Born in Heilbronn in the southwestern German state of Württemberg, Adolf Cluss (1825-1905) grew sensitive to the condition of rural and itinerant workers as a journeyman carpenter in the restive atmosphere of Europe in the 1840s. He became a communist and friend of Karl Marx. Germany erupted in revolution in the spring of 1848, but workers did not achieve the rights Cluss and other radicals called for. He thus sailed for New York, and then arrived in Washington in time to see the inauguration of President Zachary Taylor. This event was symbolic, because Cluss subsequently fashioned nearly a fifty-year career as a Washington architect.

This book traces that career through eleven text on Cluss's life and work and the German and Washington contexts that influenced him. Lavished throughout with reprints of paintings, maps, and photographs, it also contains two photography essays on the city of Washington and on Cluss's family. Edited by Alan Lessoff, a professor of history at Illinois State University, and Christof Mauch, director of the German Historical Institute in Washington, the book contains essays by academic experts in the United States and Germany in the history of architecture, historic preservation, Atlantic immigration, and urban design. The Adolf Cluss Project, directed by the freelance historians Joseph L. Browne and Peter Wanner, supported the book.

Throughout his architectural career Cluss occasionally left reminders that he had not abandoned his early political radicalism. He bought a copy of the Communist Manifesto in the 1890s. More significantly, however, his work reflected his continuing interest in creating structures of republican dignity, reliable and accessible to ordinary people, be they the working or commercial classes, schoolchildren, or immigrants. Fittingly, in 1875 he wrote, "it ought to be appreciated that the luxurious life of the higher classes depends on the strength and activity of the children of the industrious classes" (p. 77).

Over the rest of the nineteenth century Cluss, either in public service or private practice, would design or renovate more than sixty Washington buildings. Among those still extant today are the Sumner School for African American children, the Eastern Market building, the Castle and National Museum (today’s Arts and Industries Building) of the Smithsonian Institution, and the White House. In all of these Cluss brought to bear a European influence in the design of America’s capital begun by Pierre L’Enfant. As city engineer Cluss supervised modernization of the
city’s building codes, sewage system, and street paving, utilizing the new substance of asphalt. Later as building inspector for the federal government he inspected old and new buildings alike, from the U.S. Capitol to the immigration facilities of Ellis Island. Perhaps America’s hospitable image to millions of European immigrants of the age had something to do with Cluss’s subtle influence.

But Cluss’s story also had tragic elements. He lost three sons and a daughter to illness. Professionally, he witnessed the destruction of his ideas and most of his buildings as Washington moved from his rustic Victorian or Rundbogenstil styles to its current neo-classical appearance today, and as Americans re-evaluated public buildings based on their size and elaborate ornamentation, as in the Beaux Arts style, or their functionality and lack of historicism, as in the International style. Meanwhile, corruption in the city’s Board of Public Works, typical of the “gilded age” of American history, compelled him to give whistle-blower’s testimony to Congress, whereupon the Board’s director had him fired. Near the turn of the century Cluss was removed from U.S. government service when the Republican Party was defeated, and, upon visiting Germany, he saw his native land still was not a united republic, as he had dreamed a half-century earlier. In his creative achievements limited by his accommodation to political realities and experience of setbacks to his aesthetic ideals, was Cluss not something of an exemplary architect?

Adolf Cluss, Architect: From Germany to America, seeks to praise and commemorate Cluss, not to offer any critique of him, and in this it succeeds admirably. It should be of great interest to anyone interested in the history of early American architecture or in the impact on American material culture of the transformation of European political radicalism amid liberal American culture and society.

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