A Note on Excellence

Of a springtime morning, a summer moonlight, an autumn twilight, a moonlit winter eve, the great gift of the universe is a place of peace and beauty. A quality of warmth and friendliness invest it, its scale is human and humane, whether the lawns are filled with recluse recluse valutudinarians, or a simple sojourner is strolling their walks. I find pleasure in the fact that these things are so, and interest in pondering why. What are the subtleties that, melting, consume in beauty? To ask this is to ask what excellence is, for excellence and beauty are reciprocals.

Private grass, trees, flowering shrubs, moonlight, shadow, and the blue sky above—the elements from which beauty may be compounded.

Grass, shrubbery, trees—these are the raw components of forest or jungle, yet from these subtleties may be compounded. Alone, they and scattered at random, they may combine to form Thomas’s “happily wilderness,” where man has really no place of his own, and where brute nature may give off a certain thrill of terror to the sensitive observer, but when the mind and finds little lasting joy. If subtleties are the secret. The evocation of subtleties from them demands the interposition of mind, of sensibility, of aesthetic expression and response.
When this is given, Fass becomes terraced ground, with fields, ditches, brooks, and flowering shrubs; trees at random, an approach to a range of pattern and stately comity; chaos, cosmos, a first approximation to it. For the visual cacophony has yielded them to notice, and the theme stated in the midst of oak and elm, the counterpoint of flowering crab-trees, and the melodies of rhododendrons blooming—a simple subtlety has been caught forth, a human scale has been approached.

Approached, yet not attained. How does a simple subtlety appear? We ask, what demand, now. This simple subtlety is not a whole. At least it can use more than repeat itself, making new, on and on to the horizon. Each whole reaches through recurrence. Then, for all his interrupted rage, he who believes in limits finds in them a whole to be required. Seeking a limit, and man sees the whole sea is expressing the paradoxically, of his being, which demands that it be untrammeled and unrestricted precisely that it be contained. The mountain lake, contained by hills which serve as a frame to hill and valley, offers a whole that is contained and comprehensible, and so speaks to man as the means of the reflection of the vast and empty ocean within him.

The Great Court has its beauty because it is a whole, wherein the contained and the containing merge in excellency. The limestone dam, between the...
containing masses, with their upward-curving columnar verticals, their strong verticals, and subtle ophirring verticals between strong stylistic and curvilinear.

The limestone was so that

Structure and site complement and sustain one another. The containing masses, strong in stylistics and curvilinear, soaring tree in pilaster and panel, are at one with tennons and trees they surround. Orienting the whole, the great dome brings focus. The colonnade of the entrance portico full statics the whole theme with central emphasis and joins the observer to soaring above it, the great dome orients the whole.

What larger subtleties are there to these greater subtleties?

Many are the subtleties that contribute to this achievement of beauty. The first architect who from far-away Vanccawson looks back with varying’s eye to Cambridge has told us — the ootit-tab on the skew of the dome, of “enormous value there, for without it, the dome would seem to match.” These are many more. Nature does not design with square and plumb-line, and so attaining her subtle nuances. To this principle no

has ever to this principle. Nature’s example. Her subtle nuances can be traced and echoed in the refinements of which architecture is capable. In the court and entrance of the Institute, not

only the architect made all the precise lines - quarries - the sky incline gently, subtly, upward towards the culminating feature, the dome. Not only Stair is marks the perfect edge, and melds
the age of
into the sophisticated, upward lift that promises the observer
and the columns of the great columns made the seat, not on a
straight line from end to end, but on a curve) lines. The
center is never in the forward of the end points. Such
subtleties, melding, coalescence in beauty.

Taken at the dedication of the Institute's Cambridge
home in 1917, Ralph Adams Cram played the role of
master the Embellishment in the inaugural pageant that filled
the Great Court with dancers, figures, gods, and symbols.
Pageants, and processions have joined into the past. The embellish-
ment remains. It is the embellishment of beauty, of ex-
cellence, which we owe to the creativity and the pres-
cipation of the Institute's architect, Welles Bosworth.
A Note on Excellence

Of a springtime morning, a summer noontide, an autumn twilight, a moonlit winter eve, the Great Court of the Institute is a place of peace and beauty. A quality of warmth and friendliness invests it, and a sense of pause and poise, and its scale is human and humane, whether the lawns are filled with recumbent valetudinarians or a single sojourner is strolling the walks. I find pleasure in the fact that these things are so, and interest in pondering why. What are the subtleties that, melding, consummate in beauty? To ask this is to ask what excellence is, for excellence and beauty are reciprocals.

