CORRESPONDENCE

Letters for this section should be written on one side of the paper only. The writer may adopt an assumed name for purposes of publication, but he must in all cases furnish his real name and address to the Editor.

COMPETITIONS FOR STUDENTS.

SIR,—Will you please convey to the right quarter my opinion that the interests of the profession would be far better served if the subjects generally that are set for the students' competitions were of a far more modest order. The desirability of the May subject, even if only the rough idea of a plan were asked for, especially in the limited time mentioned, would be open to criticism, but when one reads what is required for its representation, one can only regret that such a request should be in "The African Architect."

Being temporarily in the Public Works Department —surrounded by numbers of young men—strengthens me in any plea for invariable modesty of subject, which I am sure will best serve the end we all have in view.—I am, etc.,

WM. LUCAS.

P.S.—Why use such unusual terms as "reticulated" and "Rhineland" feet?

Pretoria, May 8th, 1912.

THE "BOKE."

The researches of Mr. Charles Welch, F.S.A., at the Record Office have brought to light a book of ordinances of the Carpenters' Company. The "boke," as it is called, is dated 1333, though the fraternity was not formally incorporated until 1477. The ordinances show a very complete state of organisation. Work had to be given in preference to members of the guild, sickness and incapacity from accident were assisted from the "common-box," and if the common-box was not sufficient, the brethren were assessed to make good the deficiency.

ARCHITECTS, CLIENTS AND SPECIALISTS

In cases where a building and its equipment are designed entirely by the architect, and completed under his direct superintendence, the relations between the latter and his client rest upon a perfectly satisfactory basis. It happens, however, in the present day that the work of engineering specialists enters so largely into the domain of building construction, using the term in its broadest sense, that the architect cannot always undertake the whole of the details unless he happens to be a structural, mechanical, electrical, hydraulic, and sanitary engineer as well as an architect.

Consequently there is need for expert engineering assistance, which is easily obtainable, but for which the architect's client is not always ready to pay, for the reason that he considers the architect's hardly-earned fees ought to cover everything in the nature of professional advice. When this exceedingly complimentary view is taken of the architect's competency only two alternatives are open in respect of highly-specialised branches of building construction and equipment. One is for the architect to enlist the aid of professional specialists and pay their fees out of his own pocket, a course he cannot reasonably be expected to adopt, and the other is for him to invite competitive specifications and estimates from commercial specialists, who are always ready, and usually advertise their readiness, to furnish projects and drawings "free of charge."

Architect Not to Blame.

The architect cannot be blamed if he is driven to accept the second alternative, choosing the scheme or schemes best suited to his requirements, making such modifications in his detail drawings as may be necessary, and undertaking the supervision of, and responsibility for, the works executed.

As a matter of fact, the system of providing expert advice "free of charge" is far more illusive than the equivalent practice of giving away free various

articles with a pound of tea. The enterprising tea merchant merely gives up a percentage of profit on goods actually sold and recoups this by increased sales, being thereby enabled to keep down his price to the current market rate. On the other hand, the structural or engineering specialist gives away specifications and drawings to any person who may ask for them without the certainty of selling anything in return. So universal has this pernicious system become that the commercial specialist is fully aware of the fact that all his competitors are engaged in it, and that he must count himself fortunate even if comparatively few of his projects result in profitable business.

How it Works in Practice.

Now let us see how this works out in practice. The steel contractor, reinforced concrete specialist, heating engineer, or electrical engineer has to maintain a costly drawing office and estimating department for the preparation of technical projects. If every one of these were accepted, the cost would be equivalent to a very small percentage of the estimate price, and the architect's client would suffer no loss. But, owing to the competition of rival firms, the specialist can only hope to be successful occasionally, and it is found even by firms in an exceptionally favourable position that the net cost of producing schemes and drawings to be given "free of charge" amounts to from five to ten per cent. on the resulting annual turnover.

The net upshot is that for work which could otherwise be executed for £10,000 the specialist is obliged to charge from £10,500 to £11,000 in order to get back the money wasted on unproductive projects. The figures here used for the purposes of illustration may not be of universal accuracy, but there is no escape from the inexorable conclusion that enormous sums of money are being paid every year by architects' clients, quite unconsciously, for the wasted work done in the drawing offices of commercial specialists, a state of things for which architects are in no way responsible.

