THE AMERICAN RENAISSANCE? BY WILLIAM GRAY PURCELL AND GEORGE G. ELMSLIE

N ARTICLE by Alfred Hopkins, with numerous illustrations, made under the above caption (the question mark is ours), appeared in a recent number of The Outlook. Not only the statements made in this article, but the point of view which it suggests, is so wide of the truth, that it should certainly not secure, unchallenged, the wide reading that publication in such a magazine gives it. Such a statement concerning architecture as a fine art in America will be accepted by thousands of thoughtful readers as an authoritative analysis of the real condition of this art, and it would be a great misfortune if the vague ideas of the general reader should become fixed in an attitude so mistakenly optimistic as that which pervades Mr. Hopkins' writing. The absurdity of the article in question may be put at once on a plane of kindergarten simplicity, with reference to what architecture is, by directing the attention in a casual way to the photographs of buildings used as illustrations, which the author considers indicative of our ability to express in the architectural art the normal characteristics of our people.

One of the buildings is the new Pennsylvania Railroad Station in New York, pertinently described as an adaptation of the Basilica of Constantine in Rome; another is the Military Chapel at West Point, an adaptation of definite historical Gothic forms, developed about a thousand years later. No elaborate proof is needed to suggest to the average mind that a people cannot express themselves at one and the same time in the architectural forms of both Rome and the Middle Ages. Forms more diametrically opposed, in emotional and spiritual essence, cannot be imagined. As an expression of real traits, these forms are as different as an automobile and an Egyptian dahabiyeh. The two could not have synchronously arisen from a single people. Architecture is now generally recognized as an intimate expression of the times which gave it birth. It is a better index of the people than their exploits in war or politics. One may read Rome, perfectly, in her architecture, or understand the Middle Ages under the shadow of a great cathedral. We may know of the glory that was Greece, through her marble crowned Acropolis.

Now in what way do the "Gothic" Chapel and this "Roman" railroad station exemplify an American Renaissance? They do not. History repeats itself, and these buildings, so far as their architectural forms are concerned, exemplify that period in the Italian Renaissance, when Sansovino could copy literally the forms
he went to Rome to pilfer,—a period of architectural decadence. Incidentally, may we refer to Penrose, when he says in the introduction to his great work on Athenian Architecture, that his one regret in giving to the world these wonderful Grecian forms, was that they would be at once seized upon, and made base use of, as an appliqué to buildings of another breed under other skies and in other ways of life. Compare with this attitude, our Sansovino, raking over the ruins of Rome, for scattered parts of what was architecture, to dress up his buildings,—without which they would doubtless have been interesting. As an illustration of this possibility, consider the Palazzo Cornaro in Venice, and the Palazzo Albergati, Bologna—these buildings show very well, in the latter, a decadent art, stultifying the native Italian power to build, and in the other the same power to build giving itself almost free expression.

Let us consider for a moment another luminary in this American Renaissance, the building for music at Bar Harbor, Maine. It will be observed that so far we have been architecturally both of Rome and of old France, and now this building announces that we are Greeks! It is noticeable that in these “Greek,” “Roman” or “Gothic” buildings we are not a multiplex people, expressing ourselves at once with Roman splendor, Greek beauty and Mediaeval romance and mysticism, but clever groups of us assume a conceit. This day we will be Romans, tomorrow Greeks.

Considering another aspect of this building, let us quote the article: “The contrasted wall spaces with the open loggia of the columns are in perfect proportion.” Now what does this mean, this “proportion” that we hear so universally used? Is it a rule, or a guide for doing things right? Where is it to be found,—in the Greek work? If so, is it at archaic Paestum, at titanic Olympia, or at splendid Athens? We see the proportions changing with the varying temperaments of the Greeks. Where shall the norm be placed, and who could presume to decide? As a matter of fact, the word “proportion” has no meaning as a vital attribute in any art, to say nothing of architecture. It is universally used by dilettante in their critical appreciations, to cover their lack of power to discern that region in the quality of a true art work into which no critic may ever enter. What is significant and meaningful is balance and rhythm, and our “Greek” music hall has neither; true Greek art was alive and vibrant with both.

