

The Observations of a Draughtsman

By Filippo Brunelleschi in "The Brickbuilder"

(Continued from June Issue.)

It is an undeniable fact that a contented draftsman will produce more work and better work than one who thinks he is justified in finding fault with the conditions under which he is employed. Mr. Smith's men might have been divided into two general classes—the older men, men of eight or ten years' experience or more, and the younger fellows, boys of eighteen or twenty, still in their student days. That these younger draftsmen should be given every opportunity to develop their talents was perfectly fair, and the more experienced men were always ready to help them with advice and criticism, but sometimes we thought that the thing was being carried to extremes. The crisis came when one of the best men we had gave notice that he intended to leave. The Governor asked the reason for his sudden departure, and the reply was, "I have spent fifteen years learning to be a designer and I'll be hanged before I'll waste my time tracing foundation plans while the office boy does the designing." It may sound like a case of injured pride, but we all felt that the man was justified; even the office boy designer agreed with us—he had been given a task beyond his ability and he knew it. It was simply an example of the tactless method we had of assigning work, and it resulted in the loss of a valuable man.

Every office suffers from the failure of some of its draftsmen to appreciate the true value of their work. There is always the draftsman who omits structural details whenever possible on the supposition that the builder will know better than he does how to build them. Then there is the fellow whose ambition to produce a beautiful drawing so absorbs his attention that he loses sight of the fact that he is doing a detail for the sole use of a few workmen and not for exhibition purposes.

I recently saw a drawing made by just this sort of draftsman. It was a three-quarter inch scale detail of an entrance to a public building. The man had actually drawn more than 8,000 individual bricks! What a wonderful exhibition of human patience and perseverance— but where was the head draftsman while the artist was thus amusing himself?

From my experience in trying to analyze the leakage of time and energy in Mr. Smith's office, I am inclined to believe that more time is wasted in the making of details than in any other way. The Governor frequently criticized us for our methods, of making scale details. "Remember," he would warn us, "you are making that drawing for the metal worker; don't waste time showing wood, and plaster, and marble trim." We listened and obeyed, but we sometimes felt that his criticism was not well founded. One carefully drawn sheet showing all materials in their correct relations to each other would have been of more value to the contractor than half a dozen separate drawings and would have saved much of our time. What we were making was

really a series of shop drawings which the subcontractors sooner or later made over in their own way.

The Governor seldom concerned himself with the interests of his men outside of office hours. The more ambitious of the younger fellows spent their evenings in the ateliers, and were cheerfully granted the use of the office library to aid them. Mr. Smith didn't take the stand that a few architects have taken, that a draftsman cannot work in an office during the day and study evenings without neglecting one or the other—or both. Atelier training was encouraged as something of material benefit to the office. I might go into numerous other topics; the way in which the head draftsman and the specification writer worked in utter independence of each other, a state of affairs which resulted in numerous discrepancies in plans, necessitating erasures and corrections; the Governor's habit of demanding the drawings on a given date and then ignoring them for a week or more, until we learned to discount his demands so that when he really wanted a drawing on time he had difficulty in getting it; and White's custom of permitting a draftsman to do sheet after sheet of ornamental detail as he pleased, and then blue pencilling the entire lot, changing mouldings in their entirety until the draftsman in disgust was prone to tear up his work and start anew, whereas five minutes criticism at the right time would have saved time and money.

I have wondered sometimes to what extent these unfortunate conditions exist in other offices. Smith's is not the only office that is losing money by mismanagement. A well known architect has said that the ideal office is that in which there are no draftsmen; he may be right. But granting that draftsmen are sometimes necessary evils, the greatest possible efficiency can be attained only when the drafting room is under the supervision of one capable head man, and, if I may add one more condition, when the architect himself is in sufficiently intimate touch with his office to know whether or not his ideas are being properly carried out; whether, in short, his lieutenants are efficient directors.

I ask the architects who have been patient enough to read this article through to the end not to brand it merely a published grievance of a disgruntled draftsman; I have tried to make it a fair criticism from the standpoint of the employee. If only a few of the readers stop to ask themselves whether the criticisms enumerated in this paper strike home I shall consider my attempt justified.

"It seems almost superfluous to observe that an architect cannot aspire to superiority in his profession without having travelled; for it must be obvious that an art founded upon reasoning and much observation is not to be learnt without it; books cannot avail, descriptions, even drawings or prints are but weak substitutes of realities, and an artist who constantly inhabits the same place, converses with the same people, and has the same objects always obtruding on his view, must necessarily have very confined notions, few ideas, and many prejudices."—*Sir William Chambers, "Treatise on Civil Architecture."*