MODERN ARCHITECTURE

To our most casual observer it has become evident that the architecture of our cities is undergoing a change, more marked each month in its divergence from the forms which we have associated as normal to our larger city buildings. It is becoming interesting.

The nature of this change, upon examination, is one of a quality of directness and of power, a simpler and more convincing sense of design which more strikingly indicates modernness.

The past forty years have been the beginning of a great architecture among American cities. These forty years have witnessed the first works of a guild of American architects, trained in architecture in American colleges. The first half of this period, let us say, from 1885 to 1905, found in our architecture the quality of timidity; an academic application of historic architecture to a variety of objects to which the historic work had little relation. There was a sense of the applying of a cloak of refinement to a form little prepared to receive it. How very many of the buildings of this time were so essentially without form and their masses crude and boxlike. The classical treatments of their base or of their uppermost stories showed refinement, but the mass seemed as yet beyond the designer's control. The opportunity to move away from, to advance beyond, the design of the stupid, post-civil war days was very great indeed, but the ability feeble, timid and uncertain of itself.
The second decade under American trained architects showed marvelous achievement. Between 1905 and 1925, America assumed the outstanding position in architectural design among the nations of the entire world. Our buildings took positive form. In a sense the refined cloak became designed to intelligently fit the form and the form was conceived with imagination and with relative freedom. Real architecture came into being in all of our greater cities and among our greater colleges. The architect had arrived at the point where the complex problems of the modern client could be planned with skill and imagination in buildings which were real solutions of those problems and at the same time beautiful, in a beauty having generally a fitness of character to express the purpose of the building. During this period we experienced the convincing display of the growing architectural genius of our country. The required offsets in tall buildings to meet newer building laws, offered a new and interesting problem to the designer which from the beginning was accepted with delight and gave fresh zest to design. Almost immediately these new and unusual requirements appeared in skillful solution, growing daily in grace and charm. However, in field of architecture other than tall building, our architecture pursued an even tenor of its way, needing the real stimulus of imagination to urge it beyond its historic restraints.

This period, while one of great architectural advancement and of assurance of the ability of the American architect to thoroughly handle his problem, was a stylistic period. Much that was beautiful in historic architecture was reconceived to new and different purposes. Forms from Italy were restudied with an accuracy demanding high appreciation of their scholarship. Medieval
country houses reappeared with surprising honesty of both mass and detail. Our own American Colonial architecture was combed to its dregs by students seeking to record once again its exact little details, including the bad as well as the good. Imagination became lost in the gathering of the antique.

Truthfulness to the historic; accuracy to the documentary evidence became almost a fetish. The quality of design was restrained. To a degree archaeology rather than architecture, was the master. Amid our colossal opportunities to build great buildings in great and growing cities, we were to the European critic remarkably free from constructive artistic imagination. To our own critics we were becoming dull and prosaic.

We interpreted our palatial opportunities in terms of refinement accompanied by amazing skill in combining oddly selected examples of historic detail and ornament. The results have shown the astonishing versatility of the American designer. They have, however, left the constructive imagination entirely unsatisfied.

In the past three or four years a few of our architects and many of our architectural students have found it possible to express themselves in a manner of building showing keen imaginative analysis of the mass, with the rigid restraint of detail. Before them lay the examples of the creative imagination of the late Bertram G. Goodhue with his Nebraska State Capital, San Diego Exposition, his Los Angeles library and his Museum of Natural Science at Washington. A few architects with a desire for novelty and not equal to the creative possibilities of their problems, sought for freshness by the remarkable route of return to the study of primitive and barbaric architectures long known to the profession
and exemplified in the palaces of Assyria and to a degree in the primitive America. We have passed such forms quickly. The study of the silhouette inspired a fresh field, leading the designer away from the fixedness of historic accuracy. Our architecture is now showing design conceived with a directness which expresses power. Big things, and being handled as big things; historic scales and styles are being weighed as to their fitness to our problem, not simply treasured because of their tradition. The designer has his building much more under complete control with the imagination free and unrestrained, and his designs are beginning to sparkle.

Still the results are not daring, or, I would say, not fantastic. Our conservative tradition seeks refinement. We may look for the refined amid our novel and modern solutions. The ability of our young men to design is a tremendously rich and real asset to our civilization. Every day shows the acceptance of a modern thought in a creative architecture advanced and perfected to a new degree.

If one were to analyze the modern reaction in architectural design in European countries, I feel two sincere thoughts influence their design toward the expression which to us seems fantastic. The first of these is the lacking of great opportunity. In our own country vast building opportunity invites enthusiasm, but because it is vast and greater than we have done before it, invites seriousness which means for us conservatism.

The European architect surrounded by vast works of generations past, finds the opportunities of today of meagre dimension
and of lesser importance. To give to these lesser masses the quality to attract, I feel is his unfortunate gesture. It carries him too far.

However, the second and real architectural thought in Europe, as well as in America, is the freeing of the quality of design; the effort to express more directly, possibly with much less subtlety, the mass and detail of the building; a movement placing history in architecture back again in its proper niche, from which it has too actively emerged in recent generations.

The stimulus of the modernness of the European architects has reflected itself very quickly in America. We know enough to be safe from copying it. We also know enough to see its merit in suggestion, and to benefit from it.

The glorious promise of this awakening of an architectural sense lies in the fact that it offers the promise to create interesting forms possessed of beauty; to bring that beauty within terms which are attached to rather than detached from our methods of living and thinking.

An architecture fully embellished with the scholarship of accurately rebuilt historic forms, even when beautiful, must be cold, except to the scholar, as compared with equal beauty conceived and expressed with freedom and fertile imagination.

We may with confidence look forward to the time not far distant when we will find our architects expressing in their buildings the full measure of the richness and progress and power of our country.

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