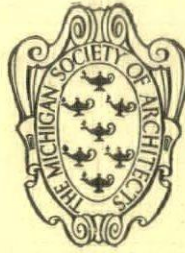


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Vol. 6

DETROIT, MICH., JUNE 14th, 1932

No. 24

SYMPOSIUM ON MODERNISM

By WIRT C. ROWLAND

Last week we published the opening chapter of a symposium on Modernism Vs. Traditionalism, being a treatise by Mr. Arthur K. Hyde delivered at the May meeting held jointly by the Detroit Chapter, A. I. A. and the Michigan Society of Architects. In opening his discussion Mr. Hyde had the following to say:

After few brief years acquaintance with architecture I was impressed with the unpleasant fact that it contained much of what would now be termed "hoovey." How much I could never decide and never will. We are all plagued with these thoughts, at times. They possess the quality of being ever new. Our inventory of essentials is constantly changing and the focus of emphasis is never fixed. The search for truth continues until mental death.

Beyond the barest formula we will never exactly define good architecture. The simplest statement with which I am familiar and which I often recall with complete satisfaction are the words of Sir Henry Wotton who says, "Well building hath three conditions: Commodity, Firmness and Delight. Architecture is a focus where three separate purposes have converged.

The more we apply our thoughts to this very controversial subject of present day architecture, the less radical in either direction we become. Nevertheless, I believe that Traditional Architecture, as it is commonly known, is a closed chapter; but that good architectural tradition is more vital today than in the immediate yesterday, and this is due to the efforts of that group who are identified by the confusing title "Modernists." In other words; that sincere modern work, even though re-actionary in character, is a direct descendant of the best of the architectural past.

Mr. Wirt C. Rowland On Modernism

You will pardon me if at the beginning I indulge in a personal reference. What I shall say with regard to architecture does not pertain to those works for whose de-

tion his changes are rapid and what he does today in all sincerity may not be in conformance with his convictions tomorrow. And if tomorrow does not bring him the opportunity to build, he cannot furnish concrete evidence whereby people may judge the validity of his theories.

With regard to tradition, I believe the most important attainment in building which the world has ever seen was the Greek temple of the Periclean age. It is natural that it should be so because the Greek builders applied the most balanced and sane philosophy not only to their lives but to their works. The principles of their philosophy which dominated were based on the ideas of there being three planes in mental qualities, the lower, the

(Continued on Page 4)

Architects' Luncheon

32nd Floor, Union Guardian Building

Private Dining Room,

South West Corner

Tuesday, June 14, 12:30 p. m.

sign it is known that I am responsible. They do not stand as examples of what modern buildings should be. After a man begins to shake off the lethargy of tradi-

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A HOUSE PARTY

Monday midnight in the shadow of the Michigan Central Station, 2134 Dalzell St. to be exact, the Detroit Edison Company were hosts to an intimate group of architects, engineers and surveyors. The occasion was a house (moving) party in which the house was taken for a ride to Grand Circus Park where it is to do duty in the modernizing campaign.

Those present at the party were Messrs. Douglass and Benjamin and other laborers from the Edison Company, Gamber, Hughes, Wright, Barry, MacMullen, a truck from Chas. J. Rogers, a trailer from Whitehead & Kales and skids from Detroit Underpinning & Shoring Co.

The engineers thought it quite a treat to see the architects at work, especially Bronson Gamber directing traffic. When Frank Wright took off his hat the newspaper men thought he was Mayor Murphy and flash lights popped from all directions.

The most fun was rushing back to Derrick's office to make a huge sign and imagining we were on an old time charette.

To begin with there were a lot of loose ends but let it be said for The Detroit Edison Company, to their everlasting credit, that they stepped into the breach and put the house on the site.

The first section of the house arrived in the park near daylight Tuesday morning and by 9 o'clock we had our first inquiring for an alteration job. Tuesday noon the architects' luncheon was given over to completing the organization in charge of modernizing one-half of the demonstration house.

