

NEW YORK CHAPTER

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The Convention is over; (OUR Convention, of course). As members of the Host Chapter we all felt apologetic about the weather, but proud of the splendid program we owe to Arthur Holden and his numerous effective co-workers. And in nothing on that program can we take more pride than in the address with which our president Hugh Ferriss illuminated the last session of the Convention on June 27.

The Executive Committee, happy in this instance to override the president, has authorized the presentation of this talk to the membership in a special issue of the OCULUS. May it strengthen memories of the Convention, and enrich the working days ahead.

TECHNOLOGY AND VISION

An address by Hugh Ferriss, F.A.I.A.
at the 84th Convention, June 27th, 1952

Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, I had hoped to ask you, at this point in our proceedings, not to lend me your ears but to lend me your eyes. I had hoped (and for some weeks have been vainly trying) to somehow transform these walls of the Waldorf into four enormous screens, upon which would emerge, in full color, an array of images - Parthenon, S. Sophia, Chartres, many acknowledged masterpieces - and these would slowly march around us, a cavalcade of architecture that you might care to remember when all words said today have been long forgotten. I wondered if such a display might remind you of a simple fact sometimes overlooked in these days of complex thinking: buildings are visible. Or if it might suggest that the visual impact is what makes many of your favorite buildings memorable. Or that great architects are men of vision.

The first specific point I have to lay before you is that this would be only half the story. For what makes great buildings great is not their appearance, attractive as it may be, but the fact that their appearance is the outward and visible sign of an inward and architectural reality. In such buildings, the visible and the substantial are at one. In that union stands the integrity of architecture. Those ancient master-builders must have faced the technologies of their day as a matter of course; they had, in one hand, the engineer's grasp. In the other hand, they had the artist's vision. What made them master-builders was that they brought both hands together in the firm grasp of the architect.

2.

Imagine, if you please, that the "cavalcade of architecture" has swung up to our own times; say, to the period since 1929. How does this modern generation of buildings stack up, against the classic criterion of Technology and Vision?

You will recall that when work resumed, after the depression of '29, it was plain that a new movement in design was well under way, openly challenging the whole basis of what we call "eclecticism". That it had been long in the making is also plain from papers read before this Institute by our predecessors, Yost and Adley, in 1896. Desirable or undesirable as this movement may have been regarded, it was in any case inevitable. For obviously architecture grows from entirely practical conditions - social, economic, technological; and not only had the social and economic conditions recently undergone world-wide changes, but the evolution of technology had been so swift as to seem a revolution. Architects, like it or not, were being handed not only new materials and methods for building but even new purposes for building. It had become simply not feasible to further pursue styles that grew from, and found their meaning in, conditions no longer existing and technologies now superseded. A search was inevitable for forms that would accord with the facts.

That much I shall assume to be obvious. The point I would stress here is that it was altogether natural for most architects to be preoccupied, at first, with the strictly technical side. If the car is a radically new make, the driving lesson comes first, the Grand Tour later. It was necessary, in design, to establish a new "discipline". If some of the buildings of the '30s and '40s now seem over-disciplinary, even to their own authors, they were nevertheless signposts and milestones on one stretch of the main highway. Their authors deserve, and receive, the thanks accorded to discoverers and pioneers.

3.

But the medal had another side. A purely technological guidance, if unrelieved, would eventually lead to a barren land. In the '30s, I met an extremist who was designing a building on a typewriter; asked how it would look when built, he not only didn't know but didn't care - he was after "a package that works". In a total preoccupation with utilitarian function, the sense of form had apparently atrophied. A technologist without vision, he was wandering forlorn in a wilderness of facts.

The familiar line, "Man does not live by bread alone" is not merely a pious saying from ancient scriptures. It is a practical proposition that had been given utmost support by modern psychiatry. People are now known to have emotional needs as specifically necessary to health as physical needs. A building that does not function for both needs is not a truly functional building. Builders who are oblivious to the psychological and spiritual side of architecture, promoters who cannot match engineering with vision, are failing the client, humanity. Sooner or later, their works will inevitably be rejected.

4.