Builders' Estimates.

Perhaps it may be thought by some of our readers that the same could be said of building contractors and their estimates. We are quite aware that builders have to face a certain proportion of unremunerated work as the result of competitive tendering, but their position is more favourable than that of engineering and structural specialists for the reasons that they are never asked to prepare designs, and that the quantities issued by architects reduce the work of estimating to a minimum. Moreover, builders only tender for work that has been definitely authorised, and each competitor knows that his tender has a fair chance of being accepted.

The specialist is not by any means on so good a footing, having to prepare designs, work out details, and get out quantities, in addition to the preparation of estimates, and, further, he is willing to do all these things for the convenience of architects and others who merely wish to consider whether or not the kind of construction or work involved shall be adopted, or to aid the architect in preparing designs to be submitted in competition with those of other architects.

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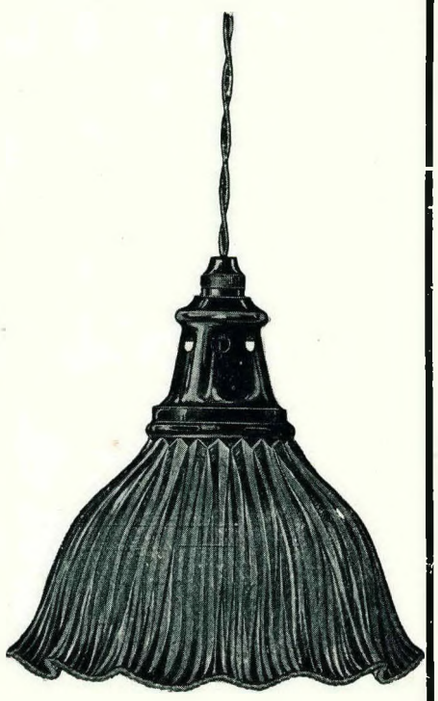

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Not an Easy Position.

The position is not an easy one to deal with, for it has arisen largely from the anxiety of the specialist firms to secure the favourable consideration of architects. The same kind of thing prevails in engineering practice, as shown by the presidential address of Mr. Michael Longridge to the Manchester Association of Engineers only a few weeks back. Consequently the waste of money in speculative estimates and designs would not be absolutely stopped if consulting engineers were associated with architects in all necessary cases. Nevertheless, the more general adoption of such co-operation would be a move in the right direction, and there is no doubt that if clients would pay directly for all necessary professional aid there would be an important reduction in the indirect payment now levied in the form of enhanced prices for work done by commercial specialists professing, but really unable, to furnish plans and specifications free of charge. In the case of many important buildings completed during recent years co-operation of the kind mentioned has been adopted on the recommendation of the architects, and we feel sure that the practice would be generally followed by the profession, where advisable, if clients would be more ready to recognise its advantages.—"The Builder."

THE BRITISH SCHOOL AT ROME.

Particulars have been published in a White Paper issued from the Privy Council Office of the Royal Charter which it is proposed to grant to the British School at Rome, to be erected on the site of the pavilion which contained the British Section of Fine Arts in the International Exhibition held last year in Rome. The articles of the charter are of interest and importance, setting forth the object and constitution of the school, and further reference will be made to the proposals in our next issue. The appointed members of the council will include two appointed by the Royal Institute of British Architects, both of whom will be architects, and four by the Royal Academy of Arts, one of whom will be an architect and one a sculptor.

NEUCHATEL.

Swiss archæologists are puzzled about the discovery at Neuchatel, by workmen on the future site of a hospital, of a vault built in bronze, which they state was erected 600 years B.C. In the vault the skeleton of a young woman was found, whose bones seem to be mummified, and on her wrists were four bracelets in bronze and two in lignite, while by her side was a little bronze bell.

MOUNT LEBANON.

Accompanying the gift of a gavel to the Marlborough Lodge, Liverpool, from Bro. Everett C. Brenton, Grand Master, State of Mass., U.S.A., was a framed address which announced that the log from which the gavel was made was brought down from Mount Lebanon by members of the Mount Lebanon Lodge. The log came from the same forest where the timber was secured for the building of the Ark and the two temples at Jerusalem.

