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Leading Article

Fire Protection: Bureaucracy or Commonsense?

IT SEEMS that fire safety regulations applied to buildings are tending to become unduly burdensome. This arises from a conflict of views. The fire officer sees a building as a collection of fire hazards and, knowing from experience what might happen in them and how foolish some occupiers can be, tends to demand the maximum of safety, regardless of cost. The architect envisages his building as having to fulfil an everyday function and to pay a return on capital; his knowledge of the possible effects of fire is, in most cases, slight; he tends to regard the cost of fire-safety measures as an overhead charge on a building which, he argues, may never suffer a fire.

The technology of structural fire protection is of fairly recent growth and, although much is now known about the fire-behaviour of structures and the planning of means of escape, opinion still governs many matters. Few practising architects know much about the subject and it is taught in only a few schools of architecture. This is an educational gap which increasingly needs to be made good as buildings become ever larger and taller, more complex and structurally slighter. What architect would rely merely on meeting by-law requirements in, for example, such technologies as structural design, acoustics, sanitation or insulation without having some knowledge of their underlying theories? Yet many architects do this with structural fire protection.

The administration of fire-safety requirements rests partly on fire authorities and partly on those controlling building by-laws, i.e., the borough engineer. Where, in county boroughs, the engineer and fireman are officers of the same authority, the two work together. The control they exercise is usually sensible, though often inclined to

be conservative. But in the counties, the engineer is an official of the borough, urban or rural authority, while the fireman is an officer of the remote county council; here, co-operation is rare. In fact, there is at present something of a cold war going on between engineers and firemen for control in the matter of structural fire protection. The sporadic and inexact nature of the laws and by-laws covering it is no help.

While there are exceptions, it can be said that few firemen have a grasp of the architect's viewpoint and problems and that many local authority engineers comprehend the principles of structural fire protection no better than does the average architect. The engineer therefore tends to follow the strict letter of the by-laws whether they are truly applicable to a particular case or not. This sometimes results in frustration, argument and unnecessarily costly building.

At present there is some measure of common ground in the Council for Codes of Practice of the BSI. The Council, through its Committee BLCP/24, which consists of experts from all interested parties, is at present preparing a series of Codes of Practice on precautions against fire in several common types of building; these Codes are intended to advise on good practice in structural design, planning for escape and fire equipment suitable for each.

The Council has recently published its first Code, 'Fire precautions in flats and maisonettes over 80 ft. in height.' It should be emphasised that this is an agreed statement by fire officers, local authority engineers, architects and scientists. The standards set out in the Code are not lower—indeed, in some respects higher—than is commonly accepted in countries which for many years past have

built tall dwelling blocks, notably the United States and Sweden. They are also economically practicable.

It is therefore regrettable that some British fire authorities are taking it on themselves to disagree with this Code. They seem to have little faith in the collective views of the experts on the Committee, made after prolonged study. Nor do they appear to know about foreign practice, or perhaps, British-like, they cannot imagine that any good ideas can come from abroad. They adhere rigidly to their own opinions from their own narrow viewpoints.

What is the answer? First, an intransigent attitude will get nowhere. Firemen will have to abandon their

present attitude of regarding the architect as being invariably an ignoramus on fire matters; architects will have to cease complaining about unnecessary bureaucratic impositions. A second, and probably the more fruitful, answer is for the architectural profession to master the technology of structural fire protection (as it has done with other technologies) so that fire problems can be discussed in a common language. All parties should have faith in the earnest endeavours of the Council for Codes of Practice. It is to be hoped that neither side will demand more legislation. The building industry is burdened with enough of that already.

