

Forum.

Social Architecture

Forum, 1924

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The Public at the present time do not take very much interest in the fine arts, so-called, in Painting, architecture & sculpture. Artists, liberals and cultured persons generally spend a good deal of time in absorbing them for this, and in endeavouring to instruct them in artistic culture; generally in an appreciation of the works of old masters, dead poets and ruined buildings.

Now of course it is a great pity that so few people really feel beauty as a part of their lives today, because, for one thing, this is the cheapest, & one of the best pleasures we can have. Short of creating beauty there are very few pleasures greater than that of receiving it.

But if the majority of well to do people today have only very feeble artistic leanings, if their appreciations are usually excessively conservative & excessively simple. There must be some good reason for it. We are naturally a very artistic race — ~~with the exception of~~ ~~the~~ and our present apparently materialistic, or unexpressive, phase is only a passing incident, due to rather peculiar social conditions.

What these social conditions are, what they are producing in art is my subject this evening. I hope to show you that art, far from being an addition, or a luxury in life, is rather a necessary symptom of life. If we have a vigorous healthy life, in people or in nation, we will have some kind of art rising from it. & That art is the only art with which we need concern ourselves.

So we shall not consider art as beauty, or as a cultured, refined thing, but as a result of life, & to be understood in terms of life.

To do this I must first delve a little into history not very far, only to the last days of the old world which passed away about a little over a century ago. The world before industrialism

## Social Architects

During the eighteenth century a knowledge of the Fine Arts, of ~~Painting, sculpture and Architecture~~, was an accepted part of the education of a gentleman. It was expected that he would be able to discuss intelligently the accepted masterpieces of ancient and modern art, and that he would have some canon of criticism whereby to measure the pictures, statues and buildings which he saw around him.

To this end young men of family and position, and these words really meant something in the XVIII century, were sent upon the "Grand Tour" through ~~the~~ the principal cities of Europe, usually under the guidance of a tutor. From their Tour they returned with some knowledge of the forms of polite society in Europe and with a collection of works of art, statues, paintings and books which in due course were included in the family library and the family collections.

So we find amongst the wealthier classes - the ruling class of the time, a well developed taste in the fine arts which, particularly in Architecture, deeply affected the national taste.

For these young men, when they came to build, demanded in their houses those beauties which they had learned to admire on their Grand Tour. They required their architects to know and to work in accordance with those rules which were enshrined in their books. of *Vignola*, *Palladio* <sup>or Scamozzi</sup>.

Now this knowledge which they had acquired abroad was essentially the knowledge of the connoisseur, as different from the knowledge of the designer, or of the craftsman. It was an appreciation of the appearance of things, apart from any question of how the things were contrived or made. and it was based upon antiquarianism.

An educated gentleman of the XVIII century cared nothing for the way in which stones are laid, pieces of wood jointed or plaster laid on. He cared equally little for the contrivance of plan, or the suitability of design to climate and habits of life.

Architecture, painting and Sculpture took therefore the form of abstract arts, whose beauties were almost independent of any practical considerations of place material or workmanship. So he required his architect to reproduce the beauties of Italian buildings by a strict adherence to Italian rules, in an English country side.

This predominance of the connoisseur in the XVIII century is the key to the Architecture of the XVIII century, nor is it altogether absent from that of our own day.

It explains the strange plans, and the disguised, if rather pompous exteriors of the great English houses of the XVIII century when, to quote the well known lines of Pope - addressed to the Earl of Burlington.

Lord Burlington's  
Villa Chiusure

"Yet shall, my Lord, your just your noble rules  
Fill half the land with imitating pots.

Shall call the winds through long arcades to roar  
Proud to catch cold at a Venetian door.

Blenheim  
~~Castle Howard~~

plan formal & disguised.

Passage from kitchen to diningroom thro long corridor -  
Great State apartments.

Blenheim  
~~Castle Howard~~

Sur John Vauvergh

Elevation

Castle Howard Entrance Hall

Ordinary people of course could not rise either to this expense or to this ostentation. They were contented to live in very sensible brick houses, whose modest forms hardly admitted of Palladian Rule.

Roppyngham. Burwash Sussex

Yet the influence of the XVIII century connoisseur led to the idea of Architecture as an abstract art only superficially connected with the craft of building. Led to the idea that a deep knowledge of the fine art of Architecture was quite compatible with a complete ignorance of building construction. Nor are these ideas altogether unknown today. It led too to the idea

of the fine arts as the peculiar possession of the learned wealthy and cultured classes.

