TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Record Reports

Perspectives .................................................. 9
Buildings in the News ........................................ 10
Meetings and Miscellaneous ................................. 15
Venetian Villas Exhibit Spotlights Palladian Era ........ 24
Views of Current Periodicals: The New Arnhem .......... 26
A Washington Report. PBS Readsie Revision of Building Standards. By Ernest Mickel .... 30
News from Canada. By John Caulfield Smith ............ 32
Washington Topics ............................................ 46
Construction Cost Index ....................................... 52
Required Reading ............................................. 56
Calendar and Office Notes .................................... 264
Current Trends in Construction ............................... 326

Regionalism in Architecture

Architecture, historically always regional in character, now faces some questions as technology clashes with deep-rooted desires and habits of people throughout the world. What is a proper approach to regionalism today?

The Meaning of Regionalism in Architecture; and an article by Pietro Belluschi ........................................ 131

Two Contrasting Schools

Two schools, one in the North one in the South, with similar problems but with different regional and climatic influences.

McDonogh School No. 36, New Orleans, La.; Sol Rosenthal, Architect; Charles R. Colbert, Associate Architect .......... 140
Flagg Street Elementary School, Worcester, Mass.; The Architects Collaborative and Albert J. Roy, Associated Architects ........... 145

Palladio Lives Again

Modern design resists historical influences. Or does it? Did or did not Palladio do prototypes for some of our most exciting contemporary houses?

Space — Time Palladian. Article and illustrations by John MacL. Johansen .................................................. 150

House in Fairfield County, Conn.; John MacL. Johansen, Architect ............................................................. 152

Continued on next page
Continued from page 5

Bold Geometry and Glass for Auto Sales
Thomson Brothers Cadillac Agency, Cincinnati, Ohio; A. M. Kinney, Associates, Architects and Engineers

Building Types Study Number 229 — Religious Buildings
Worship and the arts is the theme of this study, which examines fundamental attitudes toward art in six principal religious traditions and illustrates each tradition with a present-day example.

Worship and the Arts. An article by Otto Spooch
162

Temple Beth El, Providence, R. I.; Percival Goodman, Architect
168

Worship and the Arts in the Jewish Tradition. An article by Percival Goodman, F. A. I. A.
170

St. Peter’s Church, Pittsburgh, Pa.; Cilli-Flynn, Architects and Engineers
172

Worship and the Arts in the Catholic Tradition. An article by Maurice Lavoisoux
174

St. Sava’s Church, McKeesport, Pa.; John Pekruhn, Architect
176

Worship and the Arts in the Orthodox Tradition. An article by Milan G. Poppich, Rector, St. Sava’s Church
178

St. George’s Episcopal Church, Durham, N. H.; John A. Carter, Architect
180

Worship and the Arts in the Episcopal Tradition. An article by Edward N. West, D. Th., Litt. D. Canon, Cathedral of St. John the Divine
182

Congregational Church, Spencer, Iowa; Harold Spitznagel & Associates, Architects
184

Worship and the Arts in the Reformed Tradition. An article by Rev. Marvin P. Halverson
186

Central Lutheran Church, Eugene, Ore.; Pietro Belluschi and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Architects
188

Worship and the Arts in the Lutheran Tradition. An article by Dr. Joseph Sitler, Professor, Chicago Lutheran Seminary
190

Architectural Engineering

Church Design for Music. By Albert R. Rienstra
193

Gymnasium Structures
195

Roundup
199

Product Reports
201

Office Literature
202

Time-Saver Standards — Church Design for Music, by Albert R. Rienstra;
Fluorescent Lighting for Large Areas, I, II. By K. Steve Rasiej
205

Index to Advertising
328

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THE MEANING OF REGIONALISM IN ARCHITECTURE

By Pietro Belluschi

Dean, School of Architecture and Planning
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

"... it is no longer easy to achieve beauty by the same way in which old societies did... now we have a larger and more difficult order to achieve, and our spirit will shine through only if we are true to ourselves and never forget that it is man that we must serve"
In America we often think and speak of "regionalism" as a naive and rather soft-headed variation of our architectural mainstream. Modern architects believe that the regionalists indulge in their practice at their own risk since it runs counter to the contemporary production-line philosophy of architecture. I have often wondered myself about "regionalism," what its real meaning might be and whether it could still be practiced in the matter-of-fact world of the machine.

