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Architecture Address Delivered by Brinton B. Davis

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ARCHITECTURE

Address Delivered

By

BRINTON B. DAVIS

At Meeting of the Kentucky
Chapter, American Institute
of Architects

January 7, 1937

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Architecture

Mr. President and Fellow Architects:

It is a deep pleasure for me to exchange greetings with you on this occasion.

My first word naturally is one of appreciation of your invitation to meet with you and to have a small part in your interesting and helpful program.

"What is an architect, anyway?" asked a certain rough and ready Senator, when a public-building bill was up for consideration; and many other folks seem to be asking the same question.

Now an architect should be—and usually is—an artist, a good constructionist, a practical business man, a diplomatist, an expert in every branch of building, and about a dozen other things. Naturally it takes years of study and experience to make a really good architect; and yet in some states anyone may hang out his shingle and call himself an architect, if he so elects. The true architect never engages in contracting; for he must protect the interest of his client, against the so-called interest of the builder. To combine architect and builder, is exactly like combining the lawyers for the defense and the prosecution, letting one man act for both!

Architecture is of all the arts the one most continually before our eyes. To hear music at its best we must go to concerts or opera of one kind or another; to enjoy literature we must read, and read extensively; our best paintings and sculpture are segregated in museums and galleries to which we must make our pilgrimages, but architecture is constantly beside us.

The very nature of architecture, makes it the only art which cannot be moved, and only rarely

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removed or destroyed. We may choose our music, and look only at the best painting and sculpture, if we desire, but we must pass and gaze at architecture no matter how poor the composition might be, therefore, the basic duty of one who makes an improvement should be to build beautifully for the betterment of his community.

How many give one hour's thought a month to the beauty or ugliness, the architectural value, of the buildings surrounding us? Whenever there is the slightest attempt to make a building beautiful, there is the touch of architecture, and if we pass by this touch unnoticed, we are just so much depriving ourselves of a possible element of richness in our lives.

First of all among the pleasures that architecture can give is that which anything beautiful brings to an understanding heart, which warms the whole being, and sends one about his work wiser and better and stronger. And last and greatest of all, the best architecture brings us inspiration, a feeling of awe-struck peace and reverence, a feeling of the immense glory and worthwhileness of things that occur only in the presence of something very great indeed.

The average person is apt to think of architecture as a purely technical subject—as specialized as the manufacture of steel or practice of surgery. In its ecclesiastical and memorial aspects that is true, but in its domestic aspect it is of vital and personal concern to every house owner, and every hoping-to-be house owner, in the world; in fact, architecture might be considered as a fourth addition to the "three R's: reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. At all events it is not unreasonable to recommend that its elemental principles be included in the curriculum of every school, even if other subjects have to be discarded to make room for it.

Latin and algebra are undoubtedly good training for the mind, but they are both of about as much practical use to most of us as a knowledge

of hydraulic mining. A good stiff course in architecture could be quite as useful, calisthenically, to the mind as mathematics or Ceasar! And yet, where millions of students are obliged to study latin and algebra, not one in a thousand of them has the least knowledge of the traditions of classic structure and form; not one in a hundred knows the first thing about the beautification of a house in accordance with the standards of good taste. But nearly every student hopes some day to have a home of his own. He hopes to live in surroundings that are beautiful.

He might as well hope to be a concert pianist without ever having touched a piano, as to hope to achieve a beautiful house by means of instinct alone—unless "instinct" has been trained through life-long precept and association. One is inclined to think of taste as a natural gift, and in a measure this is true, much as it is true of music. But in addition to natural aptitude for either of these gifts, there must be persistent study and practise to acquire any satisfactory knowledge of either.

Architecture has been defined as "Frozen Music", and certainly a grand cathedral, every part harmonizing with every other part, is music in stone.

Architecture is the printing press of the ages. There is a glamor to this language we call architecture, a few of the fundamentals of which we should have clearly in mind before attempting to read the language. To say it is the whole science of building is not saying too much. Yet architecture is also an art, for it involves the creation of beauty through the action of imagination and enthusiasm.