For at this time of course the peasantry had their own fine arts, unknown to and despised by the connoisseur. They built their farmhouses and cottages in a simple manner with the local materials, they made their own furniture and their own clothes after the manner of their forefathers. The remnants of this peasant art we still have amongst us in the homespuns, the tufted weavings, the hooked rugs of Quebec and the maritime provinces. These natural simple arts which we today endeavour to revive, but which are yet slowly dying out all over the world.

(3) For, in the XIX century that great change came over our civilization which we call the "Industrial revolution" and through which we have not yet completely passed.

Boucherville Ch. S. Assumption Old Cottages. S. Assumption Church (XIXC)

This traditional art existed in England until the end of the XVIII century. In Russia, the Levant and the outlying parts of Europe it is hardly dead yet. In the New England states until about 1850. Thereafter it declines and it is evident that the main cause of its decline was that movement which we call the "Industrial revolution", a movement which is not yet concluded.

Up to the XVIII century European civilization and organization was founded on the possession of land, and upon agriculture. This culture was in a comparatively stable condition throughout the middle ages. Population increased only very slowly and the mass of the people of all classes lived on, or very close to the land.

The architecture of Europe, <sup>from the XV</sup> up to the XIX century is one of houses, built in the country. The trading and professional classes were unimportant, dependants upon this social organization of the land.

Towards the end of the XVIII century the rise of modern machinery, of factory production and of industrial organisation led at once to a phenomenal rise in population. "Hands" were required to work in the new factories, and "hands" were produced. The population of Great Britain rose from some 7 million at the close of the XVIII century, to 44 million, that of America from 10 to over one hundred million, and the greater part of this new population was, of necessity, crowded into the cities.

Here it is employed in making enormous quantities of things, of every kind, at very great speed, for its own members to buy. The more they make the more they must buy, tempted thereto by the new art of advertisement, now brought to a high pitch of scientific suggestion.

Under this industrial organisation, and usually protesting rather helplessly against it we can find the remnants of the older culture. — the farmer, still necessary because he grows food, the individual craftsman and the artist. But they are submerged by the enormous industrial population. caught up in the squirrel-cage headmill of mass production and mass consumption. And with them their arts have been submerged too. The organising heads of industrialism have indeed carried on the commoner arts of the old landed aristocracy but the industrial "peasantry" if I may so call them have lost all touch with the old arts of the country side. So ~~art~~ Fine Art has come to be the sole possession of the wealthier classes, artists are in the main the hangers on and parasites of the rich and to most people Art is definitely a luxury which could be quite easily omitted from life, and attention to which is merely a sign of culture, enjoyable, distinguished and unnecessary.

Yet there is one art which must be remade by each generation for its own uses, the art of Architecture. A stationary civilization, like that of Ancient Egypt may indeed show an architecture stationary also, but a rapidly changing culture

Culture like our own must change its architecture. For the works of the architect are made for use as well as for beauty, and with new uses, new forms will of necessity appear.

Our modern American Architecture shows this very clearly, and it is to that that I wish to call your attention this evening; and most particularly to its industrial aspects; the housing of the new proletariat, the buildings of the new education and the buildings of the new industrialism. This is essentially a city architecture serving the new city populations and in it I think we can see the two ideals - the old ideals of the connoisseur, derived from the XVIII Century aristocrat, and the new ~~needs~~ <sup>ideals</sup> of the industrial aristocrat.

~~Our home architecture in this country derived from Europe and, excepting for a few <sup>immigrations</sup> ~~details~~ of planning and construction made necessary by climate and changed conditions our houses are as English houses. They have followed the development of house architecture which took place in England ~~in~~ from about 1870 onwards.~~

~~But we cannot in America claim to have produced any distinctive domestic architecture.~~

~~Our public buildings fall into two classes - those dedicated to culture, and those inspired by commerce. In these indeed we find something very distinctively American.~~

~~The cultural buildings include libraries, colleges, club or institutional buildings and.~~

The older American public buildings are distinguished by a rather artless classicism. At the end of the XVIII Century Republican Rome was, quite erroneously, regarded as the model of simplicity for Republican America, and this was expressed in the classic forms of the buildings -

Boston State House

Washington Capitol

That these were derived largely from Imperial Rome was no serious drawback. Ideals are usually stronger than truth.

But as American Architects began to seek a higher <sup>in Paris</sup> ~~transmission~~ and the American

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But, towards the 70s the Americans began to travel in Europe, and American Architects began to get their training in the Ecole des Beaux Arts.

The result was of course a much higher standard of architecture, but the new architecture, like that of XVIII century England, was a foreign architecture.

Houses were built in the style of Francis I,

Vanderbilt House -

Newspaper offices in the style of Early Italian Renaissance

Herald Office.

These modern American buildings were, in fact, everything excepting Modern, or American.

