MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN REVIEW: STYLE AND ADAPTATION. BY C. HOWARD WALKER

The names given to styles tend to a confusion of ideas and are interpreted with as many various shades of meaning as there are readers. Therefore in any effort to consider styles, preliminary definition is necessary. For instance, shall Classic mean to us, only work expressed in terms of the orders of Architecture as drawn by Vitruvius or Vignola, or shall it mean this plus variations produced by exigencies of conditions and materials, or shall it mean as stated by Gaudet “everything that is incontestible in Art;” and shall Gothic mean the styles which were the logical result of building in stone or brick where large openings were spanned and vaulted and steep roofs desirable, or shall it mean any work in which the forms produced by such construction are adopted arbitrarily; or shall it mean all work which is the natural outcome of conditions, without eccentricity or unnecessary embellishment, in fact all work that is free from pedantry. Here is an embarrassment of riches, a plethora of ideas.

No wonder that under the circumstances there is a desire to get back to essentials, to begin “de nouveau,” and to eschew trademarks of styles. But after all, is the Trappist in Architecture a fully developed individual. Because he is virtuous “shall there be no more cakes and ale.” In the process of becoming strictly logical shall all resemblance to forms that have occurred in the expression of styles be ignored. Manifestly, any such attitude must fail in all but the mere anatomy of art, and can have no clothing, and must be void of charm, for the details which have become associated with styles are all developed from structural suggestions and are out of place only when they are either traitors to their own antecedents or are in discord with associated forms; and have been adopted to enhance the expression of an Art and from that fact deserve consideration.

Plagiarism in design can scarcely be said to exist, for conditions are protean in their changes, and no literal copy can be very successful, for, as the conditions change, the design must change in idea, in proportions, in harmony with its raison d’être and because of that fact it becomes always new. It is more or less fatuous then, to quibble about styles, as styles, but it is to some purpose that the forms in which they clothe themselves shall be considered as adaptable to needs. And at this point occurs the element of common-sense, with-
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out which any attempt at art becomes ridiculous. In art, as in social intercourse, ridicule is both irritating and belittling, and no work of art worthy of the name can live down an element which is capable of being ridiculed, whether the element be structural or decorative. Sanity of structure and its expression is therefore an architectural necessity, and as the structure is governed largely by the requirements of plan and material, it is equally necessary that they should be sane.

It is evident that all architecture, of whatever style, has originated from simple and straightforward construction, which has been beautified by two methods, one that of refinement of the lines and proportions of the structural forms, the other that of overlaying those forms with some embellishment. The genesis of any style is therefore the result produced by exigencies of structure and in so far as the structure of a new building erected under seemingly new conditions resembles the structure which has produced a style, the new building will have certain points of similarity with that style. As the Greek styles are nearly devoid of arches and are developed from post and lintel, any structure devoid of arches and not clothed with the details of other styles will resemble crude Greek forms. As the Roman style is prolific in round arches of a considerable span, any structure with round arches will to some extent have elements of that style as the acceptance of the designation Romanesque indicates. The same thing occurs with the vertical lines and the ribs of the Gothic. By their structure shall ye know them. It is impossible to prevent the apparent relationship between works of similar structure, and it is futile to attempt to do so. But it is not an uncommon occurrence to find structure which in proportions and intention resembles Gothic clothed with classic forms and vice versa. The result is unsatisfactory, must necessarily be so, and produces an effect either of plagiarism or of affectation. What more natural plan of action can be adopted than that of primitive man, that is, to let the method of building suggest the manner of building. Such an attitude once acknowledged, the process of designing is very much simplified, and originality, that so much sought for attribute, occurs naturally, and is not the absurd tour de force so often apparent.

