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REASON AS A BASIS OF ART.

It would be interesting to trace, if we could, the reasons why we are surrounded by so much ugliness—why the common articles of everyday use are intrinsically ugly. The shallow saucer, the clumsy knife blade, the pale, niggling stamp on our letters, the brutal, ill-proportioned shape and type of our daily paper, the lamp-posts and countless objects met at every turn. Why must we open our cash-box with a hideous key and find each coin devoid of dignity or grace?

We must admit that man is by nature a creative being; a builder of character if not of houses. Not only are we daily building up our own characters, but consciously or unconsciously laying the foundations of those which are yet unborn. We little realize how far-reaching are the remarks we make and how tremendous are the issues for good or
evil. Indeed, the cultivation of the character, and the purification and encouragement of the affections, in ourselves and others, must always be the highest aim and the most universal duty of man.

Although so obvious, how little this idea enters into the daily life of the house-builder, the man who is building a nest for his body, or into that of the assistants he employs. They are occupied with a thousand and one ideas which crowd into their minds and drive out the one most worthy of consideration—"Will our work tend to purify character and strengthen the affections?"

Reason, conscience, and love are the three faculties that should operate in all we say and do; and by love we mean that emotion of reverence, respect, and admiration for all that we regard as noblest and best. No sane action can be performed without these functions, any one of which without the other two is mischievous. What we ought to aim at is the right relation and healthy action of all three. On the purity and healthy vitality of these faculties will depend the quality of our work. That is to say; a sickly and feeble reason will cause unstable and erratic action, senseless imitation, and blind following of the blind. A weak conscience causes unfaithful service and deception, while a low, perverted love makes for selfishness, egotism, and corruption.

If we would erect a building, the question of supreme importance must be, not where and how shall we build it, but why?

Motive is the key-note to all subsequent action and the fruit of character. No matter whom we employ to carry out our desires, the true motive of our desire will dominate, and turn the scales for good or evil.

Thought is but the operation of the three faculties of reason, conscience, and love. A little reflection will convince us that all art is but the expression of thought and feeling, and he who builds must give expression to thought and feeling; he cannot help expressing himself, whether he desires it or not.

Many will resent this assertion from a natural feeling of repugnance for all forms of conceit, but let them remember that the best cure for offensive egotism and self-assertion is to cultivate a deep reverence and love for something higher and better than ourselves, to fix the mind on human qualities rather than persons. This is to have an ideal, the absence of which leads to sordid materialism and moral obliquity. While the attention is riveted on the ideals of human character, the mind is more likely to be loyal to the fundamental principles, such as fitness,
honesty, frankness, and a just classification of the principles of action.

"Above all, to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man."

This surely means that our expression, whether by word or action, must be a true reflection of our thought and feeling. And so it remains for us to select the words and symbols that most accurately convey the thoughts and feelings we truly have. This is Art—pure Art, and there is no other.

For instance, that which determines the true value of a landscape picture is not so much the technical skill of the painter as the quality and balance of his mind and heart—in other words, his loving reverence for what is noblest and best. According to his reverence for the Author of Nature, so will be his love of natural beauty. A merely sensuous enjoyment of form and colour is but a superficial emotion, and is not the result of the full use of the three faculties of reason, conscience, and love.

Moreover, a sensuous enjoyment, not having its basis in reason, must be subject to the influences of association and fashion, changing often, not necessarily for the better.

The attitude of our mind as house-builders should be exactly the same as that of the landscape painter, who seeks to kindle men's love for the Divine Wisdom and Goodness in nature, to build up character by fostering a love of fitness and order, harmony, rhythm, grandeur, and the countless other qualities that help to refine the soul of man. The builder, though using other materials, has the same mission to fulfil, and having his mind firmly set on this motive, finds that all other questions are illumined by it, and that many difficulties disappear.

