

Correspondence.

The Editor "Progress," Wellington.

Dear Sir,—I enclose an article on "Business Organisation amongst Architects," that appeared in the R.I.B.A. Journal for 21/2/20. It occurred to me that you would perhaps deem it suitable for reprinting in "Progress," as the subject is one which intimately concerns the architectural profession in N.Z.

The organisation of building firms who carry out their own architectural work, is already much in evidence in this country, and unless practical steps are taken, in some way or another, to compete with, or even excel these building organisations, the ordinary architect will ere long be a creature of the past.

Yours sincerely,

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Business Organisation Amongst Architects.

By ROBERT ATKINSON (F.)

[From the "Journal of the American Institute of Architects."]

Among the contributory causes of that "architectural inefficiency" which is the subject of so much contemporaneous discussion, perhaps the greatest is the lack of business organisation amongst architects themselves.

It is said that the architect loves to call himself an artist and to cultivate that irresponsibility so dear to the Bohemian, or to shelter himself behind the mask of professional tradition and to cover his defects by the thought that such things are unprofessional—a fly-away artist or soulless dummy, according to temperament, but never, or seldom, a person with a grasp of £ s d. In other words, a person for whom the average client lives in constant trepidation under the fear of unforeseen expenses.

That these things are true of some architects is scarcely to be denied. How large a proportion they bear, in numbers, to the whole of the practising profession, I do not know, but after an experience at the hands of such a practitioner, one can, therefore, understand the tendency of manufacturing firms to dispense with the architect and to secure a fixed firm estimate for the work from a builder, including plans, or to employ only those few architects whose business ability approaches most closely to the required efficiency, with very little regard for the purely architectural aspect, as it is generally understood. Few architects can hope to compete against such large contracting establishments, with their efficient systems of costing and organisation, and if the same thing is to become general in the architectural world, it will most surely be at the expense of the individuality of the designer and of the separate existence of the individual practitioner, a loss which, from the artistic point of view, will hardly bear thinking about. A business man controls, we will say, the general organisation; he handles great cash accounts, smokes large cigars, entertains largely and advertises extensively; he employs two hundred people—designers, draughtsmen, costing clerks, surveyors, en-

gineers, and clerical staff; he can give a fixed firm estimate for any job, turn out the drawings necessary in twenty-four hours, and, when necessary, undertake contracting work. Each section of his organisation does only its quota of work; the designer passes on the sketches to a draughtsman, the draughtsman to the engineer, the engineer to the surveyor, and thus each individual is tied to his particular job, cannot become an all-round architect, and cannot hope to establish business on his own account in face of such competition, or provide the cash necessary if he could overcome the other obstacles.

It is the business man who arranges the affair and the artist who provides the oil for the works. The difference between such a firm and the average large contracting firm is difficult to find; the one is called Building Ltd., and the other Architecture Ltd.; that appears to be all.

Limited liability companies for architecture, or something of the sort, are within the bounds of possibility in the very near future, and to counteract such tendencies is surely the aim and hope of all true architects. It goes without saying that a more efficient education in practical and business affairs is an essential element in any reform, and I think some sort of public educational campaign on architectural matters, conceived in a large spirit and free from personal ideas, engineered from a central department for the good of the profession generally, would do a great work in dispelling from the public mind the idea that architecture is a case of the lowest estimate and in awaking public interest generally. Such a campaign would need to be worked through the popular journals and graded to awaken interest progressively. All this, however, leaves the problem of the small professional man with limited resources very much as in pre-War days, and, possibly, by his inability to rise with the times, in worse case than before. It is with the idea of finding a solution to this problem that the following ideas have been penned.

I see no reason why several persons should not group themselves together, as presently expounded, and, by their combined resources properly organised, combat upon their own grounds the greater firms, at the same time preserving that invaluable architectural quality of "individuality," so that in the long future each building would be stamped by the character of its designer and its personality be as convincing as works by Brunelleschi or Peruzzi.

The fundamental idea is that as each architect in practice pays from his commission a certain percentage for office and establishment charges, which we will say amounts to one-third of his fees, it is obvious that a reduction of expenses and greater efficiency could be secured by several persons combining and pooling their office organisations; would it not then be of great advantage for a dozen young men, including if you like the greatest divergency of temperament and capabilities, to run in harness for their mutual advantage? The combination might include specialists in designing, town planning, decoration,