THE VALUE OF PERMANENT ARCHITECTURE AS A TRUTHFUL EXPRESSION OF NATIONAL CHARACTER: BY THE EDITOR

"Great nations write their autobiography in three manuscripts: the book of their words; the book of their deeds, and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the other two, but of the three, the only one quite trustworthy is the last. The acts of a nation may be triumphant by its good fortune, and its words mighty by the genius of a few of its children, but its art can be supreme only by the general gifts and common sympathies of the race."—JOHN RUSKIN.

NOTHING short of national honesty can produce a permanent and characteristic national architecture, because the element of sincerity which makes for permanence comes only from the expression in our buildings of direct thought, based upon the fundamental principles which underlie all art expression, but beyond that, governed only by the necessity to satisfy our own individual needs and to express by this means our character as a people. The fundamental principles of architecture are very simple. As Louis Sullivan puts it, they consist of "three elementary forms, 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 present, each building stands as a social act. In such act we read that which cannot 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."

From these three elements then,—the pier, the lintel and the arch,—which may be said to form the alphabet of architecture as well as the basis of all construction, has been developed the building art of the whole world. All the variations to which we refer as "style" have come from the application of these basic principles to the erection of buildings to meet individual needs,—whether for simple shelter from the elements, as it was in the beginning, or as an expression in enduring stone of the noblest aspirations and ideals. From this beginning has sprung as many great architectural styles as there are great peoples, and because the forms which have crystallized into these styles were the outcome of honest and direct thought, coupled with a knowledge of the principles of construction, these styles endure today.

We are too apt to think of architecture as the product of past ages and to regard the buildings which stand for all time as expressions of supreme beauty, as being a species of miracle, the like of which is never seen in this prosaic age. Therefore, according to this point
TWO CHARACTERISTIC HOUSES FROM SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA; ONE SHOWING TYPICAL SHINGLE CONSTRUCTION, THE OTHER, CEMENT WITH TILE ROOF, BOTH PERMANENT IN SENSE OF FITNESS OF DESIGN AND RIGHT USE OF MATERIALS.
TWO CALIFORNIA HOUSES THAT SHOW THE QUALITY OF PERMANENCE IN STRUCTURAL FEATURES AND THE USE OF MATERIALS.
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of view, all we can do is to imitate them and to adapt to our own needs, so far as we can, a form of building that grew out of the needs of a different people whose life was carried on under widely different conditions. Until this viewpoint is generally acknowledged to be wrong, there is no hope for the growth of a healthy, straightforward and therefore permanent architecture which shall definitely belong to us as a people. This is why we are so disposed to rejoice over each evidence of direct thought and a simple return to the first principles as expressed in the building art, for it seems to indicate that we are on the eve of throwing off, not only our architectural shackles, but some of the other false standards which hitherto have retarded our development.

Beauty in any form is one of the essential elements of the expression of sincere and vigorous thought. It is not the exclusive possession of any one people or any one age, nor does it express itself within the limits prescribed by any label which may be put on it. When you strip it of all the earmarks of period or nationality and bring together for study and comparison the achievements in various forms of art which have meant the presence of beauty in the world, you will find that the principle underlying it all is the common inheritance of humanity, because it is a part of nature and of life. Therefore in all periods which produced anything that we of today consider worth copying, the people thought directly and in the simplest terms, making their own application, according to their own need, of the principles which are universal. The fact that most of the styles we attempt to copy date back for hundreds of years does not argue that those ages were especially prolific in the invention of beautiful forms, or that the living spirit of beauty has vanished from the world; but that the men who unconsciously created those wonderful things which we revere did so because they thought directly and fearlessly, expressing their thought in the work of their hands. The fact that it has endured and has been considered good for all these years proves that the people first lived, then thought and then builded. When we learn to get back, through all forms, to the same fundamental principles upon which these old builders worked, we also will do something that shall last as an enduring record of this country and this age.