MODERN ARCHITECTURE AND RESTORATION

The "Morning Post" published some interesting autobiographical particulars of Mr. Thomas Graham Jackson, R.A., apropos of the completion of the seventy-sixth birthday of this distinguished architect. He mentions that he was born at Hampstead, and articled to the late Sir Gilbert Scott, adding: "As in some other professions—the Bar, for instance—the progress of a young architect is exceedingly slow. For those who have no private means the prospect is indeed a dreary one. For my own part, I earned very little during the first thirteen years of my professional career. I consider that I owe everything to the outside fellowship which I obtained from my old college, Wadham. It is due to that that I was not under the stern necessity to earn my bread daily, and I was in a position to travel and to pursue my studies. When I started on my professional career we were in the midst of the fervour of the Gothic revival. In those days, influenced by the writings of the celebrated French architect, Viollet le Duc, we learned to look at nothing but Gothic architecture, more especially the earlier forms of it. I do not think I ever was a fanatical adherent of that school, and I soon came to see that modern art must be eclectic—that is to say, that it is impossible to shut one's eyes to the teaching of all the styles, and confine himself simply to one. This eclecticism is the main characteristic of modern architecture, and the result is that men work with far greater freedom. They now think less of 'the styles' and more of style itself. At the same time it must be borne in mind that this freedom is only permissible to those who possess the true artistic instinct. The Gothic revival had an important effect, inasmuch as it destroyed all tradition. Previously, workmen had certain traditions derived from the Renaissance writers; they knew how to make doors and windows in good proportion. But after the Gothic revival this was all destroyed, and all styles were thrown into confusion. Our domestic architecture was at its worst early in the reign of Queen Victoria. Since then there has undoubtedly been a great improvement, chiefly in the revival of some of the beautiful forms of the eighteenth century. I know, of course, that a good deal is said in these days about the misdeeds of the jerry-builder. We are told that in the olden days men never scamped their work, and so forth. I doubt, however, whether such a Golden Age is anything but the product of certain writers' imaginations. In my opinion, there has been jerry-building in all ages.

"With regard to the restoration of ancient buildings, in which I have been so largely engaged, the fundamental principle on which I have acted has been to make no substitution: to secure, not to undo. . . . To the architect, the successive additions and alterations to a building afford an object lesson in the history of architecture, and are of priceless value. Another great thing in dealing with old buildings is to avoid 'tidying up.' They should never be made to look neat and new, as has been the case abroad almost more than in this country. Chipped capitals or damaged mouldings should be left as they are. What is put in is of no historical value, and you may be forced to devise something that perhaps you do not understand. The thing as it is is at least genuine."

THE COMPETITIVE SYSTEM IN AMERICA

From an address delivered by Mr. J. Milton Dyer, F.A.I.A., before the Annual Convention of the American Institute of Architects, on the effect of competitions on design, we gather that as much improvement in the general ethics and conduct of competitions is required there as here, if they are always to exercise a beneficial influence on architectural design. It is as true here as there that "you are afraid to be impulsive, to play with the motives, to do the thing you yourself feel," because your "independence is only too often influenced by a vague mistrust as to the personal likes or dislikes of the jury," and that this does too often create the temptation to "sell one's soul to win." Both this and the complaint that the competitor cannot get into touch with his client seem to be rather defects of method than vices inherent in the nature of the competitive system. When juries and assessors learn to judge on generally accepted principles, rather than on personal predilection, the first should disappear. The second would be considerably mitigated if assessors, remembering that they are the interpreters of the wishes of the promoters, would acquire all such general information on the whole situation—beyond the bare facts of the case—and on the ultimate intentions and point of view of the promoters, as they would themselves acquire from their own clients if called upon to design a similar building. If this was incorporated in the conditions by way of information only, the competitors would not feel quite so much in the dark. Even more perhaps in this country than America do "the efforts of all in collaboration, working in an office upon a serious competition, develop not only draughtsmanship, but a real conception of architecture in its higher meaning, such as many months of routine work may not accomplish," for here there are fewer educational opportunities than appear to obtain in America for the study of large architectural schemes. It is hardly to be disputed that in this respect the competitive system has had a beneficial influence here, although we are not perhaps altogether free from the tyranny of the order which Mr. Dyer considers so undesirable a result of this system in America.

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