Grass, bushes, trees—these are the raw elements of forest or jungle, yet subtleties may be compounded from them. Alone and scattered at random, they may combine to form Thoreau's "shaggy wilderness" where man has really no place of his own and where brute nature may yield a certain tingling thrill of terror to the sensitive soul observer, but where the civilized finds little lasting joy. The evocation of subtleties from them demands the interposition of mind, of sensibility, of aesthetic expression and response.

When this is given, grass becomes terraced greensward; bushes, shaped hedge and flowering shrub; trees at random, ranges of pattern and stately comity; chaos, the beginning of cosmos. Visual cacophony has yielded then to a motif, a theme suggested in the march of oak and elm, a counterpoint of flowering crabs, and melodies of rhododendrons blooming—a simple subtlety has been achieved, the human scale has been approached.

Approached, yet not attained. We ask, demand, more. This simple subtlety is not a whole. At best, it can no more than repeat itself on and on to the horizon, melding never, becoming restless through recurrence. For a whole to be requires a limit, and man seeking whole-
ness is expressing the paradoxicality of his being, which at once demands that it be untrammeled and pleads that it be contained. The mountain lake, contained by curves that mold hill and valley, offers a whole that a coup d'oeil comprehends, and so speaks to man as the insensate repetitions of the vast and empty ocean never can.

The Great Court has its beauty because it is a whole, where the contained and the containing merge in excellence. Structure and site complement and sustain one another. The containing masses, strong in stylobate and entablature, scoring in pilaster and panel, are at one with the terraces and the trees they surround. The colonnade of the entrance portico states the full theme with central emphasis. Soaring above it, the Great Dome orients the whole.

Many are the subtleties that contribute to this achievement of beauty. The great architect who from far-away Vaucresson looks back with memory's eye to Cambridge has told already of one—the date-tab on the drum of the dome, of "enormous value there, for without it, the dome would seem to rotate." There are many more. Nature does not design with square and plumb-line. Her subtle nuances can be traced and echoed in the refinements of which architecture is capable. In the court and entrance of the Institute, the architect has made all the parapet lines against the sky incline gently, subtly, upward toward the culminating feature, the dome. Entasis marks the parapet edge, and molds in the upward lift that persuades the eye of the observer. The columns of the great colonnade he has set, not on a straight line from end to end, but on a curved line where the center is nine inches forward of the end points. Such subtleties, melding, consummate in beauty.

At the dedication of the Institute's Cambridge home in 1917, Ralph Adams Cram played the rôle of Merlin the Enchanter in the inaugural pageant that filled the Great Court with dancers, personagess,
and symbolism. Pageantry and pomposity have paled into the past. The enchantment remains. It is the enchantment of beauty, of excellence, which we owe to the artistry and the humane perception of the Institute's architect: Welles Bosworth.

--F. G. Fassett, Jr.
On the cover of the June issue of the Technology Review, there is a photograph of this Great Court; and inside, Fred Fassett has written a brief and eloquent appreciation of its charm and elegance. Our Court, he says, has in every season "...a quality of warmth and friendliness, a sense of pause and poise, and its scale is human and humane, whether the lawns are filled -- as today -- or if only a sojourner is strolling its walks."

Those words were written as a tribute -- and as a birthday greeting -- to the architect who designed this beautiful expanse of lawn and trees and the stately buildings that surround it.

Last month Welles Bosworth of the Class of '89 observed his 95th birthday. For more than forty years -- in fact, ever since just after the First World War, when he was sent by Mr. Rockefeller to reconstruct the Palais de Versailles -- he has lived in the little village of Vaucresson just outside Paris. And those of us who from time to time have had the pleasure of calling on him there have developed a warm friendship for this delightful and remarkable man -- whose energy has seemed inexhaustible and whose ardent interest in everything that concerns the Institute has never faltered over the long span of years. Since that Commencement Day seventy-five years ago when he received his diploma, many things have changed about this M.I.T. that he has loved so much, but these magnificent buildings will remain for generations to come as a mark of his genius and
a reminder of his loyalty.

We had rather hoped that on this Alumni Day he might be with us, but since he felt it too long a journey, I have sent to him a testimonial of our affection and respect:

It reads as follows:

By this Resolution

The Corporation and the Faculty of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology send greetings to William Welles Bosworth '89 to commemorate the 75th anniversary of his graduation and to renew their homage for the gifts of his genius

Architect -- whose creative vision half a century ago -- endowed the Institute with a grand and timeless design -- Central to its purposes -- Favorable to growth -- and flexible in its mobility -- Symbolic of its aims and accomplishments --

I have promised him, too, that he would be very much in our thoughts today, and I know that you join with all of us in these good wishes.
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