W. G. Malcomson as president of the Detroit Building Congress is "Chairman of the Board." In case you have not heard of W. G. let us say that on Monday, June 13 he and Mrs. Malcomson are celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary.

Conditions in Grand Rapids

May 11th, 1932

Mister Hughes:

A while back it stood in your Bulletin that one of the members of one of the committees of the Society was Roger Allen of Detroit. Tsk, tsk. There is no such a person, or if there is he is a cheap

imitation of the original Grand Rapids Allen in non-refillable bottles.

And was I surprised when I read in the last Bulletin all about blighted areas, by Frank Cordner, or was it areas blighted by Frank Cordner? I always supposed a blighted area was a place where they just had an architects convention.

Well, the architectural business is so bad up here that the police have made it against the law for an architect to carry matches, but there is some hope yet, if we can just get the Institute Committee on Disconnecting Fire Alarm Signals functioning in a big way. This is a matter that should engage the warm co-operation of all members of the profession. Then too our researches in connection with the Rockefeller Institute in an attempt to develop a breed of mice who smoke cigars incessantly and throw the butts around behind the wainscot promises very well. A great deal can be done with a young, sensitive building by standing in front of it and saying, "My Gawd, what is this, a bargello?" This burns the building up.

May 26th, 1932.

This communication has been delayed; negotiations with the Federal Reserve bank over the matter of financing the purchase of the two cent stamp hung fire for some time. I want to congratulate you on the number of the bulletin concerning the new St. Aloysius, Aloyisus — about the church on Washington blvd., that I can't spell. I remember the old church very well; I remember one morning back in 1918 I was dragged in there to see the church; it was about 8 o'clock in the morning and some fellow was getting married. I was tired; the previous evening I had been out seeing a man about a dog, and so I fell asleep. When I woke up it was 10:30 and some fellow was getting buried. And I have often wondered if it

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was the same fellow in both ceremonies; considering the pace at which things went in those days, I have no doubt it was. Ah, them days!

Regards,

Rod.

College of Architecture

The architectural faculty has recently made the following awards:

The Gold Medal of the American Institute of Architects, for the highest scholarship throughout the four-year course, to Mr. Malcom Roderick Stirton; this young man is also the recipient of the George G. Booth Travelling Fellowship.

The Alpha Rho Chi Medal, for student service and promise of success in the profession, to Mr. Floyd Richard Johnson.

Messrs. Lyle F. Zisler and William Balbach each received a copy of Henry Adams' "Chartres and Mont St. Michel," presented by the American Institute of Architects for the runners-up on the Institute Medal award.

Symposium On Modernism

(Continued from Page 1)

imagination, above that the intellect, and the highest or third plane, a combination of the two lower planes — or wisdom. Thus, intellect acted as the discipline or mentor to the imagination. It brought it into control and made the result complete wisdom.

I believe the Greek temples the nearest approach to perfection in building. We must not forget what made them a vital expression, a vitality, which, underlies all conceptions of an apparent attempt to make them works of art. Their simple form was the result not only of their needs but also of their primitive knowledge of construction. We also must not forget that even in this primitive type the parts of the column for the pressure of the superstructure.

The perfected Greek Doric temple was the result of not merely the idea to erect an agreeable looking structure. The Greek builders were not satisfied with that which would act merely as a frame for ornament, sculpture, or painting. Every line and shadow had its purpose and I believe the result of that purpose expresses the natural law of gravity which they encountered in their limited knowledge of construction. The Greeks were masters also of geometric principles which have since not

been practiced. These subtleties of measurement were a medium which helped them to finally attain that mastery of expression. By these subtleties they made a great science of building which was not obtained by the repetition of a fixed unit of scale.

Greek architecture has been the supreme example and standard. From it may all subsequent styles of tradition be measured. And all these fall short when we measure them, not by their type of detail, their national or racial characteristics nor their historic sources, but by what they did with these to attain the same abstract end. It is to be noted, that, in what followed from the Periclean age to the decline of the Gothic in France, wherever and whatever the Greek may have touched either in influence or through actual contact through succeeding generations of artisans, he left inevitable marks of his logic. And it is not hard to believe that he was responsible even though it may be indirectly, for the highest order of articulation which we find in the best of French Gothic cathedrals.

