1923

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The Architectural Design of a Home

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The home, as an architectural problem, is one which is often neglected and not given the serious consideration it should have by members of the architectural profession. Statistics show that not more than two percent of domestic architecture in America is designed by architects. Such a condition is due to many causes. Probably the most important reason being that the person who wishes to build a house hasn't learned to appreciate the value of such professional service nor has he or she learned that there is no type of design which requires more care and skill in order to get a satisfactory result.

Again the criticism has been made that the architectural profession is indifferent to the problem and that other lines of endeavor are more remunerative. Such criticisms as cited above are both true. However, some one must take care of the design and construction of homes and the result is in many respects quite unsatisfactory. It is impossible to expect to find all refinements in proportions, beauty and taste in the haphazard types of houses which we have in our cities and towns. The builder has used his best judgment in solving the problem but due to the element of individuality on the part of every client it is almost impossible for him to get away from certain defined types. He hasn't the necessary training nor skill to produce original designs. His problem is gauged almost entirely by the expenditure and his limited experience.

As an interesting study there is no field which offers more possibilities than the planning of a home. Ever since the beginning of time man has been building to protect himself and family against the elements. The primitive types were hardly more than shelters and even today much money is expended upon ugly buildings which can hardly be said to be anything other than an area of ground covered by four walls and a roof. A systematic study of the problem will bring about many interesting solutions. The ever present element of cost usually handicaps one in his development. Unless the client is thoroughly familiar with building costs it is practically impossible to design a house with any degree of success. The impossible cannot be done when it comes to getting all the refinements of a very sumptuous house for the cost of a very modest home. In such a case the only result to be obtained consists of getting the main essentials so organized into an orderly plan as to make a house which is not only convenient but also has individuality and shows good taste.

For a house to be successful architecturally it must express the individuality of its occupants, it must be a home in the truest sense. The three fundamentals of design must be satisfied, namely economy of space—practical arrangement of the units of plan and exterior elevations, economic construction and beauty of design.

Location plays an important part in the proper design of a house. It is impossible, for example to get a satisfactory one story bungalow if it is placed on a lot which is bounded on either side by exceedingly tall residences. The bungalow would be completely dwarfed by such a setting while if it were built on the proper kind of a lot a good result could be obtained. Many very well planned homes have been spoiled by just such a condition.

Today there is quite a decided tendency to build homes to fit in with some fad or fancy and only too often such a scheme leads to results which are often regretted later. Good taste does not change like fashion. It is better to build conservatively than to feel disappointed later because the result wasn't satisfactory. Fads change. A few years ago for example the large kitchen and butler's pantry were considered essential in every home. Today with changing economic conditions the pantry has disappeared and the small buffet kitchen is in vogue.

Certain styles of houses have become too popular in many communities. For example the Colonial type whether it be of the true Northern type with its narrow eaves, many small windows, etc. or of the Dutch Colonial type with gambrel roof, etc. What can be more distracting than to see a house of the latter type which is planned with an informal arrangement of rooms on the interior and not at all expressive of the exterior. Truth in expression is one of the main essentials to be gotten if one wishes to design a successful home.

There is no rule or formula by which to design a home. Some people have very decided notions as to size of rooms. Such ideas are purely individual. For example there is no standard size for a kitchen. The size is determined by the equipment to be accommodated and the wishes of the owner. One person will insist on enameled woodwork, etc., while another will be quite sufficient upon varnished and painted walls. So one can see the endless variety of ideas that can be gotten relative to a simple kitchen.

This is only one of the reasons for saying that the design of a home is a complicated problem.

In order to plan a home and get a good result one must take considerable time and assemble all ideas possible. Then by a process of elimination gradually build up a list of essential items to submit to an architect to work out. Usually further processes of elimination take place before the house can be gotten within the available expenditure. House planning can be compared to a game of checkers in which a great deal of thought and study must be given to every move.

The writer has had a considerable experience in designing hundreds of homes, and never yet has he found any two persons who were satisfied with the same design. Unfortunately much erroneous information is published and the result follows that many people wish to build absurd structures. For example I remember a client who insisted upon using red wood for flooring in her kitchen. The idea being that it was a very soft wood and hence would be easy to walk upon. In theory such a reasoning might be permissible but from the standpoint of service the soft wood is useless unless covered with linoleum.

Climatic conditions make it particularly necessary to build sturdy structures. Flimsy wall construction means excessive coal bills, unsanitary conditions, etc. Hence the necessity for the designer of homes to be thoroughly familiar with good construction. A home is not a home when it is a “barn,” a cold structure in winter and an oven in summer. If more people would look upon the building of a home as a business proposition and that a wise expenditure at first would eliminate later replacements and heavy upkeep, domestic architecture in America would be put upon a higher plane.

Today there are many kinds of permanent materials to be had which do not cost any more than frame construction. A careful selection of materials, fixtures, an economic plan, attractive exterior elevations together with complete plans, specifications and superintendence of construction will do much to improve our cities and towns by getting real homes.