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Review of "Cheap, Quick, and Easy: Imitative Architectural Materials, 1870-1930" by P.H. Simpson

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architectural) ambients, where he played so important and controversial a role. At a time when the future of place is very much in doubt, when the urban spectacle takes glee in obliterating space and time from our cities, we need to listen attentively to those architects, like Pikionis, who interpret the experience of real locations so authoritatively.

NICHOLAS ADAMS
Vassar College

Pamela H. Simpson

Cheap, Quick, and Easy: Imitative Architectural Materials, 1870–1930

Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999, xii + 215 pp., 75 b. & w. illus. \$39.00 (cloth). ISBN 1-57233-037-6.

Anyone who has walked along the Main Street of an American town lined with nineteenth-century commercial blocks has probably seen rock-faced concrete block, pressed-steel wall coverings, and linoleum. Some may have been intrigued by the innovative nature of these products, others repelled by their cheapness and the vulgarity of their attempts to imitate more solid and permanent materials. Still others may not have given them any thought at all. In *Cheap, Quick, and Easy: Imitative Architectural Materials, 1870–1930*, Pamela H. Simpson analyzes these commonplace products, long overlooked by architectural historians. Even historians of vernacular architecture have tended to overlook these mass-produced goods, focusing instead on preindustrial craft. By giving serious attention to pressed steel and linoleum, Simpson demonstrates how much we have to learn about the impact of industrial production on everyday buildings.

As Simpson explains in her introduction, imitative architectural materials emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a result of the so-called Second Industrial Revolution, “a time of innovation, rapid development, and broad acceptance for the new ornamental materials” (5). Framed by the Civil War and the Great Depression, this period saw the rise of mass pro-

duction, a growing consumer culture, and more sophisticated methods of advertising, factors that combined to make new materials accessible to more people.

Despite the wide application of these materials to various building projects in North America and England—or perhaps because of it—there has been little scholarly work on the development of imitative architectural materials in this period. In order to uncover information on these products, Simpson has drawn on a range of sources, including trade journals and catalogues, period advertising and photographs, novels, oral histories, and extant buildings. She presents detailed histories of the most well-known imitative materials, employing methods of material-culture studies and vernacular architecture. By combining fieldwork to examine materials in situ and archival research to outline the development, production, and promotion of these materials to a broad audience, Simpson goes beyond mere aesthetic debates. She puts these products into the context of the industrial age and assesses their cultural significance with regard to mass production, mass marketing, and consumer activity.

Six of the book’s seven chapters are devoted to the development of a specific building material. Chapter 1 focuses on the invention of concrete block and begins with a short history of concrete, including the development of the Portland cement industry, which played a key role in promoting block as an easy-to-produce and cost-effective building material. Also critical to the widespread use of concrete block was the turn-of-the-century invention of an inexpensive cast-iron machine that allowed a single person, with or without construction skills, to make blocks with a range of faces. Rock-faced block was especially popular because it gave the effect of quarried stone while costing considerably less. Simpson points out that the product was particularly popular with owner-builders in the early twentieth century. Companies selling concrete-block machines marketed them directly

to individual home owners. In fact, Sears “advertised designs for concrete houses as well as for precut wooden ones” (14). In addition, building-supply companies produced the blocks in larger quantities and in the 1920s worked to standardize size and quality. Manufacturers of concrete-block machines promoted concrete blocks to both do-it-yourselfers and contractors as being fireproof, long-lasting, low-maintenance, and affordable to make and lay, while offering many ornamental possibilities.

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the development and use of ornamental sheet metal on the exteriors and interiors of buildings, respectively. Like concrete block, pressed metal developed as a result of improvements in both raw materials (in this case, iron and later steel) and in production methods (resulting in more choices and lower cost to the consumer). By embossing metal to imitate brick or stone, manufacturers created a cladding that could give a wood-frame structure a more substantial exterior appearance. For interior walls and ceilings, manufacturers gradually developed the practice of employing designers trained in art schools who developed purportedly correct Greek, Gothic, French Renaissance, Rococo, and Colonial patterns that could mimic plaster ornamentation. These strategies met with great success. Simpson notes that demand remained high until the 1930s, particularly for commercial buildings. In part, this popularity may have been due to the use of new marketing techniques such as direct sales, advertising, trade fairs, and trade catalogues. As Simpson points out, the sheet metal industry took “advantage of the whole infrastructure of mass communication and transportation that had transformed business practice in the second half of the nineteenth century” (49).

