

The presentation of history in the training of
architects, by John Sumner

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THE PRESENTATION OF HISTORY IN THE TRAINING OF ARCHITECTS

The history of architecture may be presented in either of two ways: as a chronological account of the development of successive styles, illustrated by a survey of the plans, elevations and views of a multitude of buildings; or in connection with a survey of the life of successive ages and various countries, especially in those aspects which determine the types and the general arrangements of their buildings. Without familiarity with this living background the spirit and significance of architectural evolution cannot be grasped; but an adequate first knowledge of general history is not imparted by mere references to it, or even by numerous and long digressions from a central pathway of architectural development. Such digressions, moreover, involve dropping and picking up the thread of architectural history so often as to impair seriously the clarity and effectiveness of the presentation. The evolution, qualities and modifications of a style; the blending of two styles, as of the Greek orders with the Italian arched construction; the transition from one style into another, as of the oriental Roman into the Byzantine or of the Romanesque into the Gothic; all these are matters of a significance and complexity so great as to demand continuity of treatment.

It was in order to meet this difficulty that courses in the history of European civilization and art have been made a part of our Technology curriculum. These courses are intended to provide an adequate historical background by surveying the development and successive phases of civilization. They aim at making the student familiar with the spirit and material requirements of ^{the} secular life and, in particular, of the several great religions in whose service the primary and more completely unified architectural styles, the Greek, the Byzantine, and the Gothic, were formed. Architecture is discussed only in its general relations to civilization, but sculpture, and to a less extent painting and other arts, are treated in considerable detail, with many lantern slide and other illustrations. Two considerations, in addition to their great value as a direct and vivid expression of the spirit of the ages from which they come, justify the large amount of time devoted to these arts. First, the closeness of their interrelation with architecture. This is particularly close in the three fundamental styles; neither the Greek, the Byzantine, nor the Gothic can be thought of in the fullness and force of expression which belongs to it, excepting in its final sculptural and color enrichment. Secondly, the study of sculpture and painting for their own sake is of value, not merely as an essential part of an education in any of the fine arts, but as illustrating from an independent field principles of design, in form, space and color similar to those underlying architectural design.

The treatment of these topics in a general course, or rather series of courses, is intended to make possible the presentation of architectural history as a continuous and closely unified subject in such special courses as may be devoted to it. Many practical difficulties present themselves, however, in working out the interrelation between the two groups of courses. Not only do the general courses in civilization and art require a greater amount of time than that in the history of architecture, but the time has to be so differently distributed that a parallel treatment of the two subjects has proved in practice to be impossible.

Everyone admits that history is a study absolutely indispensable in any form of higher education: the trouble is that there is too much of it. It is impossible to cover the entire field of European development in the time which the demands of other essential subjects leave open, excepting in a manner so superficial and pragmatic as to deprive the survey of the greater part of its educational value. Such a course fails to create adequate appreciation of the struggles through which humanity has advanced or of the significance of even its greater victories and defeats, or of the manner in which the past is continually working through the present and into the future. A presentation which is both complete and adequate being thus impossible, it follows that some more modest scheme must be adopted, in which the less important end, a complete survey, is sacrificed for the more important, an adequate realization of significance and values. This means

selection. Some periods must be studied in a way sufficiently detailed to bring out their problems and their significant achievements; others may be presented in a sketchy manner, merely outlining the continuity of history down to some subsequent age which, for one reason or another, demands a fuller treatment.

A method which would allow merely a scanty outline of the history of early periods, and approach fullness of treatment only as it reaches modern times, reserving the fullest discussion of all for the present or the immediate past leading up to the present, has often been advocated as one peculiarly adapted to American conditions. However this may be in courses dealing with political history, it would, I am convinced, prove educationally the worst possible method, especially for Americans, in courses in which the central interest is cultural or artistic. Present times and their work are both better known and more readily understood, particularly in the purely modern environment of American life, than is the history, architecture, and art of earlier ages. These need so much interpretation that those who have not ^{surveyed} studied them under academic guidance seldom attain any adequate knowledge of them through travel or private study. Fullness of treatment in historical courses of the sort with which we are concerned should therefore depend, not on the proximity of a period to our own, but on (1) its relative significance in architectural development, and (2) the variety and the permanent ^{value} work of its entire cultural output, in politics, literature, philosophy, science, and art.

From each of these points of view the Greek period is unsurpassed and almost unrivalled. It stands first, not merely in point of time, which is itself of advantage, but as the simplest and best field for introductory training in a great variety of the higher interests and activities of mankind. This is notably true of its sculpture and its architecture, which exhibit with greater simplicity and perfection than any other the fundamental qualities of proportion, balance, harmony, and rhythm. The student in whom familiarity with Greek work fails to develop a sense of these qualities and, in some degree, an ability to manifest them in his own designs, had best be warned to choose some other calling than architecture, or to equip himself with a view to work on its constructive or business side; for he lacks, as do unfortunately too many architects already in practice, that fundamental qualification for his profession without which no amount of energy, or breadth of knowledge, or ingenuity will avail.

