**How to Look at a Building**

**By Guy Kirkham**

"Well-building hath three Conditions: Commodity, Firmness, and Delight."

Sir Henry Wotton

Observe in how many cases reason confirms the judgment of taste. Often, perhaps always, what we call taste is but an involuntary process of reasoning whose steps elude our observation. Acquiring taste is nothing else than familiarizing ourselves with the good and the beautiful; but to familiarize ourselves with the beautiful we must know how to find it, that is to say, how to distinguish it. It is our reasoning faculty which must help us to do this. We come upon an edifice which at once awakens our admiration, and we say, What a beautiful building! But this instinctive judgment does not content us. We ask ourselves, Why is this building beautiful? We want to discover the causes of the effect it produces on us, and to discover these we must have recourse to reason."

I take this passage from Viollet-le-Duc’s “Discourses on Architecture” to illustrate my view of How to look at a building. Essays, possibly volumes, have been written on How to listen to music, How to judge a picture; and in the belief that something of interest might be said in a similar way about architecture, I ask you to consider this subject with me, not from the point of view of the archaeologist or the professional man, but of the lover of beauty.

In order to enjoy music or painting it is not necessary to be versed in the technicalites of those arts: it is but necessary to be susceptible to their impressions. So it is with architecture. Indeed it was no idle thought that called architecture a “music continual and fixed.” All the arts are bound together. Imagine a child’s impressions of Amiens cathedral: The sunlight is streaming through the rich stained glass of the great western rose window, painting its brilliant colors on the pavement where it falls. The lofty arches, the soar-
ing vaults of the sublime structure seem lost in an immensity of space. The music of the organ fills all and seems to be in all. In the child’s mind sound and color, arch and vault, blend into one harmonious whole reaching upward toward the very throne of heaven. In some aspects the child’s view is the true view; and it is well to retain something of his faith, imagination and ideality, even when we try to analyze and criticize. Certain it is that all the arts have fundamental principles in common, not only with each other but with all morality; that not only is there a natural law in the spiritual world, but a spiritual law in the world of art; that truth is universal; that simplicity and sincerity are delightful everywhere; that temperance and harmony and repose are to be sought in all our work. And why? Because these are the eternal things; because they appeal to what is best in us, and our best nature responds. The divine nature is in them as it is in us, and we recognize it and claim it as our own. For what is art but the soul of man put into his work, the realization of the divine nature through the human?

In the architectural art there should be both activity and idealism, as there was in the Greek of Pericles’ time, in the Gothic of the Middle Ages. The tendency of the Eastern civilization is for idealism to repudiate activity; of our Western civilization, for activity to repudiate idealism. We must have the activity of idealism as well as the idealism of activity.

In the great works of architecture we recognize the divine spirit and reverently bow before it. Who cannot feel the sublime power in Notre Dame of Paris? Who does not worship before Reims? Petty cares sink in the serene presence of the Capitol at Washington. If you would learn how the sympathetic eyes of genius look upon some of the great buildings of the world, read the selections gathered together in the little book called “Turrets, Towers and Temples.” Why do these grand structures seem to belong to all time, to be a
Suggestion for a Doorway
By The United Crafts
Design for Lodge and Bachelor's Bungalow at Entrance to an Estate at Shadeland, Pa.
H. Fairchild Stieven, Architect.
Design for "Guard Room" of Bungalow

Woodwork and Furniture of Fumed Oak, the walls paneled in leather to the height of the doors, and above in rough cast white plaster; the floor of unglazed green tile laid in black cement, the fire place of variously colored field stones

H. Fairchild Steven, Architect
part of very nature? "Are not the elements of ease on the face of all the greatest works of creation? Do they not say, not there has been a great effort here, but there has been a great power here?" (Ruskin) As to lesser things, the difference is but one of degree. A friend tells me that he was moved to tears by the beauty of the chapel of St. Paul's school, at Concord, New Hampshire. Men go long distances and many times to see Salisbury cathedral, the chateau of Blois, the little Rotonda of Palladio near Vicenza, the Boston Trinity church. These are the masterpieces; and it is the distinction of the masterpieces that it is recognized by all, by expert and by layman alike. It is the universality of a work of art that makes of it a masterpiece.

