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Community Stupidity

HOW REAL-ESTATE PROMOTION CREATES CONGESTION AND
REDUCES VALUES

By FREDERICK L. ACKERMAN (*M.*)

THIS statement concerns but two phases of the many complex problems surrounding the building of our cities,—windows in the walls upon the party line, and the width of rear yards.

It is my belief that the congested condition within our larger cities, the rapid shifting of districts, and the resulting uncertainty of land values, may, in a large degree, be traced directly to the fact that we have not properly considered either of these problems, nor made any adequate attempt to solve them by proper laws and ordinances.

The laws of New York City on these two subjects are typical; this argument is, therefore, based upon conditions in that city, for it is there that the greatest amount of data and material exists upon which the facts required in a demonstration may be established. The argument also presupposes city blocks approximating the size in New York City, of a varying length and about 200 feet in width.

The first proposition is this: The use of windows in the wall along the party line produces congestion, is the most important of all factors tending toward the creation of the present inadequate width of yards

in the rear, and in the end reduces the earning power of money invested in realty.

I shall assume, in this argument, that the majority of structures of a commercial nature are built by promoters. I believe this to be a fact. The motives of the operator are the promotion fee and a quick sale. A careful study of the trend of development, both in districts and blocks, shows us that the first operations in any given districts are almost without exception confined to corners and to isolated plots within a block. In other words, it is rare to find one side or even a quarter of a block solidly developed at one time; the tendency is to select alternate plots. The reasons for this are perfectly obvious; windows are permitted along the property line, and by building thus upon alternate pieces of property, it is possible—for a time at least—to show an excellent rent roll. It is, therefore, easy to sell, for there are buyers of gold bricks still in the world. Thus also is it possible, by the lure of light offices in a new building, in a good neighborhood, to fill the building at a low rent. I say low rent; for that statement there is a reason: The promotor has not deducted from his plot or floor-space any

Book Reviews

“Die Baukunst Unserer Zeit.” By Otto Wagner, Vienna, 1914. Anton Schroll & Co.

The fourth edition of this work (originally published in 1895) is sent to the Octagon with a dedication in the author's handwriting, which may be translated “dedicated to the American Institute of Architects with particular appreciation by the author.” In red at the bottom of the same page is this clause “Printed before the outbreak of the world war!”

In a delightful introduction to this edition the author says that there are innumerable books and periodicals which appear each year intended to “inform” the public on questions of art, and to raise the rather low standard of their art comprehension. They reach a very small number of people and have, with few exceptions, almost the contrary effect. This sad result is due to the fact that the authors of these books and periodicals offer one of the following prescriptions: They have either discovered a country or town whose building art they wish to introduce to the public, or they recommend a style epoch which alone is able to elevate the soul of man, or they gush over beautiful public squares and crooked streets (this in a time of automobiles, flying machines, super-dreadnoughts, cannons capable of shooting 16 kilometers, and armies of millions), or they juggle with phrases like “home crafts,” and speak of the maintenance of local civic arts, or they show their current art interest by studying the contemporaries of Vitruvius. One thing, Herr Wagner says, these authors have in common: They always mix up the field of art with the field of archæology, and they never have anything to say about the art of our time, (and more particularly the building art), or else only say things that are wrong. After we have bought these books and, what is worse, have read them, he says, we must conclude that they are really assaults on the art of our time. Therefore we must take every means to limit their possibilities for evil. It is for these reasons and others, that he

excuses the printing of this edition, twenty years after the first.

The author announces that he has written this book for the student, and yet as I look through it I cannot help feeling how much he says could well be assimilated by the full-blown architect. His lectures (as a fact they are such) on architecture deal with what we would call the commonplaces of our art—things that we pretend to take for granted, and yet they are things that not one in a hundred architects considers in his daily work or keeps in mind in his design. He writes very well indeed about such subjects as the consistency of form and honesty in the use of material; the origin of new forms in decoration; the thing that the artist shall seek in his own period; the idiocy of art imitation; the potentiality of new design in steel and concrete. Whatever we may think of the results attained by Herr Wagner in his own efforts to develop modern architecture (efforts indicated by the illustrations to this book), we must acknowledge that his arguments are sound and just as pertinent today, at least so far as America is concerned, as they were when the first edition of this book appeared twenty years ago. We can say this here, if we acknowledge it nowhere else. We, the artists who in the nature of our work come most closely to actual life and modern conditions, ignore those conditions and that life in our design.

These discourses of Herr Wagner have been translated into a number of languages. If they have not been translated into English I wish they might be, even though I know that not one architect in fifty in this country will read them. We never read books on art, and if we did we would not heed any that might disturb our serene composure. As a whole our art is still where the art of painting stood in 1780. Perhaps the Institute may in time adjust its business affairs so that a Convention may be devoted to the important topic suggested by the book under consideration: “Has architecture a chance for life, or is it as an art really dead?”