Simpson continues her focus on building interiors in chapters 4 and 5 by examining the histories of other types of floor and wall coverings, particularly linoleum. First patented in England in 1863 by Frederick Walton, linoleum was produced worldwide by the early twen-

tieth century. Like manufacturers of embossed metal wall and ceiling coverings, linoleum makers in Europe and America created in-house design departments and often employed well-known designers to produce attractive patterns that could be offered at a reasonable price. Other benefits of linoleum included its durability and easy-to-clean (some claimed even antiseptic) quality. Manufacturers promoted these characteristics in advertisements, particularly in women's magazines, as a way to expand their market beyond male customers. Also marketed to women for their modern, hygienic qualities were less widely known products like Lin-crusta-Walton, Anaglypta, and Tynecastle Tapestry—all embossed wall and ceiling coverings.

Chapter 6 focuses on a range of older faux materials, some dating from the eighteenth century and most hand-crafted, that were still being produced between 1870 and 1930. These products included compo, an inexpensive alternative to decorative wood carving; imitation plasters, such as carton pierre and papier-mâché; artificial stone; terracotta; and marbling and graining to create effects of stone and wood. This chapter and the preceding ones demonstrate the complex processes involved in making such materials and the increasingly sophisticated methods used by manufacturers to sell their products to men and women alike.

In the concluding chapter, "Substitute Gimcrackery: Aesthetic Debates and Social Implications," Simpson delves into the ongoing debate between manufacturers and promoters of new materials, who argued for their modern and democratizing nature, and architectural critics who saw these innovations as tasteless and, worse yet, culturally dangerous in their attempt to deceive. She correctly notes that much of the debate reflected class biases, pitting an artistic elite against a broader segment of society that found imitative materials attractive, at least in part because of their lower cost. By analyzing the writings of critics such as Augustus Welby North-

more Pugin, John Ruskin, Sir George Gilbert Scott, Charles Eastlake, William Morris, and Frank Lloyd Wright, she offers an overview of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century arguments for and against imitation. As Simpson points out, many of the arguments against these new imitative materials centered on perceptions of the machine as a destructive force in society. Drawing on Pugin's earlier writings, reformers like Ruskin and Morris emphasized honesty in craftsmanship and materials as the way to create an architecture that could actually improve society. In the early twentieth century, Wright still sought honesty in design but accepted the machine as "a tool for creating art" (149). Hence, Wright proposed that new materials be used in new and innovative ways rather than in imitation of historical materials or styles. For him, the machine and the materials that it produced could lead to a more democratic art.

Simpson does not go beyond the borders of Great Britain and the United States when analyzing these aesthetic debates, which is unfortunate, given that other chapters touch on European use of imitative materials. For example, in her discussion of linoleum she notes that such well-known modernists as Peter Behrens, Henry van de Velde, and Josef Hoffmann all created designs for linoleum as part of a movement to merge art and industry. These designers clearly saw advantages to using new materials to create modern forms. Since designs from continental Europe would have a profound influence on Great Britain and the United States beginning in the 1930s, a broader discussion could be particularly illuminating.

In the end, however, these debates seem to have mattered little to the public who bought and used imitative materials in abundance. And, while the widespread presence of these materials in buildings erected between 1870 and 1930 indicates their general appeal, it is also worth asking to what extent we can accept Simpson's conclusion that the people who made and used these materials saw them not as vulgar copies, but as "expressions

of aspirations for democracy, modernism, and progress" (164). To support her interpretation, she looks at advertisements and prescriptive literature on household management that encouraged cleanliness and efficiency in the home. She also cites marketing campaigns waged by manufacturers such as Armstrong Cork and Tile Company, one of the largest linoleum producers in the United States. Having determined through its own surveys that women were its primary customers, Armstrong marketed its goods to them, emphasizing the importance of a well-managed home made possible with linoleum. As further proof of the popularity of imitative materials, Simpson also offers writings of the day that promoted technology and innovation as democratizing forces. Increasing sales numbers certainly support the assertion that consumers responded to advertising, but the reader is left wondering if consumers themselves accepted the marketing hype or if they bought imitative materials for other reasons.

A related question left unanswered is why these products began to fall into disfavor by the 1930s, despite consumer acceptance of imitative materials in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Simpson notes at several points in the book that their decorative patterns did not fit into the growing popularity for smooth surfaces and streamlined forms that became more common as Modernism took hold in the United States. Yet, some of these materials continued to be popular well into the twentieth century. Linoleum, for instance, became a mainstay of the modern kitchen by adopting abstract, modernist patterns in place of those that imitated more traditional materials. It is not clear why the manufacturers of other materials did not also turn away from imitative forms.

Clearly written and heavily illustrated with period photographs and advertisements, *Cheap, Quick, and Easy* will be of great interest to architectural historians and others who study vernacular buildings. Simpson explains the physical characteristics of each material discussed and also overturns myths con-

cerning some of them, such as the still widely held belief that most pressed-metal ceilings were tin (they were usually iron and zinc, and later steel). Features of the book that will make it a useful reference include a glossary of terms and brand names, as well as an extensive bibliography revealing the wide range of sources Simpson consulted for her study. Most importantly, Simpson's careful examination of the production, marketing, and consumption of commonplace materials will help shape the study of vernacular architecture in the industrial age.

