

NOTES BY A CANADIAN ARCHITECTURAL STUDENT
IN LONDON.

somewhat awed. It is not always easy to discover whence the charm of many of these old buildings is derived. It would seem that Nature herself takes up an architect's work where he leaves it, and by a touch of color here and there, removes the harshness and crudeness of the original work, softens the hardness of outline, and in a hundred ways assimilates the building to its surroundings, till after the lapse of ages, it becomes impossible to tell whether the building or its surroundings conduce most to the charm of the view. At any rate one can hardly look with anything but reverence at the structures which have come down to us bearing the marks of many generations. There is, however, plenty on which to exercise one's critical faculties in the work being carried out in modern England. Here, at all events, an American feels himself on level ground, and is usually not slack to join issue with his English brethren of the T square. It is not my intention, however, in these notes to criticize or make comparisons of the work of English and American architects, but rather to note what has most interested me in the architectural world on this side of the Atlantic.

London would seem to be fast becoming the great centre of architectural and artistic work, as it undoubtedly is of literary work. Most American architectural students who cross the ocean for purposes of study seem to go to Paris. This would appear to be the general belief as regards the past, but more attention is now being given to English work, though it may not be quite safe to say that the tide has turned. Colonials probably have more sympathy with English work—certainly those from the antipodes have, if one may judge from the number of Australian students one meets in town.

Coming to London for the first time one is greatly impressed with its vastness, and this feeling is one that grows, for it is only after a year or two's residence that one begins really to appreciate what the simple word "London" means. It has, however, been spoilt in the making. How sadly disappointing is it to find a total absence of grandeur, composition or grouping. And this is the more annoying because after the great fire there was both the opportunity and the Man. It will be almost impossible now to give to it that unity as a whole which it might have had, had the authorities accepted and carried out Sir Christopher Wren's plan for its reconstruction.

Westminster Abbey is of course the building demanding first notice. Its interior is probably the most beautiful in England; fortunately it has not been scraped (an operation that gives to many English cathedrals an appearance of comparative newness), and consequently has all the effect of hoary age to help out the beautiful architectural detail. The manner of lighting from above is one of its great charms; the interior is always more or less shrouded in darkness, causing an effect of gloomy mysticism and grandeur. The unusually high nave roof of course greatly contributes to this, as well as the wonderfully artistic London atmosphere. The effect, to be understood, must be seen on some glorious summer's afternoon. The statues erected as memorials, in some instances seem to injure the architectural effect. Yet it may be that the Abbey itself derives an added grace by comparison with their hideousness. The north transept has been recently restored, and and seems to be a work of exceeding merit.

It would be impossible in this short note to do justice to all the old churches about town, but one cannot do less than mention the Tower, with its beautiful Norman Chapel; the Church of St. Saviour near London bridge, being restored under Sir Arthur Blomfield; St. Bartholomew, Smithfield, also under restoration by Mr. Aston Webb. This latter church is a perfect mine of Norman detail. Hidden away as it is near the great meat market, and completely shut out from view among slums, it is only recently that the majority in the architectural world knew of this jewel.

An exception to the criticism as to laying out streets and buildings for effect must be made to what may be called Parliament Square. The view of the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey caught as you enter the square from the embankment or from Westminster Bridge, seen about sunset, is literally a dream in stone.

St. Paul's Cathedral, too, from whatever point it is viewed, is a building which by its great mass and powerful dome cannot fail to attract the most casual of sightseers. The durable Portland stone from which it is built has in places weathered to an astonishing whiteness, whilst other parts are almost black from soot; all of which tend to heighten its artistic effect. The dome posed aloft above all surrounding buildings, is seen from almost everywhere and becomes the centre of many a majestic view.

Old London is fast disappearing: there is still, however, much of the domestic work of the 17th and 18th centuries left standing, but it has to be sought for in out-of-the-way places. It is specially interesting from its relation to the colonial work of America, the slight difference in detail arising from the use of stone for out-door features in the English work, resulting in the mouldings being rather coarser. Time has lent them a dignity which their simplicity and directness of construction helps out, the whole forming a strong contrast to the fussy modern detail of work rising up around it. In and about the temple is to be found a curious network of courts and alleys containing many examples of this class of work. Richly moulded and canopied doorways (mostly of brick moulded and cut to as exact an outline as if executed in stone); cornices of elaborate detail and considerable projection, sometimes in cut brick-work but often in wood, meet one at every turn, whilst scraps of wrought-iron tempt the sketcher's pencil.

Mention must be made, however brief, of the mine of sketchable subjects to be found in the almost priceless collection in the British museum, not to mention south Kensington with its collections of art work of every description gathered from everywhere.

Whichever way one's individual tastes may turn, one cannot but be struck with the energy displayed by British architects of the day in adapting the architecture of the past to their present needs, and in solving what may perhaps be ultimately recognized as the beginning of a new style. The work of some of the leading men cannot be called either Classic or Gothic. Traditional architecture is nowhere the rule except among a few of the old school,—the leaders have made the plunge, and the youngsters gasp and flounder after as best they can. To an eye trained to American practice, most of the new work here seems lacking in strength and especially in breadth. Too much detail and too little constructive architecture seems to be the rule. The value of plain wall surface scarcely seems to be appreciated properly. The English architects seem to be very fearful of destroying the scale of a building by use of large openings and of large features generally, and rightly so to some extent, but it is carried to too great an extreme. Everything in its proper order, but seeing some of the buildings here makes one think that the designer has mistaken his calling, not architecture but furniture should have been his destination. So one would at least think, judging from the recent competitions and the mass of work seen in the streets. Fortunately there are some men who are the opposite of this, and whose work seems all the more pleasing by contrast.

Terra-cotta is greatly used, and no doubt largely responsible for the extreme richness of the work now being done, and perhaps the smallness of many of the buildings causes the architect, though frequently in vain, to give importance to his building by enriching it. The great number of windows required in this dark climate to light a building effectively have to be considered as affecting its simplicity, by cutting up the wall surface.

Terra-cotta and brick are used with surprising skill. Elaborate cornices, architraves of windows, sills and many other features, are not only executed in terra-cotta, but also in cut brickwork. Some of the terra-cotta here is of a light pink, but most usually of a warm yellow tint, and has a slightly glazed surface. It does not always weather well, however, notwithstanding the boast of its permanence. It is frequently cut for ashlar work in rectangular blocks, and is not entirely free from having a hard machine look about it. The blocks being hollow have to be filled in with some material, and there is some danger when this is not very carefully done, of the terra-cotta splintering if heavily loaded.

Moulded and carved brickwork is executed with a specially made brick known as "rubbers" set in putty mortar, with a very fine joint. Mouldings are formed by rubbing them to the required section, the carving is then executed after the work has set; the whole is finished as sharp and true as if executed in stone. These bricks, though soft and not capable of standing great weights, seem to weather well. Examples are to be found nearly two hundred years old in London. One cannot but praise the quality of the masonry in the best buildings. Walls are thoroughly well bonded and built either with cement or in hydraulic lime mortar. It may be interesting to know that the Victoria tower of the Imperial Institute, some 260 feet high to top of masonry, while of stone on the face, is backed up with brick, built, of course, in cement. With the exception of Portland stone, there seems to be no stone used in London which is pleasing in effect when used in large masses; this, of course, adds greatly to the difficulties of the architect in getting a pleas-