

The Architect and His Work

Inaugural Address by President John W. Simpson, of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

IN all the World's history, there has been never an epoch like that to which we are come. Four years of energy and skill have been devoted by the Nations to the work of mutual destruction; and now they see, revealed by the light of Peace, the precipice of ruin to which their struggles have brought them. Aghast at the imminent danger, they turn—still faint and bruised with fighting—to mend the neglected structure of their prosperity, to renew the arrested progress of their social welfare.

In these tremendous circumstances, I invite your attention to the functions of the Architect. Plan—born of the fertile union of Reflection, analysing the conditions of the problem, with Imagination, quick to perceive its true solution; Construction, daughter of Caution, testing the soundness of each audacious artifice. Such faculties, at once quickened and chastened by severe technical training, conduce—as I shall submit—to a type of intellect in the Designer of Buildings which is a National asset; an instrument to be employed to its very limit at this present time.

What is an Architect?

There can be no better definition than that given by the Dictionary of the Académie Française: "the Artist who composes buildings, determines their proportions, distributions, and decorations, directs their execution, and controls the expenditure upon them."

First then, foremost, and above all, he is an Artist. And by the term Artist, I understand no more a Painter, or a Draughtsman, than I do an Actor, or—for that matter, a Hairdresser—but that which all who honestly practise those professions would wish to be; delighting in their work for its own sake, yet discontented with it because of perpetual endeavour to reach a higher perfection. Not that fitful dilettante who justifies to himself his idle hours with empty phrases—"a lack of inspiration," or the like—but a man with a life's work before him, and the time desperately inadequate in which to do it. A man of remorseless severity in the standard of his own attainment, insomuch that he shall grudge no expenditure of time and pains to achieve the smallest improvement in his work. One in whose mouth the words "It will do," and "Near enough," are not found; nor will he tolerate them in the mouths of those who work with him.

With such a Temperament, Imagination, an eye trained to the appreciation of Form and Colour, and the rare Creative faculty, endowed with all attributes of the Artist—he is yet but

an imperfect Architect. For to the Artist must be added the Technician, to make the Architect. Of what avail is his gift of Creation, if he have not Constructive Science that alone shall enable the offspring of his vision to reach maturity?

And, what a very mountain range of obstacles now appears between our eager Artist and the Promised Land of his desire. Not seldom, indeed, his heart fails at the steep ascent, and either he turns aside into by-paths which he conceives easier or more direct—or, he becomes fascinated with the very ruggedness of his toil, and remains contentedly constructing, with never a regret for what lies beyond his vision.

The Artist, then, must train his unaccustomed feet to tread firmly the slippery planes of geometry; for he is to be able, you must remember, to delineate Things, not merely as they exist, but as they are to be. Geometer and—that he may calculate—Mathematician, he must still surmount and master the rocky intricacies of the Trades. Mason and Bricklayer shall he become, and Carpenter to boot. The workers in Metal must yield to him the secrets of their Crafts, nor shall he rest till he has explored the whole mystery of Material;—Rocks, and Trees, and the Sand which is by the sea-shore.

Something of an Engineer he will find himself nowadays, being called upon to deal with Steel as a familiar friend; recognising its great possibilities, and—its limitations. He is but a poor designer who shall set aside materials as "in-artistic"; rather should he recognise it as his duty, by masterful handling, to imbue them with beauty.

The study of Hygiene is within his province; for he must be nicely studious in arranging all Sanitary matters, and that not merely as to their general disposal. Judging no detail of pipe, trap, joint, or fitting unworthy of attention, he must narrowly supervise each with the Authority which is born of Knowledge. Upon Climate, Aspect, Rain-fall, Sub-soils, and all matters pertaining to the Public Health, he will be required to advise; and to plan aright the Defences against those insidious, persistent foes of humanity, Sickness and Disease.

Armed, then, with this panoply of attainments, and the vigorous constitution proper for their exercise, yet another gift is needed for his full equipment. The very weight of his intellectual armour may be his disadvantage and undoing, if it be not supported by that solid sense of proportion—those powers of inductive and de-