INTRODUCTION

"Say not thou, What
is the cause that
the former days were
better than these?"
—*Eccles.* vii. 10.

A MAN of the eighteenth century, plunged suddenly into our civilization, might well have the impression of something akin to a nightmare.

A man of the 'nineties, looking at much of modern European painting, might well have the impression of something akin to a nightmare.[1]

A man of to-day, reading this book, may have the impression of something akin to a nightmare. Many of our most cherished ideas in regard to the "Englishman's castle"—the lichened tiled roof, the gabled house, patina—are treated as toys to be discarded, and we are offered instead human warrens of sixty storeys, the concrete house hard and clean, fittings as coldly efficient as those of a ship's cabin or of a motor-car, and the standardized products of mass production throughout.

We need not be unduly alarmed. All the inventions that go to make up our modern civilization, so far as it has gone, have awakened the same terrors. The railway, it was prophesied, would ruin the countryside, the motor-car the roads, and the airplane the upper air. All these things have happened, and to a large extent the criticisms were true, and yet man still survives and carries on, and seems happy or unhappy to much the same degree as

[1] The first Post-Impressionist show in England horrified most people at the time, yet now the *fauves* of that receding pre-war past are hailed as being in the great tradition, and are used as sticks with which to beat their successors and followers.

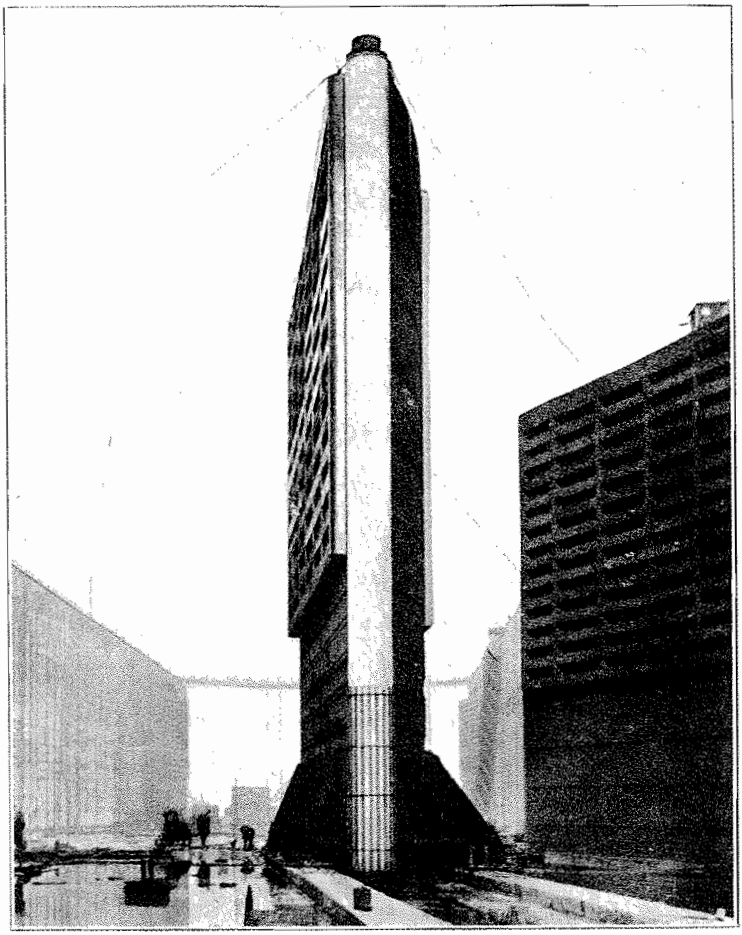
before. The truth is that man has an uncanny faculty of adapting himself to new conditions. He learns to admit and even, in a sneaking sort of way, to like *new and strange forms. The new form is at first repugnant, but if it has any real vitality and justification it becomes a friend. The merely fantastic soon dies.*

Now, in modern mechanical engineering, forms seem to be developed mainly in accordance with function. The designer or inventor probably does not concern himself directly with what the final appearance may be, and probably does not consciously care. *But men are endowed in varying degree with an instinct for ordered arrangement, and this can come into operation even when least thought of. The ordinary motor-car engine is a conspicuous example of this. Some are disorderly and "messy" in arrangement; others well planned and cleanly disposed.*

In structural engineering the same thing appears. The modern concrete bridge or dam may be a crude and ungainly affair, or it may possess its own grave and stark beauty; the structure being equally good and functional in either case.

