but could find no information to indicate Gilbert designed the Capitol in Havana. However, after viewing photographs of the building, he noted that its design was such that Gilbert could have had a hand in the project.

A search of readily available reference books provided some details about the Capitol, but there was no information about the identity of the architect. Part of the construction of the building came during the term of a reform-minded president, Gen. Gerardo Machado, who took office in 1924.

During his administration, Machado curbed political corruption, increased appropriations for public health work and greatly developed the island's tourist industry. He also undertook an ambitious public works program, which included construction of the 700-mile Central Highway running the length of the island and the completion of the magnificent new Capitol in Havana.

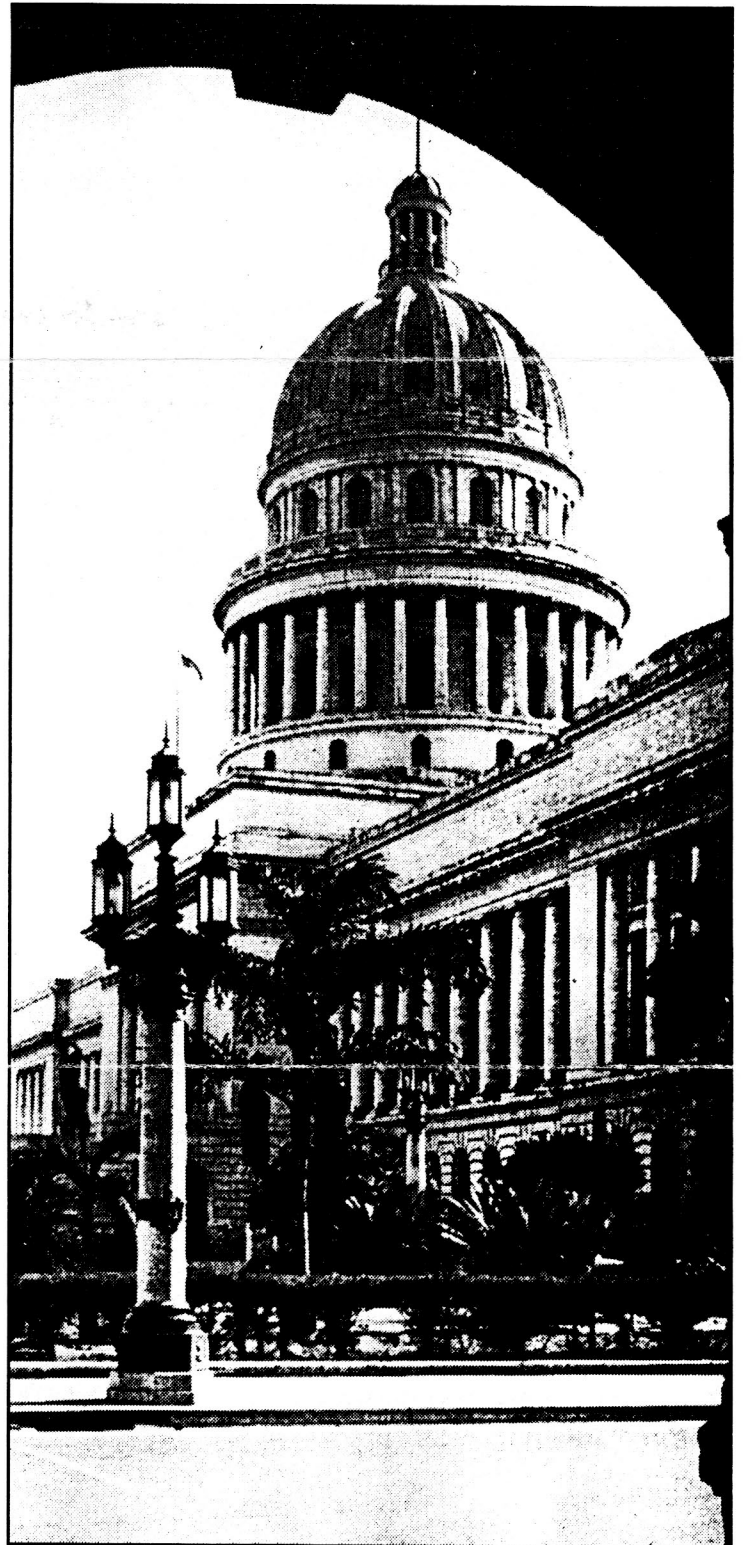
A reference book says the Capitol was furnished with marble, rare mahogany and bronze. A 22-carat diamond was embedded in the floor directly under the center of the dome and was used as a national "focal point" from which road distances in Cuba were measured.

