

Georgian Leaflet No. 4.

THE
APPRECIATION OF
ARCHITECTURE

THE GEORGIAN GROUP

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The APPRECIATION of ARCHITECTURE

Architecture is the most obtrusive of the arts. We may leave art galleries unvisited; eschew the concert hall; confine our reading to the evening paper and an occasional detective story; but whether we like it or not, we cannot shut our eyes to the buildings around us—buildings in which we live, work, visit or merely pass by. Though we cannot but see these buildings, how many of us can be said to notice them, far less pay them real attention and consider and weigh their architectural merit? Not one in a thousand! And yet until there is again a general and lively interest in architecture, it will be difficult either to save the masterpieces of the past from destruction or create an atmosphere favourable to the building of masterpieces in the future.

The failure to notice the buildings we see is in great part, no doubt, a defence mechanism, the outcome of a subconscious refusal to notice that which is painful to us. Buildings of the past hundred years have been in general so humdrum and dreary, when not extravagantly bad, that it is perhaps inevitable that we should subconsciously train ourselves to ignore everything about them except their physical existence. Only by dulling our sensibilities can we bring ourselves to tolerate the drab monotony of the late Victorian suburbs; to accept without demur the false sensationalism of the supercinema facade; or to allow our streets to be desecrated by the standardised vulgarity still too often regarded as essential by the managements of many multiple shops. And in drilling ourselves to accept passively what is bad, we resign ourselves to the loss of what is good.

Such has not always been the case. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, architecture had not yet become a *mystery* practised by a closed profession: it was recognised as something of intimate concern to each one of us, an art of which all should know something and none could know all; an art in which proportion mattered more than decoration, in which simplicity might be more effective than elaboration and in which there need be no divorce between utility and beauty. The diner, as Aristotle remarked, is a better judge of the dinner than the cook; and it is only where there are discriminating diners that there will be good cooking. If we would have good architects and good architecture, we must recreate a public sensitive to its architectural surroundings and interested enough in architecture to know not only what it likes but why it likes it.

It must be emphasised that "architecture" is not confined, as is to-day too generally assumed, to the designing of important public buildings or expensive private houses; on the contrary, architecture, the art of good building, is no respecter of persons and any building may be—and in the eighteenth century usually was—

a significant piece of architecture. The larger part of our Georgian heritage—the hundreds of modest homes in town and village up and down the country—we owe not to the great architects of the period but to the nameless master-builders who made it their business to study the principles of sound construction and succeeded in maintaining a consistently high standard of design.

Nor, for that matter, is good architecture incompatible with standardised housing. Our revulsion from the depressing rows of villas which Victorian builders added to the outskirts of our cities, has led us to overlook the extremely standardised nature of much of the Georgian architecture which we so much admire. In the squares and crescents of the late Georgian period each house is the reflection of its neighbour. Yet there is no effect of monotony. Even in an architectural composition like Park Crescent, Regent's Park, where the houses taken singly are plain to the point of dullness, the whole is superb. The interiors, too, were in the main all built to the same plan; and though without adaptation they may not be suited to modern living, they well served the age for which they were designed.

Let us, then, not only see the buildings around us but view them with a discriminating eye; note the just proportions of this house and the lack of balance in that, and the insolence of a third in thrusting its disproportionate bulk between better-mannered neighbours or in seeking by garish display to attract the attention of passers-by. Before long, we shall begin to recognise the characteristics of different periods and of different schools, and to distinguish the original structure from later additions. And so, in due course, we shall not only equip ourselves to appreciate to the full the particular excellences of Georgian architecture, but also insensibly furnish ourselves with criteria to judge buildings of other ages, including our own, and learn to play our part in providing the architectural profession with that *sine qua non* of good building, a discerning public.

The GEORGIAN GROUP was founded in 1937. Its aims are:

- (1) to awaken public interest in Georgian architecture and town planning;
- (2) to afford advice in regard to the preservation, repair and use to-day of Georgian buildings;
- (3) to save from destruction and disfigurement Georgian squares, terraces, streets and individual buildings of special merit;
- (4) to ensure, when an area is replanned, that Georgian buildings are not wantonly destroyed, and that the new buildings harmonise (though they may contrast) with the old.

Particulars of Membership can be obtained from the Secretary.