It is inevitable that the engineer, preoccupied with function and aiming at an immediate response to new demands, should produce new and strange forms, often startling at first, bizarre and disagreeable. Some of these forms are not worth constant repetition and soon disappear into the limbo of forgotten things. Others stand the test of use and standardization, become friendly to us and take their place as part of our general equipment. And these good *new forms, so foreign to us and so disturbing at first view, are seen in the long run to have a curious affinity with those of a similar function in any good period of history.*

The engineer and the architect have to work with other people's money. They must consider their clients and, like politicians, cannot



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LIVERPOOL. ENTRANCE GATE TO NEW LOCK

The photograph shows one leaf of the new river entrance lock being moved into position on timber launchways. The gates are closed by wire rope attachments. This leaf alone weighs 500 tons, and the gates will be the largest in the world.

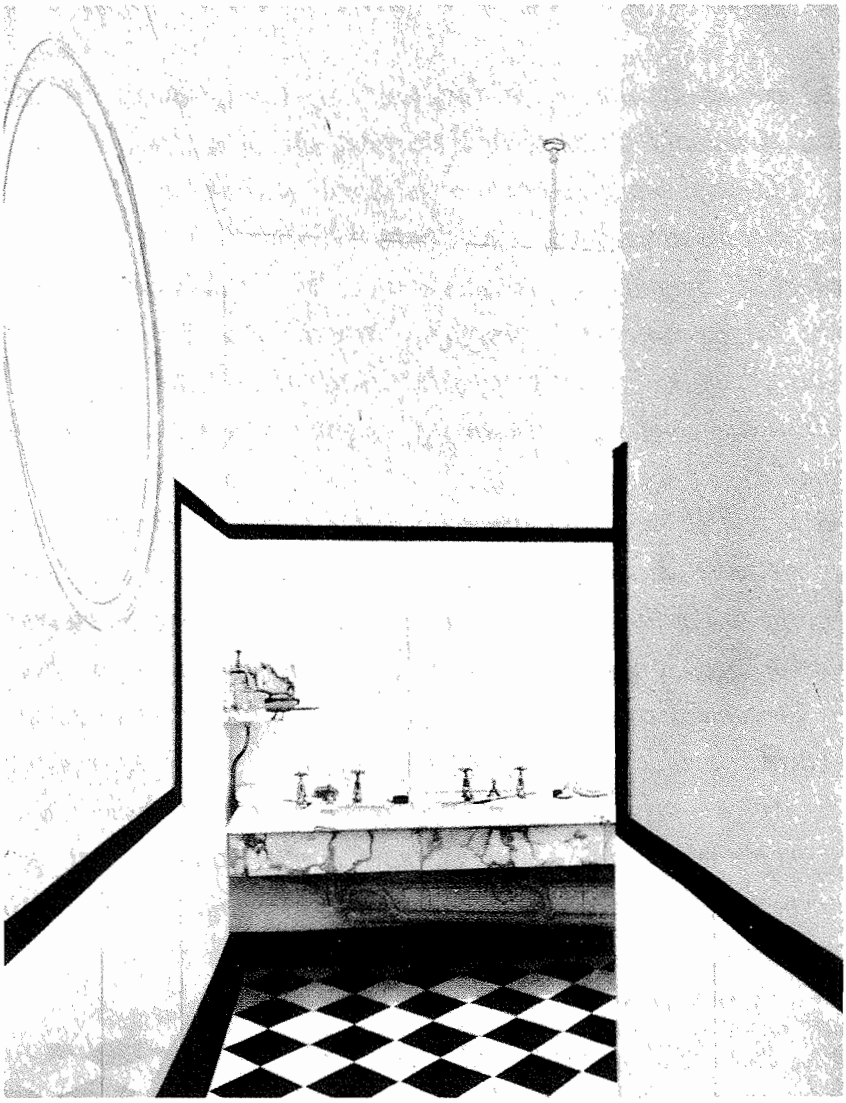
be too far ahead of their moment. The artist, on the other hand, particularly the painter, may generally find it nearly impossible to

live ; but if he is able to establish one of those curious compromises by means of which he can carry on a lean existence, he is at least free (at times) to project himself on paper or canvas without necessary reference to anything or anybody ; and to make experiment and research for its own sake. This passion, renewed in our own day by, it is true, a comparatively small body of artists, has resulted in that disconcerting but formidable body of work which angers unnecessarily so many people.

