MODERN COUNTRY HOMES IN ENGLAND:
BY BARRY PARKER: NUMBER ONE

IN NINETEEN hundred and one a book entitled “The Art of Building a Home,” written by my partner (Raymond Unwin) and myself, was published. Looking back to the publication of this book, and finding that our attempts to put into practice the principles there laid down have strengthened and deepened our conviction as to their truth, I gladly respond to the suggestion that I should show how far we have been able to carry out these principles in our own work, and what has been the result of the attempt to do this. What follows will naturally fall into sequel form, and therefore must be prefaced by a summary, as brief as possible, of the main principles laid down in “The Art of Building a Home.” I now feel that the book might well be summed up as a plea for honesty, and realize too that it arose from a conviction that a different spirit was necessary from that which prevailed in the practice of domestic architecture before it could again become a living art, and also from an earnest desire to discover that spirit.

We saw there could be only one true way of going to work, and that was to build in the simplest and most direct way possible just that which would best fulfil the functions and meet the requirements in each instance, trusting solely to direct and straightforward construction, frankly acknowledged and shown, to produce beauty, instead of to decoration and ornament, pilasters, cornices, entablatures, pediments and what not, superimposed or added and hiding or disguising the constructional features. The tendency to disregard the decorative qualities inherent in the material used in construction, or resulting from the processes of construction, the desire to cover all these up, and not only fail to make the most of them but to neglect them, and to put in their place “features” supposed to be ornamental but known not to be useful, we felt was wrong.

We noticed that those about to build their own homes seldom seemed to consider what were their actual and real needs and requirements, or what would best enable them to live the fullest and completest lives they were capable of, or what would best express their own personalities, individualities and aims. They considered any-
thing but these. They would perhaps think what impression their proposed home would make upon callers, what their neighbors, friends and relatives had, or would expect them to have; what was customary in the rank of life to which they belonged; what they had been accustomed to, and what they could afford: but seldom what would best fit them and their real needs. We conceived it to be the architect’s business to use any influence he might have with his clients to induce them to consider these real needs and weaken their adherence to mere conventions; to point out to them that the mere fact that they were able to afford what other people had was not sufficient reason for having it, without thought as to whether it would add to or hinder their fullest lives.

The architect should create for each client not merely what is accepted conventionally as a satisfactory house. He should aim at doing far more than this: at creating a true setting for true lives, stamped with the personalities, individualities, characters and influence of those lives. He must not encourage the tendency to let the household make too great a sacrifice for the sake of callers, and he must not evince as little tendency to get down to fundamentals as his clients so often do.

To enable him to accomplish this at all fully we felt it was necessary that his influence should be extended down to the smallest details of decoration and furnishing; for it was essential that he should be in a position to conceive each house as a whole, as completely as any other work of art might be, and to have it carried out in its entirety. This was impossible if others were called in to decorate and furnish, for they would inevitably fail to complete his scheme.

Just as in the building itself our hope lay in revealing the beauties inherent in construction and the materials used in construction, so hope lay in making the useful and necessary things in the house beautiful, instead of disregarding them, or covering them up with what we supposed to be beautiful.

We felt very strongly that as soon as anything useful or decorative ceased to take just that form which was “most constructional” and took a form constructionally less sound (because supposed to be more beautiful), it was outside the limits of a true work of art.

We knew that the choice of the right materials out of which to build must come first, and that these would almost certainly prove to be the materials most readily to hand; that one lesson to be learned from the work of past ages was the probability that the building materials to be found in a locality were artistically and practically the best to use in that locality, that they would harmonize best with
their surroundings, and that to conceive forms suited to them was most likely to result in that completeness of a perfect whole at which we should aim.

In short, we conceived it to be within the architect’s sphere to provide a home fitted to and expressing the life to be lived within it, complete down to the last detail. So he must ever strive to deepen his insight, and gain a wider, a freer, less prejudiced and franker outlook upon his work.

It is all a question of attitude of mind. We are so timid. Of this we have signs on every hand. The first railway carriages (naturally perhaps) took the forms of stage coaches put upon rails, and only gradually are railway carriages evolving into forms suited to their conditions. Our first motor cars were carriages without horses, with the engines awkwardly fitted into a form of vehicle contrived to suit other means of locomotion, and we are only gradually evolving forms suited to the new means. The attitude of mind which conduces to success in designing a motor is that of one who, clearly grasping what will lead to the greatest efficiency in the engines and to the comfort and convenience of the travelers, conceives the form best adapted to secure these: not the attitude of mind of one who, following tradition, accepts the forms it has arrived at for
horse-drawn vehicles, and understands the problem as one of applying motor engines to these vehicles.