If you would build yourself a house in Regent Street, and honestly adhere to your own natural conditions, requirements, and characteristics, you will be called an individualist, egotist, self-asserting advertiser, and all the bad names in the language. Pretend that you are a Greek, with Grecian taste, in a Grecian climate, and faithfully follow like an ape the expression your splendid education has given you to copy, and you will be patted on the back and much honoured. No doubt what you build will be a true expression of your taste, that is, what you like, which many will regard as a complete and final justification of your action. But the question remains, is such a "liking" founded on reason, conscience, and love? Is it an honest expression? Have you arrived at the state of loving admiration through the
feeling of reverence for the qualities your building symbolizes? Is the expression conveyed the outcome of purely sensuous feeling, or are your affections fairly won by reason and sanctioned by conscience? If the expression is of noble affections, and genuine, the manifestation is bound to be interesting and pleasing, not because it is yours or mine, but because we all like to have our highest emotions aroused and our affections stimulated.

Let us proceed to select our site so far as choice is open to us, endeavouring to give expression to our thought and feeling, and watchfully weighing all the evidence for and against fitness. Because fitness is a law of nature, we can but do our best to attain to it, and the thought of it cultivates our reason.

The conception of the ideal or the thought of human nature soaring above the material, or that state of mind in which the spiritual and intellectual is so completely in control as to subdue and well-nigh crush the physical, seems quite unaccountable to the modern artistic mind. As one proof of this we find modern designers make their angels of a definite sex, whereas the spiritually-minded ancients always made them sexless to emphasize their spiritual significance. (As in our highest moments we are free from the physical passions of the flesh.) It is not necessary to ignore or despise pure physical nature in order justly to appreciate the higher. All we need is to regulate our sense of proportion, so that we may wisely classify the functions of the mind and allow each to operate in its special sphere, so as to aid rather than hinder the other faculties. This balance of the mind and heart is essential to determine fitness, and give clearness, directness, and force to our expression.

The choice of site and its relation to our needs is not a question that can be settled by any general rules: each individual case must be considered on its merits.

Having then, we will suppose, found the land, the character of the site will suggest many limitations and conditions as to aspect and prospect. The contour of the ground obviously controls the arrangement, and the colour, shape, and texture of hills and trees suggest the colour, form, and texture of our building. That is, provided we have no preconceived notions of classical façades, or any deep-rooted preference for a particular style of architecture.

If you really respect nature, you will desire to harmonize your building with her, and not destroy more of her natural beauty than you can help. If you love the works of the
Creator, you will not wantonly destroy them to put up your own in their place. If you love your fellow-creatures, you will not hide the landscape from them by an ugly pile towering up into the sky. You will naturally shrink from aggression and try to express your reverence by leaving nature, as far as possible, to dominate. Your native modesty and unselfishness is bound to check the hand of destruction and the tendency to self-assertion. As much harmony of form, colour, and texture as you can, you will rejoicingly secure out of respect and reverence for that natural beauty which you recognize as superior to you, as Divine rather than human. It is quite consistent with a true reverence for nature to co-operate with her, and with a reverent hand prune and guide her into matrimony with your building, so bridging over the chasm of difference between the purely natural and the human creation. You may straighten and level and express breadth, dignity, simplicity, order, and repose, and, with an eye to practical fitness, so blend the building with its surroundings as to display a strong but loving control, and cause a harmonious whole to arise that shall not invite comparison. Nature and Art will thus join hands and unite in stimulating human affection.

If you love joyous brightness, you will avoid any gloomy or muddy colour; you will delight in imitating the brightness and purity of natural colours. If you love cleanliness, neatness, and methodical order, all these qualities will be expressed in your work.

It is not our contention that architectural forms and groupings of forms can be translated into prose or blank verse. But the same thoughts and feelings which inspire the author and poet may equally inspire and guide the builder, and become manifest to others through his buildings. Indeed, they must guide him whether he wish it or not. This principle applies, not only to the Architect, but to those for whom he builds. Go where you will, you may judge the affections of a people by their art.