ONE of the best examples we have of this element of permanence is found in the architecture of the Japanese, which has persisted for twelve hundred years with but little change, because it has been the product of just such fundamental thinking. In the earlier period of Japanese civilization, the conditions of national life were not so widely different from our own. Japan was a new
country, peopled by an alien race which brought with it standards and ideals that were the outcome of an older civilization. History tells us that at first Chinese influence predominated in the whole national life of Japan and that Japanese architecture was definitely imitative of Chinese. But as the national spirit developed and the race "found itself" as a separate entity, the period of imitation passed by its own accord, and, having assimilated thoroughly the best of what China had to offer, the Japanese, using this knowledge as a foundation, began to get back to first principles and to apply these to the meeting of their own needs and the expression of their own spirit as a people.

There are abundant evidences that already we are coming to this turning point in our own national and artistic evolution, for we are beginning to outgrow the leading strings of tradition and to show a tendency to use the great achievements of former times as a source of inspiration for equally honest and direct achievement of our own. Our architecture has been chaotic and lacking in significance because our national life and thought also has been chaotic. We have artlessly copied the things that have withstood the test of time without stopping to inquire why these things maintained their integrity throughout hundreds of years, while our own attempts to reproduce or adapt them were confused and evanescent. As Louis Sullivan says, "as we are, so are our buildings." He says plainly that our architecture is confused and not sure of itself, because it is ashamed to be natural and honest. Therefore it lacks a guiding principle and following, as it does, after tradition instead of turning directly to nature for inspiration, it has in it no joy of creation,—no fulness of life,—lacking these qualities to just the extent that they are lacking in our lives.

In the building of our homes the basic principles that we should cling to, through all varieties of expression, are primarily those that affect our physical, mental and moral well-being. When we start to build a house, our first care should be to see that it is situated in pleasant and healthful surroundings and that it is so planned as to give ample and comfortable accommodation, plenty of sunlight and fresh air, good drainage and all the hygienic conditions that insure healthful living. When we do this we begin at the right end, basing what we are to do upon certain fundamental necessities, keeping these constantly in view, and striving to meet each one in the best possible manner. The rest follows as a matter of course, providing we are honest enough to adjust the thing we need and desire to the resources that we find we can command when
TWO WIDELY DIFFERENT EXPRESSIONS OF THE SAME ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES OF PERMANENCE IN DESIGN AND USE OF MATERIALS.
AN AMERICAN COUNTRY HOME THAT WILL NEED NO REMODELING AND VERY FEW REPAIRS.
A DELIGHTFUL COUNTRY HOUSE THAT BELONGS TO THE LANDSCAPE AROUND IT.
Two beautiful country seats near New York, showing the satisfying quality that exists when form and proportions leave nothing to be desired.
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we look the problem of living squarely in the face. Starting from this basis, there is little danger that we will go far afield in the effort to satisfy a swarm of unnecessary needs created by artificial conditions. But when we decide to build a new house that shall be handsome and imposing and endeavor to make it a good example of the Classic style, say, or the Gothic, Italian or French Renaissance, we start at the wrong end, disregarding our real needs and taking into account mainly a certain stereotyped set of artificial requirements. In other words, we begin our work hampered by a list of ironclad restrictions that have nothing to do with the home we really need and wish to build, instead of frankly acknowledging a series of healthy and actual needs that must be met in the simplest and most direct way and are therefore an inspiration to the production of a permanently satisfactory dwelling. When we lack this inspiration, and the knowledge of essentials that helps us to carry it out, we work uncertainly and lifelessly because we are merely taking for granted the rules laid down in architectural books, and are thinking with other men’s thoughts.

One effect of planning our homes after the thought of other people rather than our own is seen in the constant changing and remodeling of our houses. It is no exaggeration to say that a house built five years ago according to the prevailing fashion at that time is considered by many people to be out of date this year and not quite up to the mark unless it can be remodeled so as to supply the latest improvements or the newest style of decoration. It is amazing to see how people who are otherwise honest and direct are apparently content to live in houses that express anything rather than these qualities,—houses that need remodeling every little while because the original thought in them was on a false basis and therefore unsatisfying,—and seem never to realize the cause of their unrest. The reason seems to be that most people regard art as something in the nature of a hidden mystery, requiring long training and special aptitude even to comprehend, and therefore to be left in the hands of experts whose productions are taken on trust as being necessarily the right thing. With such an idea nothing but impermanence could result, for the reason that a ready-made house planned by someone else after the dictates of what is in vogue at the time, has in it no trace of the owner’s individuality and only indirectly meets his needs.