There are, however, several facts to be considered. First, all simple construction is at first necessarily crude, and becomes beautiful
only by careful study of all possible refinements, by the elimination of unnecessary factors, by the expression of subtleties of strains and stress, in fact by making all parts correlative, and no part aggressive. The most exquisite lines and forms will then appear in all materials, and the finer the material the more delicate will be the forms. We may therefore expect to find the most subtle lines as expressive of metals. If this reasoning is applied to construction, structural ironwork should be capable of great refinement, a fact which is not as yet evidenced by results. The reason for this is manifest. Structural ironwork is not a finished product, it is merely an accessory skeleton, while the delicacy of line of weapons, of surgical instruments and of working parts of machines, testify that these are carried as far as possible to completion. It cannot therefore be expected that a style can be produced from unclothed structural iron though a crude suggestion of design may be derived from it, and that suggestion is one of rectangular panels, usually vertical in their direction. It is this vertical tendency which has created the idea that Gothic forms might be peculiarly appropriate to skyscrapers. As a matter of fact, there is no structural resemblance between these buildings and any that have been previously built, and one style is as appropriate as another, excepting for one consideration. Structural iron must be covered for protection and this covering has the traditions of its material. If it is merely paint, an architecture of paint may be expected, if it is concrete, it has the tradition of flat plain surfaces, if it is brick or stone, it has the traditional treatment of brick or stone for certain walls. And it is by no means necessary to announce the factors of structure behind the shell, as if the building were a radiograph. Certain general indications are sufficient, provided the whole effect is consistent with the type of construction and does not deny or oppose it. It is very likely therefore that new methods of construction and new conditions of plan while producing types, as they have already done, are incapable of producing styles. The masses of buildings in the Palace of the Dalai Lama at Lhassa, the towers of San Gimignano and the utilitarian skyscrapers of an American city have much in common, but they cannot be said to have style, being merely masses and of ordinary development. Yet they thoroughly answer their purpose, and the only further expression that can be expected of them is that of relative grouping of masses and points of focussed detail.
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It is in buildings of greater unity of purpose, of higher ideal, of more concentrated effort, that style may be anticipated, such as civic and religious buildings, and the habitation of a family, or of a well defined class. And in these the element of historical tradition is still strong. The conservatism which holds to the best of the past makes it wisdom to maintain certain observances, certain forms, and ignorance and neglect of this conservatism results in chaos in architecture, as in law. The chaotic architecture of America has been in the past due to ignorance, in the future it bids fair to be due to wilful neglect.

In the attempt to eliminate what is assumed to be artificial and imitative, two facts are overlooked, first that all beginnings are crude and while sincere lack full accomplishment; second, that the methods of expression of certain factors in construction have been tested again and again, and solutions obtained, and that a discriminative selection of the results is merely an acknowledgement of progress in the art. It seems to be as unnecessary for an architect to avoid the use of certain established details in architecture as it would be for a painter to omit the features of a face. The architect should have the common sense to recognize the fact that novelty in his art does not come from preconceived desire, but from change of relation in component parts, and he should devote his powers to making the relation of the factors as perfect as possible. In the process of this work he is constantly aided by studying corresponding results already obtained, and using such portion of these results as will fit well into his problem. To deny himself this privilege is analogous to a writer who deliberately avoids all words excepting nouns and verbs, or who tries to invent a new language. All good architecture has been eclectic in the forming, and has become crystallized into styles as the result of highly specialized requirements, both of intention and of structure, but even in the process of formation it has never ignored forms of which the use was already established and which had completed their development. Therefore there is family resemblance between all lintels and all capitals, and while variations may be extreme, the fundamental forms remain the same. All of which points to the conclusion that any and all styles have elements which will recur in greater or less degree in each architectural problem, and which can be expressed in terms that have long been established. Even Archaeological knowledge often serves an architect a good turn.

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As to the renewed interest in Gothic solutions of architectural problems, there is little to be said. Certainly no phase of architecture has become so formalized as is that of the Classic in which the orders are used. It becomes almost a necessity that the scheme of the design should be very simple in order that the Classic orders should be at their best, and as plan and elevation become complex greater freedom is essential. This freedom is to be found in transitional styles and in the Gothic, and it is natural that the work accomplished should be influenced by that fact. But unless a tradition, such as that of the Church, establishes a style, it is unwise to deliberately adopt any pronounced style regardless of environment. The chief fault with Modern Architecture is that it is a harlequinade, and one of the greatest charms of foreign towns and villages is that there is a simple harmony in the work throughout. The natural sequence in designing architecture is the simplest of construction, and the simplest expression of that construction and of the adaptation of the result to the environment. The note should not be forced. Unless the building is either so large, or is so isolated that it dominates its surroundings, there is no advantage in its being different from its neighbors, excepting by cause of its greater merit. Pronounced styles have always appeared in very important buildings, and they should be confined to that type of work. Let all other work be designed regardless of styles, but with the greatest attention to style.

EDUCATION IN ART

"I t is not for me to go now into the many reasons why it is not possible for us in these later times to enter fully into the spirit which prompted the beautiful work of the past: this one reason, that we have not first met with the difficulties the overcoming of which brought it into existence, is all that is within my province at the moment. Get yourself saturated with knowledge of form, of beautiful form, presented for your study by Nature on every hand, and apply this in your own way to meeting requirements and overcoming difficulties which you fully comprehend, which present themselves to you in the work which you have to do."

(Barry Parker.)