Notes of the Week

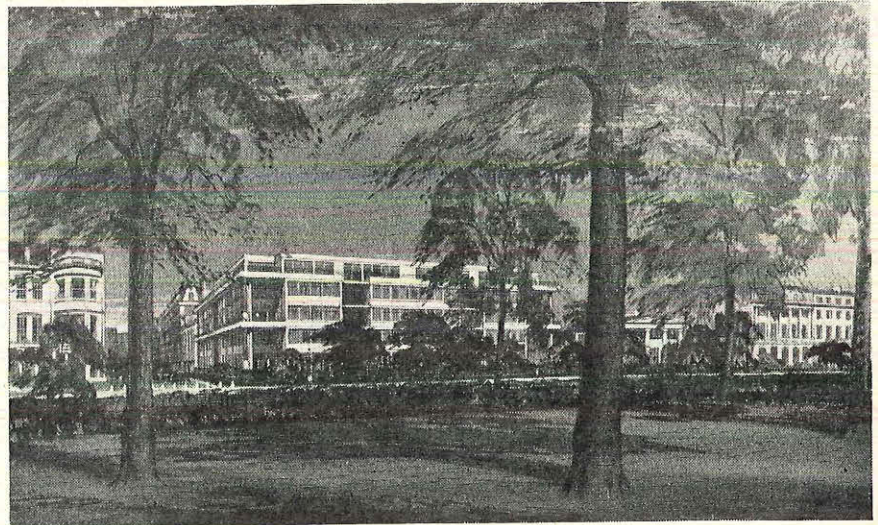
Technicians and Architects at the RIBA

THE DISCUSSION on the vexed question of the Technician class—to be trained or not to be trained—held in the Henry Florence hall at the RIBA on Monday night was quite inconclusive. This result can have surprised no one, least of all the many members of Council and of the Board of Architectural Education who were among the 120 members present. Yet the meeting had to be, if only to keep faith with the undertaking given at the last two annual general meetings that the membership at large would be given a chance to air their views before Council takes a decision, which may well be on Tuesday next.

The case for the acknowledgement of a Technician class of assistant in the architect's office was well made out by Mr. Austin-Smith who stated that research had shown that an overall increase in productivity of 63 per cent would be required by 1970 and that we could not escape a great industrialisation of building. Insofar as the RIBA survey had shown that over half of architectural staff in offices had had no technical training, the proposals to recognise and train technicians seemed to be fully established, though such training would not be at a professional level.

* * *

FROM THIS POINT ON the debate swayed between speakers who supported this view, those who supported it with qualification and those who, like Miss Jane Drew, felt that to teach everything necessary to an architect except design was highly dangerous. How, asked another member, was the technician to be prevented from taking design responsibility, especially in local authority and Civil service departments where the establishment officer would jump at the chance of getting equal work for less pay? At about this stage in the discussion a little air was let in by Mr. Kenneth Campbell's remark that too many speakers seemed to be too fearful of the consequences of the proposal. 'Architects,' he said, 'are not seemingly afraid of the 14,000 untrained assistants at present in offices but they appear to be terrified of the possibility of 11,000 trained technicians.' Before the wry smiles which this produced had died off members' faces Mr. Campbell had added that architects could not much longer resist the injection of



YORK TERRACE REBUILDING, REGENT'S PARK: In outlining the Crown Estate Commissioners' plans for the future of the Regent's Park terraces last week, Sir Malcolm Trustram Eve made special reference to the site of Nos. 44-49 York-terrace which became a total loss through enemy bombing. It has now been agreed that this separate terrace shall be rebuilt to a new design (shown above) and Mr. C. H. Elsom, FRIBA, has submitted a design on behalf of Mr. Max Rayne which is approved (with the exception of certain details with regard to facing materials) by the Royal Fine Art Commission, the LCC and the Commissioners. The building will contain flats and will commence fairly soon. Further details on p. 1286

some measure of efficiency into the building industry. Technical education for building must be enormously increased to meet enormously changed conditions; architects could be afraid of that too, but they must very soon make up their minds. One of the things that must be faced was that young qualified architects were cutting their teeth on production drawings at the expense of the client.

* * *

FOLLOWING sundry other contributions—one of them a sincere appeal from an unqualified assistant who asked why it was thought necessary to get rid of the architectural assistant and to prevent his aspiring to qualification—Sir William Holford summed up. Nine speakers (so far as he could understand them) seemed to be in favour of the RIBA going ahead with proposals for training, based on the National Certificates in building, and eight appeared to be against. These facts would be reported to the Council on June 26. A neat final touch was added

by Sir Robert Matthew, in thanking the President: he hoped that the council would approve the proposal as otherwise he, as incoming President on July 1, would be left with the baby.

Poet's Corner

THE CROWN ESTATES COMMISSIONERS have announced a scheme for the preservation of virtually all the Nash Terraces in Regent's Park.

When lovely things can be destroyed
To make more cash,
Let connoisseurs be overjoyed
That works of Nash,
Those gleaming stucco Terraces,
Are safe at last,
To startle, fascinate and please
As in the past.
Not architectural delight
But how he lives,
To many a Philistine the height
Of pleasure gives;
In such, alas (they've cash to spare!)
Nash clearly rouses
A passion not for stucco rare
But flats and houses!
Even preserved, the works of Nash
Can make, it's good to know, more cash!

ANON