

Architectural Digest

Articles of More Than Passing Interest From Our Contemporaries

HOUSE BUILDING: PAST AND PRESENT

By M. H. Baillie Scott.

I think the modern tendency is to confine our attention too exclusively to the material aspects of the problems involved in building, and to consider the art of the matter as an entirely separate consideration, and not as the leaven which should humanize and spiritualize the whole of the enterprise. Because we rightly believe that sanitation is important, there is no reason why we should always be groping in the drains, forgetting the heavens above us. It is well that every material comfort and convenience should find its place in the modern house, but, since man cannot live by bread alone, the house should minister to something more than material needs, and should indicate some of those aspirations of the spirit which we find expressed in the old houses. The main object I have in view, then, is to indicate some of the obstacles to the realization of this ideal, and to consider how they may be removed.

Before considering house building in the past or the present, it seems desirable to get some clear conception in our minds as to what building really means to us, and in what the art of it consists.

I assume that the general modern impression about building is that in its simpler forms it is a rather dull sort of trade, and that only when it becomes elaborate and complicated does it become worthy of regard as an art. This elaborate building is popularly recognized as architecture. It is built from the designs of architects, and may be readily distinguished from ordinary building because it has certain well-recognized architectural features. It has columns copied or adapted from Greek or Roman temples according to the fashion of the day, or in buildings set apart for religious purposes it may have Gothic pinnacles and cusplings. Now all these technical matters are little understood by the people, and even the highly educated are often timid in their judgments in matters connected with building. The architects are the high priests of the mysteries of architecture, and whatever they choose to do is accepted with equal indifference and apathy by the public. Of recent years, in public buildings, the architecture based on the ponderous gloom of Roman buildings has been all the mode, and this manner is carried on concurrently with various other fashions in smaller buildings. And, meanwhile, ordinary plain building is neither studied nor understood as an art. It has never apparently occurred to anyone that ordinary plain architecture is an art. The attitude towards building and architecture, which has led to this state of affairs in the building world, is supported by many high authorities. On referring to "The Seven Lamps of Architecture," by John Ruskin, I find it assumed, as a matter of course, that building itself is unworthy of regard as art, and it only becomes architecture when it includes useless features. He says architecture concerns itself only with those characters of an edifice which are above and beyond its common use.

THE ART OF BUILDING.

Now I wish at the outset to dispute entirely this modern conception of building and architecture, and I refuse to reverence any building merely because it possesses unnecessary features and ornaments. A building is not to be transformed into a piece of architecture by mere trimmings, any more than a plain man is to be made into a gentleman by adopting a conventional garb. Let us clear our minds from all the recognized cant about buildings, and look at the realities of the situation.

The principles which underlie all arts are the same. In the art of building, considered in its broadest aspect, we shall find man engaged, not, as in literature, in arranging words on a page, but in arranging brick and stone and wood on the earth. The purpose of his work is fundamentally practical, and it becomes architecture, as writing becomes literature, not by elaboration or by ornament, or by any unnecessary trimmings, but by the skill and insight disclosed in the use of the means at his disposal. In building, as in writing, the real qualities of the work are elemental and not accessory. They cannot be extricated from fundamental construction. It is impossible to make any distinct dividing line between building and architecture. The best figure which I can put forward to illustrate my conception of building is to think of it as a plant we are growing which, if our gardening is good, may break into flower. The flower is the reward of the right kind of root culture. It may be quite unexpected and undreamt of. And this living bloom is quite a different thing from the imitation flowers deliberately copied from the classic gardens. It is evolved naturally and inevitably from the very life of the plant, and cannot be stuck on from outside. In the case of building we have no critics who understand it as literature is understood, and while the latest novel or musical comedy is the subject of expert criticism in the press, buildings are seldom considered as works of art at all. A great opportunity is therefore lost of educating the public taste in matters connected with building by the lack of recognition of the building art in the popular press. A new church is vaguely referred to as in the Early English style of architecture, and the writer is obviously unaware that Early English architecture was the expression of the soul of Early England, and that the reproduction of the same forms in modern cast-iron workmanship, according to contract, is but an empty husk compared with the genuine article it imitates. For there is all the difference in the world between an inspired creation and the imitation of an inspired creation.

SIMPLICITY THE MARK OF BEST WORK.

In trying to show that the merit of a building does not necessarily lie in the architectural features, I do not wish to suggest that all elaborate building is to be condemned, but merely that beauty in building does not necessarily consist in elaboration,

and that generally a certain simplicity will be the mark of the best work. Elaboration and ornament seem to me only justifiable as the spontaneous expression of the joy of the worker—a breaking forth into song. As such it stands in the building as a kind of petrified joy, and persists as a symbol of something great indeed. In building, as I understand it, while we are bound to do honest and sound work, we are in no way bound to use elaborate ornament or architectural features, and there is no mysterious alchemy which transmutes plain building into architecture by such additions.