Richardson did indeed try to forge from the forms of Southern France, an Architecture which should be genuinely American, the well known Richardsonian Romanesque of which Trinity Church, Boston is a well known example. But + of which the Windsor Station and the Red Path Library in Montreal are good examples, but Richardson failed. His pupils hardly carried on the tradition and his buildings are today historical curiosities.

Trinity Ch  
Boston.

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For the cultured American public wanted European culture. Their cultural ideals were all modelled in Europe. A Native American culture they might dream of, but if it dared to appear it was at once condemned - or ignored.

Since then a very great change has come about in American Architecture. Our houses indeed ~~at~~ follow very closely the English model, simply because our method of living is English, excepting for a few details connected with climate and the peculiarities of service. We cannot claim to have originated any distinctive American domestic Architecture.

Indeed in one particular England may claim to be definitely in advance of America. The peculiar needs of the new industrial proletariat have resulted in the



Garden city movement, and in better housing for the industrial workers.

Letchworth. 2

Port Sunlight. 2

This movement is now making way here too. It is still very imperfect, but it is a definite effort to meet the problem of the industrial population.

It is however in Public Architecture that the greatest change has come about since the beginning of the XX century - in buildings devoted to Culture or to Commerce.

As cultural buildings we may include Colleges, Libraries, institutional buildings, government buildings and the like, as commercial, the accommodation required for business, stores, <sup>and</sup> offices.

The two forms have taken different paths, illustrating very clearly the ideals of modern life.

Our College buildings in many cases are modelled very closely upon the mediæval forms of XIV century England. A style has been evolved which is generally known as "collegiate Gothic".

Princeton? 2.

So So. There is evidently here an effort to capture some of the charm of old tradition which we are so conscious of in the older English Universities. A charm which I think is even more apparent to the American than to the native-born Englishman.

In other public buildings we find a rather cold and severe classic type.

Columbia. Library.

Sometimes very clearly influenced by archaeological motives, as in the

Temple of Scottish rite Washington

which is quite openly derived from the Mausoleum of

Mausoleum

Halicarnassus

This type is dignified, solid and severe. The buildings are exceedingly carefully designed every detail closely studied. They certainly represent a very high standard of professional skill yet they are undoubtedly dull. They lack all humanity. They are devoid of that quality which for want of a better term I shall call humour. They are abstract, dignified and dull. The sun and the cloud which flicker around their buildings, give ever changing turns of beauty leave the carefully calculated shadows of these monuments as cold as before. They are designed in an emotional vacuum.

And they are remarkably like the buildings of France or England at the beginning of the XIX Century.

Bourse - Paris.

St James Hall Liverpool. British Museum

They are not only dead - but they are essentially foreign. They betray the fact that culture in America is still regarded as something which we get from Europe and which has as yet no roots in this country. It is useless to speak of an American culture whilst our efforts are still so clearly clothed in the ~~old~~ refashioned garments of Europe. We are not even contemporary in culture.

But when we turn to our Commercial buildings show a different spirit. The great art of a country will rise from its real beliefs, and the real belief of America is in Commerce.

The use of the skyscraper has been assigned to various ~~causes~~ - to the congested conditions of Manhattan Island - In <sup>fact</sup> reality the best authorities are now agreed that the skyscraper produces congestion - it is not caused by it. The real causes for the development

often remarkable architectural form are

- (1) The desire of the land lord to get the greatest possible return.
- (2) The desire of Americans to live ~~at~~ in a crowd.
- (3) The intense pride of the American business man in his business.

And of course the development of modern methods of construction which made possible the realization of these desires.

The result has been a perfectly new Architecture. One which is still growing, and producing the most astounding forms.

These skyscrapers are not economical - they do not pay well above about the 15<sup>th</sup> storey, they lead to street congestion - but they are often very beautiful and they do express the commercial <sup>side</sup> life of our American life.

The great cathedrals of Northern France were built at a time when religion reed with civic pride ~~at~~ So Beauvais Cathedral for instance ~~was~~ built not only to the glory of God but to the glory pride of the city of Beauvais. as the loftest church in all France. ~~The~~ Religion, combined with that ~~great~~ love of the country side which has always characterised England produced in the XIII century Salisbury, set in its green sward. Pride in the glory of Commerce & the rush of city life produced the Woolworth Building. It has often been compared to a cathedral and the resemblance is deeper than ~~often~~ apparent. It is not the pseudo Gothic trimmings or the spire like appearance which justify the comparison. It is the fact that both ~~Beauvais~~ the Woolworth and the Cathedral are the fruit of an overpowering ideal; the results of a genuine ideal. Which ideal was the higher matters not. Art only requires that the ideal should be sincere and powerful and Art will transmute it into expression.

