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THE CORRUPTION OF TASTE

WHY are standards of aesthetic taste so very low in New Zealand? When one asks that question, one of course expects the reply that they are no lower than in any other country. There is some truth in this; but it does not really answer the question.

The tastes of the majority of the people in Britain, Australia, and America in such things as architecture, furniture, paintings, and crockery are little different from those of most New Zealanders. That is to say, they are extremely vulgar, shoddy, and insensitive. Things are, for some reason, much better in Sweden and in the other Scandinavian countries. On the Continent one finds a mixture of good taste and bad. But in all the British-speaking countries the general level of taste is quite appalling. In New Zealand it is probably a shade worse than in most.

The English journal *Horizon* held a holiday competition recently, to see who could send in a photograph of the worst piece of architecture. The winning snaps were bad enough—but one could find a hundred examples that were much more horrifying around the suburbs of Auckland.

In Britain there is a population much greater than our own. Therefore the small proportion of people with cultivated and uncorrupted tastes represents a correspondingly larger group of customers to make it possible for a limited number of good artists and craftsmen to make a living out of their work. For instance, it is possible in England for books of reproductions of the work of such artists as John and Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland, Matthew Smith and John Piper to be published in the *Penguin* series. This indicates that there is a fairly large public that does not regard such men as strange freaks and dismiss them out of hand. Even in Australia that very fine artist William Dobell, and others beside him, sell most of their work, and at decent prices. Nothing of that sort could possibly happen in New Zealand.

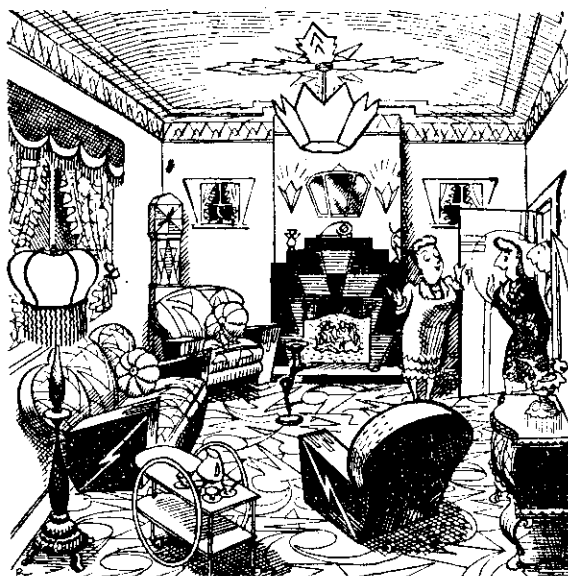
It is when we come to the "applied" arts, however, that we find the really staggering evidences of insensibility. The level of aesthetic taste that is manifested in nine out of ten New Zealand homes is so bad that it is difficult to find words to describe it. It is not that there is a simple absence of taste, of the sort one might find in a fisherman's hut—where the very simplicity and lack of pretentiousness might approximate to something like good taste. No: it is the utter perversion of taste, the positive and aggressive bad taste, the riotous vulgarity, that is so repellent.

Take furniture, for example. Chairs and tables can be made of plain wood, and be comfortable and useful. Their shapes can be simple and pleasing. Why are most people not content to aim at such a simple and honest level of taste? The "suites" turned out by the big furniture manufacturers and sold in their hundreds—elephantine in size, vulgar in their lines, and covered with material

Written for "The Listener"
by A. R. D. FAIRBURN

that revolts the eyes (usually chocolate-and-orange, or something equally vile, with an "arty" texture) . . . the bad imitation "period" chairs and tables, stained a dark brown, with carved legs . . . the dreadful pseudo "modern" smokers' stands, in black and chromium . . . the ghastly carpets, in designs and colours that make the stomach turn. . . One can only ask, Why? . . . How do people come to choose such things deliberately, and put them in their houses?

It is the same with architecture—although a few of the younger architects



"It is difficult to find words to describe it."

are trying to persuade their clients to drop all the nonsense and accept something simple and honest. Consider the spurious elegance of some of the expensive houses that have been built in our suburbs during the past 20 years. Even the less expensive homes usually bear some external evidence of an attempt to be vulgar-genteel—painted false shutters, coloured fan-shaped ornaments in wood, or the mass-produced plaster rabbit or toadstool on the front lawn.

* * *

I SUPPOSE it is the machine age that has done all this havoc in the minds of the people, and persuaded them to like vulgarity and pretentiousness. There is no apparent reason why contact with machines should sow in the mind a desire for brown-and-orange chair coverings (like a hotel lounge), or a pattern of trowel-marks on the outside of a house, or a set of china that looks as if it had been designed by somebody as a practical joke. But the fact remains that when we go back to the pre-machine age it is difficult to find much that is really vulgar and false. Take the English village, for instance. The cottages may have been a little insanitary at times (although I lived very comfortably in one of them for a year). They were simple and unambitious in design, and the "finish" had a kind of simple elegance. There wasn't one of them that

did not look pleasing to the eye. Although they were similar in style (indicating a high degree of aesthetic order), each had some trace of individual character. There is no evidence of any desire to be "different" at any cost; yet there is no crude standardisation. The white-washed walls are pleasing to look at, and have no hint of vulgar ostentation about them.

Behind all this modern vulgarity there is one thing that becomes plainly apparent when you begin to analyse it, and that is an unconscious dishonesty. The real motive, in most cases, is to make things look as if they had cost twice as much as they really did. The man with £400 a year (or more probably his wife) wants the sitting-room to look as if he had £1,000 a year. So shiny fabrics are preferred to rough ones, chromium is used instead of iron or brass, and furniture that had the tuis singing in it six months ago is stained and carved to make it look as if it had belonged to Queen Anne.

We flatter ourselves, here in New Zealand, that we are not snobs. Yet in almost any house you care to enter there is evidence of this unconscious money-snobbery—evidence that shrieks at you from every corner.

* * *

I'M told that some of the tenants in State houses objected to lean-to roofs. They said it "made the houses look like hen-houses." So, to hide their shame, false parapets were stuck on top of some of those that were built later. (Note how the word "false" keeps cropping up). Now, do we really need to go to such lengths to distinguish ourselves from fowls? Isn't it possible that the lean-to design of roof may be the most suitable both for hen-houses and for some human dwellings? It reminds one of the Victorian objection to the use of the word "leg"—the host carving the chicken and asking, "Will you have a wing or a limb?"

The basis of good taste in all these things of which I have been speaking lies in honesty: in a willingness to let things be what they are, and to value them as necessary parts of the world in which we live. There should be in the mind of every normal, uncorrupted person a liking for substances for their own sakes. (And here let me say that I think the arts and crafts division of the Education Department is doing a fine job in teaching the youngest generation to feel and think honestly about these matters). Such things as wood, canvas, brick, stone, rope, paint, iron, and glass all have a particular character, a quality that is pleasing when we touch it or look at it. Whether it cost a lot, or looks like part of a Hollywood set, is not of the slightest importance. The man who thinks that cake is in some absolute fashion better than bread is going close to blasphemy, when you work it out. Cake can be better for some purposes, that is all. So it is with the substances that are used in buildings and furnishings—they are all good when they are

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