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Jacques Gréber, Urbaniste et Architecte

David Gordon and Isabelle Gournay

Jacques Gréber (1882–1962) was born into an artistic family in Paris, and admitted in architecture at the École des Beaux Arts in 1901.¹ He was a fine student, winning several prizes during the arduous training at the École. On his graduation in 1909, he missed the Rome Prize for architecture, which changed the direction of his career. Instead of spending years in Rome studying classical architecture, he left for the United States, where American architects who had trained at the École immediately engaged his talents to design *jardins à la française* for the large houses they built in New England.

Gréber quickly developed a reputation as a landscape architect and collaborated with Horace Trumbauer of Philadelphia on mansions in Newport, Rhode Island, and Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. Gréber's work with Trumbauer helped him win his first major commissions in urban design, the 1917 Fairmount Parkway in Philadelphia (figure 1), a diagonal avenue cut through William Penn's 1682 grid plan from the Art Museum to City Hall.² While completing the parkway, Gréber was commissioned by the French government to make a systematic study of American construction practice. Characteristically, he expanded the study to include architecture, housing, landscape architecture, and urban design. It became his influential book *L'Architecture aux États-Unis*,³ which is the subject of Professor Isabelle Gournay's paper in this issue.

Gréber returned to France in 1919. The book and his winning plan for the Paris fortifications secured his reputation as one of France's leading urban designers. He was appointed to the faculty of the Institute of Urbanism in Paris, and took a leading role in the reconstruction and expansion of French cities between the wars. Gréber prepared plans for Lille (1923), Belfort (1925), Marseilles (1930–7), Abbeville (1932), and Rouen (1940), among many others. He designed two Parisian garden suburbs, numerous gardens and parks, and helped plan the 1937 World's Fair, which is the subject of Dr. Daniel Udovicki-Selb's paper. Gréber also maintained his North American connections as consultant to Philadelphia and to the 1939 New York World's Fair, and lecturer at the Université de Montréal.⁴ At this time, he prepared the plan for a Montreal garden suburb, which is the subject of Dr. Léon Ploegaert's paper.

As a landscape architect, Gréber designed formal gardens across Europe, won competitions for public parks, and designed six American war cemeteries in France, including those for Bellau Woods and the Argonne. During the 1920s, his architecture changed from his Beaux-Arts training, seen in the Rodin Museum (1926–9, with Paul Cret),⁵ to a classically proportioned Modern style, most notably in the École de plein air at Roubaix, 1926 (figure 2) and the Esso Building at La Défense (1962, with his son, Pierre Gréber).⁶ Gréber's multi-disciplinary expertise was recognized by election as an officer of the Legion of Honour and presidency of the French societies for planning and landscape architecture during his career.

In the post-World War II period, Gréber's most prominent commission was the plan for Canada's capital (figure 3),

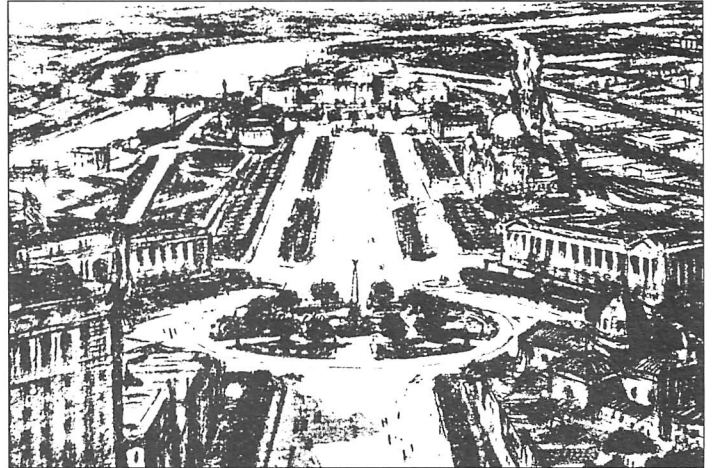


Figure 1: *Beaux Arts urban design: the Fairmount Parkway, Philadelphia, 1917. View from City Hall looking towards the Art Museum.*

Source: Hegemann & Peets, 1922, figure 1084. Charcoal sketch by Jacques Gréber.

