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978-1-108-05469-0 - A Treatise on the Decorative Part of Civil Architecture: With Illustrations, Notes, and an Examination of Grecian Architecture: Volume 1

Edited by William Chambers and Joseph Gwilt

Excerpt

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AN
EXAMINATION
OF THE
ELEMENTS OF BEAUTY
IN
GRECIAN ARCHITECTURE,
WITH
A BRIEF INVESTIGATION
OF ITS
ORIGIN, PROGRESS, AND PERFECTION.
BY JOSEPH GWILT.

“ Si quis unquam de nostris Hominibus a Genere isto, studio ac voluntate non abhorrens fuit, me et esse arbitror, et magis etiam tum, cum erat plus Otii fuisse.” CICERO, ORAT. PRO L. FLACCO.

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AN

EXAMINATION,

ETC.

ON THE ELEMENTS OF BEAUTY IN ARCHITECTURE.

THERE is perhaps no subject on which persons are more apt to differ in their opinions, than on the beauty of a building. Upon due reflection, we shall find that this ought not to be a matter of surprise,—for when we consider that the prototypes of architecture are entirely different in their nature, from those employed in the other arts of design, whose objects of imitation are in their extent, limited only by the range of animate and inanimate creation, and that those are so constantly subjected to our senses, that their images are easily understood and compared, it will be manifest, that, in an art which has no regulated standard of comparison, opinions must often be at variance with one another.

In architecture, the creative power of nature herself is the model imitated. It is an art which appeals directly to the understanding, and has not the means of flattering the senses in the same way as her sister arts; hence her productions are not universally appreciated: in truth, they are rarely understood except by those whose education and acquirements have qualified them to judge. The beautiful models of nature however are the index and guide of the

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painter and sculptor: a successful imitation of these models, even without an advance on the part of the artist, towards those higher intellectual beauties which distinguish the historical painter, is capable of affecting us with very agreeable sensations:—nay, the low and still life of the Flemish school has its admirers and justly.—But the architect creates the beauty he produces. The other artists easily address the senses and passions, whilst HE can only rely on his appeal to the understanding. His powers of art are therefore limited to operations on the cultivated mind.—With the multitude, magnitude and richness are more valued than the utmost elegance of form or the most fascinating series of proportions.

The object of an artist's inquiry is not so much to investigate metaphysically the cause of beauty in the productions of his art, as to study the effects that flow from those which by the common consent of ages are esteemed beautiful¹, and thus shorten his road by an *a priori* method. It is in this way that he will more readily obtain information on those qualities which act on the understanding and excite our affections by means of the beautiful result they exhibit². These qualities may be classed as follows³:—

MAGNITUDE AND STRENGTH, as qualities which affect the eye.

¹ “The most certain token of evident goodness, is if the general persuasion of men do so account it.” Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Politie*, B. 1.

² It is rather surprising that a recent noble writer on the subject should have employed several pages in the consideration and refutation of Mr. Burke's ingenious but false speculations as to the requisites of *smallness*, *smoothness*, *delicacy*, &c. See Lord Aberdeen's *Enquiry into the Principles of Beauty in Grecian Architecture*, 8vo. London, 1823.

³ See *Art. Beau. Encyclop. Method.*

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[More information](#)

BEAUTY IN ARCHITECTURE.

5

ORDER AND HARMONY, as qualities which affect the understanding.

RICHNESS AND SIMPLICITY, as qualities which excite the affections,—in which taste is the principal guide.

These qualities answer to the three divisions which those who have written on architecture have usually adopted, namely—

CONSTRUCTION, in which the chief requisites are Magnitude and Strength.

DESIGN OR DISPOSITION, in which the principal requisites are Order and Harmony.,

DECORATION, whose requisites are Richness or Simplicity, according to the nature of the composition.

That there are however many other circumstances which tend to the production of an agreeable and beautiful result, is sufficiently obvious—one of them should be more particularly noticed because there can be no doubt of its influence, in the excitement of our admiration of the splendid monuments of Grecian art; it is, an association with the “times and countries which are most hallowed in our imagination. It is difficult for us to see them, even in their modern copies, without feeling them operate upon our minds, as relics of those polished nations where they first arose, and of that greater people by whom they were afterwards borrowed”¹. This is one of those causes which produce such an effect on our minds when we contemplate the stupendous ecclesiastical structures of the middle ages, to which, must, at least by every man of taste, be assigned a very extraordinary and exalted degree of beauty. In these edifices, though to all appear-

¹ Alison on Taste, Vol. II. p. 157.

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ance designed on principles essentially different from those employed by the Greeks, the elements of beauty are identically the same—but an analysis to prove such an hypothesis is not within the range of the present inquiry. Our cathedrals, it cannot be denied, are very much aided in their effect on the mind, by the recollections which carry us back to those ages when religion was all splendour and society all chivalry. In short, ancient architecture of whatsoever class, country or period cannot be separated, in a just estimation of its merits, from the history of the nation in which it flourished; it is the influence and character of the age and nation to which it belongs, by which it is sanctioned and modified.

MAGNITUDE AND STRENGTH.—We are assured from experience, that, beyond certain limits of size and strength, the productions of architecture cease to be beautiful; in fact, beyond a given extent any mass of matter which fatigues the eye in embracing its extraordinary dimensions, so that the organ must undergo great exertion in order to understand and appreciate the parts, is by no means an agreeable object. In architecture, extraordinary magnitude may be considered a vicious excess: for instance—a gallery of such length that the eye cannot with distinctness penetrate to the end—a column too lofty—a building whose site is such, that the visual angle can never include its extent—a building too lofty under the same circumstances.—In short, all excessive dimensions.—These are to the eye as distressing as a light which is too strong and powerful'.—On the contrary, there is a repugnance to those objects in architecture which are

¹ See *Encyc. Method. Art. Beau.*

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[More information](#)

BEAUTY IN ARCHITECTURE.

