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Creators: Ronan, W. C.

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On the Use of Precedent

W. C. RONAN, *Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture*

Among students in architectural design there is much uncertainty as to the use of precedent. The ambitious beginner very properly resolves to be individual and not a copyist, to be a leader and not a follower. He is at once confronted with the question, where does individuality cease and plagiarism begin? Shall he strive to invent new motives, or use old ones?

It is quite easy to invent a new form, provided one is indifferent as to its quality. This has been done, giving rise to l'Art Nouveau, the examples of which are sometimes interesting but usually distressing.

All historic styles have been the result of collective effort, never the work of any one man. Brunelleschi came as near to originating a style as any architect has done, but even he used the same methods as his predecessors, and borrowed details from existing work. He probably never knew that his work marked the beginning of a new era.

Historic styles have frequently been the outgrowth of new methods of construction, so it would seem that a new style may be expected from the use of steel frame and reinforced concrete. Steel frame construction has not yet given rise to a distinctive style, the examples using everything in the way of detail from Classic to Pseudo Gothic. Some of them are very beautiful, for example the New York Municipal Building and the Woolworth Building. A number of notable buildings have been done recently in reinforced concrete. The crudeness of this material precludes any refinement of detail, and forces the designer to rely on proportion and mass alone. While these are the most important elements in composition, they would seem insufficient foundation for a new style. This is particularly true because the necessary massiveness and simplicity of the design makes the material inappropriate for any but large structures, such as warehouses, bridges and stadia. So far, then, these new materials have not given rise to a new style.

Turning from the attempt to invent new motives and following precedent, the designer sometimes feels that he is copying rather than designing. He need have no fear if he uses the old motives intelligently. If he is puzzled it is because he has confused Invention and Individuality. Good invention is and must be rare, but individuality is a birthright and a duty. Emerson says "Great men are more distinguished by range and extent, than by originality. If we require the originality which consists in weaving, like a spider, their web from their own bowels, in finding clay, and making bricks, and building the house, no great men are original. Nor does valuable originality consist in unlikeness to other men. The hero is in the press of knights, and the thick of events; and, seeing what men want, and sharing their desire, he adds the needful length of sight and of arm, to come at the desired point. The greatest genius is the most indebted man."

The greatest artists have borrowed ideas wherever they found them. Ictinus and Callicrates did not invent the Doric column; they perfected it and produced the Parthenon. Virgil worked over some old legends and of them made the Aeneid, while Shakespeare took ideas, plots, and even phrases from many sources. These men invented little; they assimilated and developed the inventions of others. They attained the very highest type of individuality.

To know that one is not merely "cribbing," he need only make sure his design answers all the requirements of the problem, that it is suitable for its position, appropriate to the material, and expressive of the conditions and ideals of the people who are to use it. These requirements vary in every community, in every age, and for every race, so, if the design answers them all, it is reasonably certain that the designer is no mere slave to precedent. To adopt is plagiarism, to adapt is design. The intelligent use of precedent, keeping to the Golden Mean is as far from copying as gold mining is from pocketpicking.

The designer, then, may take ideas wherever he finds them, if they are suitable and he properly assimilates them. This is true of styles also, hence the present day eclecticism in design. In selecting old motives, only those should be chosen which possess elements which make them appropriate. Among these are racial influences, the historical associations of the function of the building, and the historical associations of the locality.

Americans are the heirs of many races. By actual descent there are Americans of almost every race under the sun. This does not mean, however, that the styles developed by all these races are appropriate in America. As Freeman has said, in his essay on "Race and Language," the tongue we speak has more to do with the shaping of our ideas than has our actual descent. So although, for example, there is a large number of Swedes in this country, we need not expect to see any considerable effect from Sweden on American architecture. These people cease, after a time, to use the Swedish language, and that fact ultimately divorces them from Swedish literature and ideas. Instead they use English and become permeated with the ideals which have been expressed in that language. It follows then, that although we may draw inspiration from many sources, the dominant source must remain the work of English-speaking peoples.

Aside from race and language there are other hereditary elements to be considered, the styles associated historically with the purpose of the building. The Romans impressed their law upon the world, and much of our law is founded upon theirs, so the more severe phases of the Roman style are appropriate for law courts. In Art we recognize the leadership of Greece so the Greek style is well suited to buildings devoted to that purpose. The Gothic was developed to express

the ideals of the middle ages, and so remains the most appropriate style for those religious bodies which are descended from the mediaeval churches.

The other great consideration which must not be neglected is the historical character of the locality. In the South West the Spanish Colonial or Mission style is much used and is highly appropriate. The Spanish missionaries first opened this region to civilization, and their self-sacrifice should not be forgotten. Other examples of this sort are to be found in the French work at New Orleans, and in English Colonial work in New England. These localities possess charming individuality due to the presence of these styles, and it is here that the sanctity of individuality should be most strongly insisted upon.

It is worse than plagiarism, it is insolent conceit to import into these regions any styles which will not harmonize with the existing characteristic work. To destroy the individuality of the place by incongruous importations is little better than the destruction of Soissons, of Noyon and of Rheims. Western architecture is being copied in Japan, and the satisfying art of that nation is suffering thereby. The European styles do not belong there, nor the Japanese style here. Such plagiarism destroys the charm of picturesque variety as well as the individuality of races.

Besides these considerations the nature of the locality itself must not be forgotten. Climate, available materials, political and social conditions must be recognized and they will invariably modify the design. That design is best which seems inevitable, and to be inevitable it must have nothing forced about it. It must obey all of these influences—racial, traditional and local.

One form of indefensible plagiarism is the use of any but the simplest kinds of stock ornament. It is plagiarism because the work is not assimilated but copied. It is possible to purchase exact copies of the Erechtheion columns, in several sizes and for interior as well as exterior use. Let no one imagine that by using them he will create another Erechtheion. He will meet only ignominious failure. These columns were designed for one particular place, size, material, climate, race, and religious purpose. These conditions are not duplicated in America today, so the columns cannot be suitable.

But if the designer take that column, and modify the detail to accord with a different material, modify the proportions to fit a new location, modify the spirit to fulfill a new purpose, then he is doing what Mnesicles did, assimilating and developing, adapting not adopting, which is design.

One of the most disheartening offenses of this sort is the improper use of heraldry. It is possible to purchase exact copies of Tudor ceilings in which the heraldic designs of the originals are faithfully copied. These coats of arms were and are private property. They belonged exclusively to the knights who carried them into battle, and they belong exclusively to their descendants. One has no more reason or right to appropriate these designs than to assume the names of the families to whom they belong.

Of a piece with the incorrect use of heraldry is the artificial aging of a building. A time worn appearance adds to the beauty of a building mostly because it is the effect of time. The charm of

Compton Wynyates and Penshurst is due partly to the softening of the lines and mellowing of the colors, but more to the suggestion of venerable age. The old mansions appear to be dreaming of the life they have witnessed, of tournaments, royal progresses, baronial hospitality, of

“old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago.”

To attempt to obtain this charm by defacing the fresh mouldings with a hammer is merely silly. It is like wearing false jewels, painting lichens on a roof, or imitating thatch with tortured shingles.

To conclude then, we may avoid the eccentricities of too obtrusive invention and the insipidity of slavery to precedent by obeying the principles of the greatest designers of the past. The best creative work of all ages has been founded on these principles. If followed they will, as always, produce a healthy art, which will be traditional in the main, because the conditions are traditional. When conditions change the art will change with them, and the resulting new style will be not an abrupt change but a natural growth.