THE QUALITY OF FITNESS IN ARCHITECTURE — *1912*

All art is the manifestation of thought and feeling, the artistic quality of any object being that in it which stimulates thought and feeling. There must therefore always be varying degrees of art, from good to bad. According to our moral perceptions, we may arouse painful thoughts and feelings, or pleasant ones. The nobler ideas and emotions manifest the highest arts, quite apart from technical excellence. Every soul that breathes would like, if he could, to arouse in the minds and hearts of others the best impulses and acts. "Our friends are people who see the good in us and who believe in that good."

Many will ask, What have such theories to do with architecture? We believe them to be the essential basis of all the arts.

An architect may encourage greed or generosity in his client. He can suggest many vices, like deception and pretentious vulgarity, or fan into flame better thoughts and feelings, helping the struggle for good work, honest construction, simple dignity and harmony, repose and reticence. The architect may regard himself as a paid hireling whose first duty is to give his client what he thinks the client wants, never allowing his own conscience to interfere; saying, like a shopman, that he must meet all tastes; or he may tactfully encourage his client to have his needs supplied on given principles of strict integrity, and arouse in him enthusiasm for honest construction and frank admission of his true status and limitations. He can remind him of reverence which leads to respect for nature and all natural conditions, so blending his building harmoniously with nature, and making it as good as it looks, and not fraudulently in imitation of something better and more magnificent than his means can allow. Better frank simplicity than sham elaboration and pretentiousness.

Fitness is a divine law, and by fitness we mean not only *material suitability, but moral fitness*—that which expresses our best thoughts and feelings and our purest moral sense. We must recoil from all forms of dishonesty. If a client is greedy and wants too much accommodation for his money, we must refuse to supply it, if it necessitates shoddy building or weak and faulty construction. We must start with the determination to build as well as we can; then will follow such qualities as simplicity and repose, which, if truly loved and sought after, will affect our architecture not only in general design and planning, but in every detail. The proportions of our rooms will suggest repose if we are really striving for it as we design our building, and a peaceful homely effect will be produced by these qualities that will appeal to all in greater or less degree. The desire for fitness, will lead us to evolve our evaluations out of our plans and requirements, never making our plans to fit a preconceived elevation. To squeeze the requirements of a mansion into the semblance of a Grecian temple must involve the violation of fitness and the expression of false sentiment. We are not Greeks, nor have we a Grecian climate, or Grecian materials and conditions. Moreover, an attentive study of local material and conditions will greatly aid us in securing harmony and rhythm, making our building look as if it grew where it stood in loving cooperation with its immediate surroundings.

The knowledge of foreign architecture has done much to destroy the full and complete harmony in modern work which is the characteristic feature of all the finest buildings throughout the world. The more we study the conditions under which we build, the better. Not only climate and local material, but sometimes foreign materials, which, owing to facility of transit, are found to be more fit than local materials. And, above all, the character of our client and his best tastes and aspirations, remembering always, that it is not ourselves that we have to express, but moral qualities,—honesty, thoroughness, fitness and grace, refinement and harmony.

Our chief trouble is in combating the greedy who, wanting things to look better than they are, ask us to strive for *an effect* of richness without themselves incurring the cost of real richness. We need all our tact to preserve our integrity with such people. But it can be done, and must be done.

A frank use of common material well proportioned and fitly used, will often give a charming effect by reason of its frankness. You see at a glance what it is, and feel taken into the architect's confidence; whereas the covering up of construction with cheap elaboration, or material made to imitate something more costly, only makes you feel you have been cheated.

Again, a careful study of our climate makes us emphasize our roofs to suggest protection from weather. Large, massive chimneys

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imply stability and repose. Long, low buildings also create a feeling of restfulness and spaciousness. Small windows in proportion to wall space suggest protection. Bright, sunny rooms can still be secured by keeping the ceilings near the windows for reflection. It is foolish to make windows so large that until they have been half-covered with curtains you cannot live in the rooms. Besides, excess in curtaining is wasteful of money and labor, which is also contrary to fitness.

Many elaborations in modern architecture are useless and also wasteful of money and labor, adding to the expense of upkeep and often causing dirt and damp, which are injurious and destructive. Moreover, all ornament is pernicious unless it inspires good thought and feeling in others.

A *nation produces the architecture it deserves*, and if in the main it is materialistic and sordid, we shall find all material qualities considered first and the moral and spiritual ones scarcely at all. Greed will crush out generosity and shams will smother poetry and sentiment. Men will prefer the imitation grandiose to simplicity and dignity. Things will not be what they seem. Bodily comfort and luxurious enjoyment will be valued above grace and refinement. Indeed, the modern materialist will not admit there can be any moral qualities suggested or conveyed by architecture. He sees no harm in jointing his stucco to imitate stone construction. So it is we see what we look for.

We must look for noble moral qualities in our fellow creatures, if we desire to find beauty. At present the world does not *seek* beauty, but expects to be given it for nothing—thrown in with a pound of tea. But nothing can be had for nothing in this life; and we must be prepared to pay—that is, make some sacrifice—for beauty, the sacrifice at least of devoted thought and loving endeavor. If your client does not understand this, it is your duty to inspire it in him, which you may often do by appealing to his judgment and sense of fitness. If the kitchen range is covered with polished iron moldings to make it look heavier than it is, he may be induced to dispense with the fraudulent parts on the plea that they waste the kitchen maid's time and labor. Then the simple range that is as heavy as it looks, and unpretentious, will have a chance, and produce the effect of breadth, goodness and strength without waste. Let breadth, goodness and strength be the keynote throughout your building, and then no one will feel cheated.