7

extremely diminutive. In these the eye is limited and constrained within such narrow bounds, that it experiences almost the same sensations as are imparted by the flame of a dim feeble inefficient light.

Writers on the principles of taste, and especially Mr. Alison, have made magnitude a quality necessary to the existence of the sublime. That it is so in the works of nature when associated with ideas of power and danger and terror, is undeniable : but it will scarcely be admitted that these ideas can be said to find a place in the productions of architecture.—On which account magnitude may in them perhaps be more properly classed among the essentials of beauty.

It would be difficult to conceive that any work in the art under our examination could be considered beautiful, if unaccompanied by a requisite strength or stability, or at least such an appearance of either as would carry a conviction to the mind that it possessed sufficient for its existence and duration.—Though magnitude, speaking widely, is intimately associated with the idea of proportionable power or strength ; yet stability is well known to be independent of magnitude. The celebrated Campanile at Pisa, cannot from its predicament, be denominated a beautiful object. The first idea which occurs to the mind in contemplating it, is its apparently dangerous state. However pleasing its abstract form, however elegant the arrangement and proportions of its detail, still it can never excite those agreeable sensations which would be necessarily called into action, if its perpendicularity were restored.—Our amazement and terror would then indeed cease, and we might have some satisfaction in making an

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analysis of those details which, except as matter of history or speculative curiosity, is not now considered worth the labour¹.

To apply the foregoing observations at length to the remaining examples of Grecian architecture cannot be necessary.—To the magnitude, strength and consequent stability of these structures we may however add one important feature.—It is that the sites of them are almost invariably well chosen, and calculated to display their beauties to the greatest advantage.

Strength and stability in architecture are almost synonyms with fitness or adequacy, at least in appearance, of the several parts of the structure to the performance of their different offices. Thus the strength and stability of an order depend on the fitness of the column to support the entablature, and on the other hand, on the entablature not containing a greater quantity of matter than the column is either really or apparently able to sustain². To the Greeks we are indebted for those canons of proportion in the orders, which age has approved, adopted and almost sanctified.—In the Ionic order of this people, advantage

¹ “ All things that are, have some operation not violent or casual. Neither doth any thing ever begin to exercise the same, without some fore-conceived end for which it worketh. And the end which it worketh for is not obtained, unlesse the worke be also fit to obtain it by. For unto every end every operation will not serve. That which doth assigne unto each thing the kind, that which doth moderate the force and power, that which doth appoint the forme and measure of working, the same we terme a law. So that no certaine end could be obtained, unless the actions whereby it is attained were regular, that is to say, made suteable, fit, and correspondent to their end, by some canon rule or law.” Hooker’s *Eccles. Politie*, B. 1.

² See note on Arcades, Chambers’s *Civil Architecture*, *infra*.

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[More information](#)

BEAUTY IN ARCHITECTURE.

9

was taken of the happy medium between their early and clumsy Doric, and the lighter Roman examples which closed the scene of genuine art.

ORDER AND HARMONY.—We will now proceed to the consideration of Order and Harmony as Elements of Beauty in Architecture. By the word order is meant, a disposing of the several parts of a building in their appropriate places, as related to each other and to the whole. Whilst harmony is that which it would from its Greek derivation almost strictly import^t, namely a joining together of the parts in a consistent and uniform manner, so that all matter which is foreign or unsuitable to the composition be rejected.

There are no edifices in any style of architecture, in which harmony is more pre-eminent than in the Grecian temple. Perhaps, for harmony, the Gothic Style in those of its structures, which are entirely of one period, yields only to the Grecian ;—the reason is evident.—The origin progress and perfection of both styles were the result of the habits and characters, and wants of the people that produced them.

Harmony may however be carried to such an extent as to generate a monotonous effect, as it most evidently does in the architecture of the Egyptians, wherein, as well from an excess of simplicity, as from the absence of variety, it cloy without satisfying. It may be compared to a musical composition, strictly conformable to the laws of counterpoint wherein the author so constantly dwells on the same key without making use of his privilege of modulating

^t Ὡς μάλιστα αὐτῶν ἕκαστον ἀρμονίαν τοῖς μεγάλοις λίθοις εἶναι, (Pausanias, Argol. c. 25,) in speaking of the walls of Tiryns.

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into others, that he fails to fix the hearer's attention for more than a few seconds.—Harmony can never exist in a building whose subdivisions are contrived without such an attention to uniformity of character as to impress on the mind an idea of unity, and if one may be permitted to use the term, an expression of the structure's destination.—It is moreover particularly to be attended to, in regulating and modifying the decorations that are employed—for instance, delicacy, lightness and excess of ornament would ill suit a building whose character and destination were of a nature discordant with those qualities.

RICHNESS AND SIMPLICITY—are qualities in the discreet use of which, the Greeks carried the art to the highest degree of perfection, at least in the works of the best ages. One of the most exquisite examples of appropriate richness that can be cited, is the beautiful monument of Lysicrates, whilst for the reverse of that quality none can be better cited than the Parthenon.—Each is dressed with an appropriate quantity of ornament; the first captivates, the last is imposing and majestic.

It is well worthy of remark, that those mouldings of the corona, which in the Ionic order, are frequently enriched by a system of foliage carved in relief, were in the Parthenon painted in colours—so that a considerable degree of richness was thus obtained without distracting or leading away the eye from more important parts, or affecting the contours of the mouldings when viewed in an oblique direction.

As richness and simplicity belong exclusively to the third division of building, viz. decoration: it follows, that ornaments are to be chosen or rejected according to the associations which exist between their adoption and the