Are We Making Progress in Our Church Architecture?

By William Ward Watkin

Are we making progress in the architecture of our churches? This query, as it comes to the architect from the layman, indicates doubt and uncertainty. The comfortable method of reply by recent comparison can be satisfactory only to the more casual inquirer. If by this method we choose to recall the strange romanticism of the “gay nineties” with its paltry buildings, imitative of nothing bearing a likeness to churchly forms, and hideously inappropriate even in its own period of architectural meagerness, we may give a genial affirmative. The physical evidence will support us. Sound material has taken the place of shabby make-believe; reasonable historic detail has followed ignorant guesswork; general comfort and convenience have been rather highly accentuated and, if we are materialists, we may explain that an organic plant has been developed in place of a primitive building. The evidence will amply bear out all of these generalizations.

Yet the comparative method unfortunately invites still truer comparisons, and in the church leads so directly back to the period from which so many of our imitative forms have been chosen, that of medieval Europe. Here our inquirer must be answered in more meaningful terms.

Architecturally we can probably best reply that the church of today is not the church of the Middle Ages. This will, for many, probably be the truth of the matter from more than the architectural side alone. The church of today has the essential element of the preaching station around which has been assembled a complexity of activities involving education, mental and physical as well as spiritual, with social and philanthropic addenda which rise to nearly, or quite, primary importance. The presumptions or inference usually follows that these are new and untried elements not inherent in the medieval church, and so its form has been materially changed. Architecture, while enjoying the paternal blessing of tradition, must be attuned to the development of these new elements and to their dominant note. To persons of such opinion it may be unwise, though appropriate, to picture the clustered groups of the thirteenth century which extended their active work to all of these “new” elements and to many, many more. The essence of that picture which one would recall is very simple; the church of the Middle Ages “commandingly dominated” the picture. By commandingly dominated I mean just that—the vast material pile which represented the portion of the group dedicated to primary religious purpose expressed an elemental supremacy and primacy of meaning to all who came near it. Regardless of how complex or how extensive its activities, the sacred, shadowed space, which was the medieval church, cast its majestic meaning over all, and its spiritual blessing upon the entire range of its material activities. Now, seven centuries later, the panorama of countless European cities and towns is still ennobled by the crowning silhouette of the church.

If our comparative method be allowed to embrace that field so rich in example, we would be compelled to answer that the church is receding rather than progressing in its place in our architecture.

I am one of those who feel that such recession is of but a temporary period. I feel, speaking entirely as an architect, that the rising generation is seeking the churchly qualities of the church. I feel that these qualities are not to be repossessed by any magic formula of medieval revival or imitative acceptance of a spiritual clothing cleverly covering a modern and efficient business plant.

Thirty years ago the genius of Henry Van Dusen, Ralph Adams Cram, and Bertram G. Goodhue was reviving with vigor and fitting adaptation the forms of the church architecture of the Middle Ages and creating an artistic fashion which was later readily accepted for church building. Hundreds have followed their example and some with sensitiveness and ability, but the manner has not become increasingly convincing, and the historic quality suffers by repetition. Clever adaptation, even from good historic example, suffers by too frequent occurrence and diminishes when used to lend tradition to a vastly different solution. Maybe our problem is much more nearly that of the Middle Ages than we are willing to admit in our modern solution and the solutions alone are wrong.

The general nature of the recent trend in church building solution is the result of an economic problem. The church has embarked on a vast building undertaking in which the means have not been adequate to the proper part. This problem has been expressed in terms of the number of seatings required by the congregation and a vast number of ever-increasing special functions of social, charitable, and educational purpose. The contemporary architecture of our cities has given very complete examples of the architectural solutions of school, amusement hall, club, and business purpose. These examples imitated on even a most modest scale require great cube, and when they are all made a part of the modern church problem become dominant, or nearly so. In our solution the economic problem has led to the recession of the church. The problem,
one can feel, is being approached from the activities side and while a sentiment remains for the church as such, a material voice cries against the reducing of the activities side of the plan. The result, generally, is a compromise in which the church recedes and the functional parts assigned to the activities become meager substitutes in comparison to the facilities afforded by splendid modern public schools and other central buildings of a civic purpose. The conception of the church as a power of ministry to the individual, through its own majesty, seems to be daily diminishing. Its dominant reality should be again made as visual as in the thirteenth century, that it may express its meaning to inspire all worthwhile human activity. From the architect's viewpoint, the plea for unity would be the same answer to the economics of the problem.

The modern architect who studies the church is seeking to find the architectural reality of the church of the Middle Ages—that inward and spiritual grace which makes it still, even in its decay, the house of God. The answer, one feels, was not in its manner nor in its forms of construction or detail. These were the manner and materials of an age that is past. The answer seems nearer—in its sincerity, in its belief in its permanence, in its ever-increasing and refreshing inventiveness and, above all, in its solution of the primary emotional nature of its problem. It was a house built for all time, built in the firm belief of the everlasting truth of its teaching, built more soundly than any contemporary building of its time, and built in no meager scale. Its majesty, whether robust and simple or brilliantly daring, lay in its convincing domination over the other works of man ranged around it.

Its emotional essence was architectural fitness to the cry of men's souls—the yearning for consolation, contemplation and inspiration. Its shadowed space was not an array in military fashion of pews and narrow aisles; it was one of vastness to permit the lonely to be less alone and to wander in genial warmth amid sheltering spaces in which the still small voice could speak and be heard. We have substituted the brightness and efficiency of the auditorium, the all-apparent richness of costly detail within restricted space, and the dominance of the voice of the orator; in place of the quiet and dim lighting that invited rich and poor alike to personal reflection, the loftiness that freed the laboring emotions and merged even the richest art and decoration into fitting submergence to a single beauty. Even our most excellent churches seem to have reached a fixated type which creates a feeling of an inactive machine when entered for solitary worship. They repel rather than welcome. Architecture has failed to reach meaning. One needs only to wander from day to day among the decaying churches of Europe to know that their meaning was well expressed architecturally and that their essential qualities still live, and are daily rich in comfort to thousands who know little of the thirteenth century.

May our answer to the progress of the church and its building be the determination to regain its emotional meaning and the dominance of that meaning over all lesser elements.

TWO MODERN NORTH EUROPEAN CHURCHES AS SEEN IN BLACK AND WHITE BY CLAUDE E. HOOTON