Machado began his second term in 1929, a year that one source gives for the completion of the Capitol. But by this time, Cuba was in turmoil. Machado's reform measures had vanished and he assumed dictatorial powers, harshly repressed any opposition, and his government was riddled with graft and nepotism. A general labor strike led to rebellion and on Oct. 7, 1933, police and soldiers fired on demonstrators in Havana, killing 30 and wounding more than 100. The young military officers, defying their superiors, then turned their guns on the president, giving him 24 hours to leave Cuba. Machado soon fled to Miami.

While the political turmoil was occurring 90 miles south of the southern tip of Florida, Cass Gilbert already had completed the Minnesota State Capitol. During the period that an architect would have been selected for the Cuban National Capitol, Gilbert was involved in the construction of the Woolworth Building (1910-13) in New York City. It would not seem likely that he participated in the Havana project. And if he did, why is there no mention of it in historical documents or among Gilbert's letters and diaries?

A request was made to the St. Paul Reference Library for information about the Cuban Capitol, and particularly its architect. The pleasant, diligent staff there was not able to link the work to Gilbert, but said a book, "Cuba: 400 Years of Architectural Heritage," was available through the Minneapolis library system. This book, marvelously illustrated, was written by Rachel Carley, a graduate of the Columbia University School of Architecture and Planning with a degree in Historic Preservation.

Carley's solidly-researched book says the Cuban National Capitol was begun in 1912 under President Mario Menocal (1912-1920) on the site of a partially built presidential palace.



The Cuban National Capitol in Havana features the classical design that is similar to those of the U.S. National Capitol and many state capitols in the United States. The building is no longer used as Cuba's capitol. It now houses a museum and Cuba's National Academy of Science, and its elaborate interior makes it one of the country's major tourist attractions. Workers dynamited the building's original dome and replace it with a new one, as shown in this photo published in 1945.



A photo published in 1939 shows the detail of the front of the Cuban National Capitol in Havana.

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“Many architects, including Felix Cabarrocas, Mario Romanach, Eugenio Rayneri, Heitzler and Leveau (from Forestier’s group), and Louis Betancourt, came and went (and sometimes returned) over the next years,” Carley writes. Jean-Claude Nicolas Forestier was an internationally known landscape designer who had created a master building plan for Havana.

The Carley book continues, “The building was finally redesigned in 1928 during the Machado administration – but not before the first dome, part of the never-completed presidential palace, had been blown up with dynamite in 1918.

“Surprisingly cohesive after its many incarnations,” Carley writes, “the final design of the colossal, symmetrically massed structure measuring 692 feet long proved a grand statement of classical ceremony.”

One of the architects, Rayneri, attributed the design of the Capitol dome to the Parisian Pantheon.

“In addition to this French reference,” Carley writes, “the composition of the building as a whole recalls that of the U.S. National Capitol, in turn a descendent of the many early 20th-century U.S. State Capitols derivative of McKim, Mead and White’s influential 1903 Rhode Island State Capitol in Providence.”

The author says that at the time of the building’s completion, “anti-imperialists” were critical of its French and North American references.

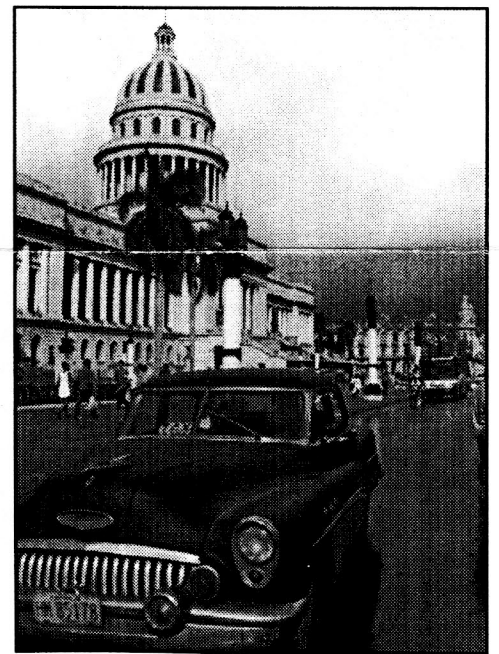
“Nevertheless, the structure became one of the most familiar landmarks in Cuba and continues to dominate countless vistas throughout Havana.”

