WHAT IS ARCHITECTURE?—A STUDY OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE: BY LOUIS H. SULLIVAN

Sometimes it is given to a man to utter fearlessly and in simple, direct words the thought that characterizes an age or a race,—a thought so true that every man, if he be honest with himself, will recognize it as his own, although unuttered and perhaps unformulated. Such a thought has been uttered by Mr. Louis H. Sullivan in this mercilessly penetrating study of the American people. It is an estimate to be read and pondered over with the open mind that makes for understanding, for it is true. It is not at all flattering, but it is better than that,—it goes down to the foundation of things and shows where lies a brave hope for the future. So important does this essay seem to the clear exposition of all The Craftsman stands for, that it will be printed entire in three sections, of which this is the first. [EDITOR]

THE intellectual trend of the hour is toward simplification. The full powers of the modern scientific mind are now directed, with a common consent, toward searching out the few and simple principles that are believed to underlie the complexity of Nature, and such investigation is steadily revealing a unitary impulse underlying all men and all things.

This method of analysis reveals a simple aspect of Man, namely, that as he thinks, so he acts; and, conversely, one may read in his acts what he thinks—his real thoughts, be it understood, not what he avows he thinks. For all men think, all men act. To term a man unthinking is a misuse of words; what really is meant, is, that he does not think with accuracy, fitness and power. If, then, it be true that as a man thinks so must he act in inevitable accordance with his thought, so is it true that society, which is but a summation of individuals, acts precisely as it thinks. Thus are the thoughts of a people to be read in the acts of a people, as clearly as words are read upon the printed page.

If, in like manner, we apply this method of analysis to the complex spread of historical and contemporaneous architecture, we perceive, clearly revealed in their simplicity, its three elementary forms,
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namely, the pier, the lintel and the arch. These are the three, the only three letters, from which has been expanded the Architectural Art as a great and superb language wherewith Man has expressed, through the generations, the changing drift of his thoughts. Thus, throughout the past and the present, each building stands as a social act. In such act we read that which can not escape our analysis, for it is indelibly fixed in the building, namely, the nature of the thoughts of the individual and the people whose image the building is or was.

Perhaps I should not leave the three elements, pier, lintel and arch, thus baldly set forth. It may not appear to the reader that the truth concerning them is as clear and simple as I state it. He may think, for example, that there was a marked difference between the Egyptian and the Greek architecture, even though both were based on pier and lintel only. There was a marked difference,—the difference that existed between the Egyptian and the Greek minds. The Egyptian animated pier and lintel with his thought—he could not do otherwise; and the Egyptian temple took form as an Egyptian act—it could not be otherwise. So Greek thought, clearly defined, took form in the Greek temple, clearly defined, and the Greek temple stood clearly forth as a Greek act. Yet both were as simply pier and lintel, as I, in setting one brick upon two separated other bricks, simply expose the principle of pier and lintel.

Similarly the Roman aqueduct and the Mediaeval cathedral were both in the pier-and-arch form. But what a far cry from Roman thought to Mediaeval thought! And how clearly is that difference in thought shown in the differences in form taken on in each case by pier and arch, as each structure in its time stood forth as an act of the people. How eloquently these structures speak to us of the militant and simple power of Roman thought, of the mystic yearning of Mediaeval thought.

BUT you may say, these structures were not acts of the people, rather, in one case the act of the emperor, in the other case an act of the church. Very well; but what really was the emperor but an act of the people—expressing the thought of the people; and what was the church but similarly the thought of the people in action? When the thought of the Roman people
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changed, the vast Roman fabric disintegrated; when the thought of the Mediaeval people changed, the vitality of the church subsided exactly in proportion as the supporting thought of the people was withdrawn. Thus every form of government, every social institution, every undertaking, however great, however small, every symbol of enlightenment or degradation, each and all have sprung and are still springing from the life of the people, and have ever formed and are now as surely forming images of their thought. Slowly by centuries, generations, years, days, hours, the thought of the people has changed; so, with precision, have their acts responsively changed; thus thoughts and acts have flowed and are flowing ever onward, unceasingly onward, involved within the impelling power of life. Throughout this stream of human life, and thought, and activity, men have ever felt the need to build; and from the need rose the power to build. So, as they thought, they built; for, strange as it may seem, they could build in no other way. As they built, they made, used and left behind them records of their thinking. Then, as through the years new men came with changed thoughts, so arose new buildings, in consonance with the change of thought—the building always the expression of the thinking. Whatever the character of the thinking, just so was the character of the building. Pier, lintel and arch changed in form, purpose and expression, following, with the fidelity of Life, Man’s changing thoughts as he moved in the flow of his destiny—as he was moved ever onward by a drift unseen and unknown—and which is now flowing and is still unseen and unknown.