Beauvais.

Salisbury.

Woolworth.

Equitable Bdg.  
N.Y.

These dove-cote-like buildings, with their unnumerable small openings - their long clean lines, their fragile delicacy are truly expressive of the unnumerable inhabitants they house.

Tower Bdg.  
x

Beginning as far back as The Tower building of 1889 they have developed in height and in design.

Gas Coy Bdg  
Chicago

At first the usual form is the traditional one of basement, wall and cornice, a form developed in the horizontal buildings of the XVI century - Then it was perceived that a tower form, shooting clean into the air, was more appropriate and therewith came a certain mental Gothic quality into the design.

Toronto  
C.P.R.  
Crane Bdg. Montreal

Broad St  
N.Y.

But such lofty buildings necessarily darken shade the streets on which they are built and to remedy this by-laws are being introduced in most four cities limiting the height of the buildings in proportion to the width of the street. This purely utilitarian proviso has only given a further opportunity to the skyscraper.

New York  
Zoning Law  
Diagram

Do So. development

For now it mounts not in one height crowned by a cornice - but in diminishing masses <sup>each</sup> ~~one~~ stepping beyond the last. A living art cannot be hindered by conditions and these recent forms are a proof of the vitality of our new architecture.

N.Y. Standard  
Old Bdg

It is of course always a little difficult to receive new forms in art, we are very conservative in our emotions, more so perhaps here than in Europe and so these great commercial buildings have often been ~~condemned~~ aesthetically, regarded as economic necessities to be condemned aesthetically.

Office Bdg  
32<sup>nd</sup> St.

Proposed  
Broadway Temple

The truth is of course the opposite. Economically there is very little to be said for them. Structurally they are frail, possibly dangerous. They lead to congestion and to serious financial injustices.

~~Artistically~~

But who can approach New York from the Sea and see these great white buildings rising on the end of Manhattan Island without feeling their sheer beauty? The ~~little~~ statue of Liberty, a monument intended for beauty, looks like an insignificant doll to one side whilst the real life of America is apparent in the delicate, fairylike forms of the skyscrapers, soaring above the mists of the river.

The Entrance to New York today is one of the great <sup>sea</sup> entrances of the world.

The Cultural Arts of America, her literature her music her painting, the Architecture of her institutions and her education + her homes is all as yet derivative + secondary - but the Architecture of her commerce is fresh, and living.

~~I have tried to show that the fine arts are not merely~~

It is often said that the Fine Arts are necessary to life. That is true, yet only a partial truth. The fine arts are an outcome of all vigorous life and wherever you have a vigorous energetic life with active ideals there you may look for a living art. Its forms will not be those of the old arts; for each generation must make its own world, yet we must accept them insofar as they are genuine. This is social art, the art which grows as an inevitable accompaniment of a living society + it is an infinitely greater thing than the connoisseur art which can only appreciate the remnants of the past.

New York  
Skyline.

We are, in matters of culture, too apt to sit with our backs to the future, admiring only the great works of our Ancestors. We forget that our ancestors, when they were doing these works, were looking forward. They did not ignore the past, for they had been produced by it, but like all really good men, they tempered filial affection with the confident knowledge that after all, they knew a bit more than the old man. So they advanced.

But, as art is an outcome of life, so the really living art of any country will be an outcome of its most energetic life. We may regret that we today live in a commercial age, but that is no good reason to shut our eyes to the few fine things which the artist can produce even from commercial ideals. Our most living art today in America is architecture and its living manifestations are in utilitarian buildings.

The U.S. Army supply Base at Brooklyn, is a purely utilitarian warehouse - yet an artist has made of it a monument.

U.S. Supply Base 2

The N.Y. City Pennsylvania Station was built partly as a monument by a great railway corporation partly as a useful station. The result is instructive

Exterior, dull + monumental.

Waiting Hall. A Roman bath. Monumental to Concourse. The useful part. Living architecture

An eminent American critic of ~~art~~ culture has said that this kind of thing is merely engineering. Art comes in surprising forms - Engineering structure when it becomes beautiful & expensive has as great a claim to our admiration as any other form of architecture

Brooklyn Brighton Bridge Ohio.  
Steel + concrete.

Quebec Bridge. — severe + dignified  
" " detail — ornament !

Wherever there exists a vigorous life, there will rise from it a vigorous art. Its forms will not be those of the old art, for each generation must make its own world and we must accept that world and do our part in it. We need not cease to love the old art but we must realize that new life cannot express itself in old forms - new wine cannot be poured into old bottles. Art is social, it grows as an inevitable accompaniment of a living society and art looked at in this way is an infinitely greater thing than that commonwealth which can only appreciate the remnants of the past.