

POINTS OF VIEW

FUNCTIONALISM AGAIN

PRO

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EUROPEANS suppose Americans to be a hard-boiled, money-ridden people who are inclined to figure all values in terms of dollars and cents. Therefore they call Americans materialistic. But this is a narrow view, for although dollar-and-cent values are determined by the mechanics of a conventional market, they are frequently influenced by an emotionalism which sales geniuses direct. And thus nature steps in again at the back door.

For example, a Los Angeles realtor may invent a Hollywood Spanish house; then the prospective consumer, immigrating not from Spain but from Iowa, is made to fall into a fervor of purchasing and honestly believes that he is following an old tradition. Falling into a fervor and believing are activities of an emotional nature; and dollar-and-cent computations based on them are by no means so materialistic as Europeans assume.

When the sales talk comes to Spanish, French, or "half-timber" bungalows, it is silently agreed that the price has really not so much to do with these esthetic values as with whether the house has six or seven rooms, one or two baths, a one- or a two-car garage, and two or three coats of paint. Within an individual style class the price is actually governed by floor footage, although Mediterranean roof-tile in pressed cement might cost more than artificially weathered French shingles.

Now beyond any doubt a computation of cost for a real Balearic peasant house would be significantly different from that for a Scandinavian lumber cottage. Fundamentally different techniques and methods are used in these structures, in relation to different materials and different climatic demands. A true computation proportioning correctly the cost of preparatory labor

on materials and their transportation, the cost of the materials themselves, and the cost of actual labor on the premises, would reveal a good deal about the economic background of the Balearic Islands or the shores of a Norwegian fjord.

The style and appearance of a building express its economic background; they express also the time attitude of the owners and the artisans. In all historical periods of architecture the time attitude has been non-rigid. But it is in this very point that our modern civilization distinguishes itself sharply from what has gone before. Mr. Ford and Mr. Broad, in their excellent articles in the Winter issue of the *Southwest Review*,¹ have in many respects made clear the need for a sincere consistency in contemporary cultural expression. A pharaoh's pyramid, as Mr. Broad points out, signifies its function as a tomb; but it also shows clearly that it has not been built for a definite period of amortization—in other words, that it has been built without any very definitely limited time schedule.

In this regard—that of time—a Hollywood apartment building in Egyptian style differs from a temple at Luxor as essentially as it differs in the treatment of layout, purpose, and details: it is financed differently from its stylistic predecessor in the Nile Valley. After the architect of today has developed preliminary financing plans and (the mortgage money having been loaned) the shoestring promoter can guarantee the architect's modest fee, everybody is in a hurry, for carrying charges begin to pile up. Everything has to be ready "two weeks from next Tuesday", and the formal concept as well as all the ancient ornamental detail has to be reproduced on blueprint paper with breath-taking speed. Because of the entrance of the time element into architecture, nowadays it is only in appearance that the ambition for eternity is reproduced.

Mr. Ford has suggested how the self-reliance of the pioneer has left behind it a behavioristic residuum which now forms a

¹"Toward a New Architecture", two essays by Thomas D. Broad and O'Neil Ford, *Southwest Review* XVII, pp. 209-229 (Winter, 1932).

“cultural lag”. Yet there is very little of self-reliance left to the present-day citizen who contemplates building. As the greater part of such an enterprise is financed by first and second trust deeds, the financiers insist on specifications which will guarantee their investment; and even in non-speculative domestic architecture it is not individual taste and predilection which determine essentials, because real-estate and loan experts’ opinions of the probable resale value of the house influence layout, style, and even floor and wall finishes. Every appreciable departure from the canon evolved from previous sales statistics is punished by withdrawal of loan commitments and building credit.

This is a thoroughly novel situation as compared with that of a French king or Roman pope who might have contemplated building a palace. Yet formal solutions of architectural problems are constantly borrowed from exactly such precedents, which have no relation to the circumstances of modern civilization.

In short, modern financing, paying of interest on loans, specific paper-planning, advance computation of exact cost, and in addition to all this, our modern hurried time-attitude, place a wide gulf between every style of the past and our own formal architectural possibilities. Yet no new forms are produced, in spite of all promises. All that is forthcoming is crude debased imitations on the order of realistic stage settings.

No form of life activity—including architecture—can stand up in the long run if sincerity is lacking. And we can not claim sincerity while we camouflage our necessities and possibilities and ignore the financial mechanics of our building activity, which are so completely without historical precedent.

Only one way is left to us, the same way which gifted generations before us have taken: that of developing without far-fetched eclecticism our own modes of building, formally as well as structurally, which are functionally in keeping with what we can and will pay for them. Form, usage, construction, and building economics must grow into a well balanced unit and thus bring us finally “toward a new architecture”.