To briefly review what may be called great tradition since 500 B. C. nothing attained a vital or even neared a perfect development. The Byzantine was short lived and the Romanesque died a clumsy death; the one to be commended for an actual structural idea, the other for the craft of its sculptural ornament. The Gothic system of thrust and counterthrust was arrived at by rude experiment and contained the idea of the parabolic arch. The pointed forms of arch were as near to the parabolic arch as they could get and they did not discover that only perfect form of arch even after nearly reaching it in their flexible forms of warped vaulting.

It is possible to conceive of what may have been possible to bring the Gothic into order, even with no more than their experimental knowledge of the science of structural forces. The huge masses of masonry at the towers not even necessary for stability as had been discovered by the slender flying buttresses, and could have been replaced by material properly utilized after the same manner to enhance the fabric of stone and glass. We must realize that the element which did bring about this already slender fabric of stone was an increase in area of stained glass, a really wonderful idea of creating a color of atmosphere by the means of light, itself the source of color. This idea we have lost entirely in the present day or do not employ it properly.

It is my contention that with the inception of the Renaissance, architectural expression lost any vitality with which it began in the Periclean age. The only structural form in the Renaissance which was at all significant was the early Florentine wall. Even that was not a matter pertaining to a high articulation of forces but a free choice of form regulated by openings and a play of that individual choice. The appearance was more a matter of created art, not the conformance of the imagination to any underlying powerful law of nature. The wall is the most primitive type of structure therefore because it carries no visual stimulation of its meeting directional forces, no visual articulation of them.

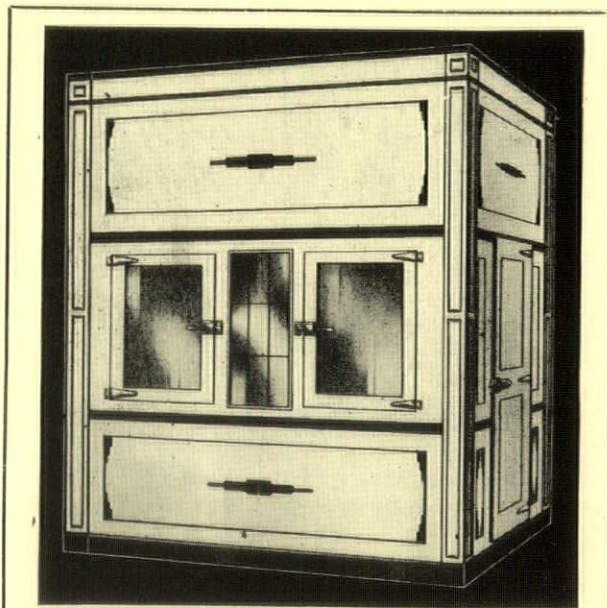
Thus architecture dwindled away into the national academics of the French. Architecture has since arrayed herself like a prostitute, sometimes crude, often refined. We are no better at the present day for our architecture is still a matter of apparel. The human body is much more satisfactory than its garment. Our buildings we dress in monumental style while the only honest things we do are factories and those we treat like dogs to run about in natures own.

My respect for tradition is circumscribed by the periods of history in which architectural form was qualified by structural principles. It has seemed quite necessary to me to briefly review in order to give some key of my approach to modern building. Contemporary we are today and will remain so unless we seek to understand the inevitable trend of our times and move positively not with tolerance. I must first condemn contemporary building in an impersonal way as wrong and insincere. To begin with we have not properly understood form either as to plan or as to elevation. On our high buildings we have played chiefly with verticality and horizontality without realizing that there may be a place for both. One of the chiefest mistakes we have committed is the old Beaux Arts hangover, the Pylon, as we have used it on our high buildings — the pylon which has always been utterly wrong and the chief toy of students. By and large the office building has been the victim of opportunism and unintellectual experiments and the structure of more modest size has followed with a timid imitation of what has been recognized as a modern treatment. Our modernistic character is no further forward than German architecture of twenty years ago and is now not unmingled with the architec-

tural harlotry of the Paris Exhibition of 1925.