The building, a popular tourist attraction, now houses a cultural history museum and Cuba’s National Academy of Science.

Contacted at her home in Washington, Connecticut, Carley was asked if she had found any reference to Gilbert in her research on Cuba’s architecture. She said she had not, “but it is not beyond the realm of possibilities” that he could have been involved. “In the late stages of the project, several North American architects were called in to help with the structure.”

Carley said she would make contact with knowledgeable architectural historians in Cuba to attempt to find out if Cass Gilbert was one of those involved and, if so, pass that information along to the Cass Gilbert Society.

In conclusion, Cass Gilbert was not *the* architect for the Cuban National Capitol. But it is possible he was *an* architect for the project.



This photo was published in the January 25 edition of the St. Paul Pioneer Press to illustrate an article on the use of old American automobiles as taxi cabs in Havana. Cutline information said the Capitol in the background was designed by Cass Gilbert. Although Gilbert was not the building’s major architect, it is possible he was hired for design work in the later stages of its construction. (Reprinted with permission from the Pioneer Press.)

PHILOSOPHICALLY IN TUNE

Architecture is frozen music
— Goethe

Architecture is music in space,
as it were a frozen music.
— Schelling

President's Report

ON THE WAY TO THE RATHSKELLER

By Jean Velleu

Unique and compelling things happened during the planning and executing of the Capitol Celebration. As the president, I get in on some things first and I find them so interesting I want to relate some of them to you.

A letter arrived from Lorraine Breckner in Richfield. Her father, Frederick Breckner, at age 30, was the foreman in charge of 200 men who did all the ornamental iron work in the Capitol (including the circular stairs). He received his training in Transylvania, now Romania, and came to America at age 17. She and her brother have compiled a scrap book of clippings and photos and wondered if it might be of interest. Of course, it is! Lorraine has since loaned us her mementos to study and duplicate for our library.

George Bounds wondered if we had seen the article in the Sports Section of the *Pioneer Press* on January 25 which mentioned Cass Gilbert? What would Cass Gilbert be doing in the Sports Section, I thought. It turns out the baseball team from St. Thomas that traveled to Cuba to compete in play had generated a lot of press and not all of it was about baseball. One article featured the "old cars" still maneuvering the streets of Havana. A photo of a 1953 Buick parked in front of their Capitol building caught George's eye. The caption said the Capitol building was designed by Cass Gilbert. It looked a lot like our Capitol. Research and documentation continues.

Lorraine Boyle from St. Louis Park told of her grandfather, Bunte Nelson, who was a Minnesota Senator from 1898-1914. He arranged for a copy of a stirring speech to be presented to the 65th U.S. Congress and printed as a Senate document. The speech was entitled: "Loyalty of German-Americans to the United States Government" and was presented in Jordan, Minnesota on November 10, 1917, by Honorable Julius A. Collier. A short quote from the document states: "Under this starry banner our boys go to the front, under it, like their forefathers in years gone by, they will fight for freedom against autocracy."

Don Bergmann, Victorian Society in America, from St. Louis sent a clipping about their Cass Gilbert Art Center being in danger. It is located near the new Madrid fault. St. Louis residents are having to make difficult decisions about how best to protect their beautiful museum. Can it be retrofitted to withstand an earthquake?

Two weeks before the Rathskeller event, we were advised there was an old Minnesota law that made it illegal for any money to change hands at the Capitol. We could certainly understand the wisdom of this law for legislators but we didn't comprehend it would also apply to our effort. Luckily, we had requested most of our guests to make reservations and pay a fee ahead of time. But it forced us to devise a "mail-in-after-the fact" plan for those guests who came without reservations. It added another challenge but not one that was insurmountable.

Nancy Stark, Executive Director of the Capitol Area Architectural Planning Board, notified all her Board members of our event and encouraged them to come. She also told us about **another Rathskeller event planned for the Capitol February 7 through February 11. Special German dishes will be served during this time and some ribbon cutting will take place.** Perhaps a German Band will make an appearance.