The bareness, poverty and negation of this whole idea of fixed proportions, as an element of beauty in a structure, is at once made
manifest, when we stop to consider that the minute and precise relationships in Vignola's "Five Orders of Architecture" are real, if at all, for but one instant, and from a single ideal viewpoint. As the beholder departs from this ideal point in observing a real building, the myriad relationships and values pass through infinite mutations, which no mind could possibly reduce to set systems or formulæ. Vignola would needs be rewritten for every six inches that one may move.

Adding scrap by scrap to our far from orderly picture of what the Greek mind was, we now know that the Greek temples were resplendent with gorgeous color; and it is interesting to note that this music building is probably the first where even a timid effort has been made to recall this color factor in Greek work. This color was far more important to the eye of the beholder than the delicate adjustment and workmanship of the structure itself, which were largely a matter of feeling. It is suggested that the reader ask himself whether the image he has in mind of what is Greek, reckons with this color effect. If his idea of Greek architecture is not a form and color idea, is it Greek at all?

In another fundamental conception our music building fails to approximate the Greek standard claimed for it. It presents to the average American no idea of the purpose of the building. According to the system of thinking which this building exemplifies, it might serve equally well as a bank, a town hall, a United States Post Office, or a Christian church; and buildings similar to this music hall may be found performing these functions in any of our larger communities. For where in this design does the reader feel the compelling power of music? The plucked lyre of the Greeks has passed. The orchestra is now a part of our intellectual and emotional life.

For anyone who is familiar with the Parthenon, and the civilization of which it is the culmination, this "perfect Greek design" may be dismissed with a single question as to whether in spirit or in fact any suggestion of the Greek mind is to be found in the remarkable treatment of the wall surfaces flanking the loggias? "Refined and highly studied?" Refined it doubtless is, and scholarly it is; but dead,—as dead as is the Greek language.

"ARCHITECTURE is the need and power to build." It centers in the very soul of the race, not in the buildings of antiquity, nor in the minds of a few wise men. What was architecture always has grown, evolved,—out-sprung from the social fabric of a nation. The great masterpieces of the archi-
tecture of all times have been the least personal and the most racial. Thus, if we would find the evidences of what is to be the great architectural art of America, we must look not to those things which we import, but to those things which we cannot import, and therefore accomplish with amazing vigor. The Italian historian, Ferrero, when he visited America last year, was not interested in our importations, and found in them no evidence of the virile race he came to study and later trenchantly to analyze. He said that the most significant expression of our architectural life was a sleeping car.

Another expression of our need and power to build is our great office buildings, these marvelous steel cities, for which all our architects and our critics have been apologizing until within the last few years. They are a new thing under the sun,—American architecture. The tragedy is that we do not leave them alone to show what they are, but must be covering them with all manner of incidents of form that brazenly give the lie to their materials, their magnificent structural system and their use. For years our renowned architects have bent every effort to make these buildings look like what they are not. They have tried to make twelve-story buildings look like six, and six-story buildings like three, anything to avoid the appearance of height, which is their most inspiring aspect. Our "best designers" continue to degrade the inherent right of materials to speak for themselves, giving us stone cornices in tin, cast concrete to imitate cut stone, terra cotta wrapped around steel to simulate the various forms of masonry, and in every field violating the normal wholesome use of building materials. Just now this same false effort is directed toward securing clever grouping of parts, horizontally and vertically, toward making a "composition" instead of an organization,—a real building,—architecture.

