

# THE ARTS AND SCIENCES

## Architecture

### THE POISON OF GOOD TASTE

By LEWIS MUMFORD

A LITTLE while ago an architect defended the Roman Catholic churches in America by saying that until the Catholics began to imitate the Episcopalians their buildings had never been handicapped by good taste. It is a perfectly sound paradox, and there is a great deal to be said for it; for we are now living in a period when certain national brands of good taste have been formulated by our architects, and no building without their particular stamp is considered decent and respectable. The result is that force and originality of treatment are disappearing from our buildings, and a decent mediocrity, like that of a respectable cemetery, is falling over our streets. There was, perhaps, more promise for American architecture in the uncertain turmoil of the late 'eighties than there is at the present moment, although the earlier period left only a handful of buildings that are worth preserving, but the number of positive eyesores erected during the last decade is, I believe, fewer than at any time since, say, 1840. A couple of generations ago the American architect dared to boast that his buildings were unique; and his boast was true, with this qualification, that no buildings so ill-proportioned, so badly modeled, so inconveniently designed had ever been planned or built this side of the moon. The disruption and villainous taste of the scroll-saw period, however, delivered the American architect from a slavish adherence to established forms; it gave men like Louis Sullivan and H. H. Richardson the opportunity to create new patterns which would weld together in harmonious units our homes, our railway

stations, our grain elevators, our banks, our schools. The Auditorium Building and the Monadnock Building in Chicago, the Pittsburgh jail and courthouse, the old De Vinne building in New York were some of the experiments towards a fresh and living architecture that were made in the late 'eighties and early 'nineties. I cite none of these buildings because of their perfection, for it would be absurd to think that unique problems in material, function and design could be solved in a single decade; all I say is that these buildings show clearly that American architecture was moving towards an interesting goal. None of these buildings was refined; none was marred by good taste; but each of them displayed a certain courage and strength which were capable of giving an æsthetic answer to any problem in building that the age offered. Richardson's masonry was clumsy and overemphatic; but the lessons he had learnt in building his churches, libraries, and townhalls were equally applicable to office buildings and factories; and he was ready to apply them.

Unfortunately, in a period of experiment no one can guarantee success in advance. Where there is no formula, where there is no cut and dried method, the chances are that a new building will look a little queer and bizarre; indeed, to get used to a fresh form requires a deliberate readjustment; and the more original the treatment the more difficult the readjustment. Moreover, the chances of making a fool of oneself and becoming enthusiastic over a monstrosity is much greater than it is if the architect keeps close to established patterns. So the fear of being ridiculous, fostered no doubt by such gentlemanly fellows as Messrs. Hunt and McKim

and White, took hold of the American business man sometime in the 'nineties: he decided to play safe and go in for the correct thing; and this snobbish fear happily coincided with the precepts of the Beaux Arts school which were being copied in our American schools of architecture. The classic in one of its numerous forms struck the safe and sane note in American architecture, and the presence of classic columns and cornices, with perhaps a little classic sculpture of the mausoleum school, was an æsthetic guarantee. None genuine without the label! It is true that the Gothic revival persisted feebly during this period; Gothic itself was standardized and reduced for the most part to some studious version of the most grammatic Gothic period, the English perpendicular; and except in Churches and Colleges an even more preposterous version of the style, "industrial Gothic," served as the sterile alternative to the classic orders.

There was one further reason that the classic took on so swiftly and completely, apart from its deep social fitness for a period of imperial exploitation. The formula for classic exteriors, the scale, the proportions, the kind of ornamental detail, had been definitely established by a host of European buildings; these constitute, as it were, so many stock patterns, and the formula can be laid on almost any interior plan. Where ground rents are high and where only a little time can elapse between the buying of the land and the erection of the building, it is a great advantage to the architect to have his design half-finished: it allows him to concentrate what energies he has upon the mechanical perfection of the interior. The original architects, like Louis Sullivan, who were trying to work out new solutions for new problems, who were trying to express in original forms the fine qualities of our civilization, demanded too much time for their work. What chance did they have of practicing their art in a period when the plans for a twenty-story office building may have to be completed within six weeks; yes, even

in less than six weeks! The less character a building had, the less nicely it was adapted to its site and its original function, the more easily could it be turned from one purpose to another; the more easily, too, could it be gambled with and passed from hand to hand. The very qualities that make a building priceless are those that would keep it off the market! It was not merely that originality might result in bad taste; worse than that, bad taste might in the end produce a little originality; and this was a consummation devoutly to be avoided. The healthy barbarians of Chicago were slow to catch on to this principle; and for a while they partly tolerated Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright; but in recent years buildings like the Wrigley Building and the Chicago *Tribune* Building have caught the safe mediocrity of the *Times* Building and the Standard Oil Building in New York. The fact is that the genteel tradition in American architecture is now as much a national brand as chewing gums and motor oils.

