

SCIENTIFIC CANADIAN

MECHANICS' MAGAZINE

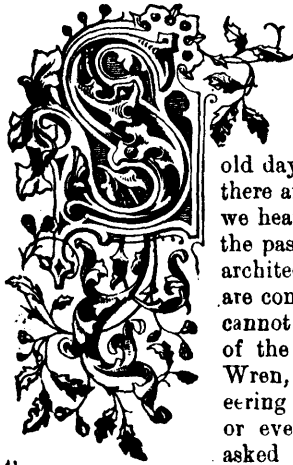
AND PATENT OFFICE RECORD

Vol. 10.

DECEMBER, 1882.

No. 12.

NOTE AND COMMENT.



SOME persons are eternally talking of the past. Nothing of the present satisfies them. They are for ever dinning things of the old days into our ears. Perhaps there are no walks of life in which we hear so much about matters of the past as in the professions of architecture and engineering. We are constantly being told that we cannot design like the architects of the time of Sir Christopher Wren, nor perform feats of engineering like the Greeks or Romans, or even the Egyptians. If you

asked these same persons what the Greeks or Romans, or even the Egyptians, had done in the way of engineering they would not probably in every case be able to tell you, still they will keep chattering on about the glorious works of the ancients, or the everlasting examples of masonry that were constructed before the time of the Flood. We do not say that useful lessons are not to be drawn from the past, but we think that the constant harping on the old days is likely to prove, in the interests of architecture or engineering at least, more injurious than otherwise. Let us rather believe that we can do just as good work now as ever was done in the world's history, and it is probable that we shall profit far more in our labour than if we keep on moaning and groaning about the degeneracy of the arts and sciences, whether in connection with architecture or engineering, or in any other respect.

Most extraordinary statements are frequently to be met with as regards architecture. A Mr. Clarence Cook has been writing in the *North American Review*, and saying that "The general excellence which marks the dwellings of any people is a proof of the non-existence of professional architects among that people," and

further, that "where architects abound the art of building always deteriorates." In support of this he cites the structures of revolutionary days, in many of which he says (and we cannot say he is altogether wrong in saying it) "there is a sense of proportion, of picturesqueness, and of comfort," in which the dwellings at the present time "are particularly wanting;" and he calls attention to the fact that all those structures were the work of "simple builders, who knew their trade, and never cared to give themselves a finer name." Proceeding with his argument, Mr. Cook affirms that "architects may have designed the bad houses of Venice, but never the good ones," a statement, of course, which we are by no means bound to accept. He instances Swiss chalets as examples of a kind of building which owes nothing to culture, science or archæology, and yet exhibits in its direct and skillful satisfying of the conditions imposed by local circumstances and taste, a degree of that beauty of fitness known as "style" which no other modern architecture can surpass. This is true enough to an extent, but are we going to set the pretty Swiss chalet against the modern requirements in the architecture of a great city?

Our able contemporary, the *American Architect and Building News*, in taking Mr. Cook to task for his remarks, says that one who studies the architecture of the revolutionary period "is apt to be constantly surprised; not at the simplicity with which the problems of house-building were met, but at the sacrifices of convenience which our forefathers made for the sake of external effect. Fond as we profess to be of picturesqueness in the design of houses, we doubt whether any architect of the present day could persuade a client into reducing the height of his kitchen at one end to four or five feet, as was often done a hundred years ago, apparently with the sole object of including it with the rest of the house under that broad sweep of roof whose beauty we seek in vain to reconcile with modern requirements; or whether he could plan a building with ceilings crossed by beams less than six feet from the floor, or steps at unexpected intervals in the passages, such as we admire so much in our ancestors' houses, without forfeiting the esteem of his contemporaries." No, the