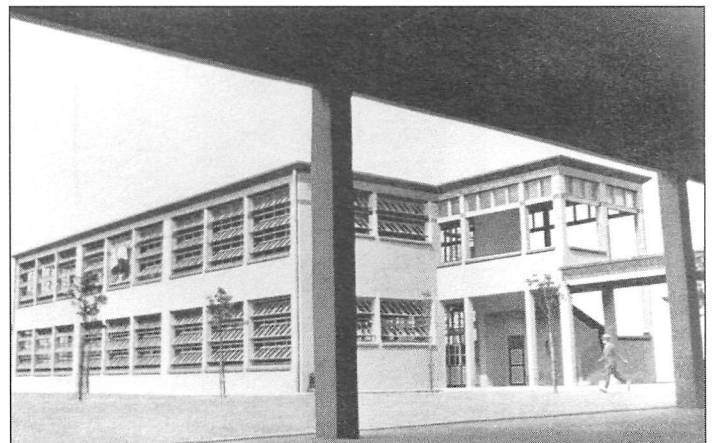


Figure 2: *Modern architectural design at the École de plein air, Roubaix, 1926.*

Source: J. Gréber promotional monograph, ca. 1935.



*Figure 3: Jacques Gréber at work on aerial photographs of Canada's capital, ca.1955.
Source: National Archives of Canada, Duncan Cameron Collection PA 197397.*

described by David Gordon's article. However, he also completed plans for the reconstruction of Rouen, Ville de Québec (with Edouard Fiset), and the Montréal region, which is the subject of José M'Bala's paper.

When Jacques Gréber died in 1962, *La Vie Urbaine* mourned him as "le plus grand des urbanistes français."⁷ Yet within two decades he was practically forgotten in France, despite his prodigious output as an architect, planner, landscape architect, and educator over a career spanning a half-century.⁸

We hope to do our part to revive some of that memory within this special issue of the *Urban History Review*.⁹

Notes

1. André Lortie, "Jacques Gréber urbaniste," *Les Gréber: Une dynastie des artistes*, Musée départemental de l'Oise, catalogue de l'exposition, 1993.
2. David Brownlee, *Building the City Beautiful* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989); W. Hegemann and E. Peets, *The American Vitruvius: An Architect's Handbook of Civic Art* (New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1922).
3. Gréber Jacques, *L'Architecture aux États-Unis: prévue de la force d'expansion du génie Français, heureuse association de qualités admirablement complémentaires* (Paris: Payot & cie, 1920). For the book's European influence, see Jean-Louis Cohen, *Scenes of the World to Come: European Architecture and the American Challenge 1893-1960* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995).
4. There is no known archive of Gréber's papers. The most comprehensive review of his work is André Lortie, *Jacques Gréber (1882-1962) et L'Urbanisme le temps et l'espace de la ville* (Ph.D. thesis, Université Paris XII, vol. 1-4, 1997). A 1936 résumé in the files of Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King is also useful. See National Archives of Canada, MG 26 J2, Vol 276, File O-303-1, "Mr. Jacques Greber," dated October 27, 1936; and a promotional monograph for his consulting firm, *Jacques Gréber, Architecte SADG SC SFU Urbaniste et Architecte de Jardins* (Strasbourg: EDARI,n.d., est. 1935) held in the library of the National Capital Commission, Ottawa.
5. See Brownlee, *Building the City Beautiful*, 77-81. Jacques Gréber commissioned his father, noted sculptor Henri Gréber (1854-1941), to execute the large marble copy of Rodin's *The Kiss* for the main gallery.
6. Colette Felenbok, "1910-20: L'avènement d'un architecte urbaniste franco-américain," *Les Gréber: Une dynastie des artistes*, Musée départemental de l'Oise, catalogue de l'exposition, 1993, pp. TBA.
7. Pierre Lavedan, "Jacques Gréber," *La vie urbaine* (janvier-mars, 1963): 1-14.
8. There has been a modest revival of interest in recent years. André Lortie, *Jacques Gréber Architecte Urbaniste 1882-1962: les allers retours France Amérique une énergie cinétique au service de l'art urbain?* (thesis, Institut d'urbanisme de Paris); Lortie, *Jacques Gréber*; and Jean-Claude Delorme, "Jacques Gréber: Urbaniste Français," *Metropolis* 3, no. 32, (July 15-August 15, 1978): 49-54.
9. The articles in this issue were first presented at two sessions of the Ninth Congress of the International Planning History Society in Helsinki, August 2000. We are grateful to the editor and board of the *Urban History Review* for allowing the authors to publish our work together, and for the financial support of the National Capital Commission for this special issue.