In our skyscrapers, it is true, gentility does not generally pay above the second or third floor; and so the rest of the building is treated with a hard logic which makes it well adapted to its primary purpose, that of creating and extracting ground rents; but on our smaller buildings, particularly on our libraries, municipal buildings, courthouses, and more pretentious country mansions the genteel tradition has laid a heavy hand. Distinguished as the late Bertram Goodhue was, he would probably have lost the design for the Academy of Sciences building in Washington had he treated it in his later free manner; indeed, his modification of classic details was a minor scandal, and it would probably not have been tolerated in a less eminent architect. What is the result? The result is that no cultivated person cares to waste two winks of an eye upon our "fine buildings"; the only places where something positive and interesting is in sight are a few small office buildings, an occasional public school or an apartment house.

The final comment on our genteel tradition was expressed by a German architect who showed me the snapshots he had taken on his travels about the country: except for a few grain elevators and warehouses, they were all photographs of the backs—the unornamented parts—of our buildings!

What excuse does the American architect make for his forests of Ionic and Corinthian pillars, for his miles and leagues of cornices, for his endless platitudes in design, for his interminable *clichés* in ornament? Well, the genteel architect bristles at the aspersion cast on his originality; he points out that his buildings *are* modern: the floor plans are different from those of a Roman temple or an Italian palace; the materials and the mode of construction *are* those of our own day; and as for the orders and the ornament, are they not, he superciliously asks, as justifiable as the established parts of speech we use in framing a sentence? It is a feeble defence. The point is that all these things are modern in spite of themselves, particularly in spite of the architect. He has not had the time or the patience or, alas! the imagination to think freshly in his new materials. He uses steel, for example, as a convenient dodge for solving an obsolete problem in stone construction, whereas if he loved his steel or his concrete, if he gloried in his technique, he would be prepared to work a new rhythmic wonder comparable

to that of the medieval cathedral builder who worked in stone. As for the notion that the five orders are the parts of speech, it is a joke. If there is any parallel at all between architecture and literature, the only things that correspond to the parts of speech are the forms which are common to all modes of architectures—walls, lintels, arches, beams, shafts. The use of the five orders today, the use of the classic forms as a whole today, would have its equivalent in literature if Mr. Sherwood Anderson attempted to translate "Winesburg, Ohio," into Ciceronian Latin, and found himself occasionally lapsing into English in spite of himself for the lack of any Roman equivalent in phrase or thought. This applies of course to all the other archaisms of style: the Gothic, for instance, is the equivalent of "meseems" and "grammercy" and "odds bodkins" in ordinary conversation.

Gentility undoubtedly has its uses; but it is mere humbug for the architect to pretend that these uses are æsthetic. In architecture, we are not Romans or Greeks or Florentines; and worst of all, we are not even Americans. Or rather, we *are* Americans; and we are only too ready to exhibit our snobbishness, our timorousness, our haste, and our distrust of the imagination. We are not yet convinced that art is a good business risk; whereas everyone knows that gentility pays.

## Biology

### AN ENQUIRY INTO THE ECOLOGY OF *HOMO SAPIENS LINNAEUS*

BY EMMETT REID DUNN

TO ANY individual animal who faces, and all must face, a world already crowded with others of his kind, there is offered a series of choices. First, he may struggle for his place in the sun; if he is successful in this struggle he may stay in his ancestral swamp until God or arteriosclerosis calls him to his reward at a ripe old age; if he is unsuccessful he must pass

immediately to that reward, or seek fresh ponds and marshes new. For the unsuccessful, migration is the alternative to death at home. But migration beyond the limits of his natural environment brings the individual face to face with new conditions. His native adaptability was insufficient to enable him to compete successfully with his fellows; it is now a question whether it is sufficient to enable him to meet the requirements of a new habitat. He may be as inefficient abroad as he was at home. If so, he fades quietly from the