A PLEA FOR TRUE DEMOCRACY IN THE DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE OF AMERICA:
BY WILLIAM L. PRICE

E AMERICANS flatter ourselves that in domestic architecture, at least, we lead the world, that we have said the last word that has been said as to the comforts and equipments of home. If perfection of plumbing and plenty of heat meant home, or if ingenuity of arrangement meant architecture, this would be so. But we have very little real domestic architecture that is worth while, real in the sense of being an expression of the life of the people, more than a mere shell for their bodily comfort.

What proportion of the people of the United States live in their own homes? We have a trite expression that "Fools build houses for wise men to live in." The facts are rather the reverse. Wise men build houses and fools live in them, for the builders at least had the fun of building, and they as builders do not live in the cast-off misfits of other men. Nearly all of our people live either in houses built to sell, without individuality or other relation to the inhabitants than selection of the least unfit by them; or they live in houses designed by architects who did not and could not know them and their life, and who in most part were more interested in their art than in the object of their art.

To really produce domestic architecture, three elements are essential: First, an intelligent demand on the part of home builders for houses that shall meet their individual needs, in accommodations, in convenience, in embellishments and as an expression of and interpretation of their real life and interests; second, architects who have the desire and are able to interpret these needs, and also to explain to the craftsmen how they can be brought into being, and third, craftsmen who can make solid the dreams of the architects and add to the building those indefinable touches of real craftsmanship that are essential to all vital architecture and that can be neither drawn nor specified, but must grow out of the work itself.

What is domestic architecture? Not pictures of houses, but houses. Not transplanted and unrelated diagrams, but stone and
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brick, wood, iron and glass, built up into an expressive envelope for human desires and sentiments.

We have one real expression of domestic architecture in the Colonial, but we are no longer colonists, and we may not hope to get a real American architecture by futile attempts to copy either the letter or the spirit of an architectural expression of even our own forefathers. Our lives differ more from theirs than theirs did from the present life of Europe. Colonial architecture was a formal and stately background for the minuet, for the coach and four, for flowered vest and brocaded gown. Its elegance has the flavor of mignonette, and your trained architects can never galvanize it into life by the application of a knowledge of Renaissance details that the creators of it fortunately lacked. And most of the culture that demands it is as foreign to real democracy as modern Colonial is to real Colonial, and as spurious as the marble detail done in wood and paint which it so much admires.

Isn’t it about time for our spurious and insincere contempt for democracy to cease? Have we not paid the humiliating price of false ideals long enough? We have some real worth, some high purpose. There are some live Americans who are no more ashamed of our crudities and incompleteness than they are proud of our vanities and borrowed plumes. There are even some architects whose hopes are beyond income and the prestige that comes from the production of extraneous elegance, whose desire is for a pregnant art, who are not afraid to interpret life as they find it, even its rawness, who are honest enough even to build in the vainglorious absurdities that they laugh at. Be honest, fellows, tell it all, as simply and beautifully as you can, but all of it,—the brag and the boast as well as the simple and manly worth and the shamed sentiment. The American is a good sport and will soon laugh with you at his own foibles, and better yet he is game, and when you have helped him to laugh at your combined efforts in his building, he will help you to tear it down and build better. Why even our very rich men, who are many of them fine fellows when they are not at work, do not live in the fool palaces they build. They really live a few weeks in the year, on the water, in camp, somewhere beyond the bonds of the snickering and contemptuous servitude of their establishments. And you rich men, why not really help life and art along by letting us build you something genuine, some place halfway fit for the fragments of a real craftsmanship for which you pay such fabulous prices? Quit building the silly, sham palaces that demean your powers even though they do express your dollars. The idea of a live craftsman like Mr. Schwab, who really does things, building
a dead French chateau in New York would be hilariously funny if it were not pitiful. Mr. Carnegie, who has built up a great American industry, and in his intense Americanisms speaks for democracy and a world peace and world citizenship, scatters over our country library buildings that are in design essentially European and unmodern. If only he would insist that they be American architecture and real craftsmanship, he might help us to vital architecture as no other influence could, even to a real domestic architecture; for the library is an adjunct to and an extension of the home. Mr. Carnegie, like some of the rest of us, believes in the spirit of democracy, only we don’t know what it is and don’t try to apply it. We are beginning to look toward something beyond or behind it, and our college professors and wise men babble about the failure of the untried.

And we think we are so practical. We, the rankest spendthrifts in the world,—spendthrifts not in the high sense of living today, of expending all in the expression of our real lives, but spendthrifts who toil and sweat and do not even always play the game fairly in getting, only to pour it out like water for shams and make-believes, for borrowed finery, for extraneous and barbaric displays of meaningless trinkets and stolen and insignificant architectural forms. We architects talk expansively and mysteriously about style, referring to the cast-off and outworn raiment of the past; and about design, meaning the limping, patched-up abortion of readjusted form. But there is no mystery about the problem of house designing, although there is mystery in the unknown process of design,—the quick flashing subjective answer to the objective problems,—that is the joy of all real creation. A house is simply walls and windows, partitions and doors, floors and roof, stairways, closets and plumbing,—that is all. But to be architecture it must be something more. There must enter in other and more vital elements,—the human being who has developed far enough to demand these, needs much more. But our sham practical age has centered its efforts on these bodily requirements only, at least for others, thinking it enough that the house of the poor man should satisfy the artificial aestheticism of the cultured at best, and should merely keep him alive and exploitable at the worst.