I have thought of it with particularly deep feelings during my frequent trips in foreign lands where examples of regional architecture are more obvious against the very drab and standardized background of the straight, no-nonsense type of architecture which is being built with appalling sameness from Bagdad to Rovaniemi. No one who has traveled abroad can fail to speculate on the causes which had given such unity and beauty and a sense of fitness to almost all the old cities, and on the reasons why modern man seemed to have lost this ability to impart character and meaning to his environment.

But first, what do we mean by "regional architecture?" I find it difficult to give a short answer to this question, because as one thinks beyond the obvious relationship of buildings to a certain region, the meaning of the term seems to spread and touch on all that man is and believes in, as a creature of his own environment. Architecture, as a reflection of man's longing for order and for adjustment to his natural surroundings, has always been (or at least until not long ago) regional in its essence and character. In the past it has been mostly a communal art, not produced by a few intellectuals or specialists, but by the spontaneous and continuing activity of a whole people with a common heritage, acting under a community of experience.

The awareness of man's physical world evolved through uncounted millennia of close contact with nature. At first, as his legs set the range and speed of his mobility, the meadows, the streams and the trees gained emotional meaning on a scale which was his own to comprehend; as mobility increased, nature lost some of its intimate reality. Locomotion by machine brought in a restless age; man can now cover the earth at great speeds, but his comprehension has lost in depth what it has gained in breadth. He can now see enormous landscapes, whole ranges of mountains and rivers by day, and beautiful patterns of city lights by night; but none of these sights can give him the direct response which his heart so fondly desires when he is at rest.

One may well speculate on the relationship between the unfolding of this era of human civilization, and the shortcomings which many people feel in our architectural forms and certainly in our squalid environment. The old forms which constitute what we call regionalism express the more serene times of the past. It is certain that in our tumultuous times it cannot be revived. It would be impossible for us to retreat or escape from a world in evolution, but somehow we must believe that a society of men may gain in wisdom by seeking again the things man can understand and love, and conversely by learning to love all that lives near him. These were my Utopian thoughts as I was revisiting recently the exquisite little villages of the Aegean and Tyrrhenian Sea Islands, of Brittany and the Tyrol, and remembered how my generation was once somewhat ashamed to admit the delight in their simple spontaneous architecture lest it be tagged as romantic.

This point of evaluating the architectural characteristics of a region became more than an academic question when the State Department through its Foreign Buildings Operations asked Henry Shepley and me to go to India, Pakistan, and Iraq to discover the elements of a style which would be appro-
appropriate for the embassies soon to be built in those regions. It so happened that the design which Ed Stone had conceived for the New Delhi Embassy had been looked upon with disfavor by the Department because it did not look sufficiently "Indian." This was a very interesting point because it touched the very essence of our architectural dilemma. Could an "Indian" architecture be defined; and if it could, should America build its Embassy in such a "style"; and if it did so for India, should it also do it for all other countries where new buildings were to be erected; and how would one go about measuring the regional content of architecture?

These were challenging questions, and it was not only appropriate to think about them in regard to the foreign buildings program but it seemed to me to touch upon a very sensitive segment of the architectural thinking of our generation — not that such a thinking can be easily described. In fact, if one should have the patience and fortitude to read all that has been written by critics, kibitzers, social moralists, and by the professional geniuses with a gift for arrogance, one would be thoroughly confused. We have functionalism versus estheticism, eclecticism versus purism, technology versus humanism, and organic architecture versus package architecture.

If one can resist the temptation of giving simple answers to a very complicated business, or of placing things into neat pigeonholes, he will find it wiser to accept the complications of modern life and will try to analyze the motives which impel civilized man's actions in order to discover what architecture means to him now. It is not easy to abstract ourselves from our time, but few will disagree with the general statement previously made that man's present environment is a far cry from that of older societies when men seemed to know how to build in serene response to the land and its people. Was there a conscious and willful sense of the beautiful in the builders of these old villages and towns, or was it rather the rhythm of their happy lives which was simply and inevitably expressed in their construction?