The modern engineer, then, pursues function first and form second, but it is difficult for him to avoid results that are plastically good. The good *modern painter pursues plastic form for its own sake, and if he has the necessary ability the results are plastically satisfying.*

These things are true of the modern engineer and the painter. Are they true of the architect, who in some ways combines the functions of both? M. Le Corbusier would emphatically tell us " No ! " His book is a challenge to the members of his own profession. He writes, that is to say, as an architect for architects, and as a scholar always with an eye on the work of the great periods ; and he writes more in sorrow than in anger! He is no fauve, *no " revolutionary," but a sober-minded thinker inspired by a fierce austerity.* Towards a New Architecture *was written, of course, originally for French readers, and there are points in it which obviously have not the same force applied to conditions in England or America ; but the book*[1] *is the most valuable thing that has yet appeared, if only because it forces us, architects and laymen alike, to take stock, to try to discover in what direction we are going, and to realize in some dim way the*

[1] Taken in conjunction with Le Corbusier's later volumes, *Urbanisme* and *L'Art Décoratif d'aujourd'hui.*



MODERN SYNTHETIC MATERIALS
MEWÉS & DAVIS, F.F.R.I.B.A., ARCHITECTS.

strange paths we are likely to be forced to travel whether we will or no.

The average architect of to-day, then, M. Le Corbusier would tell us, is a timid and poor-spirited creature, afraid to look facts in the face. He plays his little tricks with this or that historic "style," and he can turn his attention to order from "Gothic" to "Classical," to "Tudor," "Byzantine," or what not. By concentrating his training so largely on these superficial aspects, Le Corbusier would say, all "styles" become equally available to the architect for exploitation. Not so, he would say, is great or even good architecture produced.[1]

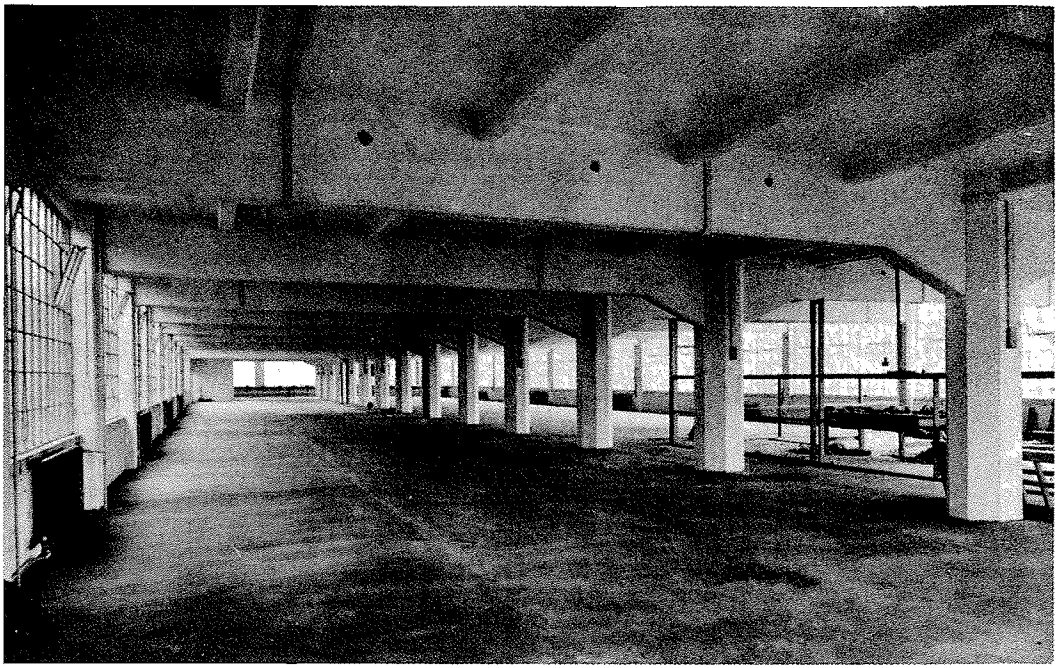
But it will be said, we cannot escape the past or ignore the pit from which we were hewn. True; and it is precisely Le Corbusier's originality in this book that he takes such works as the Parthenon or Michael Angelo's Apses at St. Peter's and makes us see them in much the same direct fashion as any man might look at a motor-car or a railway bridge. These buildings, studied in their functional and plastic aspects—all that is accidental or merely stylistic being relegated to its proper minor place—emerge under a new guise and are seen to be far more closely and strangely akin to a first-rate modern concrete structure or a Rolls Royce car than to the travesties of themselves on which we have battened.

