

THOMAS USTICK WALTER, *LECTURES ON THE HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF ARCHITECTURE* (1841-53)

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NOTE: ORIGINAL SPELLING, GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION HAVE BEEN PRESERVED.

Lecture I: On Ancient Architecture

Architecture is an art that must be understood to be enjoyed. The pleasures arising from a just perception of its beauties, can only be experienced by those who have obtained some knowledge of its principles, and its historical associations. An architectural object may, it is true, affect to a limited extent, almost every observer; but the refining and ennobling influences to which its peculiar imagery is addressed, are realized by those only who have cultivated a taste for its enjoyment. Hence, it is of no small importance that an art, so prolific of intellectual pleasures, should be generally understood and appreciated.

An impression that the study of Architecture belongs exclusively to Architects, has, no doubt, done much to retard the progress of the art, and to limit its humanizing and elevating influences on the public mind. —Such an impression, however, is erroneous. —It is undoubtedly desirable that every one should acquire some knowledge of the elementary principles of Architecture, of its historical associations, and of the general laws that govern it, as a fine art: —such a preparation of mind will enable any one to realize the beautifying effects to which architectural composition may be addressed, while the knowledge necessary to produce such a composition could only have been acquired by years of study.

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It should be remarked that Architecture possesses a twofold character. —As far as it relates to our physical comforts it is simply a useful art; —in this relation it is usually so designated; but in its adornments it is, in an eminent degree, an imaginative art; —in this relation it is called a fine art. As a useful art it employs material forms to throw around us a shelter from the weather, adapted to our physical wants; —as a fine art, it so moulds, embellishes, and disposes those forms, as to produce gracefulness and beauty, exciting in the mind agreeable emotions of taste, and thus affording a source of intellectual enjoyment. Its developments being, generally, of a durable character, it bears a faithful record of ancient times; handing down, from age to age, through the revolutions of a changing world, the spirit of departed generations. This fact is attested by remnants of the past, speaking from every land where man has made his home.

Lecture V: On Modern Architecture

The advancement and diffusion of knowledge in modern times present noble relics of the distant past before us at one view; thus placing Modern Architecture in circumstances widely different from those which have influenced all preceding periods of the art. Ancient nations knew comparatively but little of each other; —they were generally either shut up within their own precincts, or engaged in war. Their national intercourse was consequently too limited, and their prejudices too strong to admit of one nation profiting to any considerable extent from the taste or skill of another; ancient architecture will therefore be found to consist of but few principles, although in some instances those few were carried out to the utmost degree of perfection: —this fact is strikingly obvious in the remains which have come down to us from Greece; —nothing can be more perfect than the proportions of Grecian Architecture, and nothing more exquisite than its execution, but to see one greek temple is to see a thousand, —the chief marks of distinction in most of them being the sculptured representations with which they are embellished. A corresponding uniformity of taste arising out of a restriction to but few principles, is apparent, in some degree, in the works of every ancient nation, thus accounting for the peculiar character which distinguishes the Architecture of each.

But in modern times the case is widely different; —the important inventions and improvements in art, and the rapid advancement of civilization which have characterized the few last centuries open to the present age vast avenues to knowledge which were wholly unknown to the ancients.

The invention of printing alone has had a greater influence on architecture than all the revolutions of antiquity; —previous to the discovery of this invaluable art, the cost and delay which attended the copying of manuscripts rendered literature a most expensive luxury, thus confining the productions of the learned almost

exclusively to the halls of opulence and splendor; but now, the press, that most powerful engine of civilization, pours forth its volumes daily by thousands, unfolding to the poor as well as the rich of every nation in its own peculiar tongue the wisdom, the genius, the science of all.

The Architecture of the present day has also been influenced in no small degree by the art of engraving. — The architect may now have before him the most perfect representations of the buildings of all ages and all countries; and instead of receiving his impressions from a few scattered monuments as did the ancients, he is enabled to study and compare, the works of every nation.

Modern improvements in the application of steam have had an important influence on art; this mighty agent is no doubt destined to achieve results still more wonderful than any thing which has yet been witnessed; — it accelerates the distribution of knowledge, brings distant countries near each other, and is rapidly producing an intercourse between nations which must eventually resolve mankind into one great family. . . .

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Another idea in connection with modern architecture . . . is the popular notion that no invention exists in the present day in architecture, — that every production of modern times is but an imitation of some antique model; — this idea . . . has no foundation in fact; and can only be attributed to a principle of dissatisfaction with things present which has ever characterized the human mind. — If we look back at the progress of architecture through ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, and compare it with the advancement of the art in later times we shall find that human ingenuity is by no means on the wane: — During the accumulated ages in which Architecture flourished in Egypt, it was practised comparatively without improvement, after it was once firmly established on a scientific basis; — in Greece, where columnar construction reached its fullest perfection, the principles of the art were few; and we find the same forms copied from ages with scarcely a shadow of alteration; — the same may be said of Rome; and even in England where so much diversity exists in the several periods of the architecture of the middle ages . . . (a period of seven centuries) was so gradual as to be almost imperceptible.

If on the other hand we glance at the architecture of the last half century, We shall find a general improvement in the art of building beyond all comparison with any similar period in former ages. — The buildings with which our own cities are adorned present ample testimony on that subject; witness the gracefulness of our steeples and towers, — embellishments never known at all beyond the middle ages, and belonging, in their application to classic architecture exclusively to modern times. — Compare the comforts, and conveniences of the churches of the present day, with those of the houses in which our Fathers worshiped, where heat and ventilation were alike unknown, and where a lady's "foot stove" was as indispensable in Winter as her fan in summer; where half the people sat with their backs to the preacher, and where the height of the pews was so great as to render it difficult for a considerable portion of the congregation to see over them.

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None of the architecture of the present day can however be said to possess a decidedly distinctive character amongst any people who mingle with the rest of mankind; nor is it probable that any nation will ever again practice a mode of building peculiar to itself, exclusive of other styles. — The arts of printing and engraving, and the rapidity with which knowledge is every where diffused will undoubtedly prevent such a result; — these arts present every thing which has been rescued from the shades of antiquity, together with all the most important developements of more modern genius, to the view of every civilized people; and as all ideas in matters of taste are dependent on visible objects for their first existence, it is obvious that these arts will ever exert a resistless influence on design even in the humblest departments of decoration. — We shall have to suppose some intelligent nation to be separated from the rest of mankind, and deprived of all recollections of the styles and modes of building which now exist, before we can imagine a people capable of originating a style entirely independent of the forms and proportions which are now familiar to all the World.

It must therefore be obvious, that in the present state of society it would be wholly impossible for any civilized people to resist the influences of the great mass of architectural ideas with which all are now surrounded, so as to admit of their originating any new mode of building superior to, and at the same time independent of, all existing styles and fashions.

It should however be remarked that although the architecture of all the world is now the property of every civilized people . . . still there are peculiarities of climate, – of manners and customs, – and of government which influence the taste of every nation, and which impart a peculiar character to the architecture of each, even in the adaptation of similar principles.

Hence the general diffusion of knowledge, and the subjection of wealth which characterizes our own free institutions must eventually make as great a difference between American and European architecture in point of taste, as that which now exists in the character of their governments: – instead of the magnificence, grandeur, and showy gorgeousness always affected under hereditary monarchies, we shall gradually settle down into a simpler, chaster, more decided taste – a taste like that which marked the triumphant career of Republican Greece, and to which even the severe and equalizing laws of Lycurgus opposed no obstacle; in the language of a celebrated English writer, “the purest system of civil freedom, is creative of the noblest powers of intellectual excellence.” [Shee’s Rhymes on art – page 49]