

A STATUTORY QUALIFICATION FOR ARCHITECTS.*

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The question of the advisability, or not, of demanding a statutory qualification for Architects has been engaging the attention of the profession for some time. Much has been said and written on the subject, on all sides and from all points of view, but I venture to think that the basic principles underlying the argument have often been misunderstood and the point of view cramped and ill-taken.

We grant it is a delicate subject for the profession to agitate, motives can be so misrepresented and arguments appear biased and prejudiced but, for want of disinterested advocates, we needs must take up the cudgels in our own behalf, fortified with the conviction that we are not fighting the battle of the "select few" but the wider field of humanity and public interest. Opposition is even met with in our own ranks, from men and influences compelling respect even if they be against us; whilst laymen look upon it as another species of "tradesunionism" and "incorporated tyranny". It should be needless to point out that the principles underlying the formation of "tradesunions" are wholly different from those which actuate us. The former is purely a movement to regulate the compensation and earning powers of the individual amongst a limited number of persons, whilst the latter is a movement to raise the standard of professional practice and to safeguard public interests without limitation (other than that set by competence) to the number who wish to practice the profession of Architecture. Tradesunionism is a combination for offensive and defensive purposes, of the weaker against the stronger; statutory qualification for Architects is a voluntary movement of the stronger (represented by the profession) in the interests of the weaker (represented by the public, who are often also entirely ignorant of the responsibilities inherent to the practice of our profession).

Generally speaking, there are two sides to architecture, viz: the aesthetic and the utilitarian, the former appeals to the senses, whilst the latter is the practical, the application of theory to the requirements of mankind. The former may, or may not, have a good or bad influence on humanity, this being dependent upon whether we are prepared to admit that without beauty we cannot have goodness, and ugliness usually leads to depravity; but as regards the latter (utilitarian) especially in its constructional aspect there can be no division of opinion as to the necessity for the most careful examination before being permitted to design and erect structures. The object of an architect's labour is to prepare, generally speaking, for habitation by humanity; human life has, under civilizing influences at any rate, always been looked upon as valuable, beyond price and compensation. It is recognized in the practice of medicine, all countries demanding a most rigorous examination before one is allowed to administer to the corporal ills of mankind. It is recognized in the practice of law, where even the civil life of man must be guarded by specially trained individuals. Why should it not be recognized in the practice of architecture where requirements are demanded combining Science Chemistry and Law, all individually and collectively of the greatest importance and fraught with serious consequences to the public.

It has been said that a statutory qualification is only necessary in countries where the standing of the profession is not as high as it ought to be. We would infer from such an argument that as soon as it was decided that the professional standing had reached a certain height, the statutory qualification would be withdrawn; and on the other hand it would be fair to assume that the elevation attained by the profession under such circumstances, in the public estimation, was due to that very statutory qualifica-

tion. If the statutory qualification was the means of elevating the profession, why remove it? Will the profession remain stationary after such a procedure or will it not naturally enter on a retrograde movement. The argument is illogical.

To me it is a surprise that the question has not been taken up by the governments of the respective countries long ere this. We are hedged about by legislative enactments which, at their root, must have emanated from the conviction that the practice of architecture was a responsible one calling for particular training and study. In the Province of Quebec we work under the Napoleonic Code which attaches to an architect the responsibility of the stability of his buildings for ten years after completion. The only inference to draw from such an enactment is, that the practice of the profession is of such a nature that the individual cannot throw off all responsibility the moment a contract is complete, but that he must have exercised such caution that a building in all its inherent and constructional parts must be perfect for at least a period of ten years after completion else the responsibility devolves upon the shoulders of the architect. Of course a certain and individual responsibility pertains also to the contractor but such side issue does not affect the general argument. Architects are compelled to erect buildings under the direct superintendence and dictates of law; the logical sequence would be that the law would make provision that all who enter on the practice of the profession would be found fully competent to carry out the spirit and dictates of such enactments.

How can such an end be attained? Obviously the only answer is, by a system of examinations. True, this is not always the most satisfactory method, but for want of a better we needs must adopt it. We grant that the mere passing of an examination does not ensure a competent practitioner, but at least, for want of a better method, it obviates the fear that he may be altogether incapable. It is certainly far ahead of present conditions which are almost universal today, where any irresponsible individual may clothe himself with the title "Architect" and no one has the right to say "yea" or "nay".

The public require to be protected. At present they are indifferent. How are they to know whether an architect is qualified or competent to be entrusted with the erection of buildings. As a rule "time" is the judge but ere "time" has passed his verdict the trouble has been done, structural weakness becomes apparent, or, what is sometimes even worse, another abortion is raised, before the eyes of an unsuspecting public, to wield its baneful influence, unwittingly it may be, over the moral temperament of its unhappy beholders. A man should not be permitted to endanger lives and property neither should he be permitted to offend the higher senses of mankind.

I have already said that competence can only be ascertained by a system of examinations, such examinations must be all-embracing and wielded by powers beyond the faintest tinge of suspicion, and removed, in the public eye, from all question of self-interest.

There are at present several architectural societies working under private or legislative enactments where entrance can only be obtained after passing a series of examinations. Such examinations are, as a rule, conducted by professional practitioners, men, who, in the public eye, are particularly interested in the number entitled to all the benefits of such associateship. Now I do not want to be misunderstood in this connection. I am not impugning the motives underlying the formation of such an examining board, neither am I questioning the motives influencing such examiners, far from it. Those of us who belong to such associations know that the question of the number presenting themselves for examination has no influence whatever on the minds of the examiners or associations when it comes to the question of how many they shall pass;

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