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

This Architecture, in the large sense, is barren of poetry; yet, strangely enough, it faintly contains in its physiognomy a latent suggestion, which bespeaks dramatic, lyric, eloquent and appealing possibilities. In fine, it expresses obscurely the most human qualities you as a people possess, and which, such is your awkward mental bashfulness, you are ashamed to acknowledge, much less to proclaim. One longs to wash from this dirty face its overlay of timidity and abase ment; to strip from its form the rags of neglect and contumely, and to see if indeed there be not, beneath its forlorn aspect, the sweet face and form of an unsuspected Cinderella.

I surmise—or is it a hope born of visible possibilities? For, truly, what in all the world is more charming in the last analysis, however fickle, and at times childishly cruel, than is the American heart!

On this foundation, deeper and stronger than you suspect, I would, if I were you, build a new superstructure, really truer to yourselves, and more enduring, than that which is now crumbling upon its weak support of over-smartness and fundamental untruth.

Fortunate, indeed, are you, that your corruption is so crude; for you can still survive the surgery of its eradication. It is on this sound heart, and that still better part of it as yet unmatured and unrevealed to your own consciousness, that I would build anew and aright. For he who knows even a genuinely little of mankind knows this truth: The heart is greater than the head. For, in the heart is desire; and out of it comes forth courage and magnanimity.

To be sure, you have assumed that poetry meant verses; and that reading such was an unworthy weakness for men of brains and hard-headed business. You have held to a fiction, patterned upon your farcical common sense, that sentiment has no place in affairs. Again you did not inquire; you assumed; took for granted—as is your heedless way. You have not looked into your own hearts. You have looked only at the vacancy of convention from which realities have long since departed. Only the husks remain there, like the shells of beetles upon the bark of a living tree.
WHAT IS ARCHITECTURE?

YOU have not thought deeply enough to know that the heart in you is the woman in the man. You have derided your femininity, where you have suspected it; whereas, you should have known its power, cherished and utilized it, for it is the hidden well-spring of intuition and imagination. What can the brain accomplish without these two? They are the man’s two inner eyes; without them he is stone blind. For the mind sends forth these powers, both together. One carries the light, the other searches; and between them they find treasures. These they bring to the brain, which first elaborates them, then says to the will, “Do”—and action follows.

Poetically considered, as far as the huge, disordered resultant mass of your architecture is concerned, intuition and imagination have not gone forth to illuminate and search the hearts of the people. Thus are its works stone blind. If such works be called masculine, this term will prove but a misuse of neuter. For they are empty of procreant powers. They do not inspirit the thoughtful mind, but much do they depress it; they are choked with inarticulate cries which evoke pathos in the hearer.

Consider, now, that poetry is not verse—although some verse may be poetic. Consider, now, poetry as apart from words and as resident in things, in thoughts, in acts. For if you persist in regarding print or language as the only readable or hearable thing—you must, indeed, remain dull interpreters of the voices of Nature, and of the acts and thoughts of the men of the present and the past, in their varied, but fundamentally alike activities. No; poetry, rightly considered, stands for the highest form of intellectual scope and activity. Indeed, it were truer to say psychic activity, if it be known what realities lie behind the mask of that word.

And, be it said in passing, most words are masks. Habit has accustomed you to this company of masks, beautiful some of them, repellent others, but you seldom draw aside a word mask to see for yourselves the countenance of reality which it may both reveal and conceal. For, as I have said, you do not inquire, you are prone to take things for granted. You have seen masks since childhood, and you have assumed and still assume them to be real, because, since childhood, you have been told they were, and are, real, by those to whose selfish interest it was, and is, that you cherish the illusion. Lately, however, you have sufficiently awakened to draw aside the mask word “respectability.”
WHAT IS ARCHITECTURE?

You dearly love the mask-word "brains," which means physical action, and sniff at the word "intellect," which stands for clear, powerfully constructive reflection. Therefore, as this is your thought, naturally enough, you are the victims of your impulsive acts, and of your apathy toward far-reaching inevitable, yes, inexorable, consequences.

