Drafting Culture: A Social History of Architectural Graphic Standards / George Barnett Johnston.

Architectural Graphic Standards (AGS) has been the indispensible design and reference handbook for architects since it was first introduced. Published in 1932, before the codification of architecture and building standards, it was the first handbook that compiled disparate standards into one source by translating them into visual graphic standards - the preferred language of architects and draftsmen. It was an immediate success and now, in its eleventh edition, it has served as a historic record of construction practice, materials, and techniques. To author George Johnston, an architect, cultural historian, and professor, AGS is more than a classic architecture manual; it is a symbolic narrative of the history of the architecture profession in the United States.

Using AGS as his reference point, Johnston analyzes the cultural and historical developments of the architecture profession from early to mid-nineteenth century. Traditionally, draftsmen were the foundation of the architecture profession. Following the apprentice model, the vocationally trained junior draftsman could advance to the level of architect if he possessed the talent and skill. However, over time, with a push towards a university education and state licensure for architects, opportunities for the technically trained draftsmen were greatly limited. The tension between draftsman and architect is a continuing theme of this study. What started out as a drafting culture transformed over the decades into a design culture, only inhabitable by those having the proper credentials.

Drafting Culture also explores the personal dynamics between and biographies of the two AGS authors, Charles George Ramsey, a draftsman, and Harold Reeve Sleeper, an Ivy-League educated architect. Both men were employed at the architectural office of Frederick L. Ackerman, a socially progressive architect.

Johnston acknowledges the important influence of earlier monographs and journals on the development of the AGS. In particular, he cites the inspiration provided by Architectural Details by Ramsay and Louis Rouillion (New York, NY: John Wiley, 1924), the popular drafting journal Pencil Points; and a catalog of woodwork from the Curtis Company (Clinton, Iowa, 1919).

Johnston’s somewhat prolix writing, in combination with the volume’s forty five pages of extensive notes, reflects the genesis of Drafting Culture as his dissertation. The book is most suitable for graduate students, faculty, and architectural historians and is recommended purchase for an academic or museum library with a collection focus on architecture.

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