I should think that anyone who studies designs coming off drafting-boards today, or who attends current seminars and discussions, must be aware of a recent change in climate. As though a winter of cold appraisals were passing and Spring returning

to architectural design. As though the imaginative artist, hidden in every architect, were at last catching up with the calculating scientist.

Not that the impressive gains on the engineering side will ever be discarded; rather that equally impressive gains on the artistic side may now be expected. After all, architects have now been living in this new age long enough to take its novel requirements for granted - to be no longer repelled by them, like "traditionalists" nor enchanted by them, like "modernists". Novel tools no longer need be played up in designs as though they were the heroes of the piece, but can be used as tools are intended to be used: means to some creative end.

5.

The net effect of all the social, economic and technological upheaval is to make architecture, once again, a creative art. After the long "eclectic phase" and after what might be called the more recent "technological phase", such an outlook is fascinating.

But by no means simple. For artistic creation on any such broad front takes time. And it is bound to be a time of innumerable artistic experiments; therefore, of numerous failures.

Also, all strong movements attract camp-followers. Wandering minds that take to novel forms just for the novelty. Fortune-hunters who ape a Modern Style perceiving in it merely a current fashion. Modern eclectics who swipe motifs from recent buildings to paste onto student designs.

Furthermore, no definitive Modern Style has yet been established. It is a journey into the unknown with no fixed, guiding star. It is true that several bright "stars" are now in the local heavens, each with his school of satellites. But, if an observer on the sidelines may say so, what they have to offer, at best is - ingredients: likely ingredients for an American architecture of the future whose actual appearance no one alive can now foresee. And I notice that other likely ingredients turn up from day to day in the most remote of our fifteen thousand drafting-rooms.

In spite of all these uncertainties and difficulties, one has only to leave this harried metropolis, cross the Alleghenies and watch, at the actual sites, the buildings now rising around the Lakes, the Valley and the Gulf - around the Plains, the Mountains and the Coast - to realize that most architects are now successfully engaged in a widespread effort to reunite two of man's oldest impulses: to make things work and to make them beautiful.

6.

Or rather, architects will succeed in this widespread effort unless stopped by forces rising entirely outside the field of architecture. Their drive toward integration is being attempted in an age that lacks it. This is invariably called "the age of science". It is never called "the age of art" nor "the age of religion" nor "the age of philosophy". It is an age of universally recognized danger: not in too much scientific advance, as such, but danger in the absence of any corresponding and compensating advance in human relationships, spiritual aptitude, ethics and esthetics.

Some compensating and reintegrating movement is called for. In any such movement, architects are pre-eminently qualified to be leaders; for while others may teach, or preach, synthesis in men's lives, architects can actually build it into the environment and through the massive influence of better homes, offices and plants, better neighborhoods, towns and regions, can directly and intimately influence men's lives. Even more far-reaching projects, in a world-wide mood for building, are not inconceivable. Writers may use a million words bearing witness to a more humane and unified life; architecture is the witness that is absolutely silent and absolutely convincing.

7.

In closing, may I briefly allude to the urgency of the situation. There stands, this morning, on the Arizona-Nevada line, a great dam, itself a rare combination of use and beauty. Not long ago, a group of admirers looked down its curved retaining wall, trying to estimate the constructive energy being generated and broadcast to the whole western region. But driving away from Hoover Dam, via Las Vegas, our route lay not far from an officially sequestered area where is being generated power of a different order, designed for a different purpose. It is no idle fancy that makes you suspect the sudden flash, the rising mushroom-shaped cloud. On one hand, technology, combined with vision, available for unlimited construction! On the other hand, technology, devoid of vision, available for total destruction!

I believe one thing - and you can believe it, too: architecture has never been called a destructive art. You practicing architects, by nature as by training, are on the constructive side. Your long-range constructive projects, as compared with the sudden, destructive ones, will always be the harder to launch and to sustain, always the less appealing to publicity and propaganda. Architects will never be headlined along with the authors and agents of planned destruction. But there is something to be said for the purely creative impulse. It is the sign of an evolutionary scheme in whose further possibilities we may devoutly believe. It is a mark of man at his manliest. And it is the least obscure reflection of his Creator.