The fashion of the day for public buildings may be expressed in the following formula. Work out your structure in a skeleton of steel and concrete, and when this is done conceal these essential factors of the constructional scheme with a screen composed of architectural features copied out of books. The curious compound resulting from this fundamentally unsound and dishonest process is usually described as Classic architecture. But those of us who have our own conception of Classic architecture may perhaps be pardoned for not accepting it as such. Classic architecture in the modern world—and the Grand Manner of building generally—stands for pride. There is no humility in it, and the antic man postures and plumes himself at large. And the cure for all this is the proper cultivation of a sense of humor. It is much to the credit of modern life that these bombastic buildings do not interest anyone, and the only reason for their production is due to the fact that all public buildings are produced under a competitive system, in which the professors of the Grand Manner are at present the sole arbiters.

In the building of houses there is some small hope of better things, because those who still understand something of the possibilities of building as an art may find in the house a means of expressing their ideals, untrammelled by official standards. But the trend of modern thought is so largely infected by utilitarian and mechanical ideas that the general atmosphere is too often fatal to the growth of any real building art. The house is considered as merely a combination of conveniences, hot-water taps, labor-saving appliances, and so on. I have no wish to undervalue these things. They are undoubtedly of great importance. But I can never accept a hot-water tap in exchange for all those noble qualities which have been and may yet be expressed in building, and I would rather think of the house as a temple to the household gods than as a mechanical contrivance which would reduce all human activities to the single act of pressing a button. I think it was Professor Lethaby who said, "A house should be as efficient as a bicycle." That is quite true as far as it goes. But it is apt to mislead us if we suppose that the problems involved in building a house or in making a bicycle are of the same kind. The function of the bicycle is such that in making it all our doings are strictly governed by insistent conditions which admit little latitude for creative choice, and its ultimate form is the resultant of remorseless material forces. But in the building of a house no such conditions restrict us. We have to enclose and to roof over a piece of space, and subdivide this space for the purposes of habitation, and according to the usual modern formula we may allot spaces for drawing-room, dining-room, and so on. Now I do not think you can tell me of any natural law which insists on any definite size or shape for any of these apartments; and, supposing the house to be wind and weather proof, to be conveniently arranged and completely warmed and lighted, there is still a large margin for creative choice in its forms and details—in the proportion of its rooms, in the technique of its workmanship, and in the qualities of its materials. It is, then, impossible to escape from the conclusion that the creation of a house is essentially an artistic matter involving deliberate selections and rejections, not entirely subject to utilitarian restrictions; art, either good or bad, cannot be excluded from its conception and execution. And the most valuable kind of art in house building is that which is intimately associated with the proportion of its masses and the very bones of its anatomy, so that, when stripped of all its superficial adornments, its wallpapers, and its curtains, it still preserves unimpaired, if unadorned, its essential qualities.

THE BUILDING OF A HOME.

The idea that house building is merely a matter of practical utility and not, like the painting of pictures, for instance, essentially an art, leads us naturally to suppose that the modern house is necessarily, as the outcome of a long experience, especially adapted to our needs, and in every way an advance on the older houses. If we wish to obtain the greatest efficiency in a locomotive, we should not in these days be inclined to use the earlier types of engines, and we rightly prefer a Rolls-Royce motor-car to Stephenson's "Rocket," for the whole development of such means of locomotion has been a continual advance in efficiency. So the modern bicycle is better than the old bone-shakers or velocipedes, as they used to be called in the days when cycling was a fearful and hazardous adventure. But there is this difference between the proper subjects for scientific study and those which are governed by artistic principles. In the former we may expect advance and improvement coincident with the material progress of civilization, but in the latter it is often found the earlier work is better than the later, and so the old picture may often be better than the latest expression in painting, and the old house better than the modern villa. Give me an old house—let it be as early in date as the twelfth century if you like—and after adding a bath and cooking range, and a few hot-water pipes, which constitute almost the only contribution to efficiency to the house that modern times have supplied, the old house shall make as good a dwelling for all practical purposes as any modern house, and in addition, as a work of art, it has a value difficult to measure or describe in words and qualities, which with all our enlightenment and knowledge we have forgotten how to produce.

In thinking of building, then, I want to try to dispel the idea that architecture is an elaborate and complicated kind of building which we in our modern enlightenment have evolved out of the darkness and ignorance of the past. I want to substitute for this conception of the building art the idea that whatever