Our world now has undergone enormous changes; the traditions slowly developed through the centuries, the old allegiances and restraints have largely disappeared; the community living which was the pattern of old societies no longer exists, at least in the same form. Today it seems almost impossible for us to act with the unity and dedication of older times. There are too many forces in our social fabric, too many demands, too many disrupting influences. We have suddenly become conscious that this is one world, and the problems of other lands and other people have become our problems; but for all that we have succeeded rather in losing touch with our own people, our own small, close-at-hand world whence our deepest emotions spring. We know so much but feel so little. Our emotions are second hand; they come through books, movies, radios, television, in world-wide uniformity. We have gotten more and more away from nature and from the discipline which nature requires. A rain or snow storm or a strike leave us stranded and helpless. We no longer stop to listen or to hear or to see, but travel at 50 or 200 miles per hour through an impersonal landscape in unhappy restlessness. Our knowing so much and seeing so many unfelt images has drowned our sense of the appropriate. Our elegant magazines will sell pretty pictures to entice people in Maine or Florida or Oregon or Pakistan. Under those conditions it is difficult to achieve convincing and heartfelt unity.

Some people think that the architect should be less concerned with being original and more intent on satisfying more basic human values. Yet besides being an artist capable of choosing between the superficial and the real and of feeling himself part of his society, he must also be a good technician; and I believe that architectural forms which are not born of the peculiar demands of
5 Photograph of Posilaneese fisherman by Paul Pietzsch, Black Star. 6. Urbino, Italy. 7. Positano, Italy. 8. Scilla, Italy. Last three photographs by Samuel Chamberlain.
the job to be performed, but which come out of preconceived esthetic theories alone, will be in constant danger of becoming artificial, tricky, and fashionable, and their transitory quality will be even more evident after they have gone out of fashion. This means that not only the emotions but also mind and logic must be satisfied before lasting values may emerge. That is also why there is never real Beauty in the lie, in the fake, or in the blind copying — and why forms will shine when they reflect a sense of reality, and reality cannot easily be contrived.

Thus it would be impossible to ignore all the techniques which science has placed at our disposal; not only would it be impossible but it would be silly, so that again the architect must use his judgment and common sense if confronted with problems which only advanced techniques can solve. It would be foolish for him, for instance, to tackle the design of a skyscraper as he would the design of a house. He can only ask himself if other means can be found rather than skyscrapers to house offices, but this is not for him to decide; similarly in modern factories the human requirements are becoming as important as structural and functional requirements, but the architect will not necessarily design a romantic environment to satisfy them, nor would it make sense to carve out the Rocky Mountains as a New Egyptian Valley of the Kings to house the Air Academy so as to give it the flavor of the region. On this particular project one may question the appropriateness of using vast amounts of glass, but the juxtaposition of crisp, clean, business-like structures on a mountain landscape can be justified by sound esthetics — but more so by the strictly disciplined around-the-clock life which 2500 cadets must live while being educated and trained in the waging of aerial warfare. It seems impossible for us to draw laws and conclusions which cannot be challenged on some point. We crave change even if we fear it. The creative artist feels that emotions can be communicated with more eloquence if he can forge his own expressive symbols, if he can use his own language; but even language or the words which the poet uses in moving and significant ways did not grow in a vacuum nor were they invented at a stroke. They had roots and grew slowly into meanings, which in turn became both stimuli and limitations to the user but which were never detached from some human connotation, some habit of thought, which was the point of departure of the poet's language.

Similarly, an architect's creative powers need not act in a vacuum; they are nourished by the world he lives in, by the people he knows and with whom he must deal, by the things he sees and the things he has learned, and also by old symbols and forms. Thus the greater his understanding the greater scope will his creative powers have, and within such sphere his contributions will have lasting significance. Believing this, we should not attempt to formulate a rigid intellectual program for architecture. In a way we must accept the enormous variety of situations which our age has created and try to find solace in the thought that nature has evolved the weed and the orchid, the whale and the mouse, the eagle and the humming bird, from a wonderfully complex but orderly set of things.

