

John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown
 THE ARCHITECTURE OF AMERICA
 Little, Brown and Co., BOSTON, 1961 \$15.00

NOTE: The editors include the reaction of two reviewers to the same book this issue. THE ARCHITECTURE OF AMERICA has been regarded by critics generally as a book of major importance.

1. John Burchard, Dean of the Humanities and Social Sciences at M.I.T., and Albert Bush-Brown, Associate Professor of Architecture at M.I.T., were commissioned by the American Institute of Architects to write a history of American architecture from the seventeenth through the mid twentieth century as part of the Centennial Celebration of the Institute. The present book is a result of their labors. Without reservation it is the best single history of American architecture which has yet been written. Since the authors are primarily concerned with the relationship of architecture to its social and cultural environment, their study goes far beyond that of a mere factual history of buildings and city planning. Each phase of our architecture is critically discussed and examined. Whether one always agrees with their conclusions is of minor importance; what matters is that each of us is forced to re-examine critically many ideas which we have always accepted. A case in point would be their discussion of our own southwestern architecture; "A writer in the *Architectural Record* of 1923, Rose Henderson, suggested 'The Indians were the first cubists in this country,' and she praised the modern cubist revival work of Carlos Vierra whose house at Santa Fe of 1922 was an imitation of the old pueblo buildings." ". . . in 1926 the *Record* willingly went along with the joke by a full article entitled 'The Southwest Develops Native Architecture.' The joke was less funny in 1929 when it encouraged Albert Chase McArthur to build a pueblo village for the Arizona-Biltmore Hotel at Phoenix."

—David Gebhard

2. *The Architecture of America*, a book for architects and laymen alike, concerns the architectural development of the past 100 years in this country. Not written in the usual historical terms of dates and stylistic descriptions, it reveals, instead, an unfolding and developing concept of American architecture. The authors emphasize the major architectural problems that designers at different periods turned their attentions toward, what they seemed to think was important about architecture, how they approached their problems and, above all, how the architecture they produced was shaped by the cultural level and values of a given period.

In order to examine how American architecture has been effected by these cultural forces, a systematic historical inventory is made of important aspects of our growing culture: population, science, engineering and technology, industrial consolidation and organization, transportation, building practices, aesthetic and philosophical questions. With this survey at the beginning of each chapter, the various categories of buildings erected by a given generation is then examined. Significantly enough the early chapters contain more discussion about private residences, churches and mon-

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umental civic buildings; later chapters discuss housing developments, commercial and factory architecture and, above all, city planning.

With a canvass so vast, there is an understandable tendency to deal in generalizations. Nevertheless, the best parts of the book (dealing with the development of the skyscraper in Chicago, for example) are those that deal with specific problems and take time to analyze individual edifices in detail.

At the same time the authors do not neglect architectural evaluations. Rather than the indiscriminate praise of authors who have become partisans of the subject about which they write. Messers Burchard and Bush-Brown maintain strict standards in their evaluations. They do not, for example, let the romantic circumstances of pretentious buildings erected in nineteenth century mining towns blind them to architectural limitations no matter how interesting this work might be as social history.

The literary style of the book is at once a great asset and a partial drawback. So persuasively, even poetically is it written that certain weak points in the argument relating architecture to its cultural antecedents are glossed over or too easily inferred by free-flowing phrases. On the other hand, the authors' aptness in turning a phrase, their freshness of insight, and their incisive architectural characterization are a source of great pleasure for the reader.

Several subsidiary themes are of particular interest. One such topic that comes up from time to time considers architectural regionalism, and various reasons are advanced for its disappearance. Another recurring topic of discussion concerns the generally conservative social outlook evidenced by the architectural profession. By and large architects have sat complacently on the side of the status quo, and it is sobering to realize how few leaders of reform or intellectuals alert to the burning issues of the day the profession has provided.

The Architecture of America is an important book. It underscores again the fact, which we all more or less accept but need to be reminded of in the forceful manner of these authors, that architecture does not grow in the vacuum of capricious stylistic innovation. It develops, instead, in response to specific demands and limitations that society at a given moment place upon it. This volume also marks a new and desirable direction in the writing of architectural history. Rather than the uncritical acclamations that too many writers on the subject fall into, this book contains discriminating architectural criticism. The only major exception to this statement is the somewhat untempered praise of Frank Lloyd Wright.

In addition the book is the fairest evaluation of late nineteenth century American architecture yet to appear. For the first time the period receives almost sympathetic treatment. Indeed the authors go so far as to concede a certain value in the work of such Worlds Fair Classic architects as McKim or Hunt. At least they are discerning enough to absolve these men of the "dishonesty" of which they have been accused by writers of the last generation. This new appraisal of the "polite" architecture of the 1900 era seems to indicate that we are finally beginning to get enough historical perspective to "see past" one of our architectural blind spots.—*Bainbridge Bunting*

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