Does it disturb our enjoyment of nature to inquire into the cause of its beauty? Not at all, but rather does it enhance our pleasure and increase our reverence for the infinite wisdom and goodness of its Author. So also should our pleasure in man's work be increased by tracing in it the development of his design.

Some would have us silence our reason, and drink in the sensuous beauty as we often do our food, for the mere pleasure of being pleased; so feeding, not as a means to an
end, but as an end in itself. Rather should we approach the works of men in all time, intelligently seeking the higher motives of their action, in order that we may purify and strengthen our own faculties; that we also may create beauty intelligently, with a holy purpose; and not imitate as apes the semblance of fine feeling, while remaining gross and stagnant.

Take the early Greek and Roman architectural enrichments: we find that they arose from definite thoughts and feelings, and originally possessed a symbolic significance long since forgotten. In our days we repeat the forms, and neither know nor care for their original meaning.

We are far too apt to feel satisfied with the symbol, and bask in the warm sunshine of sensation, forgetting for what the symbol stands, and not troubling our heads about the spiritual force that permeates it and gave it birth.

It is mere thoughtless imitation, requiring little or no mental effort, that causes men to erect the myriad houses we see, which, if they do not impress us with an aching void, inspire our anger and resentment.

We see men plan the roads to their houses with no more apparent design than there is in the wobbling track of a drunkard. Yet if you challenge them you find that they love simplicity, sobriety, and directness, and gladly recognize the reason for laying out their path in harmony with natural contour. They have had an impression of beauty in some winding walk, winding by necessity and beautiful because most fit. But they imitate without understanding, and hence arises the suggestion of ignorant elaboration, as ignorant as it is aimless.

We are taught to observe and copy. Convention is the most sacred law according to the twentieth century morality. How ill-mannered it is not to think, behave, and act as others do! It is the same in art, and how can the artistic expression flourish? Modern culture consists in knowing, not in being. Yet “being” is the real cause of our actions. As we are at heart, so must we build.

The complexities of an ever-developing civilization must be considered. We cannot get away from our environment. But we can by a little thought avoid dishonest confusion, and the very effort to express ourselves truly will do much to simplify life. We need not crowd our houses with museum articles, or strive after the effect of riches which we do not possess.

Michael Angelo said, “The ideal of beauty is simplicity and repose.”
Lofty rooms that need elaborate warming, furnishing, and cleaning, may well be left by the moderately poor to the immoderately rich. We find often enough the man with little or no capital seeking the house that would alone be fit for the rich. The drawing-room, the pantry, and the servants’ hall are now required of the architect by those who really cannot afford to possess more than a cottage—a real cottage—not the villa that is falsely so called. His house must have an imposing front, must show itself to the public as much above the station of the occupier as the dishonest architect can make it. He can manage much by cheating the foundations and cutting fine the roof timbers, and all construction that is hidden from the public gaze.

Will he not save a little by using cheap ugliness in the servants’ quarters? It is not seen, except by people who are supposed to be incapable of appreciating anything better. So say ninety-nine out of every hundred, forgetting the subtle refining influence of beauty. Perhaps we care very little about refining our servants, the process is too slow and the return not so tangible as Consols. Nevertheless, all classes are affected for good by beauty, and for evil by ugliness, and the artist must count it a sin to be deliberately a party to the perpetration of any of the latter. He must, if he is honest, wage ceaseless war against all ugliness. He cannot without loss of self-respect do that which he knows to be not beautiful.

Still we go on making ugliness and finding a thousand and one excuses. “The man who pays will have it so,” is the favourite excuse which only proves that the payment is more desired than the principle, and men believe that it is kinder to their families to make money by things hideous than run the risk of starving for a principle which after all may be a false one. But even if it be false—if the holder believes it to be true—it is by being prepared to starve for it that Art will flourish. Thomas Moore wrote:—“More mean things have been done in this world under the shelter of wife and children than under any pretext that worldly-mindedness can resort to.”