Generosity is a quality that affects our sense of proportion and

improves our construction vastly. An ungenerous client will induce weakness in construction. The hidden parts will be reduced to their smallest dimensions, and servants' quarters will lack the comfort due them. And when all is done, the pride of architect, builder and workmen is gone, and anxious fear of being found out takes its place.

Generosity is a quality the poorest of us may possess; indeed, it is mostly found among the poor. If a man cannot afford to have everything as good as it looks, he had better go without. Shams are poisons and degrading.

On going over a house, you feel cheated if you find polished hardwood and marble freely used in the reception rooms, while bedrooms and offices are in painted deal, cheap and tawdry. The same degree of durability may be used without any sacrifice of fitness, just as you may have fine finish and smoothness in a jewel case, while strength and durability, equally valuable, belong to the traveling chest.

A law-abiding people, not impatient of discipline (like the well-trained soldier accustomed to obey) will produce an architecture conspicuous for its tidiness, repose and reticence, having the strength and vigor of the well controlled. But the lawless, slack and slovenly people, who are absorbed by the love of gain and pleasure, will produce the architecture we see all around us, which for the most part is restless and "rotten." Our attention is too much riveted on material things. Market values obscure the view of those qualities which go to purify and strengthen character. We do not object to ugliness, if it does not affect bodily comfort; whereas we ought to be waging eternal warfare against all forms of ugliness; mainly by keeping up a flaming love and desire for beauty. We must love all beauty—beauty of character, beauty of sound, sight, smell, touch and taste—with a passionate desire that is ever ready to make sacrifices for attainment. This burning love of the beautiful is really at the bottom of all true progress. It is something outside ourselves that lures us on in the improvement of character; so the more we can have in our architecture the better.

It is a common fault to regard beauty as a form of pleasure only, forgetting its influence on character and disposition. A peaceful, homely room, free from draughts, yet well ventilated and warm, with nothing in it that does not fulfil some useful purpose, and plenty of comfortable seats and places for work, with a big, hospitable-looking fire, high up above the hearth suggesting

dignity and importance, will make you feel on entering that you can rest and be at peace with the world. So different is the usual confused motley of museum articles, in your way at every turn, and calling on your notice, worrying your sensations of color, form and texture, all at war with one another for supremacy, and the fire cringing on the floor and looking dejected and lost in the motley of glittering bright metal tiles, marbles and wood, all detracting from the natural brilliancy and vivacity of the burning embers. Such a room fills you with restless uncertainty and bewilderment. Few rooms are not overcrowded, as if the owner were seeking to impress you with a sense of his own importance and the multitude of his possessions. Richness of effect, he may call it, but it is only the richness of gluttony and confusion. True richness can only be attained through simplicity and fitness. Have what you own in the best material and workmanship of their several kinds, and true richness will be the effect. But no richness of effect will atone for draughty, damp or cold rooms; construction must be sound in theory and practice, if it is to be fit, and it must be fit if we would have it beautiful. We must arrive at beauty through fitness, and by no other road.

We are too often afraid to be ourselves, imitating the more wealthy. Many a poor man's house would be more comfortable and better built if he would dare to live in fewer rooms. But the artisan must have his drawing room and wax flowers, even if only required for funerals. If he lives in his kitchen, he must hide the fact. And in every class you find some people trying in vain to appear better off than they are, just as our architectural details strive to look better than they are: woodwork painted to look like marble, or grained to imitate oak. Deception everywhere! Surely the first condition of true art must be truth in every part. Our moral sense being given to us to help us in the pursuit of beauty as a means to improve character.

One word must be added on color. Be not afraid of bright color; it is a powerful aid to cheerfulness. Avoid crude mixtures of many colors, for cheerfulness and harmony can be secured with a few. The desire to suggest cheerfulness will help us to avoid large masses of brown, and all indefinite tints suggestive of decomposition. Rejoice not only in the colors of living nature, but above all in the proportions of her color schemes.

OPEN LETTER TO THE ROYAL INSTITUTE OF BRITISH ARCHITECTS — *1912*

Gentlemen,—I earnestly appeal to you to use all your influence to bring to an end the evil custom of publishing the names of assessors in architectural competitions before the designs are sent in to be judged. The practical outcome of publishing the names beforehand has been to prevent many from competing who have felt unable to sympathise with the taste and ideals of the assessor. But the greatest evil of all is that men are induced to design up or down to the assessor's level. Not setting out to do what they honestly feel to be the very best they are capable of, but for the sake of the reward, to prostitute their powers by endeavouring to appeal to the taste of the assessor. Let no competitor know who is to be his judge, and you at once remove a powerful inducement to unfaithfulness. It is a fearful tyranny that imposes any style on a designer.

Conditions and requirements and moral law are enough data from which to produce the noblest architecture, if properly attended to; assuming of course, some degree of native refined sensibility. But when any style is imposed upon the designer the conditions and requirements that ought to control him are made subservient to the style. The poor plan has to be squeezed like a Chinese foot, and the honest expression of needs is sacrificed to the conventional commonplace of symmetry. The supposed leaders in the profession by this system can impose upon the British public the deadly dull imitations of the style they affect. Hence we have seen public buildings arise one after the other with the same trail of the serpent over them all. No healthy national style can be artificially grown in this way.

Yours faithfully,
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November 26, 1912.

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