

## HOW TO STUDY DESIGN.\*

Is it possible to design in harmony with the spirit we live in, or to distinguish between the archaeological and architectural beauty of ancient buildings? Why cannot we design buildings as an engineer designs an unsophisticated iron bridge without the result being hideously ugly? Will not the terrible buildings of the Victorian Gothic era with which our land is bespattered have in the eyes of succeeding generations the same beauty (is it architectural or archaeological?) that the crude Classic productions of the Jacobean and Queen Anne periods have in ours? and if so, why do we not see the beauty of our bad architecture? Are not we perhaps on the wrong tack altogether, and only manufacturing picturesque grottoes of ancient relics, while the genuine and characteristic architecture of our age is to be found in the works of engineers, mill and factory builders and gin-palace fitters? Are the congeries of Mediaeval and Classical oddments, whether in plan or detail, that compose our Domestic and Ecclesiastical architecture, really works of national art? Are not workhouses and hospitals or a Metropolitan Tabernacle or railway station interior nearer the mark? Do not architects, as far as their revived pedantries of Art are concerned, run a great risk of becoming mere exotics, useful perhaps in arranging the business of a building, but to the world at large as artists, idiotic in expression and utterance?

Can architecture as now practised by its professors continue to survive when the *debris* of the ages has been rummaged through and there is nothing new to revive—when the history of architecture has been learnt in vain, and the poor history-bred architect can no longer find fountains for priggish ready-made details from? Must we really come to the conclusion that clothes can only be made on old patterns, patches and defects included, and only artistic pictures painted of bygone times and not of our own? Is there not beauty or pathos, simplicity of wondrous complexity in our own extraordinary age, with its incessantly varying developments that the architect can reflect in the buildings that he designs for its accommodation? Cannot we hope that some seeds of true architecture may be sown in our work-a-day buildings that may develop into a detailed style possessing true beauty? Does the barren unphilosophical study of our present authorities assist us one whit, or even suggest to us the idea that our own age is the outcome of history, and that we should pursue its direction and learn its lessons of the motive of its soul rather than hark back again and again to the mere outer forms of nothing but bygone art "as if that soul were dead?" We may well ask ourselves the plain question, whether if the so-called history of architecture comprised in illustrated authorities, a list of which would be short and easily made, was laid as much aside by architects and their educators and examiners, as, say, the history of ornament is, though for no given reason—perhaps it is mere forgetfulness—we should be able to design at all? Imagine yourself, if you can, sitting down to design a church or a house in the country with the stipulation that you were not to revive any ancient style in your building, and does not the thought seem both absurd and painful? If so, take for your subjects either a factory, say for boot blacking or fancy scap, or a railway station block, in which it ought to be both absurd and painful to employ any ancient style, and see how you would be able to get along without the seemingly indispensable history. And yet if history teaches us anything as to the sources of life and motive in design, it shows that the Greeks had little or no history of architecture to draw upon and revive, and that the Goths, who probably knew little or nothing as to ancient Art, deliberately set aside the productions of their ancestors, even as types, and thought and acted for themselves alone. Can anyone say that the results do not justify their methods of study, and shall we be forced to accept as a conclusion that the less we have of the study of architectural history as at present conducted the better?

Let us return to our examples. The results of your efforts to design either a factory or a railway block would probably be satisfactory and negatively beautiful in proportion to your regretful resignation to the facts of the case, and to your own ignorance of the pictures in your own architectural history books, or, in other words, of what different people had done under differing circumstances elsewhere. What positive beauty your work possessed would consist in the manifestation of your skill in the choice, contrast and arrangement of materials, in the proportions of your building, in its balancing of voids and solids, its recessings, in its simplicity or variety of line, its unaffected expression of purpose and skilful adaptation to use. Every one of these qualities should be equally evident in the more monumental or domestic subjects, such as the church or country-house. The church having no obstructions to sight, and being perfect acoustically, and with the house rejoicing in pure plate-glass windows where necessary, with further qualities such as a perception of the poetry of scale, of rhythm in contrast or repetition of grouping and perspective, of mystery and distance, with fancy at work on the detail, applied perhaps unconventionally, but always where most effective in execution, and either emphasizing construction or decoratively masking it, suggesting intellectual composition as well as picturesque freedom, the harmonious arrangement of features as well as the application of free ornament and many other ideas in design, with play of light and shade, effects of lighting and schemes of color, all open to the student cut adrift from the modern school of architecture, and an interesting building having naturalness of purpose and real beauty is almost assured so long as each quality of use and fancy is exercised with reasonableness and decency. Some difficulty may occur to the mind as to the quality of ornament not cast in ancient moulds, but the same elements of beauty govern and compose ornamental detail as general architectural design, and there is

