

ON THE VALUE OF THE STUDY OF OLD WORK.

ADDRESS BY PROF. PERCY B. NORRIS, OF MCGILL UNIVERSITY TO THE SKETCHING CLUB OF THE PROVINCE OF QUEBEC ASSOCIATION OF ARCHITECTS.

I sometimes regret that the word "style," which is so often on our lips, was ever invented. It has come to have so many meanings that much misunderstanding has arisen as to the main idea it conveys. Once upon a time people in general understood what style meant, and in those days the word had no use. As the grosser material elements of civilization developed, men ceased to regard art as an essential part of life, and soon lost the power of using art as a means of expression. Then they began to pay us architects to know what style is for them, and we are very largely responsible for the superstition that architectural character is a thing independent of men, materials and climates, of constructive principles and tradesmen's methods—in a word that architectural character is a thing imitative, irrational, deceptive—that style means fake.

Just the other day a Montreal journalist waxed eloquent on the fittings of the new turbine boat. Journalists do not make public opinion, they reflect it, and this is a fair example. I have not seen the inside of the liner in question. Certainly it contains much that is rich and rare. Possibly it is a work of art. That is not the point, however. What I wish to draw attention to is the journalist's views. He describes the splendors of smoke-room, saloon and lounge, and marvels greatly, emphasizing throughout the fact that he did not feel as if he was on a ship at all. His peroration contained this highest meed of praise—the smoke-room was like the hall of some ancient castle!

Alas, the old gods are dead. Neptune had never allowed a ship like that to sail on his blue seas. If the ship is really like an old castle inside (or more probably a new hotel) so much the worse.

And the inside of a ship may be so very beautiful with its sheering lines, curving decks and all the quaint appurtenances and neat joinery that make for naval architectural character and style.

To the man in the street style is a matter of mimicry. "Let us pretend," say the children, and the "higher gifts of imagination" at once convert the nursery chairs into a hurrying train or the dining-room table into an impregnable castle. "Let us pretend!" say their elders, and a house is covered over with Rococo detail or Francois I. dormers are reared aloft and then they go and say "So-and-so built my house in such and such a style," when such style as the house has is in reality a thing very slightly affected by the source whence the details and features are borrowed.

Still this superstition on the style question carries with it a ray of hope. It is a popular protest against the vernacular architecture of the day which is so bad. Look at any business street in any business city, say Craig street or the district round the G. T. R. station. Compare it with some old business street and note how all semblance of decency in designing

ordinary things has been thrown to the winds of fate. The positive ugliness of the great majority of city streets and country cottages is almost, nay quite, *admirable*. There is absolutely no reason why utilitarian things should be made specially ugly—the prevailing thing is that the ugliness is often put on at considerable expense. It is because our vernacular architecture, our common way of doing things is so bad that wherever some sense of elegance is desired a fake of some old style is resorted to so eagerly and with so little comprehension. This fake architecture carries with it a multitude of mean deceptions—modern antique tiles, imitation of materials, and a hundred cheap contrivances of the jerry-building fitter-mongers who call themselves "art designers" and offer "sketches and specifications free."

This brings us to our main subject of discussion to-day—the main theme of our lives as architects—vernacular architecture.

Last century saw construction revolutionized and the whole scheme of trade and craftsmanship changed. It will surely not be long before things shake down into a semblance of accepted methods which will enable building traditions again be formed. Our lack at present is not so much a want of good traditions as of any at all, and this is not likely to be remedied by the training of architects in colleges in place of the old apprenticeship system. The practice of drifting through offices for a few years without any articles of obligation between chiefs and assistants cannot be called architectural training at all. Some young fellows may get on in the world as a result of this practice, but vernacular architecture will not improve.

Vernacular architecture then is about as bad here in Canada as it is possible to imagine, and the very high achievement of some individual efforts only makes the contrast the more painful. Under present day conditions good men are sure to be found for special jobs and it is not to help these to find themselves that such organizations as the P. Q. A. A., the School of Architecture of this university or the P. Q. A. A. Sketching Club exist. It is to the improvement of the common, everyday work on back streets and suburban lanes, in the heart of the city or in the country, that such corporate effort as these institutions can display must be directed.

To this end we must study old work in general, and the local old work in particular, for happily there were buildings put up in this province and down the river in the days when men yet cared about doing things decently and in order.

Let us briefly enumerate the benefits derivable from the study of old work.

Firstly, it brings the student face to face with work, be it grand or simple, which is conceived in the right spirit—self-respecting work—work which does not forever play at being something other than it is—work which even at its roughest seems to emulate what it is not, which at its finest is wondrously potent to express purpose and intention and work which at all times is a true reflection of the life to which it ministered.

Secondly, the measuring of old work (there is only one way to study it—to measure it) teaches us what

nothing else can and that which is the most important element in an architect's training—the sense of scale. Detail may be learned from a patient master, or in a school of architecture, but the sense of scale can only be apprehended by scrambling about buildings with tapes and measuring rods.