We may find reasons to hope for an improved set of social values for mankind, but our creative struggle will never come to an end because the human mind, which reflects and recreates, feeds what it touches and in turn is nourished by what it sees, will always make architecture a dynamic, expressive force which should be allowed to grow to flourish, even to decay when need be. As an Art it will strive for roots and continuity but will not deny to the man of genius the right to innovate if that is his moment and if his voice rings true.

So it is well for us to admit that it is no longer easy to achieve beauty by the same way in which old societies did, because there is no longer a scale of
9. Photograph by Nora Dumas, Black Star.
unity which will allow for it. Now we have a larger and more difficult order to achieve, and our spirit will shine through only if we are true to ourselves and never forget that it is man that we must serve.

There are cases when regionalism can still be obtained by thoughtful self-imposed discipline, by a submission to certain traditional ways, by a humility of approach, and in rejecting show and change and experiment unless for a good cause. But Regionalism at its best cannot be measured or imposed, is not a school of thought but simply a recognition within its own sphere of what architecture is to human beings, a deep regard for their emotional demands, and this need not be forfeited even in the most practical demands of a project. For instance, Jose Luis Sert by his plans for the Embassy in Iraq has shown us how a great modern artist can use his gifts toward a sensitive version of a regional architecture which is both creative and appropriate.

It was also with a deep thrill that we perceived how sensitively had Stone understood the real essence of India, how subtly had he incorporated in his design for the Embassy the things which really belong to the region — details and features developed through the centuries, through the demands of a hot climate, the habits and love of a people. He did not copy but brought his sympathy and his understanding to bear upon his creative powers. Finely perforated grills, roof overhangs, water pools, serene proportions, exquisite materials upon which the shades and shadows could play, were to be seen in many humble places and in great monuments in the hundreds of miles Mr. Shepley and I traveled by car. Indeed we could report back that the Stone design was really suitable for India, even if it did not conform to the style called “Indian” which was imposed by that gifted architect, Lutyens, who early in this century attempted to graft Moslem externals onto a thoroughly monumental Western style loaded with all the large scale symbols of power which a Colonial empire could bring to bear on a subject people. The “Indian” style may have been politically appropriate when it was introduced and had scale and beauty of a kind, but it had little to do with Indian climate or tradition. It took an artist like Stone to express with a sure hand a renewed sense of the region. I felt great elation to think of the possible influence which such design may have on the local architects. I met with many of them and with the students of the school in Delhi. I saw their works and heard their words and felt that they were anxious to find native expressions, but Western influences were too strong and too disrupting, and few had the wisdom or the maturity to break through with work which would reflect their new status as an independent nation, a synthesis of their old culture, and of all that they had so far learned of new ways and techniques.

Unfortunately, throughout the Eastern countries we visited, architecture is a superficial imitation of the more obvious western forms. Local conditions of labor, climate, and site are largely disregarded, and the solutions are sad indeed. In Bagdad, a city with romantic connotations to the average American, we saw the most atrocious building of the juke-box style being erected in the main street. It was done in cheap materials, with unbelievably bad and unworkmanlike details — a most disheartening proof of what can happen when old traditions are discarded for standards which are neither understood nor loved. And this is happening not only in Bagdad or in Agra or in Karachi but in Italy, in France, and even in Finland, wherever reconstruction of bombed out areas has taken place.

The plea which we can make then is not that we go back to what once was, not that we become romantic, but that we face creatively as free spirits and in deep honesty the complexities of our modern world, yet never forgetting that man is the measure of all values.
"... he did not copy but brought his sympathy and understanding to bear upon his creative powers..." Design for American Embassy at New Delhi, India, Edward D. Stone, architect.


"... a sensitive version of regional architecture which is both creative and appropriate..." Design for American Embassy for Iraq, Jose Luis Sert, architect.