Why should we take it for granted that anything new must imitate what it supersedes? Linoleums were first made to look as much like carpets as possible, and American leather to imitate real leather. The first iron bedsteads were fashioned and painted and grained to simulate wooden ones. Concrete building blocks have not yet been long enough in use for them to have passed out of the stage in which it is taken for granted they must be made to imitate either stones or bricks. Neither have steel-framed buildings been with us long enough for us to have the temerity to give them a form which frankly acknowledges them as such. The same is true of ferro-concrete structures. We still feel we must try and give them the appearance of being either stone or brick built.

I am here speaking of more than just that falseness which we all now recognize as eliminating the element of true art from anything in which an inferior material is made to look like one held in higher repute,—as when plaster is painted in simulation of marble. I am speaking of a difference in our whole attitude to our work. To carry further in illustration of what I mean by the example I have already taken,—a steel-framed building
"THE HOMESTEAD": THE HOME OF MR. EDWARD WOODHEAD AT ASHGATE, NEAR CHESTERFIELD, DERBYSHIRE.
DINING ROOM OF THE HOMESTEAD, SHOWING INTERESTING BUILT-IN FITTINGS.
THE MINSTREL GALLERY AT ONE END OF THE LIVING HALL OF "THE HOMESTEAD."

ARRANGEMENT OF WINDOWS AND WINDOW SEAT IN THE LIVING HALL.
THE DETAIL BELOW SHOWS INTERESTING CONSTRUCTION OF STAIRWAY AND GIVES GLIMPSE OF LIVING ROOM IN MR. WOODHEAD'S HOUSE.

VIEW OF THE LIVING ROOM IN MR. WOODHEAD'S HOUSE, SHOWING BUILT-IN FITTINGS AND FURNITURE OF OAK.

TWO VIEWS OF "BRIGHTCOT," THE HOME OF THE MISSSES WILKINSON AT LETCHWORTH, HERTFORDSHIRE.
should suggest the presence of steel, one reason for this being that we feel and know steel to have properties which make it possible for a building framed of it to be carried to enormous heights without walls so thick at the base that the lower stories are almost solid; but this would not be the case if the walls were of stone, so the building is unsatisfactory and wrong when made to look as if of stone. I shall here be met by the argument that iron and steel are not suited to exposure to the elements; that they must be protected, if only by a covering of paint; and that this alone is not enough to meet fire-resisting requirements. This is quite true, and I say: cover the steel with stone if you find nothing better for the purpose, but in such a way as to suggest the presence of steel, not in such a way as to give the appearance of a stone building. Instead, it should give the appearance of a steel building covered with stone.

So one of the outstanding duties of the architect of today is to find a right expression in ferro-concrete. This needs less protection from the elements than does steel or iron, and perhaps what protection it does need might be given in the form of a decoration. Solutions of the problem may possibly in some cases be found in the application of mosaics, or tiles, or slabs of other materials. But is it not true still, as of old, that the most effective decorative properties are those inherent in the materials and in the processes of manufacture and construction? So is it not likely that better solutions will come from recognizing this and making the most of it? The process used in constructing in ferro-concrete is, after all, one of casting, and what lends greater facilities for the production and repetition of ornamental forms? Should we not when constructing cast in decorative forms?

I have taken most of my illustrations of the application of abstract principles from outside of what has been the sphere of our own work, because I thought I might by doing so make the principles stand out more clearly, and so simplify the application of them to the designing of all that goes to make up the externals of a home.
In some respects considerable progress has of course been made during the past ten years. We no longer, even at the worst, have our physical and artistic susceptibilities bruised by having polished fire irons, which no one ever dreams of using, laid in a fender as a trap for us. Many door fastenings now are not buried in a hole dug in the wood of the door, and some are guiltless of any case or covering, and are as pleasant in form as were many of the beautiful old latches. All the foregoing is merely touching lightly in introduction on much which must be left for fuller consideration later.

In every house there should be one room which takes the place of what in olden times was known as “the houseplace” or “hall” as the center of the common life of the household. Although we sometimes still find such a room in small houses, larger houses have come to be divided into a number of rooms, such as dining rooms, drawing rooms, libraries, morning rooms, and what not, none of which forms a real center for the life of the household.

