

# Architectural Digest

## Articles of More Than Passing Interest From Our Contemporaries

### BALANCE IN DESIGN.

Equal disposition of mass about a centre or axis is due to a law having its origin in the demands of equilibrium. In architecture the rule applies rigidly to free-standing parts and components, such as columns. It cannot always, and need never, of necessity, apply to a whole composition. No doubt a peculiar dignity, not obtainable otherwise, attends the exactly-balanced facade in monumental buildings; but site, circumstances, and practical conditions often make it an impossibility for the designer to proceed on centre-and-wings principle. We have, then, to design irregular building masses with grace and beauty. Irregular architectural composition favors variation and novelty; that which at first sight seems an evil need not necessarily prove so. Looking back into architectural history, we see that irregular plans are by no means inconsistent with grandeur of effect. The departure from exact balance in Gothic buildings gave them one of their greatest charms.

In all great styles the rule of exact symmetry in the part is closely followed. This assertion may seem inconsistent with fact, and would be so did we not here include all components that are wanting in exact equal-sidedness by reason of their breaking into other masses. Where a square plan breaks into a circular, the square and the circle are broken; but the spirit and intention in the square and in the circular plan is exact symmetry. When, therefore, we assert that in all great architectural styles the law of equal disposition of mass about a centre or plane is duly honored, we include, for the reason stated, symmetrical components breaking into others. It is possible that those of expansive views, but small practical experience in architectural design, would regard part breaking into part, and leaving an irregular junction, as fatal to all beauty of effect. The architect will contend that such irregular junction, whereby something on asymmetric principles is produced by the union of two symmetrical objects, is not only without offense, but may originate great beauty and interest, and is quite an essential in the "picturesque." If we generally agree upon this, then something is gained of practical usefulness to the asymmetrical planner, and to all those whose minds are greatly exercised with questions of "balance" whenever they are compelled to abandon the principle of centre-and-wings.

The stair-turret and the tower are largely evidenced in our old village churches. We have shown that both the turret and the tower are planned, in spirit, as objects of geometrical regularity and exact symmetry (so called). As carried out, an irregular, unbalanced mass is produced. To destroy symmetrical orderliness by breaking the one into the other seems, at first, a crude idea, likely to cause offense; but we have urged, and taken for granted the concurrence of the reader in our view, that no such offense is produced, but that, on the contrary, a resultant architectural mass of true beauty and interest is obtained.

Under certain conditions, an element or compound will crystallize in true "symmetry" as a cubical figure, a tetrahedron, or the like. Under other conditions the crystals cluster. The free-born, regular, isolated crystal is an object of beauty; but no less beautiful or interesting is the group of associated crystals. Yet here, as with our turret and tower, and as in the case of all irregular junctions of divergent masses in building, broken and diverse—asymmetric—forms are produced; but so much of each crystal as exhibits itself is true to the crystal form, true to angle of crystallization, and possessed of symmetry. On the face of things, one might conclude that the irregular massing of crystals would destroy their beauty. All who carefully ponder this matter will admit, we think, that the resultant forms, lines, outlines, and masses are beautiful, often very beautiful indeed, and highly suggestive for the picturesque grouping of masses of building on the asymmetric system—that is, opposed to the centre-and-wings arrangement. We should consider this natural phenomenon, and endeavor to establish some general proposition respecting the breaking-in of part to part in architectural composition. On elevation, such masses may appear at times "lopsided"; but this effect of out-of-balance disappears in perspective.

Once we have, either by choice or necessity, abandoned the centre-and-wing plan, we must, we assume, proceed on a different fundamental design principle. Asymmetrical or irregular composition must be adopted without compromise. There must be no weak leaning towards the rules of symmetry, and we should ascertain what will be the true effect of masses in execution before we amend apparent defect on elevation. Equal-side, centre-and-wing composition of a whole facade is one way; the other is totally different. It was, sometime back, observed to us on passing a block of office buildings, that it seemed that the tower "should have been bigger." The observation was not made by an architect; but, all the same, it was much to the point. A strictly "symmetrical" facade, with equal mass right and left, up to about roof-line, had on one side a weak, half-hearted turret, an excrescence just budding, one might say. The effect and impression was that the designer had hesitated to destroy the exact equal-sidedness. Had a bold tower been provided, the composition, from a mere tribute to pseudo, or distorted, symmetry, would have passed clear into true asymmetry.

