REPLY TO MR. FREDERICK STYMETZ LAMB ON "MODERN USE OF THE GOTHIC; THE POSSIBILITY OF NEW ARCHITECTURAL STYLE." BY LOUIS H. SULLIVAN

It is too evident that Mr. Lamb is making a special plea for Gothic as Gothic. In so doing he differs not a whit, in principle, from one who makes a plea for Classic as Classic. Psychologically the plea is the same in either case, in this, that it takes for granted we are to accept, as alive, objective results the subjective causes of which have gone beyond recall.

In either case the pleader persists in regarding historical architecture, not as the living thing it was, but as a fetish within his own mind.

The flaw in our current architectural reasoning (if reasoning it may be called) lies in the fact (curious enough, to the logical mind), of a persistence in refusing to discriminate between was and is; and this,—in open view of the clear truth that nature, which surrounds us with its life,—always thus discriminates with precision. Hence with each discussion comes merely an added and ever-futile attempt to detach an art from the civilization which gave it birth.

Mr. Lamb discriminates between the plasticity of the Gothic and the fixity of the Classic, as he sees them; but he fails to balance his statement by a recognition of the tranquillity of the Classic and the restlessness of the Gothic,—both considered in their original manifestations.

He perceives that the Classic art when applied to modern American conditions loses dignity and becomes increasingly restless, even to the point of torture, as the conditions become more and more specifically American;—that is to say less and less Greek or Roman. And yet he affects to believe that Gothic art by the magic of a name will have a different fate!

In other words he complacently suggests that Mediaeval thought is really more American than the thought of Greece or Rome—meanwhile completely ignoring the possible suitability of twentieth century thought for our twentieth century conditions and demands. In other words, Mr. Lamb would deliberately throw over his
shoulder the wonderful riches of modern thought, in order that he may have dalliance with Gothic detail.

All such special pleadings are beside the mark, and do not in the least touch upon the real problem.

This real problem is practical and immediate, and concerns the actual thinking-power of an architect, when such thinking is put to the test of simple terms.

Our real, live, American problems concern neither the Classic nor the Gothic, they concern us here and now.

They concern our actual, present ability to see straight, think straight, and act straight.

All this talk about Classic, Gothic, Renaissance, etc., merely indicates inverted thinking, and has nothing to do with our case. Our case is the big urge of American life as well as its many lesser urges.

When once we realize this, that instant we will have discovered a prime fact, and all historical architecture will thereupon become a secondary fact in our thought; for our thought will then have crossed the threshold of artificial thinking and entered the life-domain of natural thinking.

The primal elements of architecture are the same to-day as ever they were since the dawn of things; namely, only three—pier, lintel and arch. All other forms are secondary, tertiary, quarternary, or further derivatives of these original and elemental three.

The architectures of the Egyptian, Assyrian and Greek, based on pier and lintel, reflect, each, in its way, the nature of the three civilizations.

The Egyptian pier and lintel were results of what the Egyptian thought; the Assyrian, of what the Assyrian thought; the Greek, of what the Greek thought. There came a time when a certain section of men had other thoughts, very specific in nature, and Gothic art arose in response to Mediaeval thought.

Now in the course of time there has arisen a new people, in a new land called America. A land that but a few short centuries ago lay sleeping and dreaming, silent and alone amid the waters upon the fair round surface of the earth. This people at first few, rugged, hardy, fearless, increased marvelously in numbers. So rapidly, thoughtlessly and loosely did they organize and prosper, that disintegration (as was inevitable) kept a gaining-pace within their minds.
and their social structure, and, hence, corruption steadily worked an ascendancy, until now, at the height of their prosperity, they have also reached appalling depths of moral degradation,—and virtue is found in hiding.

This condition of heart and mind explains the pathology of our American architecture. That architecture is what the American people think.

Corruption has gone so far, that it is time for a reaction. Not a trivial reaction from Classic to Gothic; but a fundamental reaction from irresponsibility to responsibility; from irrational to rational ideas; from confused to clear thinking. It is time for the nightmare of our feudalism to end, and for us to awaken to the reality of healthful life.

Nor need any man fear that an art of expression will fail him merely because he is honest and thinks simply. On the contrary, such art of expression will come to him inevitably and spontaneously, just because his thoughts are clear and natural.

Nor need any man assume that this means the extinction of intuition and imagination. On the contrary, simple thinking, simple fearlessness of truth awakens these greatest adjuncts of the power of reason, reveals their nature, their normal healthful use, and the fluency and power of the great Life from which they draw their sustenance,—and which is unitary.

To discuss architecture and ignore life is frivolous.

To discuss American architecture and its possibilities, while ignoring the repressive force of feudalism and expansive force of democracy, is sheer lunacy.

That the educative forces surrounding the architect have been and are unfortunate, is but too true.

The net result has been to foster in the selfishness and egoism of the architect, the irresponsible notion that he need not think, and need not be a man; that the real, the spiritual interests of his people do not concern him.

Therefore is all special pleading for Classic, Gothic, or any other “ic” or “ance,” irrelevant, immaterial, and inconsequential.

What is of consequence, is vital direct thinking stripped of all hypocrisy, pedantry and dilettantism.

Our need is for fresh air and a general mental sanitation.