It is vitally with realities that poetry deals. But you say it is not; so that settles the matter as far as you are concerned—at least you think it does—in reality it settles you—it keeps you self-bound. You say that poetry deals only with metaphor and figures of speech. What is your daily talk but metaphor and figures of speech! Every word, genuinely used, is a picture; whether used in conversation or in literary production. Mental life, indeed physical life, is almost entirely a matter of eyesight.

Poetry, properly understood, means the most highly efficient form of mental eyesight. That is to say, it is that power of seeing and doing which reveals to man's inner self the fulness and the subtle power of life. Poetry, as a living thing, therefore, stands for the most telling quality that man can impart to his thoughts. Judged by this test your buildings are dreary, empty places.

Further, these buildings reveal no genuine art of expression—and neither have you, as a people, genuinely expressed yourselves. You have sniffed at this, too; for you are cynical, and very pert, and very cocksure. The leer is not long absent from your eyes. You have said in substance: "What do we want of an art of expression? We cannot sell it!" Perhaps not. But you can and have sold yourselves.

You have assumed that an art of expression is fiction, something apart from yourselves; as you have assumed almost all things of genuinely preservative value to be fictions, apart from yourselves—things negligible, to be put on and off like a coat.

Therefore, look at your body of laws—complicated, grotesque and inefficient, spiked with "jokers," as guns are spiked. Look at your constitution. Does that now really express the sound life in you, or is there a "joker" in that, too, that is surely strangling you? Look at your business. What is it become but a war of extermination among cannibals? Does it express democracy? Are you, as a people, now really a democracy? Do you still possess the power of self-government
WHAT IS ARCHITECTURE?

of a people, by a people, for a people? Or is it now perished, as your Abraham Lincoln, on the field of Gettysburg, hoped it might not, and as hoped a weary and heartsick people at the close of an awful struggle to preserve democracy in its integrity, to preserve that fundamental art of expression whereby a people may, unhampered, give voice and form to the aspiration of their lives, their hopes, as they press onward toward the enjoyment of their birthright, the birthright of every man—the right to happiness.

Do you realize with what caustic accuracy this stupor is shown in your buildings? They, too, stand for the spiked laws of an art of expression. For what is there to express but the true life of a people? What is there in a democracy but all the people? By what right does any man say: “I am! I own! I am therefore a law unto myself!” How quickly among you has I lead! become—I possess! I betray! How glibly have you acquiesced! With what awful folly have you assumed greed to be the basis of democracy!

HOW significant is it, that now a few rough hands are shaking you, a few sharp, shrill voices calling: “Awake before it is too late!”

But I hear you say testily: “We are too young to consider these accomplishments. We have been so busy with our material development that we have not found the time to consider them.”

Know, then, that to begin with they are not accomplishments but necessities. And, to end with, you are old enough, and have found the time to succeed in nearly making a “fine art of—betrayal, and a science of graft!”

Know that you are as old as the race—that each man among you has in him the accumulated power of the race, ready at hand for use, in the right way, when he shall conclude it better to think straight, and hence act straight rather than, as now, to act crooked and pretend to be straight.

Know that the test, plain simple honesty (and you all know, every man of you knows, exactly what that means) is always at your hand.

Know, that as all complex manifestations have a simple basis of origin, so the vast complexity of your national unrest, ill health, inability to think clearly and accurately concerning simple things, really vital things, is easily and swiftly traceable to the single, actual,
WHAT IS ARCHITECTURE?

active cause—dishonesty; and that this points with unescapable logic and in just measure to each individual man!

The remedy—individual honesty.
A conclusion as logical as just!
"But," you may say, "how absurdly simple."

Doubtless it is absurd, if you think it is, and will so remain, as far as you are concerned, just so long as you think it is—and no longer. But just so long will your social pains and aches and unrest continue; and these you do not consider absurd.

When Newton saw the apple fall, he saw what you might likewise call an absurdly simple thing. Yet with this simple thing he connected up the universe.

