IS OUR ART A BETRAYAL RATHER THAN AN EXPRESSION OF AMERICAN LIFE? BY LOUIS H. SULLIVAN

It is futile to seek an understanding of architectural conditions in America without a prior survey of social conditions. For, little as we Americans believe it, social conditions are basic—all else superficial thereto. If, therefore, I were asked to name the one salient, deeply characteristic social condition, which with us underlies everything else as an active factor in determining all other manifestations, I should without the slightest hesitation say betrayal. It is so clear that no one can avoid seeing it who does not take express pains to shut his eyes.

That the first and chief desire, drift, fashion, custom, willingness, or whatever you may choose to call it, of the American people, lies in this curiously passionate aptitude for betrayal is, I am aware, a startling statement; but it is nevertheless as startlingly true.

This, therefore, being my thesis, I purpose to develop it briefly but with care, with the end clearly in view and near at hand of showing that a non-betraying architecture can no more be expected of a betraying people than figs can be expected of the proverbial thistle; and that a genuine architecture—that is, an architecture which does not betray but really expresses—can begin to appear only when the American people shall begin to right themselves in their fundamental social position, and seek not to betray each other but to express each other. This should seem an elementary and axiomatic statement. But it is not accepted as such by us—for we good and simple Americans have a horror of simplicity and efficiency, just as we practical and sensible Americans, as we like to term ourselves, are the most visionary and impractical of any people on earth.

The proof that we are impractical and super-sentimental lies in the fact which at once confronts us, that we have no social scheme, view, theory or method that is practical, clear and efficient. We are, in fact, mere grown children, and unruly children at that. A really practical and sensible people would seek to understand itself and the conditions essential to its social health and functioning; we do not.

The truth is we are not American in our thought, but Mediæval European. And our civilization is not democratic, as we fondly suppose, but utterly feudal through and through. We have not glimpsed the simple nature of Democracy and there is no hint of such glimpse even in university, college, public school, church, text books or the public press. For the fundamental of Democracy is that man shall not betray. This is a truth of such simplicity and force that it
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has never occurred to us that it could be real. It is perhaps, therefore, asking too much of us as a people that we develop a sensible and beautifully expressive architecture, germane to ourselves; while we have not even as yet developed a science and art of living.

It is a remarkable fact that eighty millions of people, living together as one political aggregation, are without a philosophy—that is, without a real reason for living. The spectacle is startling enough, to be sure; and yet it does not startle us, for we do not see it. We are so busy, foolishly betraying each other, that we see nothing real—not even the betrayal and the folly of it, and our thoughts are so saturated and deeply dyed with old-world feudalism that we do not even see the feudalism and what it means, what its tragedy is in everyday fact. No, we do not see and we do not listen. Now, a people which neither sees nor listens is not practical, and cannot, therefore, be expected to produce a practical and fitting architecture, which architecture must of necessity be based on seeing and listening.

The reason we do not see is simple; we do not look. The whole vast spectacle of ourselves is right before our eyes; but we do not look at it. Hence, of course, we do not look at our architecture. The absence of clear vision amongst us is astounding. It follows thus that we are the victims of mountebanks and demagogues of every grade, shade and kind, architectural and otherwise, and everywise. Because we will not be effectively simple, we pay the price of complication and inefficiency, and we do not perceive either the real nature of the complication or the real nature of the price—because we do not look!

Were we to look, we would see how extraordinary and how tragic is our betrayal of each other, and to what friction and consequent unhappiness it leads. We would see that the prime evil lies not so much in the betrayal itself as in the basic fact that such betrayal prevents the expression of a people by and for itself; and that social health can come only with expression; that suppression of function always means disease; and disease, in practice, is simply another name for inefficiency.

Now, social inefficiency is in itself a convincing symptom of betrayal; and, per contra, efficiency is the requirement for health. And if it be asked, efficiency in what? the answer is clear; efficiency in social expression: that is to say, in the expression of our real lives, our real beliefs, aspirations and hopes as a people; in other words, the real art of living, the true contact with nature and with man, and the true response to such contact.

Between ourselves and nature and our fellow man we now allow
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curious fogs, phantasms and abstractions to intervene. On account of these our contact is not clear and our responses are unkind. That is, we are not our real selves, because we suppress ourselves in favor of fantastic traditions which are not ourselves.

A really modern architecture can, of course, come only from a really modern people, And this we are not.

A truly modern people could not betray—would not think of such thing as entertainable.

And this, therefore, is the indictment: that we betray our true selves; that we are not modern.

This, of course, will shock your good American who thinks he is as modern as the clock, and who will be aghast to hear that he has no clear notion of things social.

THE TOUCH OF BEAUTY

WHAT is that magical strange quality
    That gives to all the words and ways of you
    Something supernal? Others are as true
Expressions of the inner thought, maybe,
But they are prose, and you are poetry.
    You merely look at me—and something new
Calls me to give it form, some faint, far clue
Touches me from a world I cannot see.

And sometimes when the beauty is not so high
    It overpowers me, I am moved to sing.
But, O Beloved, how mere words belie
    The wonder of that half-embodied thing!
It merely brushes me in going by,
    But leaves me all alive and quivering.

ELSA BARKER.