In the house here illustrated, “The Homestead,” we have tried to reinstate “the houseplace.” There is a comparatively small dining room, and the rest of that space which would have usually been broken up into a number of other rooms is devoted to one large, dignified hall. The result is that instead of the household always being in one or other of several comparatively small and uninteresting rooms while the rest stand unoccupied, they live in spaciousness which gives breadth and dignity.

“The Homestead” stands a few miles out of Chesterfield, in Derbyshire; and being in a district where stone is plentiful it is built of a gritstone quarried in the neighborhood. This stone
has also been used in forming the fireplaces and ingles, and is left both as the exterior and interior finish of all windows.

The house was placed well back from the high road which runs past the south front; but in order not to sacrifice any of this precious south front and view to entrances, and to secure it all for the windows of the principal rooms, the drive was taken round to the north side, and the front door placed in that side, but where it is abundantly sheltered and protected.

Entering this house, then, we come at once into a limb of the great hall. An essential characteristic of such a hall is that no traffic should pass through or across it, or its comfort would be gone; but as the staircase must be in it, and the entrance and many other doors must open into it, all coming and going must be contrived in a part devoted exclusively to these purposes.

One of the demands of true art is that no convenience or comfort should be sacrificed to effect, so we find this hall is, before all else, comfortable. Part of it is carried to the full height of two stories of the rest of the house. Across one end runs the minstrel gallery with its piano, securing the charm of music coming from a hidden source.

The settee in front of one of the fires has all the comfort of a luxurious Chesterfield couch while it retains some of the charm of an old English settle. Most of the furnishing is in the form of oak fixtures and fittings, to which fact is due much of the quietness and restfulness of the whole effect. The floor is of oak blocks laid on concrete, which produces a silent footfall.

The photographs will show how the structure of both building and furniture provides the decoration of this room. Note the stonework of the walls of the ingles, of the windows and fireplaces, and again how the framing is left showing in the wood-framed partition, which is required to form one wall of the bedroom over the low-ceiled part of the great hall.

In this framed partition is a little window looking down from the bedroom into the hall. Even the smoke flue above the main fireplace stands out in carved stonework from the wall.

In the west wall of the hall is an arch built up for the time being, but arranged to open into a billiard room to be built on at this end of the house. The central part of the fitment on the wall of the hall is so designed that it can be placed in a position prepared for it in the designs for the billiard room when this room is built.

I was permitted to design all the furniture throughout the house, together with the carpets, the metal work on doors and cupboards, the gas fittings and decoration. The latter is entirely the work of artists' hands, and consists of stone and wood carving, embroidery
and metal work. Most of the metal work is in what is known as silveroid, which does not tarnish and is silver-like in color.

Where the walls in this house are plastered they are left rough from the wood float, a little coloring matter being mixed with the plaster.

The stonework has been allowed to give the keynote to the interior color scheme, which is the same throughout the house. The plaster is cream colored, and forms a pleasant contrast to the peacock blues of the carpets, curtains, and upholsteries.

A house constructed, furnished and decorated as this has been entails practically no expense in redecoration and painting,—the iron-work, of which there is little, and the doors being the only things that require painting outside, and the interior walls, stonework and wood-work needing only occasional cleaning, and nothing requiring renewal. This obviously effects a great annual saving.

The ease with which such a house can be kept clean, and the fact that dusting is reduced to the minimum, may not be noticed by the reader unless pointed out. This is partly the result of using fixed furniture, and furniture designed for its place, partly of leaving construction as decoration, and partly because the scheme having been conceived as a whole is therefore complete, and the temptation to be constantly adding to it is removed.

"Brightcot," the house built for the Misses Wilkinson in Letchworth, is chiefly interesting as an example of simple, straightforward and economical planning, to suit the site, of a house for two ladies to live in.

Above all the warnings I would give to the designer of small houses would come one against the conscious effort to gain picturesque ness. Let the exterior be always the logical outcome and expression of well thought out interior arrangements. I would on the other hand call his attention to the fact that perhaps the most potent factors in artistic success or failure in designing small houses is in the relation of solids to voids, of window spaces to wall spaces, and in the proportions and distribution of these.

Every turn of the road reminds us that we seldom find satisfactory solutions of the difficulties that the modern demand for lighter rooms has created, and how frequently this demand upsets the charming relations of window spaces to wall spaces which make much of the old work so lovely.