This flow of building we call historical architecture. At no time and in no instance has it been other than an index of the flow of the thought of the people—an emanation from the inmost life of the people.

Perhaps you think this is not so; perhaps you think the feudal lord built the fortified castle. So he did, ostensibly. But where did his need and power so to build come from? From his retainers. And whence came the power of his retainers? From the people. As the people thought, so they acted. And thus the power of the feudal lord rested upon the thought, the belief of the people; upon their need and their power. Thus all power rests upon the consent of the people, that is, upon their thought. The instant their
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thought begins to change, that instant the power, resting upon it and sanctioned by it, begins its warning. Thus the decay of the old and the formation of the new are synchronous effects of one cause. That single cause is: Thought. Thus we perceive that the simplest aspect of all human activity is change.

To analyse the influences that cause thought to change would take me, now, too far afield. Suffice it to say that thought, once having undergone change, does not again become the same—however great the lapse in time. Thus is there ever new birth, never re-birth.

It may now become clear to my reader that we ought, in viewing historic architecture, to cease to regard it under the artificial classification of styles, as is now the accepted way, and to consider (as is more natural and more logical) each building of the past and the present as a product and index of civilization of its time; and the civilization of the time, also, as the product and index of the thought of the people of the time and place. In this way we shall develop in our minds a much broader, clearer panorama of the actual living flow of architecture through the ages; and grasp the clear, simple, accurate notion that the architecture always has been, and still is, a simple impulse of which the manifestation in varied form is continually changing.

I should add, perhaps, that, in speaking of the people, I do not use the word in the unhappy sense of the lower classes so-called. I mean all the people; and I look upon all the people as constituting a social organism.

I am quite aware that these are views not generally held among architects. Indeed you will not find a thesis of this kind set forth in books or taught in schools. For the prevailing view concerning architecture is strangely artificial and fruitless, as indeed are current American ideas concerning almost any phase of the welfare of all the people. That is to say; in our democratic land, ideas, thoughts, are weirdly, indeed destructively undemocratic—an aspect of our current civilization which, later, I shall consider.

I therefore ask my reader, for the time being at least, to repose sufficient confidence in my statements, that he may lay aside his existing notions concerning architecture, which are of necessity
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traditional, and, as such, acquired habits of thinking, unanalysed by him; and thus lay his mind open to receive and consider the simple and more natural views which make up my paper, to the end that he may perceive how far astray we are from an architecture natural, truthful and wholesome, such as should characterize a truly democratic people. I ask this because the welfare of democracy is my chief concern in life; and because I have always regarded architecture, and still so regard it, as merely one of the activities of a people, and, as such, necessarily in harmony with all the others. For as a nation thinks concerning architecture, so it thinks concerning everything else; and as it thinks concerning any other thing, so it thinks concerning architecture; for the thought of a people, however complicated it may appear, is all of a-piece and represents the balance of heredity and environment at the time.