When there were no architects apart from builders the sense of scale was learnt without effort from the nature of a man's training—on the job all the time. Since paper architecture came in no designer of any note has been able to dispense with the study of old work. Brunelleschi and Rafael and all the great Italians measured the Roman remains for the sake of the detail—to attain to a technic; but of far more value to them was the ever evinced sense of scale and fine proportion which characterize their achievements and which they absorbed unawares in pursuit of scholarly detail. From this time till our own there has been but one road to the attainment of the greater architectural qualities—to measure, to measure, to measure. Three further direct advantages accrue to the draughtsman who measures:

(1) He gets practice in measuring up for alteration purposes without leaving out some important height or check measurement and learns rapid and methodical methods which are of great service to himself and his employer.

(2) He draws for the love of his subject, and so attains to sympathetic ways of rendering. A measured drawing of an old building should be more than a diagram or record. It should bare the same expression of countenance as the original. Some buildings smile, others laugh and others look tired; while pride, serenity or power are as distinctly characteristic of buildings as they are of men or women's faces and poses.

(3) The possession of a decent set of drawings is an immense aid when the time comes to go up higher. A man with a good roll of drawings under his arm need never be out of work for long.

So much for old work in general and the benefits derivable from its study. What of the local old work. The beautiful words of William Morris in appreciating the vernacular art of England are as appropriate to the work we find here around us, and I feel sure if he were familiar with the charm and quaintness of the old Quebec farms and seignories he would have written something very similar about it.

For as was the land, such was the art of it, while folk yet troubled themselves about such things; it strove little to impress people either by pomp or ingenuity; not seldom it fell into commonplace, rarely it rose into majesty. Yet was it never oppressive, never a slave's nightmare or an insolent boast; and at its best it had an inventiveness, an individuality that grander styles have never overpassed. Its best, too, and that was in its very heart, was given as freely to the yeoman's house as to the village church; never coarse, though often rude enough, sweet, natural and unaffected, an art of peasants rather than of merchant princes or courtiers, it must be a hard heart I think that does not love it, whether a man has been born among it like ourselves, or has come wondering on its simplicity from all the grandeur over seas.

(a) You will find in the local work of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a wholesome antidote to that eclecticism in which we are trained to-day. In an age of cheap illustration we see all the work of all peoples and all times, and as each tradition has its charms we are very apt to be led away by our admiration into the sincerer forms of flattery.

(b) When you have good local traditions always use them. They are founded on sense and experience and national temperament;—a touch of local tradition will go a long way towards giving character to a piece of simple work.

In illustration of this local character I recommend to your study the methods of such men as Lorraine and Lutyens, whose country houses always look as if they had grown and not been planted amid their surroundings. This is too large a theme to say much about here, but a glance at some old Scotch vernacular work and at some of Lorraine's new houses and at some Kent and Surrey cottages and then at some of Mr. Lutyens' work will show how local tradition should be applied to modern work wherever there is any to apply. Do not study old ways with a view to imitative faking or artificial reproduction of ancient mannerisms and effects, but to get understanding of the sweet simplicity of natural expression, which is so very much more edifying as an adjunct of life than the affectations and poses and deceptions or sheer ugliness for its own sake so characteristic of vernacular architecture to-day.

And lastly (and of all reasons, this is perhaps the most cogent) let us study the old work around us because it is ours, the natural product of this lot of earth on which we live. I assure you there are the germs in the local style of a manner which if rightly developed with loving care, would go far to make a national style possible. To that end it is necessary that a number of designers shall look at things from one standpoint and briefly work on parallel lines. Individualization has gone too far and it is high time we joined forces again like the makers of the great styles and work from a common point of view. Let the old local traditions furnish us with the bond for similarly directed effort and then it may be that this little society of study may become a great force for good. Let us then cherish our traditions as sacred, hold to them with loyalty, and the result will surely be the improvement of vernacular art, the making of streets into pleasant places and the evolution of something with more character than the average architecture of the schools to-day.

IT PAYS TO EMPLOY A REPUTABLE ARCHITECT.

The Court of Civil Appeals of Texas, in the case of White vs. Green, 82 S. W. 329.

The defendant had employed an architect to draw plans for a building which the defendant followed in constructing the building. The plans proved defective, and the building fell, injuring the house of the plaintiff and adjoining owner. The court held that as the defendant had exercised reasonable care in employing a reputable architect, he was not liable for damages growing out of a defect in the architect's plans.

The (Baltimore) Builders' News, from which we extract the above note, suggests the probability of a sequel to this decision which will test whether the usual building practices are equal to his remuneration.

BUILDING AT WINNIPEG.

This year so far has witnessed a boom in covering over buildings, have been issued at \$200,000, combined with \$200,000, representing \$2,000,000, last year.