

Architecture

Mr. Voysey: Veteran Gold Medallist

By JOHN SUMMERSON

THE Royal Gold Medal for Architecture is awarded annually. The recipient is recommended to the Sovereign by the Council of the Royal Institute of British Architects as a person whose labours have benefited architecture in some special way. Since 1848, when the award was instituted, the Sovereign has regularly endorsed the Institute's choice.

To the public—even to the small part of it which likes to follow architectural affairs—the award of the Medal is rarely an event of overwhelming interest. Often the honour goes to a person already as well endowed with orders, titles and degrees as is good for any man below the rank of Field-Marshal: he collects this ultimate laurel, his colleagues applaud at a formal investiture, one more name is cut on the shiny marble at 66 Portland Place, and that is that.

But this year's award is rather different. Turning up the name of Charles Francis Annesley Voysey in the Institute's Calendar, I find not one single honorific addition. Not so much as a B.A. Mr. Voysey is plain Mr. Voysey; and it is perfectly in keeping with the saintly simplicity and reserve of this very remarkable man that the first honour to come to him should be the highest to which an architect can aspire.

What has Voysey done? I can only answer that by asking you to cast your mind back to the dowdiest house you can remember—a house, perhaps, built by a great-uncle for his retirement, a matter of half-a-century ago. It was the reddest of red brick, with probably a rich belt of terra-cotta, a curly-timbered triangle in the gable, filled with stucco sunflowers, and a tiled roof brooding over a sextet of spiked dormers. Inside, it was busy, full of coves and corners, beady mouldings, bracketed shelves and yards of bumpy, rollicking ornament; there were Italian marbles and picture tiles in the dining room; the billiard-room reflected turned oak in embossed copper; the hall had tinted glass, fixed in grooved and varnished joinery. Complicated carpets stared up at complicated ceilings. It was a well-appointed mansion; but not a beautiful house. Nobody had ever called it a beautiful house. Great-uncle liked it because it was the kind of thing he had always cherished in his heart as the house of a man who had done well. It was, to be sure, a fair imitation of the houses of men who had done even better.

The darkness which had descended on middle-class

domestic architecture in those days was inscrutable. For the industrial nobility a few select masters might produce a work of real quality, in the course of paying expensive compliments to Haddon Hall; but for the small man with only moderate wealth to lay out on his dwelling, there seemed nothing to do but to swim with the Philistine tide.

Until Voysey showed the way. It was in 1884 that, as a young man of twenty-seven, with a sound Victorian training behind him and no prospects at all, he set up in practice. He went in for a big public competition—and did not win it. A friend put him in the way of designing wallpapers and fabrics, and it was in these that he found the first outlet for his fine, nervous draughtsmanship and sense of pattern. Then he designed a house—an imaginary house—for himself. The drawings were published in one of the technical papers and by the happiest of chances they were seen and admired by somebody who wanted to build. Within a few years Voysey had a good practice.

Such a thing could hardly happen today. But in the 'eighties, when the incomes of professional men were strongly on the upgrade, there was a desire, felt rather than expressed, for a new kind of small house—something which was not a take-off of a big house, nor an elaborate composite symbol of social prestige; something simple, convenient, modest and of honest quality. Voysey's intuition divined the need and provided the answer.

Nobody else could have done it; for Voysey's single-mindedness, his faith in himself, his crystal-clear sincerity were, and are, unique. So the gentle, grey houses, with slate roofs and casement windows, planned with that feeling for the beauty of usefulness that you get in ancient farms, began to be built. They were puritan buildings; positively heretical in their dismissal of the need for stylistic sanction. Indeed, it seems as if heresy runs in the Voysey family, for it was the architect's father, the Rev. Charles Voysey, whose refusal to believe in the doctrine of an everlasting Hell lost him a Church of England living and made him the founder of the Theistic Church and one of the best loved preachers of Victorian times.

Voysey has been something of a preacher himself; and although his most compelling sermons are in brick and stone and wood—and sometimes in wallpaper—he has occasionally put his point of view into words. Here is a



Mr. C. F. A. Voysey, who has been awarded the Royal Gold Medal for Architecture: a photograph taken at an exhibition of the architect's work held in London in 1931

plea for simplicity, made forty-five years ago. Even if the conclusion he advocates is now a commonplace, I do not find the manner of expression any the worse for wear :

Try the effect of a well-proportioned room, with white walls, plain carpets and simple oak furniture, and nothing in it but the necessary articles of use, and one pure ornament in the form of a vase of flowers—not a cosmopolitan crowd of all sorts, but one or two sprays of one kind, and you will then find reflections begin to dance in your brain ; each object will be received on the retina and understood, classified and dismissed from the mind, leaving you free as a bird to wander in the sunshine or storm of your own thoughts.

Today, at 83, Mr. Voysey is puzzled to find himself revered as one of the Early Fathers of the modern movement, a role which he has, I imagine, no earthly intention of adopting. He does not see eye to eye with this age of collectivism. He believes in the individual and the individual's obligation to rule his life and his work in the light (as he says in his writings) of Reason, Conscience and Love. Such a sense of responsibility leaves little room for the pursuit of honours and applause, and I dare say that even the award of the Royal Gold Medal will give more satisfaction to Voysey's admirers, old and young, than to the medallist himself.