

**REMARKS ON
LIBRARY
CONSTRUCTION**

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Remarks on Library Construction by W. F. Poole

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AT BUFFALO, AUGUST 15, 1883.

Our thanks are due to Mr. Edmands for the very able and interesting report to which we have just listened. Its views on the subject of library architecture are in harmony with opinions and resolutions which, without a dissenting voice, have been expressed at the last three meetings of this Association, where it has been freely discussed. In the wide range of topics relating to our profession which have been considered at our meetings, perhaps there is no one on which there is such a unanimous concurrence of opinion as on this,—that the typical style of constructing library buildings in this country and abroad is very faulty, and needs to be reformed. The discussions we have held have directed public attention to the subject, and the reform has already commenced. No committee or board of trustees, who now have the charge of erecting a library building, would take their architect to Boston, New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Washington or Cincinnati, and reproduce what they there found. Those buildings are all in the old conventional style,—a mediæval Gothic structure, with empty nave and galleries from four to six stories high filled with books. At Boston, Judge Chamberlain would say to the committee: "Do not copy our plans; they will vex you as they have us. We have abandoned them ourselves in the new building we are about to erect." At Cincinnati, my friend, Mr. Merrill, would say, as he has often said: "Make your building as unlike ours as you can, and you will not make a mistake."

The problem of library architecture is not a difficult one to solve if we will abandon conventional and mediæval ideas,

and apply the same common-sense, practical judgment and good taste which are used in the construction of houses to live in, stores to do business in, and hotels to accommodate transient visitors in. We want buildings for doing the work of a library in; for giving readers the best facilities for study; for storing books in the most convenient and accessible manner, where they will be secure from fire and heat, and for doing in the best manner whatever pertains to the administration of a library. The architect is not qualified to decide what the requirements of a library are, for he knows nothing about the details of its administration. The librarian should study out the design of the original plan, and the architect should take his practical suggestions, harmonize them, and give to the structure an artistic effect. It would be well if librarians gave more attention to library construction. If left to architects alone, the business will run in the old ruts.

The conventional style of library architecture has come down, through the centuries, to our day under the supposition that it was beautiful. Committees start out with the single idea, and seldom get beyond it, that a library building must be, in any event, picturesque. It may be objected that a building constructed on the practical and utilitarian ideas which have been promulgated of late through this Association will not be æsthetic. Beauty is that which is pleasing to the sight or gratifying to the other senses. That only is really beautiful which answers the purpose for which it was designed. Different persons have different æsthetic ideas as to the same object. A stranger entering the Cincinnati Public Library, and gazing aloft at the ornamental skylight and at the upper galleries filled with books, regards the design as beautiful; but the assistant, who is obliged to climb four flights of stairs to get a volume, sees no element of beauty in the arrangement; and when Mr. Merrill, on a summer day, finds that the sun streaming through that ornamental skylight has raised the temperature in the upper galleries to 140°, and that the bindings of his books are crumbling because they have been

burned up by this excessive heat, the sight does not appeal to his æsthetic faculty. No person who has had experience with buildings of this class will say they are beautiful, and for the reason that they do not meet the legitimate wants and conditions of a library.

We have naturally an interest in the plans which will be adopted in the construction of the two great library buildings soon to be erected in Boston and Washington, and chiefly because they will indicate the progress, if any, in library architecture. Mr. Edmands has given us such information concerning them as he could obtain, which is not very definite. With the plans for the Washington library we have an especial interest, because it is the National Library. If this American Association of practical librarians is good for anything, it would seem that it ought to have some influence, by the way of advice, in determining what those plans shall be. Hitherto its advice has been wholly ignored by the Congressional committee on that subject. The committee's plans were exhibited and explained by its architect, at our meeting in Washington, in February, 1881, and by resolution they met the disapproval of every member. They were in the old conventional style, with open nave, alcoves five stories high, and skylights. They were condemned again the next year, at our Cincinnati meeting. No notice was taken of our action; and the question of adopting those plans coming before Congress, the bill was defeated, on a motion of Mr. Holman, of Indiana, that the expense of the building (estimated by some architects at about ten million dollars) should not exceed two millions. The question will doubtless come up again in the next session of Congress. Mr. Spofford, in his letter to the Association, which Mr. Edmands has just read, says it appears to him "that the Association should take measures to make its views on the matter of library construction more widely known, and its influence felt in a more definite and emphatic manner." This is the very thing we have been trying to do, and with very little success. "And it is quite cer-

tain," he adds, "that with the prestige we [the Association] have, it is possible for us largely to give direction to public thought on the subject, and through the public to the action of Congress." I think we ought to heed this good counsel and to suggest that we be heard by the committee when the subject next comes up for consideration in Congress.

I regard the adoption of Mr. Holman's resolution as a fortunate circumstance, for it makes the construction of a building on the plans adopted by the committee, an impossibility, and indicates that the members of Congress propose to give to the matter some consideration. It affords the librarians of the country, also, an opportunity to express their views. As to what shall be the architecture of the exterior, this Association has no interest, and hence has expressed no opinion; but with the construction and arrangements of the interior it has, by unanimous votes, expressed and reiterated decided opinions, first at Washington, in 1881, just after the committee's plans had been exhibited and explained to the Association, and in these words:—

Resolved, That, in the opinion of this Association, the time has come for a radical modification of the prevailing typical style of library building, and the adoption of a style of construction better suited to economy and practical utility."