ever open to the ornamentist the fountain of Nature, which, unlike prosaic and traditional sources, is infinite as the sea. Let it not be supposed, however, that by ornament derived from Nature naturalistic ornament is meant, as the forms of Nature copied in carvings or paintings. The material and the purpose of the ornament, and many other circumstances, must control the conventionality of its treatment. Remember that a world of art and design exists between the Parthenon frieze and the actual horses and men that Phidias saw around him, and that if intellectual discrimination is not used in the translation of form and matter, and design is not interposed between Nature and ornament, no beauty will be the result. But this is at present a digression apart from carvings and paintings. How about moldings, capitals, cornices and purely architectural forms? Can these be designed except by ignoramuses, apart from style and precedent? Most certainly. In your blacking factory example you may only require a dignified and simple cornice of brick and stone to crown the wall, and though, from pure poverty of imagination and defective training, you may have no other resource than a doubly-debased Greek molding, there is the conceivable possibility of a simple contrasting arrangement of light, shade and elevation considered in relation only to the wants of your front, and also a possible combination of line in contour of curved and straight members, forming a harmonious whole that shall be satisfactory and yet original, furnishing evidence of independence of thought and perception of beauty to your professional critics. This may sound impracticable, and we expect to be told that ancient styles are the languages of the art of architecture, that their forms and details are its words, and that our fine imaginings without such words and diction are vain and utterly incapable of realization. That we must learn these languages as part of our education, and trust either to heredity or to fickle fortune to teach us what to say and how to say it. Learn your styles, master your Orders, copy them carefully, drum them into your memory for a senseless reproduction as mere forms, and you will be qualified to become a student of a dignified architectural school, and in addition if you cram up the mathematics of the proportional ratios, count the columns of the Parthenon and master a few pendant technicalities from Gwilt's *Glossary of Terms*, you may pass the Art section of a qualifying examination. That the training adopted to this end has its uses cannot be denied, for all training is valuable, and as an introduction to the study of archaeology it may be definitely useful, though this is very far removed from the cultured dilettanteism in which it took its rise; but to the architectural student it is purely incidental, and as at present conducted, the study of the styles of antiquity is in no sense a qualification for the practice of modern architectural design.

We are living in an age distinguished above all others for its inventive genius—the prime essential of genuine architecture—for wealth, another essential to the practice of architecture. Having a profession of admiration for the arts—famed for municipal enterprise—an age, too, of unexampled peace and prosperity. But architects, instead of growing in public esteem as artists, are losing ground yearly; their works, instead of being characteristic of the whole spirit of the age, only illustrate their own personal fads and fancies and their love for the passing whims of the day. The whimsicalities of the gentler sex with regard to the latest fashion will not exceed in grotesque flightiness the eccentricities of the architects of the last few generations, as illustrated in their periodical fashion-plates of buildings, when they are reviewed, say, at the jubilee of the Architectural Association. To what esoteric impulse are the gyrations of the muse of architecture due, if not to the error of imagining that the past is the present, that ancient means modern, and that archaeology is architecture? What accountable idea underlies the continuous and futile reproduction of architectural antiquities in modern design? Why should a consistent and enlightened race such as English produce, through their architects, within a century, such anachronisms as the National Gallery and the Royal Courts of Justice, or public statues, either clothed in nothing but sheets without canopies or in full modern dress (gilded), covered by baldachinos, and surrounded by unprotected figures, mostly females, only ideally clad? What rational theory of architectural design, apart from archaeology, can reconcile the production of St. George's Hall, Liverpool, with the Houses of Parliament at Westminster? Will not posterity justly conclude upon abundant evidence that the Victorian architects were petty-spirited, out of sympathy with their environment, each bent on vindicating some absurd archaeological revival wholly unsuited to their buildings, and wasting their eloquence in incriminating the age which gave them birth as lacking faith, as Philistine in spirit and cruel to all the arts, and in bewailing the hard fate that did not cause them to be born barbarians or feudal serfs? And yet our age cannot be said to have lacked men practising as architects, possessed of genius and talents of the highest value to architecture, with inventiveness, perception of beauty and form, of wide artistic sympathies, and of remarkable adaptability of style. The English architects of the various revivals have been men of eminent gifts and enthusiasm for their art, and probably without their equals among European nations. The Greek revival, based upon the work of Stuart and Revett, Wilkins, Cockerell and others, was no mere artistic fad; these men were profound archaeologists, and the combination of artistic instinct and antiquarian learning displayed in such works as the beautiful Hanover Chapel—doomed, shall we say, through the apathy of architects?—the entrance to Euston Station and University College, London, is worthy of unstinted admiration. There is a thoroughness of historical study manifest in these buildings that compels praise; in each case a lofty ideal conception has been attained, and a completeness of architectural feeling for every detail that betokens the earnest designer. Yet in each case the manifest powers of design possessed by the architect have been concentrated upon designing a Christian church as a Greek would have designed

\*Paper read by Mr. A. Berbsford Pite, A.R.I.B.A., before the Architectural Association, London, on November 10th, 1893.