It is more difficult to apply abstract standards to architecture than to painting or to sculpture. It is by its nature more complicated and involved. In it practical considerations are inseparably mixed with aesthetic,—if the latter enter into it at all. We are conscious of beauty in a building, as in anything else, by the pleasure the sight of it gives us. Rarely do we find complete and unmixed pleasure in looking at a building, for completely beautiful buildings are rare. This need not deter us from taking a limited enjoyment in the limited beauties we see. We must not demand or expect too much. We do not expect every piece of music to thrill our spinal cord.

Have we a right to ask of any building that invites our attention and lays claim to consideration as a work of architecture how much it cost? I believe that a building, to be considered as architecture, should (1) indicate its character and purpose, (2) suggest a logical construction, and satisfy with the appearance as well as with the fact of stability, and (3) please by its form and proportion and by its judicious use of material and color. Finally, (4) it should convince us of its unity and vitality.
Given a building to look at, I would ask: Is its character indicated, its purpose expressed in its appearance? Not: does some sign or mark on it indicate it; not: does each part of the building proclaim its own particular use; but does the building itself, in general and as a whole, proclaim its character and purpose? Do I know that the building I am looking at is a church, a library, a dwelling, a stable? I believe a church should look church-like, a business building business-like, a home home-like. Accepted conventions and the association of ideas have much to do with our impressions and the emotions which they arouse. This is as true in architecture as in music. But there are qualities, aside from these conventions, which, if worked into a building, as into a piece of music, give out again from it to move the spirit of the beholder. I believe that the spirit of consecration may be so wrought into a church—should be so wrought—as to be ever after recognizable in it.

Next I would ask of the building we are looking at: Does its appearance indicate a logical and sound construction? Ruskin says: “Neither can there be any architecture which is not based on building, nor any good architecture which is not based on good building.” The good is the essential basis of the beautiful, and we must have good building before we can have beautiful building. There must be honesty and propriety in the use of material, and indication of a reasonable structural organization. Truth in design, as in morals, is primarily a matter of right relations, rather than of bald and isolated facts. Unpleasant, inopportune, unrelated or unimportant facts may be as unnecessary, as objectionable, to state in architecture as in morals. Of one thing we may be certain. There can be no true pleasure in make-shifts, shams or pretences. These things are ugly aesthetically as well as morally. Neither can there be more than a passing interest, a stirring curiosity or wonder, in tours-de-force. Repose is an element of beauty in
architecture as in sculpture. All violence is disturbing. I wish that sturdy foundations were more to us than expansive show windows; that broad wall spaces were more to us than flaring sign boards; but I realize how utterly reactionary this wish is. The sight of overhanging masses, of vagrant towers without visible means of support, is a burden to us all. We feel in our own structure something of the tension they exert and long for rest, for the security and ease of nature’s laws frankly acknowledged and adequately met.

Thirdly, I would ask of the building we are looking at: Does it please in its form and proportion, materials and color? When the crude architect wishes to lead the thought away from the hopelessness of his base detail, he generally lingers lovingly on the beautiful proportions of the design, feeling secure in the indefiniteness of the thing. Unwittingly he pays tribute to a power he knows not of. Why is it that the architectural schools make the classic orders the basis of all their study in design, in the face of perennial protest? It is because the classic orders are the most perfect exemplars of proportion, and proportion lies at the base of all good design. Proportion has ever been called the whole of architecture. When we consider the details of a building, we regard it as an aggregate, and concentrate our attention on each component part in its individual aspects and relations. When we consider the proportion of a building, we regard it as a composed whole, and concentrate our attention on its aspects and relations as a total composition. The larger aspect is the more important,—the whole is greater than any of its parts,—and matters of proportion and composition are relatively more important than matters of detail. It follows that no richness of material or cunning of handiwork is able to redeem bad proportion; that good proportion rises superior to detail, and glorifies the humblest material; and that color, except as it affects proportion and detail, is subordi-
nate to form in architecture. The judicious use of color, however, may add materially to the beauty of a building; the right use of material, too, may be a considerable factor in the success of a design. What we should require of material is that it should be chosen judiciously, used honestly, and treated properly according to its nature and its place.