This book, then, is an important contribution to the modern study of architecture, and to the study of modern architecture; it may annoy but it will certainly stimulate. M. Le Corbusier has not wasted time and space on a catalogue raisonné *of modern buildings; he has*

[1] This is, of course, a relatively new state of affairs dating roughly, with exceptions, from the time of the Industrial Revolution; though the Victorian era in England, with all its faults, had its own mind and its own outlook.

confined himself to the statement of some of the problems that confront the modern man, and so the modern architect, and he has indicated solutions as much by his presentment of ancient buildings as by that of modern ones.

These problems arise mainly out of the vastly increased scale *on*



A MODERN FACTORY. SMART & STEWART, ARCHITECTS

which modern enterprise is conducted. The Trust or Combine has greatly ameliorated its character in latter years, and seems likely to be a permanent feature of "big business"; the Store has largely replaced the small shop; urban dwellers are finding themselves more and more housed in huge blocks of flats; problems of transport and traffic will sooner or later demand a radical transformation of our

streets—all these factors mean fresh problems and fresh solutions, and it is our business to use the materials and constructional methods to our hand, not, of course, blindly, but with a constant endeavour to improve them.

And this process is certainly going on, whatever we may think of the results. An architecture of our own age is slowly but surely shaping itself; its main lines become more and more evident. The use of steel and reinforced concrete construction; of large areas of plate glass; of standardized units (as, for example, in metal windows); of the flat roof; of new synthetic materials and new surface treatments of metals that machinery has made possible; of hints taken from the airplane, the motor-car or the steamship where it was never possible, from the beginning, to attack the problem from the academic standpoint—all these things are helping, at any rate, to produce a twentieth-century architecture whose lineaments are already clearly traceable. A certain squareness of mass and outline, a criss-cross or "grid-iron" treatment with an emphasis on the horizontals, an extreme bareness of wall surface, a pervading austerity and economy and a minimum of ornament; these are among its characteristics. There is evolving, we may begin to suppose, a grave and classical[1] *architecture whose fully developed expression should be of a noble beauty.*

It is a delight to note the first faint indications of a spontaneous and unforced interest in æsthetic matters on the part of the modern man. He has had an admirable unconscious schooling through the trim efficiency and finish of the machines and apparatus which surround and govern so much of his daily life. Already the average user of the motor-car is beginning to take a keen pleasure in good bodywork, in

[1] But not imitatively so.

cleanness of line and general design. It must be many years indeed since such close attention has been given to a particular æsthetic problem by so large a number of human beings. It is not too much to hope that this interest may soon include within its scope our modern architecture, passing from, it may be, an appreciation of works of a

MODERN DOORS. W. A. PITE, SON & FAIRWEATHER, ARCHITECTS

functional or purely constructional character to embrace works of even greater significance.

I give here one or two quotations which seem to suggest the trend of thought in this direction. They are not taken, it will be seen, from "revolutionary" sources.

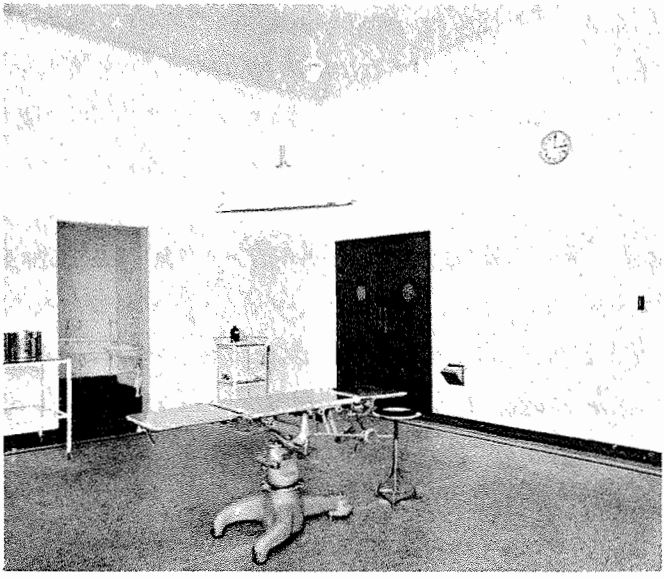
> *". . . education has touched business groups, companies and combines, who march behind the banner of better building . . . and contribute to the æsthetic amenities of cities and towns by*

allowing architects freedom from stereotyped ideas, thereby permitting glimpses of the twentieth-century spirit in building. . . . Industrial buildings are accepted as deplorable necessities by some critics . . . the terms 'utilitarian' and 'harsh' are regarded as synonymous. . . ." Mr. John Cloag, who writes this in the Architects' Journal *of January* 12, 1927, *thinks the latter view "exasperating," and goes on to say: "Utility untrammelled by an imagined need of some disguising 'style' is not lacking in beneficent effect upon the form of an industrial building."*