You then ask me if I am sympathetic with the so-called international style of Europe. I am — so long as Europeans are sincerely trying to solve their problems. Some recognize the chief of those problems to be economics. By actual testimony it is even more than that. They have lived for centuries with traditional work at their door. They have been for two centuries buried alive in the niceties of fine archeological study, while we have not quite reached the photographic saturation limit. It is natural to see that, with new and more flexible mediums, they have turned, and as usual in many cases, the pendulum has swung in the extreme. This many of us view with alarm and we mark it as impossible — but it has something for us in this way, that it has an honesty of purpose which we have not yet dared to imitate. Nevertheless if we adopt it as a style without applying its principles to our own conditions, we are charlatans.

The architect who tries to meet requirements essentially modern with a mild eye upon tradition is doomed to many disappointments and thereafter many excuses. He is afraid to cut away the lower surface of his building because his habit of thought



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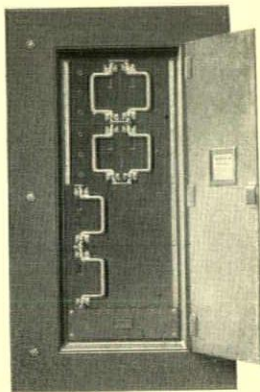
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has been the well or piers of masonry. His mental habits have also not allowed him to conceive of hanging, as an enclosure, on a steel or concrete frame, anything but a face material which was once rightfully used for a bearing wall. As much as we have been given to the domination of the long romantic era and the glorification of the imagination, yet—we have not imagination enough to conceive of a creditable and finally an acceptable and satisfactory architecture developed—from the very simplest principles through the tremendous fund of materials which science has not given us. Our attention has often been on ornament. This has partially caused the colorless character of our building. It seems to me that color is an answer to a lack of ornament, but it must be regulated by scientific knowledge and not on past aesthetic and academic values.

It is impossible for us to avoid the general tendency of all building to frame construction. Given our latest structural methods we have the medium through which our building form is controlled just as it was in our factories which we have been building for thirty years. Only, as Americans we have handled concrete like school boys in comparison with Europeans, both in size of members and quality of substance. Concrete as it has been developed presents the idea a completely homogeneous frame, steel welded, which, I had once been warned would never come into general practice, now is able to provide a similar idea in a quicker simpler manner. Better than that and in a most tardy manner we find a structural reaction from the dirigible or the aeroplane, as exemplified by a roof over the largest enclosed space in the world at the future Chicago fair.

But you say, those are structural ideas. I maintain that they are now architectural ideas because they are vital and give rise to vital forms which man can control with his conceptions and do not rest on traditions. They can become as satisfactory as the Greek temple because they conform to the same ethics of building which inspired the Parthenon.

Architects who quail and rebel at the vast paraphernalia of practical requirements in these days do not belong in this age. Especially when they try to disguise them by the precious relics of antiquity. A very nationally prominent architect and mural painter once replied to my statement that the aeroplane was the finest existing example of architecture, by saying that it would become so when we should begin to beautify it. That is an example of



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the same general attitude toward radiators which were at least honest and did their work and much more respectably than the architecture about them, which was sham. Now we only have to blush at a casual wall register.

The hitherto aesthetically unsurmountable problems can be met with order. I do take issue with those Europeans who go out of their way to fling rows of pipes in one's face. To begin with it is not modern heating and after all the pendulum has swung beyond its bearing. My quarrel is with the architect who first tries to cover up with useless scenery, who encourages it in public, fosters it in his patrons—who for the sake of exterior effect puts the light in the wrong end of the room, in the center, or on the corner. He is afraid of labor of a new thought or lacks the ambition to establish an order which does not give the fond traditional effect.