Finally, I would ask of our building: Does it appeal to us by its unity and vitality, does it seem organic? Is there something inevitable about it, as there is to the works of nature, or is there a conscious and obvious straining after effect?

All architectural construction, broadly considered as a means of covering space, is a construction of either the beam or the arch. In this classification the truss may be considered as a compounded beam acting, like the simple beam, as a load with direct downward pressure, to be resisted by vertical supports. The arch exercises a lateral pressure, to be resisted by inert mass, as in the Romanesque, or by counter pressure, oblique supports and buttresses, as in the Gothic. Of the two constructive principles, the beam reached its most perfect development, its highest artistic expression and excellence, in the Greek temple, of which the Thesecion and Parthenon at Athens and the temple of Poseidon at Paestum are great examples. The arch attained its most perfect development, in the Gothic cathedrals, of which Reims, Paris, Chartres and Amiens are the highest examples. In the Greek buildings every opening was spanned by a lintel; in the Gothic by an arch. In the Greek the predominant lines were horizontal; in the Gothic, vertical. Greek architecture is pre-eminently the architecture of repose; but “the arch never slumbers,” and Gothic is the architecture of thrust and counter thrust. That is its vital distinction, not the pointed arch, as many suppose. There are buildings pure Gothic in which the pointed arch hardly appears, if at all. The Roman, com-
ing between the two, was a transitional architecture. It partook of the character of both constructions without fully realizing either. The Renascence was a revival of Roman forms adapted to later uses. The main point to be observed here is this: that the consistent and expressive development of a system of construction constitutes a true style. Whole and part take on expressive forms through practical and artistic exigencies. In the true style form follows construction, not construction form. We moderns speak of building in this or that style when in fact we build in the modern style. We knowingly give a name to the whole construction which applies only to superficial details adapted with more or less consistency.

Both Greek and Gothic were religious architectures. Their important buildings were temples and churches. Roman was a secular architecture. Its greatest works were baths and palaces, aqueducts and amphitheatres. The Renascence, the architecture of Roman revival, was like it, a secular architecture. Greek and Roman and Renascence were essentially aristocratic, existing for the few; Gothic was democratic, representing a great popular movement, existing for the many. Each period or style was sympathetically carried out through all its detail of molding and ornament; and it is interesting to trace the evolution of whole and part through successive generations. Gothic pier is the lineal descendant of Greek column. The Greeks, with their fine perceptions, made the outline of the ornament echo the profile of the molding it enriched. The developed Gothic architecture anticipated each separate pressure of groin and rib in the clustered pier shafts.

An enterprising architectural periodical of wide circulation lately invited from its subscribers an expression of opinion as to which they considered the eight greatest facades in the world, and again, the ten most beautiful buildings in the United States, and published lists of the facades and buildings receiving most
frequent mention. The results were interesting as showing at once notable unanimity of opinion and catholicity of taste. The eight facades most frequently found on the lists were Notre Dame de Paris, the Parthenon, the Paris Opera House, St. Mark’s library at Venice, Amiens cathedral, the Farnese palace at Rome, and the Doges’ palace at Venice. The ten buildings were the Capitol at Washington, the Boston Public Library, Boston Trinity Church, the Congressional Library, Columbia University Library, New York Trinity Church, Madison Square Garden, St. Patrick’s Cathedral, New York, Biltmore House, North Carolina, and New York City Hall. I would suggest that the next time you have occasion to see any one of these buildings, you look at it in the way we have outlined, asking: Is its appearance indicative of its character and purpose? Is its appearance suggestive of a logical and sound construction? Is it pleasing in form, color and material; and finally and supremely: Has it organic unity and vitality? Does it seem to be just as it is, because it could not as well be different?

