

Letter from Colonel Roosevelt

To the American Institute of Architects:

Gentlemen: I wish it were in my power to attend your meeting, and if not, then at least to write a serious paper for you. All I can do is to send you this letter of good will. There can be no democracy without leadership, and there can be no leadership worth while in a democracy that is not in the interest of the people as a whole. This is just as true of art and literature as of government and war.

France has shown us how a radically democratic people can yet develop beauty for all the people by its fostering of artistic work. It is to our discredit as a nation that our governmental buildings should so frequently be monuments of sordid ugliness. Only too often the Government does less to advance the standards of architecture, and therefore of public taste, than has been done by many big private corporations. As instances of what can be done privately, witness the New York City railroad terminals and many of their stations, and the Harvey eating-houses and hotels in the Southwest. Always, when the Government has done something well, it has been by searching for or accepting expert leadership. In public buildings this means getting the better architects or artists to guide and represent the public taste. Congress, acting on its own initiative, is as unfit to prescribe conditions for the erection of public buildings as it would be to prescribe conditions for a general or an admiral, for a Grant or a Sheridan, a Farragut or a Dewey. It needs leadership in one case just as

much as in the other; the function of Congress should be to try to secure the best and wisest leadership in all cases. It is much to be regretted that our Government has never acted on the report of your body drawn up in 1907 by Mr. S. B. Trowbridge in favor of a Governmental Bureau of Fine Arts. The Tarsney Act, while in existence, made possible the employment of first-class architects by the national Government, but this Act was repealed, although the character of the buildings erected while it was in force ranked with the best in modern architecture. Since then the public work of this kind has not been good; and the Commission appointed by Congress to consider the matter split in two, the majority report recommending action that would have been practically worthless or worse, while the minority report looked in the right direction. The services of a "business man" are essential in connection with this particular governmental bureau, of course, but it is as emphatically necessary that the head shall be a great architect as it is that the head of a geological survey shall be a great geologist; and congressional initiative, as distinguished from the final right of Congress to pass on the recommendations of experts in bulk, is as damaging in the architectural branch of Government work as in the reclamation service. The application of "pork barrel" methods by Congress in the case of public buildings has been ruinous from every standpoint, including that of economy. It has been a betrayal of the public trust.

Let me add a most earnest plea to the architects themselves. Mere copying, mere imitation is as thoroughly unworthy in architecture as in every other branch of art and life. We need to profit by everything which has been done in the past, or is now being done, in other countries. We need always to adopt and develop what we adopt, and, if possible, ourselves to develop what is new and original or else what is indigenous to our soil. California and the Southwest generally have been particularly successful in thus developing the old colonial Spanish architecture to our own uses; and in places the southwestern people are now doing the same thing with the far older architecture of the Pueblo Indians. The need of avoiding the aberrations of false or artificial originality must not blind us to the fact that unless there is real originality there will be no greatness.

To follow conventions merely because they are conventions is silly; the type of mind to which precedent becomes a purposeless but all-powerful fetish is that which regards as important the denial that Shakespeare's sonnets are sonnets because they lack the conventional sonnet versifications or number of lines. Let me give one small instance: the lion, because of the way in which his mane lends itself to use in stone, has always been a favorite for decorative purposes in architecture. He has in architecture become universally acclimatized and there is no objection to his use anywhere. But we happen to have here on this continent, in the bison with its shaggy frontlet and mane and short curved horns, a beast which equally lends itself to decorative use and which possesses the advantage of being our own. I earnestly wish that the conventions of architecture here in America would be so shaped as to include a widespread use of the bison's head; and in a case like that of the New York Public Library there would be advantage from every standpoint in substituting two complete bison's figures for the preposterous lions, apparently in the preliminary stages of epilepsy, which now front on and disgrace Fifth Avenue.

There is good architecture, public and private, here in the United States, good architecture of all types from the loftiest to the humblest, but it is over-slaughed by the mass of poor architecture. If houses are built simply and comfortably, and if each feature possess a definite and wholesome purpose, then, although they may lack distinction, they are never ridiculous or discreditable. But there are avenues in at least some of our big cities, and in at least

some residential countrysides, which run between houses, mostly small houses, two-thirds of which represent painted and pretentious gimcrackery of the most odious type. There are districts crowded with domiciles of the very wealthy which are mere jumbles of unrelated copies of what is good abroad and of sporadic types of native ugliness. Yet there are also plenty of houses in the city and the country where wealth and taste have combined to give to the house distinction, while yet amplifying all that is useful and comfortable. These houses show love of beauty for its own sake, and also the power to heighten comfort and usefulness while making them beautiful.

I am not able to give advice to American architects, but I am able to wish them God-speed in the great work of helping supply the leadership that will give to our people what is simple, fine, and genuinely national in our forms of architecture. I am, Faithfully yours,

(Signed) THEODORE ROOSEVELT.

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313