If today we pick up with delight some new material, some new gadget which has solved an old problem, do we ever contemplate the comparatively small part we have had in its development? Have we not been left behind for lack of ideas? Have we kept step with the times while we were muddling with this style or that? If the age is machine minded we must be machine minded. We must follow the age. My plea is not for the individualist but for the man who can rightly see the signs of his times and cooperate. America is the victim of a vast conglomeration of thought. We hate monotony, therefore every expression is restless. We must be different from our neighbors so we are too different. International architecture is called monotonous, therefore we dread it. We chafe at its discipline. One view of a main street is sufficient proof. We lack the same discipline in our architectural ideas and—we also lack the imagination which can foresee a real development in that which can be a thoroughly honest architectural expression.

As you have seen I am for functional architecture. I believe in the idea as firmly as I believe in the efficacy of a fine machine. But I recognize a building as such and a machine as such. A machine represents something to me much finer than a building even though both may be well proportioned to their functional parts. A machine may move while a building is necessarily inert. There may come a time in which I shall be content to sit by a fire-side in peace and quietness, but I am inclined to believe that even then, the machine and its influence, now so greatly dreaded by artists, architects, will yet

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stimulate me. The most wonderful machine in the world is the human body, in spite of skeptical anatomists who wonder that it holds together. It was the chief inspiration in the days of Pericles and from it they may have achieved their high ideals of structural articulation. Are we to be content with less than they?

Abstract principles have existed before theories and when the theories have been proven they merely coincide with or,—add to our knowledge of principles. So, the latter having always existed, are not influenced by the mind of man, and their effectiveness in his works is limited to his intelligence and knowledge of them. Beauty and art are certain impositive terms. They seem to me wanting in true definition; And not sufficiently regulated by principles. Beauty has long been generally a matter of opinion, carelessly on the lips of all without a thorough attendant knowledge of a real source and a real standard. Someone has said that beauty is the reward of having sought the truth. Truth is also as indefinite a term—relative—and always open to question. Art also is a result, it has been a category, falsely limited to certain human works.

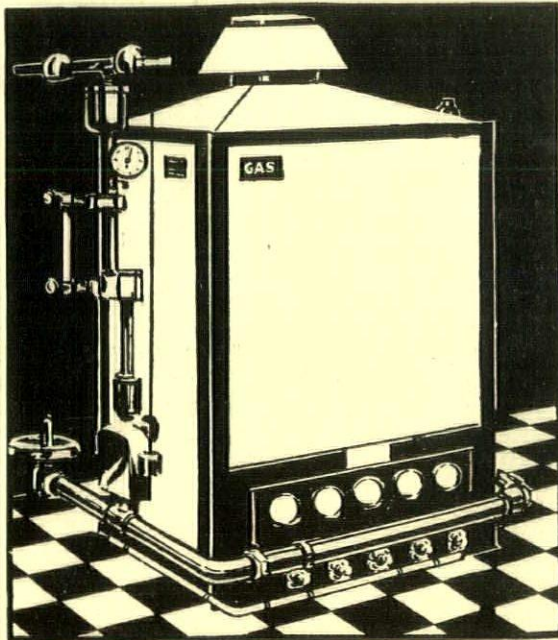
Soul and feeling are the sob sisters of architecture. Through them it is difficult

to comprehend realities. One of these realities is the satisfaction we should find in a machine which is economically proportioned to its parts and those parts formed to properly carry out their duty. If this then be called beautiful, the underlying idea of functional proportioning is that which makes it beautiful, the conformance with nature's laws of motion and mechanics, and not the free and unrestrained ideas of form which man may apply out of the figments of his imagination to create what he may call art. I cannot but believe that it must be the same with vital architecture, that there must be some visual evidence in it of performing its work, first as a structure—then, as having fulfilled all of the requirements of its purpose to serve the human being and with great respect for the inherent qualities of craft which is due to those materials with which it is built.

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