Let us apply these questions to some familiar building and see what answers we get. Can you realize a picture of the New York Trinity Church? As we see it, should we know from its appearance that it is a church? Yes. How, by its spire? Yes, partly, but only partly. The whole building looks the church. Because of its use of conventional church forms? Yes, partly, but only partly. The building is obviously adapted to the uses of a church, and perceptibly partakes of the nobility of character and consecration which should distinguish such usage. As we see it, should we judge that it is logically and substantially constructed? Yes. Why? Because there is visible evidence of it. The building appears to set firmly on the ground, the spire has a broad base and is well buttressed, the door and window openings show a good thickness of wall, and the stones seem well bonded together. As we see it, does
its treatment of form and color and material please us? Yes, aside from its indications of high character and sound construction it is distinctly pleasing to look at. We feel it would be a personal loss to be deprived of all sight of it as we pass.

Finally, as we see this building, has it an appearance of organic unity and vitality, as our bodies, or the forest trees have? Yes, one part seems to develop naturally and easily from another part to make a united, complete, and inevitable whole, to which nothing need be added; from which nothing could well be taken away. There is no apparent straining after effect, no conscious exaggeration, no sense of violence. It does not look lop-sided, top-heavy, incomplete, overloaded, disjointed. All seems natural, straightforward, unaffected and gracious.

Few realize how much and how inevitably the designer puts himself into his work. As Phillips Brooks said, "The man is in the work and the work is in the man." A German admirer of Richardson's works, when Richardson's self was pointed out to him, exclaimed: "Mein Gott, how he looks like his own buildings!" If we desire certain qualities in our buildings we should consider the personalities of our architects in placing our commissions. The usual method is to commission this one because he is the cheapest, that one because his father is a member of our church; expecting equally fair and lovely results from any and all, no matter what the character of the work may be. The architect cannot put in his work qualities that have no place in himself; he does put into it something of the qualities that have. The man who would have vulgarity in his house should seek the architect of vulgar personality—if there be any such! The man who would have refinement in his house should seek the architect of refined personality.

There is an inevitable publicity in buildings. Even the private house invites public atten-
tion. Our taste in painting or sculpture, or music is primarily a matter of individual concern, and, to be cultivated as such. But no man builds to himself alone. In architecture the public interest is inevitably involved, and our taste in it becomes relatively many times more important. Let us have thought for this "noblest art of all the arts." Let us "hold communion with her visible forms," for like nature, to her lovers "she speaks a various language." It will vastly increase the interest of our daily walks as well as of our wider travels. Let us cultivate a discerning judgment and a discriminating taste in this "finest of the useful arts and most useful of the fine arts." In this way can our cities best grow into beauty; for this alone is it well worth while to consider, How to look at a building.

THE SMALL COUNTRY HOUSE by H. Fairchild Steven

The small country house in America, as opposed to the pretentious country-seats of the American aristocracy, is often so inconspicuous as to escape our notice, or if we notice it, to receive only our hasty judgment. Because the country house is to be limited in size or expense, either from necessity or from the desire of the occupant to cast aside during his summer rest most of the customs and necessary functions of the town house, there is no excuse for slighting the problem of the cottage by the sea, or the bungalow in the mountains, since the question of artistic merit need not necessarily be measured by the amount expended.

The country house, like the town house, should conform in appearance and arrangement to its occupant's mode of living; indeed, if it be considerably isolated from its neighbors, it may express more forcibly the characteristics, or even the eccentricities of its owner, without fear of casting reflections on its neighbors, as would usually be true of an eccentric town house closely penned in by sombre brown stone facades. But