No amount of technical skill or education will ever take the place of the spiritual force that permeates all true art. When once religious fervour (no matter to what creed belonging) dies out, the ideal will quickly wither and give place to mundane motives. Art will then be impossible.

The higher functions of character are the only true source of art. No amount of
scholarly repetition and imitation will fulfil its purpose, which must spring from living thoughts and feelings. An author may use words, or even sentences taken from great writers, but the fact does not establish his claim to be regarded as a great writer. Why, then, should the architect's reproduction of ancient monuments be regarded as architecture? Moreover, as H. T. Buckle has written in his History of Civilization, "A people who regard the past with too wistful an eye will never bestir themselves to help onward progress; they will hardly believe that progress is possible. To them antiquity is synonymous with wisdom, and every improvement is a dangerous innovation."

Beneath the apparent crust of sordid materialism there is the heart of man, which is ever ready to respond to the expressions of the higher life if only they be wisely and modestly suggested to him. And it is the architect's duty to touch the cords of the higher affections and gently win the heart of the man for whom he builds, and give expression to those higher qualities which are never wholly absent. Many are so absorbed in worldly pursuits that the duty of forming character scarcely ever occurs to them, and they do not recognize the means for encouraging the better side of our natures.

If, for instance, railway companies were to add to their list of duties the duty of encouraging cheerfulness, we should in time see brighter and livelier colours on our stations and carriages, and the gloom of chocolate and drab would for ever be banished.* It is not for the so-called artist alone to redeem the world from ugliness. Everyone has his share of responsibility and power, and by reasoning love can help to establish beauty and destroy the reverse.

There are, of course, innumerable practical difficulties in the way of the house-builder. He has often to furnish it with things he cannot always choose, or impress with feeling, and it must take time to correct this trouble. Schools must be reformed, and designers trained to think and feel rightly, and encouraged not to copy blindly.

Of course, if the man's main object is to make money, he cannot entertain the idea of making any worldly sacrifice in order to improve his own character. No art can then be expected from such an one. He would probably not admit that any spiritual

* A few of the big railways have recognized this duty by encouraging station gardening, with a result that has given gladness to thousands.
force can be imparted to a building, and through it to the beholder.

What attempt is ever made in our Art schools to provide ethical teaching, such as we find in Ruskin's writings? The very thought that ethics have anything to do with art is scouted by a vast majority. A scholarly knowledge of the human organism, and of the proportions of ancient buildings, is still regarded as the essential foundation of an architect's training. Anything like independent individual thought is looked upon as a great danger. Reverence for the love that inspired the ancient builders is not deemed any qualification.

We have the profoundest sympathy with those who shrink from the idea of wearing the heart upon the sleeve. Any aggressive show of personality, any semblance of self-assertion or self-confidence, is distasteful; but at the same time it must be remembered that it is better to give expression to honest personal feeling than pretend to feelings which we have not got. It is painful enough to feel peculiar, and attract attention, but far worse to live a false life—to make false pretence, and either deliberately or carelessly to convey a false impression. However much we may wish it, we cannot hide our own identity. Even in the most conventional

matter of dress, the personal character of each individual is evident to the careful observer.

It is easy to trace in modern costume thoughtlessness, ostentation, pride, self-indulgence, deception, and a want of reverence and of manly independence. When some good people have felt repelled by these qualities in our dress, they have sought to imitate the expressions of the Greeks and Romans, and wonder why the ancient symbols which were in their time true expressions, are now in the grime of our London streets merely grotesque. Let these same people remember their own characters and their own conditions and materials, and the result will be just as full of beauty as are their characters.

If it is true that individuality must express itself in outward form, how much then must it concern us that such expression shall be honest, and by carefully looking for and studying the expression of spiritual qualities in the material world, we shall acquire the art of expressing the same in our work.

