Architecture and Building

[Note The Articles appearing on pages 1011 to 1018 are published by arrangement with the New Zealand Institute of Architects.]

Planning for the Client

(From "Architecture."

It seems to be a very common impression among the people who come to architects, that as soon as the architect gets a job he is going to try to put something over on his client; that he is more or less like a child with a new suit of clothes which father has purchased for Sunday use, and sonny insists on wearing it in all sorts of weather, just to "show off," regardless of the effect on the clothes or the consequent loss to father's pocket book.

Unfortunately, there is some ground for truth in this sentiment. Architects do occasionally permit their artistic instincts to run away from their practical side and they furnish, not what the client needs in the way of a comfortable house or a good working factory, but what they think the neighbourhood demands as a terminal feature of a street, or an ornament to a corner. It will rarely be found that beauty and practical considerations cannot be reconciled and in almost every instance a good working plan will permit of an exterior of good, if not of the highest, quality. Absolute freedom of limiting conditions of plan would permit the use of blank walls, or projections, wings, colonnades and other ornamental features which cannot be profitably included in the design of any specific building; yet architecture in its truest sense is final and complete acceptance of logical necessities of plan and their expression as may best be done on the exterior.

Of course, this can be carried much too far, and the client, desiring a country house, who insists that his dining room be 15 ft. by 19 ft. and his living room 17 ft. by 32 ft., and will not consent to changes of two or three feet in either one of these rooms is a very foolish person; but the architect who would desire that the two rooms be made equal in size because of some preconceived notion of exterior treatment, would be still more foolish.

Every building is the result of a series of compromises between different ideals, those of space, cost and appearance, and the successful architect is he who arrives at the most equitable balance between these factors. In many buildings too great stress is laid upon plan and too little upon exterior, since the functions of buildings are liable to change very rapidly, and as most buildings of any size are intended to permit further expansion of business, the exact arrangement of the building is determined somewhat by probable requirements as well as by actual ones. Very few people foresee just what working arrangements will eventually be necessary, and with the growth or increase in the functions housed in a structure, or even the development of these functions, the plan which begins by being ideal, ends by becoming a poor compromise; and if all exterior appearance is sacrificed to ideal present conditions, eventually the building will be entirely worthless as much from a utilitarian as from an artistic standpoint.

On the other hand, the most beautiful building possible may be so badly arranged that it can never be a good investment or a workable enterprise, and the architect who considers beauty alone will defeat his purpose to erect a monument to his own ability because the building well be remodelled and re-arranged or destroyed. A notable case in this respect is the Madison Square Garden, one of the handsomest things in New York and which has so little accommodation that company after company has failed to meet running expenses and it looks as if the building would have to be destroyed, since even at the low price at which the present owners secured the property by foreclosure sale, it has no earning power.

The architect who keeps the requirements of his client firmly in his mind, is the man who succeeds best, whether his speciality be residences, commercial buildings or public buildings, and the man who in his struggle for artistic effect sacrifices vital conditions of plan, may achieve a professional success but will be unable to secure further commission for other buildings of that kind. A case in point is that of the designer of a country court house which had in combination with it the usual number of cells for the detention of prisoners. This architect neglected to make provision for a bath room for the prisoners, and in consequence they were, and still are, taken in automobiles some eighteen miles to be washed. He has produced a building of extreme beauty and which in most respects fulfils its purpose, but every county commissioner in that state has been informed of this omission and it is improbable that the architect will ever secure another building of similar type, although the appearance of the building has attracted a sufficient amount of attention to bring to this architect several commissions for private people.

Unfortunately, whether individuals or corporate bodies, clients are far less apt to recognize beauty as an asset than is the architectural profession, and the man who makes a good working court house of hideous aspect, is more apt to secure other commissions of similar type than is the man who builds a lovely but impracticable building for the purpose. Nor can the architectural profession properly complain against this fact. If architects desire to be known as a collection of artistic dreamers who spend their client's money without regard to their client's wishes, they cannot fairly regard the man who does not employ them as being of doubtful intelligence. If architects desire that their profes-