For the Future, Fitness and Harmony

By William Ward Watkin

The romantic concept that architecture has been privileged to record the true and lasting picture of civilization, particularly of bygone civilization, has become one of architecture's most hallowed traditions.

When with the closing years of the twelfth century it produced work the spirit of which has been expressed in the Latin—de materiaibus ad immaterialia transierendo, there was pictured the summa of its saving grace. The work of peasant, guildsman, bishop, and builder blended in crystallizing the philosophy of the age in shadowed vault on lofty arch and slender pier—with the accuracy of sound mathematics and the artistry of stained glass. Material, local and dull earthy material, had become a medium of expressing external beauty.

The romantic concept which had enabled architecture to the academicians of earlier ages had become for a while at least a practical reality. Now in our own age one can but doubt whether this interpretation of the instructor, who waxed warm in glowing tribute to the majesty of the Athenian Acropolis or the splendor of the portal of St. Gilles, ever really became sufficiently clear in its meaning to cause the student to leave the classroom with eyes sufficiently open to question the expression of present-day civilization embodied along the streets he traversed from his home to the classroom.

Architectural education in American schools came into existence only a decade before the beginning of a period of vast architectural activity in American cities, therefore during the past forty years practitioner and student alike appear to have been entirely too busy—and while very busy working, possibly found less time for thinking than those of earlier ages in architecture's history. Now that some two years of uncertainty have given the profession ample leisure, the evidences of inquiry as to whether we have been going, have been quite frequent and in the varied opinions there has been much diversity. Professor William A. Boring in a very recent article so courteously expressed his opinion, that while power might be a very true element of our most recent architecture, beauty had rights and privileges which exceeded those of power, and could be expected to continue to enjoy them; that too much of function and too little of refinement seemed the story of the day. I wonder whether underlying the sometimes crude expression of power and function has not been, in a very true degree, a creative desire for cleanliness—eyes which were being opened to the reign of error, which had been the resulting expression of a system of choice whose foundation had been the individual's interpretation of the mirage of beauty.

Today, while a nation pauses, fearful of progress—in this day of unbuilding—may it not as searchingly account for its errors in architecture as it must and will account for those in agriculture, industry, and banking. In architecture the evidence is visible, here day by day to eyes which are open. Find a city whose beauty satisfies the architect! Find a city whose retail business center can be understood as having been the outcome of the design and thought of a cultured people rather than an uncultured race—yet architects have built these; and the architects individually were capable men.

I read with warm sympathy the kindly criticism of those architects who would restore the gentle beauty of our Colonial cities—but as a people, our manner; and as a city, our movement is not that of those days long past.

I appreciate the crusaders' ambition which leads our young men of high talent and ability to search for some happy history to give to the small home a bit of what we have learned to term "architecture."

For the modernist who feels his world and would express it with a modern story, I even more truly feel the sincerity of his striving toward a surer goal.

Yet are these not all but the collective story of the time we have traveled? Is it not time to look about us with eyes which are open?

Capable men traveling with enthusiasm and earnest effort the road as these men would have us travel it, have given us the expression of our cities as they are. Can we say that they—any one of them—would have chosen the conglomerate picture we see—so ill-proportioned an ensemble, so discordant a result? In each of the best of these men were sweet sensitive appreciations and each sought beauty, yet day by day the results were more discordant than before.

Whether, as students, we were impressed by the platitudes of the classroom, whether architecture did or did not seem to express the philosophy and character of bygone civilizations countered for little at the
time, for it was a picture of the past and not of our day. We have grown up amid American cities, themselves constantly growing, and a more truthful story was not told in the age of Pericles or with the building of Rheims. A discordant civilization, completely unarranged and embracing the highest altruism with the grossest selfishness, the deepest research with a shallow habit of thinking, has created its own material picture which all who pass may read. When occasionally the twilight of reflection comes, as it has today; when in less busy hours, a nation may take account of itself, as is the happy privilege of the individual, then indeed the mind and the emotions seek to choose their most precious possessions.

In this time of reflection the rich words of the exponents of style, the clear logic of the exponents of function, and the magic words of the exponents of beauty, uncertain as they may be, each fall upon dull ears. A nation, as well as we profession, needs thrift, honesty, and inspiration. The most common factor of the three is honesty.

Architecture, which for an ultimate beauty can find no higher value than that of perfect fitness, can not excuse the diversity and confusion created willfully upon our busy city streets, nor the bizarre medley willfully created to mark and mar our residential communities. Fitness accepts the right of neighboring buildings each to their place in a lasting picture. Fitness denies sole authority to the individual to mar the quality of the community. Fitness, when a guiding virtue in creative work seeks, as is art's mission, to "make gentle the life of the world."

I wonder whether we would not judge achievement more truly were we to measure it by the degree to which it creates or promotes harmony rather than individuality?

Today when we see artisans and mechanics, thrifty, capable, masterworkmen, long idle and approaching despair, in a nation possessing material riches in the excess; when our entire civilization falters and threatens to fall because it produces too much and sells too little; what a faithful picture, to eyes which will see, has architecture raised to portray so well our strange confusion!

The vision of the profession for the future, for the days of rebuilding which are sure to come, should be a broad and understanding human view, with honesty first, in material, in structure, and in fitness to surroundings; all qualities the modernist could preach without his willful discard of harmony; and with it, adjustment over a wide area with true regard for the economics of the problem. It is a view of architects working in unison to a common good and with an understanding of the common needs of their community. They should plan toward a sustained harmonious ensemble, to the submergence of the highly individual ambition and its expression within a still higher artistry which, working within desirable limitation, creates even greater beauty—a harmony that elevates all and degrades none.

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