Whence Comes This Modernism?

MOST stimulative to the genius productive of recent architectural work abroad has been the driving power of a rigid demand for economy. This requirement has occasioned the architectural housecleaning which foreign modernism expresses. Unfortunately the adaptation of modernism in America has been without so definite a premise. The movement for modernism has come to us with much of the nature of opportune selection characteristic of our architecture through the past three generations.

Post-war Europe has passed sufficiently far beyond the meager work of the period 1920-1924—a superficial revolt expressed in bizarre form—to find the new manner supported by sane and capable men, accepting the discard of the costly costume of the past as appropriate to new needs and new methods in structure. It is fascinating to watch the rapidity with which, once the modern viewpoint is taken, the artist finds a quickening of his imagination in the composition of simple geometric forms, essentially free from ornament.

A more fitting frankness and a more convincing architectural meaning seem to appear at once with the freeing of architecture from the long accumulated encrustation of historic detail. Buildings emerge clearer, cleaner, and more understandable to the layman; expressing by this directness a greater fitness to the character of our epoch, which is one that seeks to approach its problems in a less devious manner and to adjust them according to facts made available by present day research. To a degree this process would seem to take from the architect a few of the robes of pageantry to which he has clung, even as it takes from architecture certain cherished costumes.

The modernist’s choice of the machine as a figurative example of his inspiration has not been a fortunate one, although it has been relatively correct. The machine as a picture appears without artistry—cold and forbidding—yet its success results from fitness to purpose, sound economy made possible by excellence of material, and by scientific intelligence tested through prolonged experimentation. These qualities are constructive and architectural.

The reinforced concrete innovations of France and the common brick studies of Holland and Germany were developed as solutions of the industrial problems of those nations prior to the World War, yet a searching analysis of solutions for greater convenience, lesser space, and with minimum cost remained to be brought forward under the post-war financial depression. “From this time we go forward to an architecture which shall be the exact expression of our age,” says M. Andre Lurcat, “from the beginning to the end of our work the law of economy is respected.” He holds it a violation of aesthetics for architecture to wilfully pass beyond
the law of economy and finds in the simple material and simple construction resulting from present day economy in France a pleasing prospect for new beauty with fitness in architecture. This we can accept as a sane philosophy, recognizing without the extravagance of Le Corbusier that it will produce a greater fixedness of standards within which the zeal of competitive architectural genius shall produce beauty. The focusing of the vast genius existing today within a more direct range promises greater things than its fruitless dispersion has given us.

Economy in its application to architecture, in the sense of a scientific problem, has been too little studied. Economy has frequently meant only inferior material with the substitution of imitations of one type or another—and with the expression of inferiority made evident in the result. From the purely architectural viewpoint, with the acceptance of the problem in the manner of science, it should be but a definite problem, the elements of which are known and whose truthful solution becomes beautiful with the application of the architect’s skill.

This reaches not alone into the choice of material of lowest cost with enduring quality or the omission to a point consistent with refinement of all varied form and ornament, but also in severe analysis of every plan requirement, seeking saneness in the use of space, with elimination of dimensions which are possessed of pomp rather than reason. Under these conditions design takes added interest.

This spirit of approach creates economy as a fascinating factor and it in no way denies the ultimate attainment of refinement and beauty within or without. What appeal to our people could be more true and timely than a conservative interpretation of this tenet of economy which the modernist holds! Have we not all listened for many years to the popular exaggeration of the architects’ extravagance? Has not this extravagance in part, possibly in major part, been the unconscious outcome of a continued expansion of the “styles” with more and more careful study into an infinite range of historic example, the fitting nature of which has become increasingly doubtful?

Through this indirect manner the architect has too easily cultivated temperament, a quality setting him apart from, rather than in touch with, the scientific practice and reasoning of his age. Since temperament is a weak contender against logic, the art truly expressive of an age requires that its creators take their themes and material from their age, and not from the cemeteries of archeology.

With all the fantastic and ugly that modernism has offered as a solution, it also is offering an increasing number of examples of crystalline clearness and beauty. Germany and Holland in the past (Continued on page 88)