The Greek period being the first, and in some respects the most valuable of all the greater ages for cultural study, an introductory survey of the geography and races of Europe and the Mediterranean world, and of the earlier civilizations and art of the near east, in particular of Egypt, must be followed by an adequate presentation of the development of Greek civilization in its manifold activities. All this requires, however, so much time in comparison with the small amount needed for a sufficient presentation of the architecture of Egypt and of Greece, that no parity between the general and special courses is here possible. This being so, it might seem that the broader, cultural course

should precede the specialized one in architectural history. That, however, is made impossible for us by practical considerations. It is essential that our students should have their survey of the historical development of Greek architecture as early as possible in the second year, simultaneously with their study of the orders in the first course in Design, which they are then beginning. Moreover, the European Civilization and Art course, in dealing with Greek sculpture, must presuppose a general knowledge of architectural forms as its condition and setting. This architecture, particularly the Doric, was, however, not complete until it had received its rich embellishment of metope and pediment sculptures.

Personally I am convinced that the necessities of our tabular view do not, in this case at least, result in any disadvantage. It is well that students should have become familiar with the A, B, C, and the concrete forms of Greek architecture before they attempt to penetrate into the rich and complex culture that produced it. The study of Roman architecture, at least in its elements, should follow directly upon that of Greek, but at this point I believe it would be desirable if the course in Architectural History could be suspended and all possible time devoted to the general survey of the later Greek world, the Roman Empire, and the transition to Byzantine and Mediaeval civilization. Thereafter the study of Architectural History should be resumed and a careful presentation given of the development and interrelations of the Byzantine, Saracenic (or Coptic), Romanesque, and Gothic styles. Here, I am inclined to believe, the special course in the History of Architecture should end. The character of Renaissance and subsequent styles should be outlined, if possible, in the general cultural course;

and all these styles, together with the Roman should be studied in greater detail through selected examples, to be presented in a course on the Theory of Architecture, which should not follow a historical treatment but be planned in close relation to the problems undertaken in the more advanced courses in Design.

The reasons for an intensive study of Greek architecture and art have already been given. It is essentially an art of the exterior, i.e., of form and of sculptural enrichment through forms.

Byzantine, on the other hand, is essentially an architecture of the interior, of space-creation, of interior surfaces, and of the enrichment of surface and of space through color. Gothic, finally, combines the form interests of Greek with the spatial interests of Byzantine, being an architecture of both exterior and interior, both form and color, but attaining in each an expression wholly new. Achieving neither the perfect form expression of Greek, nor the perfect spatial and color expression of Byzantine, it blends and develops both these elements with a freedom of phantasy and a power of imaginative appeal unapproached by any other style. To the direct training in form, space, and color perception which the earlier styles present, Gothic adds the lesson that freedom of imaginative expression may be not merely combined with, but actually enhanced by, the observance of law.

The impulse toward order, the perception of beauty, the feeling for style, and the value of freedom, which an appreciative study of these three completely organic styles can and does produce, is attainable in like degree in no other way. Compared with the fundamental educational values obtainable from the study of these styles a detailed survey of the composite architecture of Roman,

Renaissance or modern times has very little to offer. Yet I would not be understood as denying or underestimating the importance of these less unified styles. Familiarity with them is of course essential, presenting as they do, in purposes and as examples of complex planning, many analogies to the needs and problems of architecture in our own time. Inferior manifestations of any style, as, for example, the Gothic of Germany, should, however, not be systematically surveyed. They may be at most touched upon where they exhibit some new and special feature or adaptation which is of architectural value. Purely provincial developments should be discussed only exceptionally, as a means of making the student realize that good architecture has never been fixed and rigid but always responsive to local conditions and to methods of construction varying with local materials or usage. Oriental and other styles wholly exotic to the art of Europe and America, while occasionally valuable for purposes of comparison or contrast, should in general be omitted altogether. If interest in them arises they should be treated in detached lectures, not as a part of the required course.

With the advantage of a sound school training in the architectural styles and in the main cultural traditions coming down from the past, the study of modern architecture can be pursued at any time, with or without academic guidance. Is it not safe, moreover, to assume that it surely will be pursued, throughout his entire career, by any architect who practices his calling in the spirit not of a mere business but of a liberal profession?

Finally, in closing such a discussion as this, it is worth while to remember that the central aim of all education is to render the mind on the one hand accurate in its operations, and on the other, flexible and active. A liberal education is an education which liberates, which in addition to training the senses to perceive and the mind to understand, sets the imagination free from that rigidity which narrow or limited surroundings tend very early to produce. In particular, this freeing of the imagination, above and beyond the mere stocking and training of the mind, is essential to creative activity in any of the professions. Whatever his field, the teacher who can stimulate creative imagination in his pupils is the one indispensable teacher. To accomplish this he must, however, be free to form his own conception of his task and to follow it according to his own methods. The most perfectly planned and complete course which an intelligent body of specialists could devise, while very valuable to him for guidance and suggestion, would be in danger of strangling his usefulness if imposed upon him as a controlling law. Such a servitude would be, to put it concretely, German in its inspiration and not Greek.