There are many who do not regard taste as any evidence of character, and are satisfied if the taste they manifest is in harmony with that of the recognized authorities on such matters; and will order such manifestations
to be made, often against their secret inclination. The result is a miserable incongruity which is clearly evident to the thoughtful observer.

Often the ugliness in our houses is due to ugliness in our character far more than to poverty or ignorance. For we find as much ugliness in the houses of the rich as we do in the houses of the poor.

The desire for gaudy richness and effect has produced the shams we find in the shops. The well-made, solid, plain articles, such as the poor man, if he did not try to hide his poverty, would wish to have, are scarcely ever to be found. There is a universal desire (which is the outcome of insincerity) to make things look better than they are.

The plain, solid oak furniture of bygone times is now replaced by stained and highly polished and decorated rubbish created by an endeavour to make something look better than it is. So-called ornament is lavishly used to hide bad workmanship and bad material.

A general revolt against shams would surely check the supply. But even those who have an idea that they ought to like the plain article, show they are not wholly freed from the snare of sham by having it stained with a false age. It must look old to please them, even though it were made yesterday.

How we might progress if only it were recognized that the sham effect of anything was a moral and spiritual poison in our homes, and no true expression of our love of honesty! But the great majority do not regard their possessions as having anything to do with their own personal characters, and will resent such a suggestion. They do not regard outward conformity as having anything to do with the secret mainsprings of character. Hence we have clever designers juggling with forms, colours, and textures; playing upon the emotions; recalling all manner of past sensations; and ignoring the reason and conscience and bewildering the mind of the simple and the sincere.

Does the designer with his endless pattern on curtains, carpets, cushions, and walls, kindle our affections for any human or natural quality?

Is not the effect produced the very parody of richness? Is there not a complete absence of simplicity, breadth, repose, and dignity? It is not enough justification to plead that pattern hides the effect of wear and tear, because that practical quality can be otherwise attained. Colour and texture
can be so ordered as to produce the wearing quality desired without the loss of breadth or crowding of pattern. Real richness can only be attained by much devoted thought and feeling and loving care. Every material and form must be used so that each harmoniously lends lustre to, and enhances, the other, and is not at war with it. Elaboration is not richness, though often mistaken for it. Elaboration is a vice never found in nature.

When nature is angry and disturbed, we see angularity of forms, complexity of colour, and movement of many kinds. She presents these moods comparatively seldom, to intensify by contrast our enjoyment of peaceful repose. Why then should we make our homes like perpetual storms, crowded with discordant forms, colours, and textures?

Consider the average fireplace in the average home, and count the number of different materials and colours of which it is composed. Is it conducive to restfulness and quiet reflection? Or is this whirlwind of countless sensations needed to drown our sober thought? Are bustle and discord necessary to our home life? Often it is felt that the additional confusion produced by wall papers helps to hide the ugliness and elaboration of our furniture and ornaments.

All this excess of elaboration is encouraged in the interest of trade, and it is ugly because it is the outcome of low motive. And we would ask, can it be in the interests of mankind generally if it does not tend to improve man’s thoughts and affections?

We must first understand simplicity before we can truly appreciate or produce real richness.

Edmund Burke on “The Sublime and the Beautiful” will be found very helpful in pointing out the grammar of material expression, and should be studied especially by architects. But never must we lose sight of the pre-eminence of subject over method of expression.

Given the necessary depth of feeling and the clearness of reason, and the quickness of conscience, the means of expression will follow. We must study the past to intensify our love of thoughts and feelings which are beautiful and noble, not to imitate them after the manner of apes.

Form can be copied, but feeling never. The imitation of forms will not avail by themselves. We need only to look at our modern public buildings to be convinced of this fact. What do they remind us of but money, worldly power, and fraud—all manner of earthly ideas? See them, like lifeless corpses,
exhumed from foreign soils, glaring at us, glass-eyed, like so many mummies.

Do we feel a sense of awe and reverence and patriotic love when we pass our Government offices?

