

THE ADVANCEMENT OF PUBLIC TASTE IN ARCHITECTURE.*

A few weeks ago Mr. Langton came to my office and asked for the title of the paper I was to read at the Conference this year. This was the first intimation I had received that a paper was expected from me. However, I believe it is the duty of every member of the society to do his share towards making our annual meeting a success, and although through want of leisure my attempt will not be of the value I would like it to be; I will not withhold it on that account, but give it for what it is worth.

A few days after the interview with Mr. Langton, I have just mentioned, I had the privilege of hearing the Rev. Mr. Shortt lecture to the Toronto Chapter, and he gave me the keynote for my remarks to-day in deploring the state of ignorance existing in the public mind regarding architecture, and suggesting that some method should be found and used—by architects—for its enlightenment. I therefore selected the subject you find on the agenda, "The Advancement of Public Taste in Architecture." I will not, however, promise to stick very closely to my text, as I shall have, perhaps, quite as much to say about the taste of architects themselves.

The architect from the popular point of view is a pictorial artist on a large scale, and of all the arts his is the one most capable of prolonged effort in design, music and poetry coming next. Again the painter will produce pictures to frame and hang on a wall to be seen only by a chosen or limited number; a sculptor will adorn a pedestal with his effort, and only those who seek it find it; music and poetry reach an increased number, but architecture, as a decorative art, is seen by all men at all times, and its silent influence, consciously or unconsciously, affects the minds of the cultured and uncultured.

To speak broadly, there are two faculties displayed in the architectural art—*invention and imagination*—one *constructional* and the other *aesthetic*. Invention has to do with the plan and scheme of a building and the relationship of its parts—the artist calling this faculty into play in much the same way as the dramatist creates characters; disposes of their destinies; thinks out the course of events in his story, and sets the scenes. This can all be done by the faculty of invention. Having made the plan and settled the scheme of the structure, its heights and sizes, imagination does the rest, and clothes it with beauty. The construction will, of course, give the motive of the design. Every structural problem will be met and solved before the building is begun, and the architectural design keep pace step by step with the construction, partly modifying it and making it obedient to artistic consideration.

It is of the decorative or imaginative side of the art that I wish to speak—the side which appeals most to the public.

We are all the time seeing and handling things which are beautiful and give us pleasure, or ugly and give us pain. There is nothing, however, to compel us to look at poor pictures or distorted statues; but we cannot escape the ugly buildings which disfigure our streets. Nor can we prevent the baneful influence of such bad buildings on the minds of our children, who, unfortunately, grow familiar with them, and whose tastes will, in all probability, become as corrupt as those of the public to-day.

Considering then that architecture as a decorative art is so transcendently important, is it not astonishing that the bad architecture should have been so long a matter of indifference, or at any rate so long tolerated by the educated public?

The first question I ask therefore, and will endeavor to answer is—"How is the Public Taste to be trained to a better judgment in matters of architecture—a better appreciation of art—and taught to know good architectural design from bad?"

The first essential is, that the public shall be induced to take an interest in architecture, and shall be educated to do so. How is this to be achieved? Not so much by talking as by doing. Not so much by lectures and papers and art criticism as by our actual work in stone and brick and wood. By the quality of the art set before it will the public taste be healthy or unhealthy. It depends, therefore, upon the architects themselves in the greatest measure whether there shall be any advancement in the popular appreciation of our art.

The next essential is closer and more friendly relations between the public and the profession. While I don't agree that the feeling of contempt that is sometimes spoken of exists, except amongst the least thinking class, it is undoubtedly true that there could be a more mutual feeling of respect between them.

It is said that culture only means the development of new

relations between ourselves and the world around us—a better understanding of how one thing affects another. This can be made clear perhaps by imagining the way in which every individual would conduct himself towards the rest in a society of the highest possible culture. Courtesy would of course be the rule. Each person would recognize the welfare of the whole as of the utmost importance, and do all in his power to establish it. Nothing would be done in a spirit of selfishness or to draw attention. All would be in sympathy and work in harmony. Under conditions such as these architecture could attain to something like popular appreciation.

My second question is—"Are we architects going to work in the right way to produce the best of which we are capable, or are we working under hopeless conditions, which must prevent not only any originality, but even tolerably good work?"

Any art is valuable only so long as the artist can be seen in it. The inanimate material which the artist handles, be it a lump of clay, a stretch of canvas, or a heap of stones or bricks, is quickened into life by the artist's communication of his own spirit into the thing. I mean, of course, without pre-meditation, resulting in unconscious expression. We all know of some buildings which have been erected under conditions where the thought of the architect can be read, and his hand traced not only in the general design but in the minutest feature. Such buildings are interesting because they have character, and they owe it to the impress of the architect's personality on his work; and it is only such that can charm and interest the uneducated as well as the educated, and that really deserve the name of architecture.

In the middle ages very much was left to the trained workmen which the architect—or master builder—employed, but they worked under his personal direction, and he was always on the spot to tell them what to do and how to do it; and often himself worked with mallet and chisel on the sculpture which adorned the building.

If this supervision over every part of the building was necessary then, when the architect had under him a skilled body of artisans, trained to the methods of a single school; how much more necessary must it be at the present day when he has no such traditions? They have to work one week in one style and the next in another, and then probably in no style at all. No wonder they are hopelessly at sea when left to themselves. The architect of to-day should, therefore, think no part of his work too small for his attention; everything should be thought out, studied, and the smallest detail designed as carefully as the more important.

It is hardly necessary to say that this has not been done with a large proportion of the buildings in our cities. It is a melancholy fact that much that has been produced is either positively bad or absolutely uninteresting. The buildings that are offensively bad are so from sheer ignorance or contempt for the recognized rules of art, and those that are dull and stupid often are so from the mere mechanical repetition of stock forms and stale ideas, which do duty for thought and save trouble of invention. With others truth has been sacrificed to whim, orders have been painfully caricatured, the details are inappropriate and often out of their proper position—a meaningless combination of forms, freaks and devices, dressed up to look fresh and clever. An uncultured and unappreciative public will call any extravagance fresh and clever until they are taught to know that there is a violation of some law. But the architect who does these things wins a cheap, but doubtful, reputation by pandering to a taste, which if he does not know is bad it is because his taste is no better than their own. He does not fear to blunder in his details, because he knows there is no one to detect them. His safety is in public ignorance.

How essentially different was it when the Greek architects were building. They were encouraged or admonished by the knowledge that they were watched by the trained and cultured eyes of all the Athenian people.

Every citizen was an intelligent critic. No Greek architect could deceive the public with a false proportion or vulgar profile; neither were they deceived by abundance of ornament covering a weak design. Nothing but purity and perfection obtained for the architect a reward. But when their high ideal of art was reached the appreciation and applause were promptly and ungrudgingly given and the reward—riches, honor and fame.

But alas for the architect to-day who is endowed with creative imagination and a keen sense of duty—whose profession is dear to him because of his love for his art. There is little in the condition of public sentiment from which he may draw inspiration and encouragement. He will see bad work pretty generally admired poor work too often approved.

* Paper presented at the eleventh convention of the Ontario Association of Architects.