Moreover, this simple thing, honesty, stands in the universe of human thought and action, as its very center of gravity, and is our human mask-word behind which abides all the power of Nature's integrity, the profoundest fact which modern thinking has persuaded life to reveal.

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HAT folly, then, for man to buck against the stupendous flow of life, instead of voluntarily and gladly placing himself in harmony with it, and thus transferring to himself Nature's own creative energy and equipoise.

"But," you say, "all this is above our heads."

No, it is not! 'It is close beside your hand!' and therein lies its power.

Again you say: "How can honesty be enforced?"
It cannot be enforced!
"Then how will the remedy go into effect?"
It cannot go into effect. It can only come into effect.
"Then how can it come?"
Ask Nature.
"And what will Nature say?"

Nature is always saying: "I center at each man, woman and child. I knock at the door of each heart, and I wait. I wait in patience—ready to enter with my gifts."

"And is that all that Nature says?"
That is all.
"Then how shall we receive Nature?"
By opening wide your minds! For your greatest crime against yourselves is that you have locked the door in her face, and have thrown away the key! Now you say: “There is no key!”

Then how shall we make a new key?

First: Care scrupulously for your individual and collective physical health. Beware of those who are undermining it; they are your deadliest danger. Beware of yourselves if you are undermining it, for you are then your own deadliest enemy. Thus will you achieve the vital preliminary—a quiet, strong and resilient nervous system. Thus will your five senses become accurate interpreters of your physical surroundings; and thus, quite naturally, will the brain resume in you its normal power to act and react.

Second: Begin at once the establishment of a truly democratic system of education. The basis of this must be character; and the mind must so be trained in the sense of reality that it may reach the fulness of its power to weigh all things, and to realize that the origin and sustenance of its power comes from without, and is Nature’s bounteous, unstinted gift to all men.

Such system of education will result in equilibrium of body, mind and heart. It will develop real men and women—as is Nature’s desire.

It will produce social equilibrium in every aspect of human affairs. It will so clearly reveal the follies that have cursed you that you will abandon them forever. For you will then recognize and gladly accept the simple, central truth that the individual grows in power only as he grows in integrity, and that the unfailing source of that integrity lies in the eternal integrity of Nature and of that infinite serenity of which Nature is but a symbol.

Thus will you make of democracy a religion—the only one the world will have developed—befitting freemen—free in the integrity of their bodies, free in the integrity of their thought.

So doing, all aspects of your activities will change, because your thoughts will have changed. All of your activities will then take on organic and balanced coherence, because all of your thoughts will have a common center of gravity in the integrity of the individual man.

As the oak tree is ever true to the acorn from which it sprang, and propagates true acorns in its turn, so will you then give true expression and form to the seed of democracy that was planted in your soil, and so spread in turn the seeds of true democracy.
WHAT IS ARCHITECTURE?

Thus, as your thoughts change, will your civilization change. And thus, as democracy takes living and integral shape within your thought, will the feudalism now tainting you disappear. For its present power rests wholly upon your acquiescent and supporting thought. Its strength lies wholly in you, not in itself. So, inevitably, as the sustaining power of your thought is withdrawn, this feudalism will crumble and vanish!

So have you no need of force, for force is a crude and inefficient instrument. Thought is the fine and powerful instrument. Therefore, have thought for the integrity of your own thought. For all social power, for good, or for ill, rests upon the thought of the people. This is the single lesson in the history of mankind that is really worth the while.

*Naturally, then, as your thoughts thus change, your growing architecture will change.* Its falsity will depart; its reality will gradually disappear. For the integrity of your thought, as a people, will then have penetrated the minds of your architects.

Then, too, as your basic-thought changes, will emerge a philosophy, a poetry, and an art of expression in all things; for you will have learned that a characteristic philosophy, poetry and art of expression are vital to the healthful growth and development of a democratic people.

As a people you will have enormous latent, unused power. Awaken it. Use it. Use it for the common good. Begin now. For it is as true to-day as when one of your wise men said it: "The way to resume is to resume!"

*The End*