Mr. R. A. S. Paget, in a letter to The Times, *summarized in the* Architects' Journal *of April* 7, 1926, *thinks that Regent Street should have been designed as two great continuous stores facing one another in separate blocks which composed it, being connected by covered ways, tunnels or bridges at convenient intervals, so that customers could pass from one block to another in protection from the weather. He would also have had direct covered communication from the Tube station to the shops and motor omnibus passenger stations, so that the public could alight and embark under cover. The pavements in front of the shops would be arcaded, while the lighting of the ground-floor shop-fronts would be secured by clerestory windows in the shop-fronts themselves above the level of the roof of the arcade, so as to avoid the objections which were fatal to Nash's original arcades. On the roof of the arcades he would form an attractive open-air promenade for use in fine weather, with raised foot-bridges crossing the side of the streets.*

From an advertisement *in the "Hospital" number of the* Architects' Journal *of June* 24, 1925.—*"The modern hospital is a triumph of the elimination of the detrimental and the unessential. Because of its absolute fitness to purpose its operation theatre—like the engine room of an ocean liner—is one of the most perfect rooms in the world." (This is indeed the voice of Jacob!)*

As to mass-production, this is no new thing. All use of machinery has, of course, tended to mass-production. But the process goes much further back. The carpenter's plane bears much the same relation to the adze that the safety razor does to the older sort (which I confess I am conservative enough still to use), and in both cases the more modern



AN OPERATING THEATRE.
WALSH & MADDOCK, ARCHITECTS

tool achieves what we may call a mass-produced surface. And printing began merely as mass-produced writing. We have been burdened in this country with a timid Arts and Crafts movement, which has inevitably helped to obscure and deny the real virtues of mass-production; but this feeling, though it still lingers, is negligible, and even "artistic" people may now enjoy without apology the admirable products of mass-production.

Above all, in considering the vital problems adumbrated in this book, we must avoid any sort of snobbery. To take a small and unimportant case, the outcry against the modern roadside petrol pump seems to me a good example of this, and to be also the purest nonsense. I do not, of course, pretend that petrol pumps possess any great beauty or interest; but they are probably pleasanter than our pillar-boxes, and certainly than the majority of our lamp-posts. They are painted in clean heraldic colours which perform to perfection the true purposes of heraldry, and they give some touch of life and colour to our evil suburbs and our moribund villages.

This book, then, in its English dress, is published with the object of stimulating thought and arousing interest in the serious problems with which it deals. I have no doubt that some of the modern French work illustrated in these pages will appear unpleasing to many of us, but that might apply to individual architectural works of any school. We claim, and I think rightly, that we have gone far in this country towards solving the problem of the small or medium-sized house that shall be trim, well and economically planned, and pleasant in its general lines. We can hardly claim to have gone as far in matters of town-planning on a large scale, or in the provision of the immense modern structures which will inevitably be needed still more in the near future. A reading of this book may open out some avenues of thought in this direction.

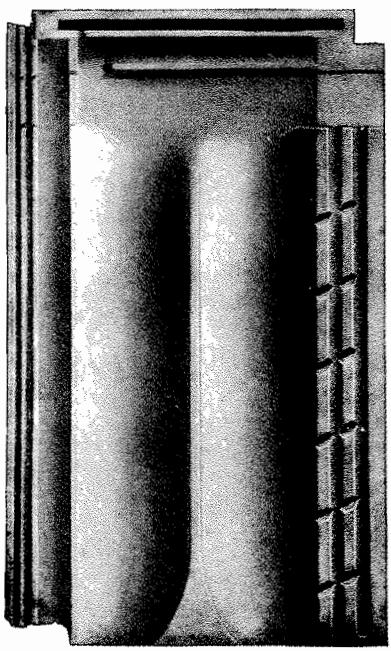
Some apology is needed for the translation. M. Le Corbusier writes in a somewhat staccato style which is a little disconcerting even in French; and his book is of the nature of a manifesto.

My aim has been to present a rendering as close and literal as possible, at the expense of some awkwardness in phrasing and the retention of a certain number of Gallicisms.

FREDERICK ETCHELLS.

NOTE.—Since the above was written I have read with much interest and pleasure, as some of my readers must have done, the report of the admirable paper read before the Royal Institute of British Architects on Monday, March 14, 1927, by Mr. Howard Robertson on "Modern French Architecture." The tone, both of the paper itself and of the discussion which followed it, was so discriminatingly sane and judicious that I advise any reader of this book to procure a copy of the *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* of March 19, 1927, where a full report will be found.

F. E.



A ROOFING TILE