ARCHITECTURE AND CIVILIZATION

STICKS AND STONES. *By Lewis Mumford. 1omo. 247 pages. Boni and Liveright. $2.50.*

MR LEWIS MUMFORD has systematically exposed the degradation of the American scene as revealed by the architectural march from the simple beauty of Puritan communism to the monstrous ugliness of the contemporary city. Sticks and Stones is a book of first importance, not only by reason of its historical truth, but also because of its intelligent blending of aesthetics and humanism. In reading these essays, I was continually impressed by the author's perceptive balance: the fact that a young Utopian like Mr Mumford should have written with such charm and hopefulness while presenting the most sordid and bombastic phases of our civilization, is, I take it, indicative of his faith in the future. Beginning with a reconstruction of life in the early New England village, where building was co-operative and architecture an organic growth, he goes on to elaborate the stupid land-butchery of the pioneers, the importation of culture in the shape of bastard romantic and classic styles, the development of the Imperial Façade, as typified by the White City of the Chicago Exposition in 1893, and last of all, the age of the machine with its standardized horrors. And what conclusion are we to draw from his survey? Simply this: that the element of beauty in architecture has been debauched by the craze for material profit; that the very utility in which the American glorifies his inventive skill has been used against him by the capitalist; that the present city-dweller has forfeited his lawful right to aesthetic surroundings, and has become a machine-slave altogether as ignominious as the puppets of Samuel Butler's Erewhon.

Assuredly such a prospect is an unhappy one to contemplate, but I do not see how any right-minded critic can quarrel with Mr Mumford's point of view, or reverse his carefully prepared judgements. To the average American, of course, who regards economic expansion as an unqualified sign of progress, the book will be only an impudent heresy. What right has anybody to say that the

American city has devised human sewers through which the mass of plebians can be dragged daily back and forth from their dormitories and factories? Or that the skyscraper is purely a product of engineering, that it has nothing to do with the human arts of seeing, feeling, and living, and that it is an architecture for angels and aviators? The average reader believes in the skyscraper—the higher the better—and in the imposing silhouette of the serrate skyline, but in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred he never sees this beauty. He only remembers it—and the photographs in the pictorial supplements of the Sunday newspapers confirm his opinions. While gazing on pictures entitled Woolworth Building Greets the Sun, or Towers of Lower Manhattan Bathed in Mist, he is inclined to resent Mr Mumford's contempt for the cathedrals of commerce. It does not occur to him that beauty, in a larger sense, is not limited to structures of genuine aesthetic significance, and he forgets what nature, under certain atmospheric conditions, does for the tenements, and even the garbage heaps. He remembers the impressiveness of the skyscrapers, and that at some time or other he has found them beautiful; by a common psychological process he attributes these natural appearances to the structures themselves, and like all good apostles of "progress," fails to distinguish between mathematical science and aesthetic building. On the other hand, the man of artistic tastes, as well as the thoroughgoing Philistine, when confronted with the architectural problem, is unwilling to delve into the more profound issues of motives and tendencies—he cherishes a vague notion that the American builder, if he has not as yet accomplished his purpose, is on the way to achieve some vast and superior form of art, and that any criticism of his activity is, at this time, premature.

The sociologist has always been looked upon as a dissatisfied critic with a grievance against society. And so he is. His attitude toward art and life is a challenge to the complacency of popular "success," and to the moral pretentiousness that accompanies it. But all the same, his method is the only adequate tool for digging into the sources of modern architecture, and for working out aesthetic values. The sociologist attacks the problem at its roots; indeed, much to the discomfiture of the proud and sentimental wreckers of civilization, he shows, in this case, that order, decency, and purpose in the arts have been smothered by chaos, squalor, and

extravagant futility. Mr Mumford has not been taken in by the staggering effects of American engineering, or the intricate juggling of materials. He has not attempted to deprive the engineers of their rewards, and he has been at pains to note the audacious beauty of the "draped cube" wherever it has sprung up; but he is interested primarily in buildings that can be "seen, felt, and lived in," and for this reason has discussed technology only so far as it relates to motives. By proceeding from motives to the resultant mechanistic expression, the historian can readily determine the functional value of the completed forms—for it is only in terms of function that the constituent parts of a form can be justified. Are the structural elements essential? Do they fulfil a genuine need? In modern painting and sculpture, which are, I am sorry to say, more or less divorced from an objective and social use, the difficulty of following motives forces the critic into an investigation of general psychological tendencies and the vagaries of temperament and desire. Form, in this connexion, is the expression of individual needs, or at best, of a limited collective need, and function refers to the essential fitness of the constituent parts. In architecture, however, the creative business is on a more objective plane. Motives are tangible, and the value of the structural elements can be easily ascertained. With this particular problem I feel that Mr Mumford has been a little too summary. He has frequently touched upon the relation of function to aesthetic values, but has not sufficiently stressed the importance of this interaction.

The difference, for example, between the grain elevator and the skyscraper which aspires to more than a perforated shell, is simply one of significant parts. In the elevator each component, down to the smallest detail, is indispensable—patently so—while the skyscraper offers to the eye of the man in the street only meaningless ornamentation, and to the aviator a miraculous flouting of Newton's laws. Mr Mumford is aware of this, but he has overlooked a vital point in aesthetics: to appreciate a work of art, one has need to *recognize* the essentiality of the parts, and to *follow* a structural rhythm to its conclusion. We will remember that the Greeks allowed nothing to interfere with the basic lines of their buildings. Ornament, no matter how complex or beautiful in itself, never interrupted the reasonable and stable progression of the several parts. The significance of every line in a Greek temple

is felt. It is a sensuous reality. This, of course, is a requisite of all true masonry. The rhythm of a stone structure cannot be disguised—for good or ill its qualities are obvious. Mr Mumford shows how modern stone work is little better than a mask to conceal the modern skeleton—a dress flung over it—and he also points out that the improved appearance of the later skyscrapers is the result of aligning this dress with the steel frame. The duplication of the steel line is a form of adaptation rather than creation, but the device is at least a sensible one, and prevents such outrageous efforts as the Flatiron Building, where the heavy, arched masonry at the top belies the unsubstantial appearance of the middle stories. The disguising of means has always accompanied bad art. Modern sculptors, who support acrobatic postures by means of complicated hidden armatures, kill all sense of stability in their work. They are akin to modern builders.

Mr Mumford is neither a reformer nor a prophet. He has written the most interesting and authoritative work on architecture that has yet come out of America. "If we are to have a fine architecture," he explains, "we must begin, not with the building itself, but with the whole complex out of which the architect, builder, and patron spring." True, but how? Mr Mumford, in his brief conclusion, would seem to put his trust in the garden-city, a community organized in the spirit of permanency and humanity without which there can be neither art nor beauty. But how are these garden-cities to be planned, and for whom? For millionaires? And will the taste of the *parvenu* be any better to-morrow than it is to-day? I leave these questions for the author of this enlightening study to solve in his next book.

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