This resolution was repeated at Cincinnati, with some additional resolutions, among which were the following:—

Resolved, That the plans submitted to this Association at the Washington meeting, by Mr. J. L. Smithmeyer, and adopted by the Joint Committee of Congress, embody principles of construction which are now regarded as faulty by the whole library profession; and therefore, as members of the American Library Association, we protest against the erection of the building for the Library of Congress upon those principles.

Resolved, . . . That it is of great importance to the library interests of the country that the old and conventional errors

of construction be avoided in the interior plans of this building."

As these are the views on library construction which this Association has uniformly expressed, they must be the views which Mr. Spofford wishes "the Association to make more widely known, and its influence felt in a more definite and emphatic manner." I certainly am not inclined to shirk my share of this duty.

The only information we have as to the plans which are now in contemplation for the Congress library building is contained in Mr. Spofford's letter which has just been read. In it he "regrets the vote of the Association condemning an interior plan, assumed by those who passed it to have been fixed upon definitely, when it was merely provisional and designed to get some kind of a building from Congress." We were not told that the plans submitted to us for our information were provisional, and did not mean anything; and we never suspected that the committee had adopted plans simply "designed to get *some kind* of a building from Congress." Asking Congress for an appropriation, which involved an expense of some ten million dollars in carrying them out, had the appearance of business and serious intentions. We are now told that the interior arrangements, as well as the materials, were to be ultimately agreed upon by the commission, "with the understanding that the librarian's judgment would be carried out as to details." It was not to the details, but to the general plan, that we objected. Hon. C. B. Farwell, of Chicago, who was a member of the committee, said to me that he was as much responsible for the adoption of the plans as any member. I asked him whether, in case Congress had enacted the committee's bill and made the appropriation, the commission could have essentially changed Mr. Smithmeyer's plans. "Not at all," he replied; "the bill carried the plans with it, and was drawn so intentionally."

So much for the past; now what of the future? A building contrived for show, such as the late committee proposed,

can not be built for \$2,000,000; but one sufficiently commodious, adapted to the practical wants of the National Library, and architecturally an ornament to the city of Washington, can be built for about that sum. No committee will be likely again to go before Congress with plans which have not been duly considered. If they consult the librarians of the country and give any weight to the advice they receive, their plans will in some measure represent the views which this Association entertains and has expressed. The Librarian of Congress, who is one of our members, ought to have, and will have, much influence in determining what those plans will be. He was, when we met at Washington, cordially with us in condemning the conventional style of library buildings, and we have had no intimation, until we listened to his letter which has just been read, that there had been a change in his opinions. Recalling, Mr. President, the views he expressed to us when, with Mr. Cutter, we partook of his generous hospitality after the Washington meeting, I am surprised at the statement of his present views of what the interior of a National Library should be. It seems like falling back on Mr. Smithmeyer's plans. He says:—

"1. A grand central hall, sufficiently impressive in height and proportions to show at once, by its well-lined walls, the wealth of its literary stores, and to appeal to public taste as something worthy of the country."

Not a word or intimation is given as to the use to be made of this grand central hall, except that it impress the public as a show-room. Are there not show-buildings enough in Washington? A library is for the use of students and scholars, and not for sight-seers. It is the last institution which should be housed in a show-building. This central hall is to be of great height, and its walls lined with books, in galleries, of course, of which there are five tiers in Mr. Smithmeyer's plans. Possibly this number may be increased in a room of the height proposed. What is the purpose of all this? It is not a convenient mode of shelving books and

making them accessible ; and it is well known that the bindings of books stored in galleries are destroyed by heat. Mr. Spofford here proposes to repeat and perpetuate the injury to books from heat which he experiences in his present library rooms, and which he so vigorously condemned at the Washington meeting. He said: "If you go into the upper galleries of the Library of Congress on any day of the winter, and take a book from the shelves, the chances are that it will almost burn your hand. It has often occurred to me that, if these warped and shriveled and overheated volumes were not inanimate beings,—if they could only speak,—they would cry out with one voice to their custodians, 'Our sufferings are intolerable.'" Mr. Spofford now thinks that this arrangement "will appeal to public taste as something worthy of the country." To ignorant people who come to gape and stare, it will be impressive ; but to well-informed and educated persons it will be anything but an appeal to public taste. It will be pitiable, and positively discreditable to the Nation. If these be really Mr. Spofford's present views of what the National Library ought to be, I regard his comments on some plans of library construction which I proposed at Washington as positively complimentary to them. "In any case," he says, "the scheme proposed by Mr. Poole would be wholly unsuitable to a National Library building." My scheme has certainly a very different purpose in view from his ; and that I regard as its chief merit. The delectation of strangers and casual visitors is not the primary purpose of a library building. The Washington Monument, five hundred and twenty-five feet high, will soon be completed, and visitors from the rural districts can do their gazing and wondering there. They can now roam through the Capitol (which is a show-building), and with delight look aloft in the rotunda. They can visit the Smithsonian Institution, the Patent-Office, the President's House, and admire the marble columns around the Treasury Building. With these opportunities at sight-seeing, the National Library ought not to be constructed for their special