ROBERT D. KOHN (F.)

Obituary

Samuel Booth Snook

Admitted to the Institute as a Fellow in 1895

Died at Upper Montclair, New Jersey, March 13, 1915

Samuel Booth Snook was born August 21, 1857, in New York City. He was a son of John B. Snook, who came from England in 1815, and who engaged

in the practice of architecture in 1837, being the founder of the present firm of which Mr. Snook was a member, and which is said to be the oldest architectural firm in this country. The family moved to Brooklyn about 1860, and Mr. Snook received his education at Erasmus Hall, Flatbush, and later at Temple Academy, Brooklyn. He en-

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tered his father's office in 1878, as draughtsman, becoming head draughtsman in 1885, and entered the firm in 1887, just fifty years after it was founded, and continued an active member therein until the time of his death. He was married in Brooklyn on June 4, 1884, to Ella Louise Pendleton. He had two sons—Curtis Pendleton, a member of the present firm, and Elward Sayer, who died in 1902.

Mr. Snook was a resident of Brooklyn until 1907, when he moved to Montclair. He was a charter member of the Brooklyn Chapter and some time its Vice-President.

Normand S. Patton

Admitted to the Institute as a Fellow in 1889
Died at Oak Park, Ill., March 15, 1915

The Forum

Is There Such a Thing as a "Proper Minimum Charge?"

TO THE FORUM:

Perusal of the Proceedings of the Forty-Eighth Annual Convention, just received, reminds me that at Convention time the duties of the Judiciary Committee, upon which I was drafted for the occasion, prevented all but brief and occasional presence at sessions, and gives me a quickened appreciation of the frame of mind of my confrères to whom the situation was not a first experience. The hours of Convention sessions should be made a "closed season" for protracted committee meetings, if for no other reason than the interest of the spiritual welfare of the victims.

But what I intended to say pertains to the discussion in connection with the report of the Committee on Schedule of Charges, which, after these months, is fresh—to me—fresh, in the sense of a late rendering of an old theme, whose refrain runs a "proper minimum charge." As such it summons a train of memories and reflections. There comes to mind a conversation: "On account of the large quantity of eastern material used in the Northwest, entailing heavy freight charges, and on account of higher wages in certain lines, I suppose a given building costs more in the Northwest than in a large part of the East. Given a building costing in the East \$100,000, for which \$6,000 is pronounced a 'proper minimum charge,' would \$6,600 be a 'proper minimum charge' for producing the same building costing, in the Northwest, say, \$110,000, because of freight rates and certain higher wages?" Even at a slightly increased draughtsman's cost to the architect, the question is embarrassing.

Another incident: A building is about to be let for contract. It is designed in common red brick. At the last minute an expensive brick is substituted, at an expense of \$10,000. Its color, scale, and texture makes unnecessary a single change of line, while specifications note the alteration. Is \$600 a "proper minimum charge" for making the change in the specifications?

I once designed a woolen factory. The drawings

consisted of elevations, sections, and details of a corner and one other typical bay. Was 5 per cent (the current rate) a "proper minimum charge" for the 350 feet of mill built then? But suppose the 400 feet which was added the following year had been built at the time of the first 350 feet, would 5 per cent have been a "proper minimum charge" for the total 750 feet?

Years and years ago—it seems—when a former President of our Institute, and in fact our present President, used to serve clients in my community when I was an inexperienced fledgling (I suppose they adhered to the then "proper minimum charge"), I reflect how perfectly simple it was for me to make the thrifty Vermonter appreciate that my work, born of inexperience and youthful enthusiasm, was worth just as much as that of the practised gentlemen referred to. I feel rather foolish when I think of it, yet I guess, perhaps, I got more than my services were worth for "standing for" the "proper minimum charge," as promulgated by the Institute. That was twenty years or more ago. The Institute still promulgates the "proper minimum charge." I notice, too, that the conception of a "proper minimum charge" wanders off into the Competition Code and seems to cause nervousness there. It occurs to me also that when the Institute employs an architect it avoids the issue of a "proper minimum charge," and somehow it impresses me as a sensible act.

I have a suspicion that, perhaps, in considering the proposition of a "proper minimum charge," we have for long been dealing with something like unto the pot of gold at the rainbow's end—there is no such thing. At least the question recurs: For architectural work of all sorts, large or small, simple or intricate, plain or rich, performed under all the differing conditions of practice, of building, or of living, with the differing degrees of professional and artistic ability among practitioners, is it reasonable to suppose that it is possible to name a "proper minimum charge" intended to cover all cases? Is there, in all reality, such a thing as a "proper minimum charge?"

W. R. B. WILLCOX (F.)