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Francis R. Kowsky

Country, Park, and City: The Architecture and Life of Calvert Vaux

New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, ix + 378 pp., 124 b. & w. illus. \$45 (cloth). ISBN 0-19-511495-7.

Francis Kowsky has produced a thorough and gracefully written study of Calvert Vaux's life and work. It is structured chronologically, rich in description of the buildings and landscapes designed by Vaux and his collaborators, well illustrated mainly with period photographs and drawings, and full of detail about Vaux's architectural practice, his clients and associates, and his social setting. Since Vaux left no personal papers, this detail is hard-won, the fruits of prolonged research. Kowsky's elegantly constructed sentences are filled with information, and are neither encumbered nor noticeably informed by current theory.

Vaux began his training as an architect in London where he apprenticed at the age of nineteen to Lewis Nockalls Cottingham whose practice involved restoring medieval buildings as well as designing contemporary urban buildings and country houses. After leaving Cottingham, Vaux made money lettering maps for lithographers, earning his living by lettering fast backward. When he

met the traveling American landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing, Vaux was ready to accept an offer of employment in the United States, since there was little architectural work for him in the London economy of 1850.

Vaux came to Newburgh, New York, to be Downing's assistant, then his partner, turning out a series of country houses and garden designs between 1850 and Downing's death in 1852. Kowsky shows us Downing's house and the rear extension that was added to contain their architectural offices, and tells us that Vaux's senior partner could slip into the house proper via a revolving bookcase to see his wife and children during the workday. Since Downing was also involved in writing articles and producing an edition of his book *Cottage Residences*, much of the design work in their partnership fell to Vaux.

Kowsky is interested in identifying Vaux's individual contributions to the Downing practice, such as the Italianate tower on Algonac, the Delano residence of 1851 in Balmville, N.Y. The Gothic villas designed in the office after Vaux's arrival show greater compactness and verticality than those produced earlier by Downing in his collaborations with Alexander Jackson Davis, revealing Vaux's rethinking of the type. The Findlay House in Newburgh of 1851/52 had Gothic details but a newly opened floor plan: in the reception rooms Vaux used pocket doors to provide views of the Hudson River. "The Findlay House epitomizes a type of dwelling that Vaux would design for the next two decades," Kowsky says, suggesting that Vaux arrived at his basic design principles early in his career (34). Vaux was not limited to Gothic houses, however; he had traveled in Europe, knew the work of Serlio and Palladio, and used a free classicism when that style was appropriate, as in an 1852 house in Newburgh for Dr. Daniel Culbert.

After Downing's death, Vaux moved into new offices in Newburgh, formed a partnership with Frederick Withers in 1853, and moved to New York City in 1856. Vaux was involved in the early

moves to professionalize architecture. He was at the founding meeting of the American Institute of Architects in New York, and gave one of the first A.I.A. lectures, in which he presented his ideas for apartment building design. A very interesting segment of Kowsky's text considers the contemporary reviews of Vaux's *Villas and Cottages* (New York, 1856), and notes some reviewers' negative feelings about the business-generating aspects of the book and its inclusion of a price list for Vaux's architectural services.

In lengthy passages of description, Kowsky walks readers through numerous houses, pointing out stylistic features, materials, characteristic rooflines, chimney profiles, and alignments of views from the houses toward landscape features. He is less forthcoming on plan features and room proximities, observing the location of reception rooms but addressing neither service spaces nor private family rooms, and ignoring the relation between the location of a room and its function. Vaux was inventive in house design: he had two sons after his 1854 marriage, and his house plans in *Villas and Cottages* accommodate children's needs. Vaux also designed a log house, published in *Harper's*, for frontier settlers "who wanted more than one all-purpose room" in their cabins (75). But, with the exception of Kowsky's discussion of Frederick Church's house Olana, we get little sense of how owners used their houses or what they might have needed—beside breathtaking views of the natural landscape.

Kowsky regularly ties Vaux's early work to well-known masters, urging us to see Vaux and Downing's Commercial Block (1851/52) in Boston as perhaps influenced by Schinkel's Berlin Bauakademie. He describes the Dudley Observatory as sited above Albany like "Juarra's eighteenth-century church La Superga," topped by a "Ledoux-like cylinder" (51). Kowsky utilizes a familiar art-historical model of description that evokes certain qualities in Vaux's designs by comparing them to familiar works. At the same time, such links are meant to enhance Vaux's reputation by associating