Nations have always sought to embody great undertakings in harmonious architectural form. Over the whole earth and at all periods they have raised the pillars of their temples and public buildings and reared to the skies the minarets or towers of their mosques and churches like an act

of hope and faith carved in stone. All the great ideas of all civilizations have their imperishable monuments which are eternal reminders of the conquests made by the human mind.

The Colossus of Rhodes, the Acropolis at Athens with its monuments in architecture, the beauties of its Parthenon and priceless treasures in art, attest a nation whose soul was in her work, whose inspiration of perfection in beauty were drawn from lofty ideals. By these same tokens we should know her citizenship to have been of high intelligence and scholarly attainments, liberal in their thoughts and unselfish in their government.

If she had slaves they are not in evidence in her monuments to posterity, especially as compared with the nations about her. Ancient Greece at once stands out with a soul of sublime beauty.

The Colosseum and the stupendous military achievements of Rome at once testify to the character of her soul. While the grandure of her accomplishments would indicate her to be a nation of great power, of high intellectual attainments, her ideals of greatness were military in character, and her soul was in her conquests. Thus may we read the essentials of history and the character of peoples by the evidence of their ideals expressed in their works. These are the guideposts that should serve to direct our own destiny. These silent landmarks of national aspirations should hold an interest of importance to us. May our progress be marked by the erection of noble buildings dedicated to the high ideals of architecture.

The monuments of accomplishment strewn all along the pathway of advancement in civilization, clearly indicate the ideals that actuated the national life of the time. They are an infallible aid to history. The pyramids of Egypt are more eloquent testimony of a nation of slaves than volumes of print; a more lasting memorial of her ideals in national greatness than tablets of bronze.

The Temple of Solomon, representing the maximum achievement in national glory, bespeaks a nation whose ideals represent a service to a Divinity. Also their interpretation of the nature of their God is reflected in the enormous sacrifice of wealth, labor and human life that entered into its construction.

Every city in this nation, and most of our towns, contains examples of all the principle periods in architecture, besides some of no legitimate parentage whatever. The polyglot character of American architecture is an excellent example of this general truth. We are a young nation, composite in character, and not yet bound by any great ties of common tradition. We are made up of all the nations of civilization. The Latin and the Saxon stand side by side with the Teuton and the Celt, and amalgamation, though more rapid than ever before in the world's history, has not yet been rapid enough to produce anything like complete homogeneity.

Archeologists and historians delving into the ruins of cities and palaces of mighty peoples who have disappeared from the earth in centuries of long ago are bringing to light knowledge of ancient architecture and of the habits, customs, ideals, sentiments and philosophy of forgotten ages.

Builders of a nation, either consciously or unconsciously, record the story of that nation in its architecture. The ancient Greeks record in their Parthenon, for instance, the story of their race. Athens had its eight gods in the beginning, as the United States had its original colonies. Memory of these gods is preserved by eight columns in the end portico. To each of them the Greeks built a temple with columns to represent his virtues.

It was the idea of George Washington, Jefferson, Architect Hoban and others that the architecture of the public buildings in Washington should record the story of the birth and growth of the Republic. Daniel Webster amplified this

idea in his oration at the laying of the corner stone of the House wing of the Capitol. It was embedded in the symmetrical proportions of the Dome. Thirteen columns, representing the thirteen original colonies, support the pedestal of the goddess; thirty-six columns, representing the number of States in the Union when Lincoln became President and war broke over the land, girt the center of the dome. The thirty-six columns surrounding the Lincoln Memorial represent these thirty-six States.

There are now forty-eight States in the Union and that number of columns built into a temple would give a square structure with thirteen columns to the side in formation of the entire girth.

The plan of architecturally recounting the story of the Nation is fostered and kept in mind by the American Institute of Architects in the present building program. Philosophers will find in the building era of today food for thought in after years, and historians will read in it the story of America.

When an architect makes a tour of the world, he is constantly seeing expression of major efforts of different world civilizations; temples of Japan, China, and the great palaces, the Chinese wall, Borabudur, the great Javanes monument, the superb group of cities and buildings of Cambodia — among them, of course, Angkor Vat; the monuments of India; the Pyramids; finally the Roman and Greek remains of Italy and Greece, all of completely varying character, material, and representing totally different times and cultures.