Nancy Peterson, our Historian, volunteered to memorialize the Capitol celebration by snapping some photos.

The fact that the Cass Gilbert Society was the first organization to approach the staff at the Capitol about a party in the Rathskeller space meant a challenge for them. They were reluctant to make any commitments to us at first. The Rathskeller wasn't yet finished, the new kitchen hadn't worked out its "bugs" if any, they had not done this sort of thing before, etc. We persisted when perhaps they hoped we would go away and what resulted was a fine event showing off both our magnificent Capitol and the newly restored Rathskeller. The seventy people who came thoroughly enjoyed the professional tours of the Capitol given by Christine Huettl, Elizabeth Karel, and Jean Olson. The description of the restoration work in the Rathskeller by Carolyn Kompielen made us all appreciate what effort it took to make it happen. We did all agree, however, the acoustics were not to our liking. Carolyn reassured us it *is* helpful to the Legislators who often meet there and prefer not to have their conversations overheard. Apparently sounds bouncing off the walls makes this possible.

Although one of our members was not pleased with the "amount of tax payers money spent on such a foolish thing" and chose not to come, it *is* truly a beautiful space.

On behalf of the Cass Gilbert Society, I want to thank the Capitol workers who did a flawless set-up and the catering staff who presented the wonderful buffet. And a special thanks to all our Cass Gilbert members who welcomed and hosted the Rathskeller event.

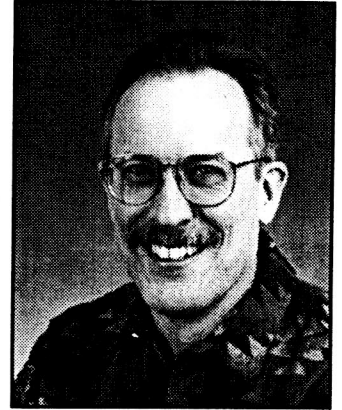
HISTORIAN PAUL LARSON EXAMINES GILBERT'S EARLIEST YEARS IN MINNESOTA

Architectural historian and award-winning author Paul Clifford Larson will be the featured speaker of the Cass Gilbert Society lecture series at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, February 22. The illustrated lecture is to take place at the University Club, 420 Summit Avenue, St. Paul. "Missing in Inaction: Some Reflections on the Lost Beginnings of Cass Gilbert's Architectural Career," will focus on the period from 1883 to 1886, when Gilbert was struggling to establish a client base and develop his own distinctive artistic vision.

Paul Larson came into this world well ahead of his time, for he was born in Ventura, California, the city destined to supply Minnesota's present governor with his name. As an architectural historian, however, Larson has been a bit of a laggard. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laud in philosophy from the University of Minnesota in 1966, then went on to graduate studies in philosophy at Yale University. After several years of teaching at Yale, Carnegie Mellon University, and the University of Pittsburgh, he left academic life to pursue a succession of careers in carpentry, restoration contracting, and historical design, before settling on his present vocation of historic buildings consultation, exhibition, and writing. In the past fifteen years, he has made up for his wandering youth by curating two national exhibitions and publishing seven books, with two more due out in 2000-2001 and three others in the wings. He has recently contracted to write a definitive study of Cass Gilbert's Minnesota career for Afton Historical Society Press.

Larson's slide lecture can be counted on to apply a new spin to Gilbert's early Minnesota struggles and accomplishments. The architect arrived in St. Paul with the slimmest of professional and financial connections. Throughout his Minnesota tenure, he also labored under the conviction that both his artistic sensibility and his professional ambition were hamstrung by the provinciality of his home town. In spite of these conditions, much of the work of his 20s bears the marks of a mature architect. Unearthing those projects that have been lost or forgotten and deconstructing those that have been buried beneath remodelings will be the first aim of Larson's talk. A second task will be to initiate an analysis and evaluation of Gilbert's work in the context of that of his equally driven young contemporaries in St. Paul of the mid-1880s.

Cass Gilbert Society lectures are open to members and non-members. There is no admission fee for members. There is a nominal fee for non-members. Those who join the society on the night of a lecture will not be charged a lecture admission fee. Membership in the Cass Gilbert Society, registered as a non-profit organization, is \$25 per family, and is tax deductible.



Paul Larson

CASS GILBERT SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP

- Yes, I would like to become a member of the Cass Gilbert Society.
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