Do we feel that the myriad dust-traps on their grimy faces are features to call forth our admiration? Or are they not the skin disease of false art—the symbols of rate-payers' pockets emptied by designing architects and commissioners?

It is love that we need to kindle, love which every creature possesses, whether educated or not, no matter in what circumstance of life. And our architecture is one of the many channels through which this noblest of human qualities can be called forth and encouraged.

It needs education to express, but none to understand and feel. Our old familiar expression "how lovely!" reminds us that all that has herein been urged is no new idea, but is as old as the hills. Only it has been forgotten by many, and therefore must be repeated.

It is forgotten by our schools, which cram the heads of students with what they please to call the grammar of ornament, and all the while are starving the heart and reason and ignoring the consciences of men. We are drilled and pounded into conventional moulds and encouraged to repeat like apes, forms and combinations of forms that were once the deliberate expressions of noble minds, and the visible outcome of noble thoughts and affections. But without the old thoughts and feelings as a mainspring the mere repetition of the forms is like the babbling chatter of parrots.

Descartes has said, "When men are too curious to know the practices of past ages, they generally remain very ignorant of their own."

Unfortunately the ugly and wicked are far more easy to copy and imitate than the good and the true. Hence the predominance of exaggerated eccentricity, which is often mistitled originality.

We are apt to over-estimate the value and importance of so-called originality, without distinguishing between the healthy form of it and that which is mere eccentricity. If an artist seeks to attract notice by novelty, or exaggerated form, colour, or arrangement, his aim being low, the result must be harmful. But if he creates novel effects from the freshness and sincerity of his thought, and is more concerned about his thought and feeling than the applause that may follow, his efforts are likely to be fruitful of good.
Much that is now regarded as original is merely the revival of old methods and materials, and strikes only the minds of the ignorant or forgetful. We must look beneath the surface of what passes as originality, to see if the spiritual force behind it is of a healthy, noble nature, or merely a sordid worldliness or commercialism.

True originality is the outcome of sincerity. If the artist’s motive is to purify character and stimulate the higher affection, he is engaged on a mission of common interest to humanity, and one that must strengthen the tie between himself and the layman.

No one in his senses can sneer at the artist’s calling if the latter takes this wide view of his duty. “We may still differ in the means to the end, but may sweep away a mass of ill-feeling, if we acknowledge this motive, and keep it well in view.”

Of course there must remain differences of opinion as to the relative value of loveworthy qualities and the relative clearness of the symbols we use. But such variation in opinion will only stimulate thought and energy in the exercise of reason, conscience, and love—without which qualities “all is vanity and vexation of spirit.”

Plato has written, “Good language and good harmony, and grace, and good rhythm all depend upon a good nature, by which I do not mean that silliness which by courtesy we call good nature, but a mind that is really well and nobly constituted in its moral character, and such qualities, I presume, enter largely into painting, and all similar workmanship, into weaving and embroidery, into architecture as well as the whole manufacture of utensils in general, nay, into the constitution of living bodies, and of all plants, for in all these things gracefulness or ungracefulness finds place. And the absence of grace, and rhythm, and harmony is closely allied to an evil style, and an evil character: whereas their presence is allied to, and expressive of, the opposite character, which is brave and sober-minded.”

“Ought we not to seek out artists who by the power of genius can trace out the nature of the fair and the graceful, that our young men, dwelling as it were in a healthful region, may drink in good from every quarter, whence any emanation from noble works may strike upon their eye or their ear, like a gale wafting health from salubrious lands, and win them imperceptibly from their earliest childhood into resemblance, love, and harmony with the true beauty of reason?”

Henry Thomas Buckle has clearly shown
that the progress of every science is affected more by the method according to which it is cultivated, than by the actual ability of the cultivators themselves. So it is hoped by this article to suggest the method by which alone we believe vital and progressive art can be stimulated and engendered in the minds of the thoughtful.