All seem to be actuated by a common strong effort, a response to impulses that were sufficiently powerful to draw the best out of the people and their period. These more important works keep on attracting one, in spite of the biandishments of the more fantastic or startling.

Athens is the birthplace of good architecture and all that is great, good and judicious in archi-

ture we owe to ancient Greece. Its period has come to be known as the classic, and this style, modified but little by various transplantings and reinterpretations, is the dominant style of our best in architecture. The Grecian architects had the greatest freedom, being considered as above both sculptor and painter, for they used their brains and did not labor with their hands. They studied under the great philosophers, collected libraries, and traveled in the Greek colonies and in foreign countries and developed the "Golden Age" in architecture not surpassed in the years that have passed.

In addition to these requirements, the ancient Greeks included truth. This meant that each item of building material actually served the purpose to which it pretended. Blocks were truly blocks, not facings; they disliked plasters, which had no depth and carried no weight. Greek columns actually supported the entablature, and so on.

It makes not an atom of difference whether a style be that of the past, the present, or the unevolved future; neither does it matter in which of the five continents it had its inception. But fundamentally basic principles have always mattered, and the chances are that they always will matter.

American architecture really begins with the so-called Colonial, which is English Renaissance or Georgia, which, in turn, is a translation of the Italian, early Roman, or French Renaissance, all in some measure derived from Greek architecture

Bullfinch, who designed buildings in Boston, and Strickland of Philadelphia, were inspired by the giants of the 17th and 18th Centuries

All the important Federal buildings of the Colonial period were, perhaps, inevitably in some form of classic which has ever seemed best to express the ideals of civic or national dignity or power. These early buildings are the best

we have, and they express not only their special purpose, but our national spirit as faithfully as we have been able to express it. Building on this foundation the Government has developed a distinctly classic form for Federal buildings, so there are coming into being, or recently completed, in many parts of the country classical buildings which are serving as inspiration and models for other public or semi-public structures. It is largely as a result of this Federal initiative that evidence of a sound and wholesome classical revival is so apparent in our best buildings throughout the nation.

The Colonial Architecture of the 17th and 18th Centuries and the post-Colonial work of the early years of the Republic, constitutes an artistic possession of which our country has become somewhat tardily aware. This delightful work, so much of which possesses real distinction, serve both as a link with the past and a guide to the future.

The tradition which Colonial Architecture represents is that of continuous growth. From country to country and from century to century this tradition has spread, ever adding to itself new qualities of structure or decoration as it responded to the varied needs and tastes of the nations in which it thrived. From early Greece to Renaissance England and from thence to the United States is a far cry, but the distance was traversed by such easy stages, by such natural growth and modifications, that its course is not difficult to trace.

At present the "Modernistic" movement appears and to some it seems to threaten the advance in architecture we were gaining for it seems to be based on illogical methods, stressed constantly by its advocates, the truth of which may well be questioned. The proponents seem to think any new ornament, no matter how bad, is better than an old form, however good. The slogan of these modernists, together with an un-

restrained use of thin veneers of glass and other synthetic materials, and the utter disregard of the laws of gravity, tend to give the modernistic structure a flimsy, temporary appearance.

It is true that under these veneers and in those strange angles, there are steel skeletons to overcome the laws of gravity, but this construction is not apparent to the eye of the beholder. When we see a large building supported by a void, it does not give a sense of repose nor satisfy the eye, though we must admit such gymnastic feats are possible.

It is beyond dispute that we have yet to see a building in which the devices of modern construction, exemplified by the Modernistic school, have been employed which affords the same sense of dignity, repose and endurance that a building designed in good brick or stone and resting solidly on the ground produces. We would fain speak a word in defense of a type that would forever vanish if the Modernists had their way. However we must admit if this so-called period is conservatively designed with due care for simple and correct proportions, and the elimination of unnecessary detail and meaningless ornament, it would present a more pleasing and dignified appearance and thereby add to the value of the architect's services to his community.

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