I trust, further, that a long disquisition is not necessary in order to show that the attempts at imitation, by us of this day, of the bygone forms of building, is a procedure unworthy of a free people; and that the dictum of the schools, that architecture is finished and done, is a suggestion humiliating to every active brain, and therefore, in fact, a puerility and a falsehood when weighed in the scales of truly democratic thought. Such dictum gives the lie, in arrogant fashion, to healthful human experience. It says, in a word: The American people are not fit for democracy. Perhaps they are not. If so, we shall see how and why. We shall see if this alleged unfitness is really normal and natural, or if it is a feudal condition imposed upon the people by a traditional system of inverted thinking. We shall see if those whom we have entrusted with leadership in our matters educational have or have not misled us. We shall see, in a larger sense, if we, as a people, not only have betrayed each other, but have failed in that trust which the world-spirit of democracy placed in our hands, as we, a new people, emerged to fill a new and spacious land.

All of this we shall presently read in our current architecture, and we shall test the accuracy of that reading by a brief analysis of the thought and activities of the American people as they are expressed in other ways. For, be sure, what we shall find in our architecture, we shall as surely find elsewhere and everywhere.
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If it is assumed that the art of reading is confined to the printed page, we can not go far. But if we broaden and quicken our sense of reading until it appears to us, in its more vital aspect, as a science, an art of interpretation, we shall go very far indeed. In truth there will be no ending of our journey; for the broad field of nature, of human thought and endeavor, will open to us a book of life, wherein the greatest and the smallest, the most steadfast and the most fleeting, will appear in their true value. Then will our minds have escaped slavery to words and be at liberty, in the open air of reality, freely and fully to deal with things. Indeed, most of us have, in less and greater measure, this gift of reading things. We come into it naturally; but, curiously enough, many are ashamed because it does not bear the sanction of authority, because it does not bear the official stamp of that much misunderstood word scholarship, a stamp, by the way, which gives currency to most of the notions antagonistic to the development of our common thinking powers. It is this same scholastic fetishism, too, that has caused an illogical gap between the theoretical and the practical. In right thinking such gap can not exist. A true method of education, therefore, should consist in a careful and complete development of our common and natural powers of thinking, which, in reality, are vastly greater, infinitely more susceptible to development than is generally assumed. Indeed the contumacy in which we habitually underrate the latent powers of the average human mind is greatly to our discredit. It constitutes, in fact, a superstition,—a superstition whose origin is readily traceable to the scholasticism of past centuries, and to the tenacious notion of social caste. It is definitely the opposite of the modern and enlightened view now steadily gaining ground, that the true spirit of democratic education consists of searching out, liberating and developing the splendid but obscured powers of the average man, and particularly those of his children.

It is disquieting to note that the system of education on which we lavish funds with such generous, even prodigal, hand, falls short of fulfilling its true democratic function; and that particularly in the so-called higher branches, its tendency appears daily more reactionary, more feudal.

It is not an agreeable reflection that so many of our university graduates lack the trained ability to see clearly, and to think simply,
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concisely, constructively; that there is perhaps more showing of
cynicism than good faith, seemingly more distrust of men than con-
fidence in them, and, withal, no consummate ability to interpret
things.

In contrast, we have the active-minded but "uneducated" man,
he who has so large a share in our activities. He reads well those
things that he believes concern him closely. His mind is active,
practical, superficial; and, whether he deals with small things or
large, its quality is nearly the same in all cases. His thoughts al-
most always are concerned with the immediate. His powers of re-
fection are undeveloped, and thus he ignores those simple vital
things which grow up beside him, and with which, as a destiny, he
will some day have to reckon, and will then find himself unprepared.
The constructive thinking power of some such men, the imagina-
tive reach, the incisive intuition, the forceful will, sometimes amaze
us. But when we examine closely we find that all this is but brilliant
superstructure, that the hidden foundation is weak because the
foundation-thought was not sought to be placed broad, deep and
secure in the humanities. Thus we have at the poles of our think-
ing two classes of men, each of which believes it is dealing with
realities, but both, in fact, dealing with phantoms; for between them
they have studied everything but the real thoughts and the real
hearts of the people. They have not sufficiently reckoned with the
true and only source both of social stability and of social change.
If, in time, such divergence of thought, as it grows in acuteness,
shall lead to painful readjustments, such will be but the result,
natural and inexorable, of a fatal misunderstanding, the outgrowth
of that fatal defect in our system of thinking which is leading us
away from our fellows.

(To be continued)