You say the craftsman does not need to be surrounded by the beautiful,—that if he has sanitary plumbing it is enough. How then should you hope for intelligent or even honest construction and adornment of your own house which he must build? You say that your mill operators have neither intelligence nor taste to demand the artistic. Then reform the methods of your boasted production that makes them what they are! You can’t have a civilization for
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a minority class, and the germ born in the sweat-shop breeds in the parlor both physically and spiritually.

And these matters of brick and stone are very close to the spirit, but in the “how,” not in the “how much.” Just as a business matter, it takes no more material to build a beautiful house than an ugly one, and it takes less work, for most of the ugliness is attained by the addition of the unnecessary and unmeaning, and most of the beauty by simple directness and the elimination of extraneous detail. But you cannot attain beauty by the education of architects and the ignoring of the needs and powers of the common man, rich or poor. Architecture is the inevitable flower of real civilization, not the wax imitation under the smug glass of exclusion that adorns the stilted mantel of cutaneous cultures.

Now I know that you will repudiate me and my philosophy, protesting that you do not have wax flowers on your mantelpieces. No, but your grandmothers did, and you have your near-Classic architecture, the same exquisite and exclusive taste for the dead, and I am not at all sure that you will not soon be back to the wax flowers. You are flirting with the hoopskirts of the past,—the next step in your renascence of dress, and you already cover your walls with the pop-eyed wall coverings of the early Victorian, and clutter up your rooms with their elaborate inlaid and veneered furniture (less the honest construction), which half-culture calls Chippendale, although that worthy made no inlaid furniture. Oh, yes, you are headed for the wax flowers all right.

How then should we go about creating a real, vital, domestic architecture? Apply William Morris’s saying as to furnishing your house. “Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful and believe to be beautiful.” Be a child. Ask why? If you are consistent you may drive your architect crazy, or to thinking, but you will save your house. If you ask your architect why he puts this or that thing on, or if he ask himself and his answer is because he believes it to be beautiful, insist on the first and more important part of the test. If the architect is self-insistent on knowing why he is putting on ornament—and most of it is put on—he will either have to admit to himself that he is dishonest, or leave it off, and then his real work will begin. The subtle line that expresses purpose beautifully is far harder of attainment than the most gorgeous enrichment. The Japanese gentleman of taste, a taste which to ours is as fine gold is to fine gilding, drinks tea out of a Satsuma bowl, but it is not the Satsuma of embossed gold and hectic color, but the simplest of forms, with a surface that is crackled to the eye but velvet soft to the cheek, and with no ornament other than a simple written
sentiment without and a drawing in three strokes of Fujiama within, and even this in a faded black. We might well but for one thing adopt the Japanese method of house adornment, perfectly plain walls and wood frames guiltless of oil or varnish, and just one of his many treasures for its adornment. But, alas, we haven’t the treasures. Yet we can adopt the principle that ornament must be good enough to look at more than once, good enough to live with, or it mustn’t be there at all. The moldings and ornaments dictated by reason and purpose and not by the styles of the past are very few.

When your architect asks you what style of house you want, tell him domestic. And when he suggests Elizabethan or Spanish or Italian, still insist “domestic.” A house may be English or French or Italian, but a home must be domestic. The better “Elizabethan” a house is the worse domestic architecture it is, except in Elizabethan England. Even though we are in blood and life more dominantly British than anything other than American, we are no longer even English colonists.

Of course, culture always tends to cling to the elegancies of the past. It is the shadow of the past that is the very soul of culture. But suppose the past had also been “cultured” in this sense? Then we could have had no precedent and no culture. It is ours to pick over the scrap-heap of the past, putting its few vital records into the pocket of our minds, and, with knowledge enough, and hope unbounded, to turn our eyes to the future.

A new architecture is always struggling, Phoenix-like, to arise out of the ashes of the old, but if we strangle it in the cemeteries of the past, how shall it spring into effulgent life? Painting and sculpture and song may content themselves with yesterday. Architecture is of tomorrow.

There are few materials that are not fit to build with. It is in the misuse of them that disaster comes. When you use wood treat it as wood, even though it be painted. Stop using silly cut stone details and stone construction when you are building in other material. Use stone, plaster, brick, concrete, tile, anything you will, but use them for what they are, and let their qualities be shown forth as well as their purpose, and above all keep ornament out unless you can get real artists to put it in, and even then it must tell some story of purpose or interests. Cover your floors with carpets if you must, and rugs if you can, but the carpets must be of the simplest and without distracting detail, while the rugs may be as distracting as possible. For the rug is individual, even its repeats are not really repeats, while those of the carpet are deadly regular. And the rule for carpets will
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apply to wall coverings. I have seen many beautiful samples of elaborate wall-paper, but never a beautiful room papered with them. The more interesting they are, the more the individual spot in them attracts attention and interest, the worse it is when that spot of interest is hurled broadcast about a room in meaningless repetition. Use wall-papers as backgrounds, either plain or in patterns that are little more than texture to the eye, used so that they are entirely defensible. Paint on them if you have anything to say, but don’t flatter yourselves that the good sellers of the store windows are in good taste because they are the momentary vogue. Vogue and stylishness are the evanescent vulgarities of the élite, but taste and style are permanent attributes of truth. They are the inevitable expressions of sincere, creative life, expending itself in the service of humanity.

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IN THE gray Novembertide
Came the Indian Summer days;
All the world was weary-eyed,
Sleeping in a dreary haze,
Till dead Summer touched the hills
With the magic of her hand;
Now the sad earth sings and thrills—
Youth and Joy are in the land.

So amid a darkened hour,
In the twilight of my days,
You have brought your young love’s flower,
All my poor heart to amaze;
You have thrilled me with a word,
You have waked my soul once more;
In the Autumn I have heard
Summer calling at my door!

CHARLES HANSON TOWNE.