But the tall office building has become a great architectural landmark, in spite of the interference of those who should have been the first to see its inherent power. And the day is coming when the American office building will be considered on its own inspiring merits. In various parts of the country there are now a few of these buildings, treated in a normal and rational manner. Most of them, however, belie this need and power to build which we have, and of which we should be so proud,—denying in their every appearance, their structures and their use,—ignoring utterly the fundamentals of architecture. Considering this building farther, it does not appear that those in the upper floors of the building can have anything in common with those in the lower floors, because the architectural story told by the two parts of the building
THE AMERICAN RENAISSANCE

is so radically different. For we must remember, that, when use does not change, form does not change. This is a universal law, and must be so recognized. Now what do we have in the upper stories? Something very grandiose and splendid, doubtless. There appears to be a little touch of humor in the interlarded sixteenth story, and what, oh, what, takes place in the attic? Why cannot we be frank, and wise, and bold, and tell what is going on from pavement to roof? Why all this troubled machination to conceal, to belie and to stultify? The general reader should remember that this building is built of steel, and the steel framework does not become larger toward the top, as would appear, for evidently the architect had a terrific time to enclose something up there, but just what it was, is not evident. It is also suggested that the architectural arrangement of the building, which apparently gives an extra measure of light, air and sunshine to those in the upper stories, who are doubtful well supplied, is the reverse of what would naturally be expected in a wisely planned and arranged building. But one may not leave a great building of this kind, with a word of negation. Here is power; here is science, riches and skill and imagination; in other words, a great American enterprise shines forth in the regal bigness of this building.

T HIS discursive comment on the “American Renaissance” is ventured into simply to help indicate, the more clearly and in a few words, the real nature and attributes of the finest of the fine arts; and to indicate also in what way the turning of the balance may be induced, so as to give America, fair and far-flung, an opportunity to triumph with materials in the way that has been witnessed at ever-recurring periods in the history of human kind.

Our social fabric is the architectural matrix; likewise our emotional content; the splendor of our spiritual enrichment; and our great now-forming commonwealth, with its world of moving material things, sum and substance of our commercial life.

The need and power to build is architecture.

Surely the need is now.
Surely the need is here.

And with overwhelming certainty is the power.

As a people we are practical optimists in all the arts but architecture, and in this art we are the most utterly gloomy pessimists, full of wretched forebodings, and given over to despair. Our build-
ings bear witness.

It is but a few years since a president of the American Institute of Architects declared in his annual address that he dreaded the
day when the creative impulse of the American architect would be given free play.

We give our painters liberty to paint the face of Nature as they see it. We give our sculptors liberty to bring forth "sermons from stones." We give our musicians liberty to interpret the wonderful domain in which they move. We give our architects liberty to interpret into living things of beautiful usefulness, all our needs, our hopes, ambitions, dreams?

No. We give them liberty to copy, venally copy the noble work of other ages, designed for other uses under alien skies, and then call it the American Renaissance!

Mr. Hopkins says, "To Italy the student, whether decorator, painter, or architect, must still go for his inspiration of things beautiful, for the detail studies which make up the finished technique of his trade, as well as for the analysis of broad lines and general principles of composition." This is a cruel joke, a parody. Creative power in any field of activity is indigenous to the soil. Witness Tolstoy, Wagner, Abraham Lincoln! Where did the Greek go for inspiration? Where did the Hindoo go? Where did the Chinese go? Where did the cathedral builders go? Are we poorer than these?

What antiquity has for us is inspiration, and while nourishing in our hearts the wholesome spirit of emulation for the glory of past achievement, we should have such controlling respect for the integrity of our own natures and the God-given creative impulse that copying architectural motifs should appear strange to us, and as cheap and contemptible as plagiarism in literature.

The creative faculty of the mind and soul of the American is marvelous. Untrammeled by tradition, he has seized upon the needs and materials at his hand, with a fecund imagination. His magic touch has called forth new organisms of compelling impressiveness and moment:

The harvester, the automobile, the color press, the aeroplane, the steel skeleton-construction, grain elevators, railroad trains, mile-long shops, a myriad growth of things built—a wonderhouse of new forms, American minted. Surely here is no Renaissance, and cannot be; but a virgin field for a great democratic architecture, its technique already in process of development.

"Others may praise what they like;
But I, from the banks of the running Missouri,
praise nothing in Art or aught else,
'Til it has well inhaled the atmosphere of this river—
also the Western prairie scent,
And fully exudes it again."