



*The Railroad Station. An Architectural History*

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**Autor:** Carroll L. V. Meeks.  
**Editorial:** Yale University Press,  
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The book on railway architecture by Carroll L.V. Meeks, published 64 years ago, still continues to be one of the most comprehensive studies on the railway architecture of Europe and North America. Meeks worked as a professor of architecture and art history at Yale University, and the focus of his work was on the architecture of the 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century as can be discerned

from his other publications such as *Italian Architecture, 1750-1914*. In the book *The Railroad Station*, he has looked at railway architecture as a typology to discuss the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture. He places the architecture of the period into a single coherent unit, the style which he defined as *picturesque eclecticism*, with emphasis on visual qualities. He looks at the three stages of this style: early, middle and the last phase, which then ultimately laid the ground for the emergence of the international style in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He also establishes that “Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century the principles of picturesque eclecticism controlled the architect’s arrangement of masses and silhouettes, while the changing concepts of eclecticism suggested the shapes of his arches, roofs, and towers.” Meeks has aligned the development of railway stations along the progression of this architectural doctrine. He has reviewed a time-period from 1830s to 1950s and has divided it into five periods: 1. ‘Functional Pioneering’ (1830-1845) 2. ‘Standardization’ (the 1850’s) 3. ‘The Middle Phase: sophistication (1860-1890) 4. ‘The Third Phase: Megalomania’ (1890-1914) and 5. ‘The Twentieth Century Style’ (1914-1956).

After establishing *picturesque eclecticism* and its characteristics in the first chapter, in the following two chapters, he shows how “the experimentation of the 1830s and early 1840s was gradually replaced by slower, more orderly progress” leading to a mature standardization in the next decade. The following 30 years,

marked by further advances in technology and world-wide prosperity, saw the train-sheds and station buildings including railway hotels, reach new aesthetic heights. “Unprecedented size” was the characteristic of the next period, in which traditional schemes were revised and multiplied; particularly striking examples of this period were to be seen in the USA. These two phases have formed the focus of his fourth and fifth chapters respectively. The last phase of *picturesque eclectic* ended with the World War I, giving rise to a new, modern architecture, which stressed “rationalism more than its aesthetic”, which he has discussed in the final chapter.

In these chapters, Meeks has undertaken an extensive survey of railway stations particularly from Western Europe and North America, and has described their styles, and historic and technical developments. The “aesthetic of the picturesque” and “the possibilities inherent in metal constructions” are two themes fundamental to his study, as he himself has mentioned in the introduction. He discusses the construction of station buildings as well as sheds, and also highlights the ensuing competition between architects and engineers of the time. Starting with the early railroad stations like Crown Street, Liverpool and Baltimore, USA, he takes us on a journey of railroad development of 126 years. Another importance of his work can be seen in the classification of stations as head type, two-sided and one-sided type, thereby offering links between the station developments

across various regions. Similarly, he has discussed the evolution in station sheds as well, in terms of size, spans and materials used, and has offered comparisons among them. He has also taken into account the contemporary evaluations of certain stations and their style, which offers an understanding of how they were being perceived by the critics of the time. Moreover, this study, though focussed on engineering and architecture, does offer valuable glimpses into understanding how the early stations were used, and the facilities they offered. This book is a wonderful repository of information for railway historians, and a particularly useful record of the early stations, now demolished or modified. It is further aided by ample illustrations (as many as 231) such as sketches, plans and photographs that are offered along with text, making it a rich database for further study.

The importance of Meek’s work has to be analysed at two levels: one when the book was written, and its relevance today. 1950s was the time when the interest in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture was meagre. At the time, structuring the architecture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into a coherent stylistic narrative was a daunting task, which Meeks succeeded in. Moreover, such a detailed inventory of railway architecture, at the time when many once glorious stations lay in ruinous state, being faced with the threat of demolition, brought the railroads into the limelight as objects of architectural study. When the book was originally published in 1956, one question raised was whether the book “oversimplifies

the analysis of the nineteenth century taste”, as the Review of the book in 1958 mentioned. As it was argued, *picturesque eclecticism* could only be applied when the exteriors were considered, but difficult to see “beneath the surface ornamentation to the essential quality of a design”. The architecture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in general and railroad development was influenced and driven by factors much more complex, and this book has merely touched the surface. However, such a structured analysis of the architecture of this period and that of railway stations is an achievement, when this theme wasn’t subjected to much research. The value of this work can be appreciated more today, when railway architecture is seen as an integral aspect of railway history, and is addressed by academia and also given attention in heritage conservation and urban planning. This book has laid strong foundations to railway research, and is a valuable resource not only for scholars and students of railway history, but is also an interesting read for the railway enthusiasts.

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#### **Additional References:**

"Carroll Meeks Professor, dies: Taught history of Art and Architecture at Yale." 1966. *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Aug 28, 93. <http://erf.sbb.spk-berlin.de/docview/116876969?accountid=13723>.

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