WE HOLD that everyone about to build a house that he intends to be his home should have the benefit of the best advice that can be obtained, but that the architect, however able and experienced, should act rather in the capacity of an advisor than that
of a dictator. The objection to this would naturally be that the average layman knows nothing of the subject and that the part of wisdom is for him to leave it entirely in the hands of the man who has made it a life study. That is just where the trouble lies. If we want buildings that express our own individuality and meet our own needs, it is absolutely necessary that the owner should be sufficiently familiar with the essentials of what he requires to coöperate intelligently with the architect in the production of a house that should, when it is finished, be fitted to stand for the rest of his life and to descend unimpaired and unaltered to his children.

The first things to be considered in the building of such a home are the position, income and occupation of the owner, and the providing of surroundings that seem pleasantest and most natural in relation to the life of the family. With regard to the initial outlay, this would depend largely upon the nature of the owner’s income and whether or not it may reasonably be depended upon to continue at about the same level. The creation of an expense that threatens to become a burden in hard times is always a dangerous thing, and this is especially true when it comes to the building of a home, which should be a refuge from the cares of business life rather than an addition to them. While it is undeniably true that economy is often best served by getting a good thing rather than a cheap one at the start, it is also true that the more extravagantly and luxuriously we build in the beginning, the harder the house is to keep up, for there is the wear and tear to be considered and the matter of heating, lighting and caring for each additional room. The main consideration is to spend wisely the money that can be set aside for the building and to do each thing so that it will stay done. Fortunately, the question of cost is not of the first importance, for all that is essential may be had within the limits of almost any reasonable sum that we care to devote to that purpose.

If a house be designed so that its lines and proportions are simple, dignified and in harmony with the surroundings, and built with such care that it will be sure of its natural lease of life, there is no question about its value as a permanent investment, whether the amount invested be large or small. If the interior be arranged so that every inch of space is utilized and the housework made as easy as possible,—so that the housewife can afford to ignore the ever-present domestic problem,—and the rooms large enough for freedom and restfulness, the house will be a comfortable place to live in. And lastly, if the structural features be interesting, the division of wall spaces well planned and the color scheme mellow, friendly and harmonious, no costly furnishings are needed to make it beautiful. Beauty is never
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gained by making an inexpensive house in imitation of a costly one, and our besetting architectural sin as a nation has been the attempt to do this very thing. There are many evidences now that we are beginning to grow wiser, and not the least of these is found in the number of dwellings, some large and costly, some small, modest and inexpensive, but each beautiful in its own way and each an honest expression of American life, that are springing up in every part of the country.

The permanent architecture of a country has its beginning in only one place,—the dwelling,—because only there is there room for the honest expression of personal tastes and needs. Once given the idea that good things grow naturally from direct thinking, the progressive architect will inevitably use the same methods in getting at the character of the larger buildings meant for public use. But these always follow the trail that has been blazed by the builders of homes. There are a number of men in this country now who are doing gallant work in blazing these trails, because they have the courage to cast aside precedent, tradition and other restrictions and to handle each separate problem in the most direct way. Several of these pioneers, in response to our request for illustrations of this article, have sent us what they consider good examples of their own work, and these we reproduce here. As will be seen, the houses range from large and luxurious country seats to simple cottages and farmhouses, yet all alike serve to illustrate our meaning when we talk of permanent architecture, because in all are seen the dignity of line and proportion and the right placing of structural features that make a house satisfying from the day it is built until it falls to pieces from old age. Also it will be noticed that these houses are free from all excrescences, eccentricities of shape and unnecessary ornamentation, all of which mar the beauty, add to the cost and shorten the life of any house. In fact, each and every one of them carry out to a marked degree what we have said concerning the essential elements of a permanent architecture, and form the best proof that it is beginning to take shape among us as a genuine expression of American art.