The Growth of Architecture

By HALSEY RICARDO, F.R.I.B.A., in "Architecture"

On nearly the last page of that amazingly able little book by Professor Lethaby on architecture—a book that all interested in architecture ought to possess and study with close attention—there is this pregnant statement: "No art that is only one man deep is worth much; it should be a thousand men deep." It has been much the fashion—especially from the time of the Early Italian Renaissance onwards—to accentuate the names of the architects of the famous masterpieces, and to regard them—the architects—as the sole creators and originators of their works. I do not mean that they regarded themselves, or that we regard them, as independent of tradition and experience; but that we look upon such men as Brunelleschi, Bramante, Peruzzi, Michael Angelo, Sir Christopher Wren, and so forth, as creative ends in themselves, as independent phenomena who individually affected and controlled the tendency of their time. But from another point of view we may look upon them as resultants rather than causes; the environment has produced them, they have not constructed the environment. Samuel Butler—the author of "Erewhon"—puts it aphoristically in this way: An egg is not the means by which a hen contrives to produce another bird; the hen is the contrivance by which an egg enables itself to produce another egg. The stream of life—which is the cardinal thing—is immortal, and the various mortal shapes in which it manifests itself to our eyes are the outward sign of its current, and owe their characteristics to the actual composition of the stream at that moment of their appearance, its structure being the synthesis of effective individual influences resolved into a kind of general quality and direction. To come to our own particular tributary of this stream, we may take the building instinct in mankind as immortal—that is to say, as co-existent with mankind itself. Its manifestation at any particular period of the world's history depends upon the ideals prevalent at that time, and the structural resources—in the matter of technical abilities and materials—of the builders. The dominant factor determining these manifestations is the main stream of life carrying the aspirations and voicing the ideal of the nation, the constructional instinct being secondary and tributary to the greater stream. With the egg the simple ideal is, no doubt, the preservation of the endless chord of life, without attempting much control over the intermediate phenomena which serve as carriers. It deplores celibacy naturally, and resists violent endeavours at crossings; species are, comparatively, fixed, and hybridization is only permissible within defined limits. Subject to these conditions, the hen may do what she likes, and mate with whom she pleases—it is her egg that is the justification of her existence.

With a nation the issues are more involved. The chord of life consists of many strands, closely and loosely interwoven, and beside it are many supplementary and contributary threads, running parallel, running crossways, obstructing, blending, confusing, or accentuating the main issues of life. "Sports" occur: "throw-backs" to some predominant or persistent strand in the main cable—diversions into new or reactionary channels—accelerations and slackening of speed; the seeming tangle now clearing itself and again shrouding itself indecipherably. It has its nodes, its pulsations; at times it is lyrical in its outcry, at others solemn in its vibration, mysterious in its silence. It voices the passions, the hopes, of a thousand hearts, for it is the pulse of the nation and the nation's ideal is in its utterance. This history of the world is shown by its art, with a faithfulness that no other record can approach—for it is not consciously a record, and has no side to take in politics or in government, beyond ministering to their requirements. By their skill in engineering—especially hydraulic engineering—Mesopotamia was a fruitful and verdant land; they had mathematics enough to be land surveyors and astronomers, and in a country where the nights are clear, and a considerable portion of life is carried on beneath the starry splendour of the firmament, astrology takes a prominent place, in religion and in the details of daily life. But their art shows them to have been a cruel people, yet with a great capacity of suffering born stolidly and without resistance. With the Egyptians it was otherwise. The bulk of the population were devoted agriculturists. They hated war, and had no delight in the pomp and circumstance of military display. The Arab delight in the horse of war—as witness the Book of Job—spelt misery and physical pain to them, as evidence of their conscription and servitude—and in their pictures of animal life the horse appears rarely as a beast of burden or traction. But with the animal life about them the Egyptians show an exceptional sympathy. Think what it means to have acquired the ability to draw those hieroglyphics, to have seized upon and reduced the vital characteristics of bird and beast to such simple formulae, and yet so instinct with the individuality and power of the thing represented.

In mediaeval times the constitution of society was quite different; instead of one vast empire regulated by an oligarchy of aristocracy, under the direction of a field marshal, we get a feudal system of government, side by side with independent communes. Cities were virtually republics in the Thirteenth or Fourteenth Centuries, and life was fiercely competitive, full of expansion—and the enthusiasm following it—engendered by the new forces and sentiments in peoples hitherto quasi-nomad, and predatory rather than gregarious, outside the tribal connections. Their architecture was the architecture of equipoise—the architecture of the mason in excelsis and of the craftsman, as a builder, whether he worked in stone, timber, or metal. Different from the decadent Roman architecture, the early mediaeval—i.e. to the middle of the Fourteenth Century—was integral in all its features. Columns and pilasters were not applied for effect, or to mask the facts of construction; they sprang from the constructional