In a very difficult subject, we have endeavored to suggest two rules for guidance in irregular architectural composition, such as we find must necessarily pertain in the great majority of buildings: firstly, to maintain the great principle of mathematical equal-sidedness in the part, either actually, as in a column, or in spirit and intention, as in the circular turret breaking into the square tower; and, secondly, that when once the symmetrical whole facade is not possible, or not desired, the asymmetric principle should be consistently observed. If we believe in the former suggested rule, we shall not put pilasters with one left-hand volute on the right side of a facade, with a right-hand, single-voluted, cap on the left wing. In irregular architectural composition we must needs be too urgently concerned in rendering each part beautiful to have time to waste in perpetrating these or other monstrosities. The offense is against the rule of studied "symmetry" in the part. The strongest argument for irregular architecture, and

for dispersed ornamental device, is that each part of the composition may be so fashioned as to be interesting and graceful, irrespective of other parts. In unbalanced (in a sense) composition we need not distort the unit for the sake of some whole effect; and a beautiful building, surely, should be such that, as we pass along, every part, contributory to the whole, should appear an object of interest and beauty. Then architecture bears comparison with music. Our subconsciousness, or memory, holds the general air and progress of rhythm and melody, while our immediate consciousness is enthralled with the instant harmony. We cannot have it both ways: either there must be symmetry, so-called, or asymmetry—either a St. Quen interior or a west front of Rouen Cathedral.

The idea that we must "balance" in irregular architectural composition is often a delusion, an impression, a legacy of lingering sympathy with exact equal-sidedness, itself largely the outcome of habitual elevational display of architectural device. The lion is sufficiently like the unicorn to balance in heraldic composition; sufficiently unlike to give individual interest to dexter and sinister hands. If we duplicate either the real or the mythical quadruped, we certainly attain exact equal-sidedness; but sameness is substituted for variety. This, by the way, demonstrates the fundamental difference between asymmetry and symmetry, so-called. We cannot however, deal with architectural mass as the herald employs lion and unicorn. Divergent "twins" towers to cathedral west-ends may have a certain quaintness; but we generally feel dissatisfied, or unconvinced. The failure may, perhaps, be accounted for as the result of an attempt to graft asymmetry on symmetry, which we have endeavored to show is not possible. We must either produce the monumental, equal-sided building, or start away on a new plan, based on quite a different principle. Small variations in detail are added charms in many symmetrical compositions; but a great belfry is not a detail.—Chas. H. Sturgis in "Architecture."

### APPLY MODERN METHODS TO SUPERVISION OF BUILDING WORK.

The surprisingly low ratios of efficiency obtaining in some of the departments of state and city government having jurisdiction over the construction, equipment and operation of factory buildings, in New York City, revealed by the investigations held as a result of the Diamond candy factory fire seem to add tremendous weight to the contentions of those who advocate a consolidation of all departments governing building construction. That the present plan, involving as it does a division of responsibility among various departments, leads to a waste of public funds, and gross inadequacy of service appears now to be pretty thoroughly established.

Under the laws nominally in force here at present—and it is probable that conditions differ but little in other cities of the first class—factory buildings are inspected by seven, tenement houses, theatres and motion pictures by six, and office and hotel buildings by five separate and distinct departments. The advantages to be derived by establishing one bureau and conferring upon it complete jurisdiction over building construction and alterations are many, and would seem to be so apparent that all classes coming in active contact with building work must recognize them. It would, for example, inevitably lead to the establishment of high standards of inspection in place of the present multiplicity of ineffective and superficial inspections with divided responsibility. It would at the same time greatly reduce the cost of this work to the city, and add immeasurably to the convenience of architects, builders and owners.

The Advisory Council of real estate interests, in recommending a unification of all departments controlling the construction, equipment and repair of buildings, goes on record as follows:

"If this consolidation of building inspection departments should be accomplished, friction between minor city officials and property owners would largely disappear, while simultaneously some saving should be effected to the annual budget by the elimination of those positions consisting of similar duties. Economy and efficiency is not a slogan merely for taxpayers, but realization is gradually dawning upon the rentpayer that the high cost of living here is largely due to high taxes, and that high taxes can be partially accredited to extravagance in the administration of many of the city departments. It has been difficult to make progress in this respect, because of the mandatory legislation imposed on the city by the State Legislature. If a large part of this legislation could be repealed during the coming legislative session, and the various conflicting duties of the various city departments co-ordinated and unified under a single department, the mayor and the comptroller would have corrected one of the chief evils in our local government."

An advantage not noted by the various bodies which have given endorsement to this movement for consolidation of departments controlling building work, is the amount of time which it might be expected to save in the securing of permits for new buildings or alterations to existing ones. Under present laws the filing of plans at various departments and the necessity of securing the approval of some departments before the consideration of others can be obtained—traveling from one part of the city to another, and in general attempting to comply with the complex and often conflicting requirements of different departments—has resulted in not only a burden of expense and inconvenience to the architect, but a real loss to the owner, in the construction of whose building cannot be undertaken until the approvals of all the various city departments have been secured. In the interest, therefore, of economy, convenience, thoroughness and general efficiency—in fact from every point of view except possibly that of the politician or holder of some of the easy berths existing by reason of the present lax and indefensible methods—it would seem desirable, if not actually mandatory, to consolidate and bring under one responsible head all the various branches of city and State government now charged with the control of building work.

As suggested by the Advisory Council of the real estate interests, it is devoutly to be hoped that conflicting legislation will be repealed and new laws necessary to the establishment of the new order of things passed as the first important act of the coming session.—"American Architect."