

Which is the Finest Building in the World?

THE CHOICE OF OUR LEADING ARCHITECTS.

BY FREDERICK DOLMAN.



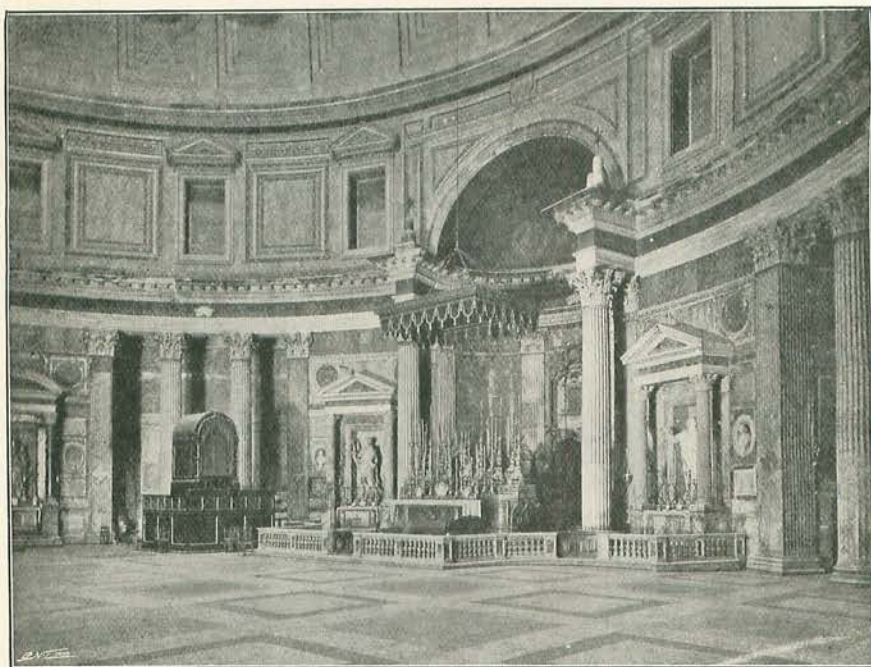
WHAT is our present-day ideal in architecture? Every Cook's tourist knows from conventional guide-books that there are certain buildings in various countries which he is expected to admire, but it is pretty certain that the expectation is not always realized. The hundreds of edifices that are starred in Murray or Baedeker cannot all appeal with equal force to the cultivated taste of our living masters in the art of building beautifully. On the other hand, there must be some which more or less realize their highest ideals. Which are these poems in stone and marble?

Mr. George Aitchison, R.A., the Professor of Architecture in the Royal Academy

our conversation he had two large portfolios brought into the room, filled with photographs and engravings of European buildings which he had seen for himself at one time or the other.

As we rummaged over the contents of the portfolios Mr. Aitchison successively mentioned, with more or less admiration, the Pantheon at Rome, the Church of S. Maria della Saluta at Venice, Amiens and Milan Cathedrals, St. George's Hall, Liverpool, and the Opera House, Paris. But it was to the Pantheon that his thoughts again and again returned.

"Of course, I am speaking of the interior—the exterior is comparatively insignificant. I admire it mainly because of its exquisite simplicity. In architecture as in literature



From a Photo. by]

THE PANTHEON AT ROME.
(Selected by Mr. George Aitchison, R.A.)

[Brogi, Rome.

The Pantheon, the best-preserved structure of Ancient Rome, is about 2,000 years old. Built as a temple by the Emperor Hadrian, it was consecrated in A.D. 609 as a Christian church. The interior, lighted by an aperture in the centre of the dome, is so beautiful that the name Pantheon is supposed to have been derived from its resemblance to the vault of Heaven. The dome is 140ft. both in height and diameter. The Pantheon contains, among other tombs, those of Raphael and the late King of Italy, Victor Emmanuel.

Schools, and the designer (among many other beautiful buildings) of the late Lord Leighton's house, devoted an hour at his residence in Harley Street one afternoon to the consideration of my question. To assist

the art should never be visible. I remember reading somewhere in a book by Anatole France that purity of style was like a beam of light across a room. You can't see the colours in the light, although you know they

are there. So it is with the Pantheon—it produces an impression of perfect symmetry, but no effort on the part of the architect can be seen to produce this effect. In the Paris Opera House, on the other hand, beautiful though it is, there is too much labour apparent—the arrangement of the elaborate staircases, for instance, always gave me this feeling.”

“The name of the architect of the Roman Pantheon cannot even be conjectured?”

“No, unfortunately the Romans were very careless about the fame of their artists, who were mostly Greek slaves, and although making good use of their talents, never gave them the honours bestowed upon successful soldiers and administrators. Until a few years ago it was always supposed that the Pantheon was part of the baths built by Agrippa, but a Frenchman, who had obtained the permission of the Government to make a thorough examination of the building, found bricks in various parts of it that bore the stamp of the Emperor Hadrian. This discovery made it clear that the Pantheon could not have been built before Hadrian’s reign, and it is now thought to have been designed as a kind of temple of heroes.”

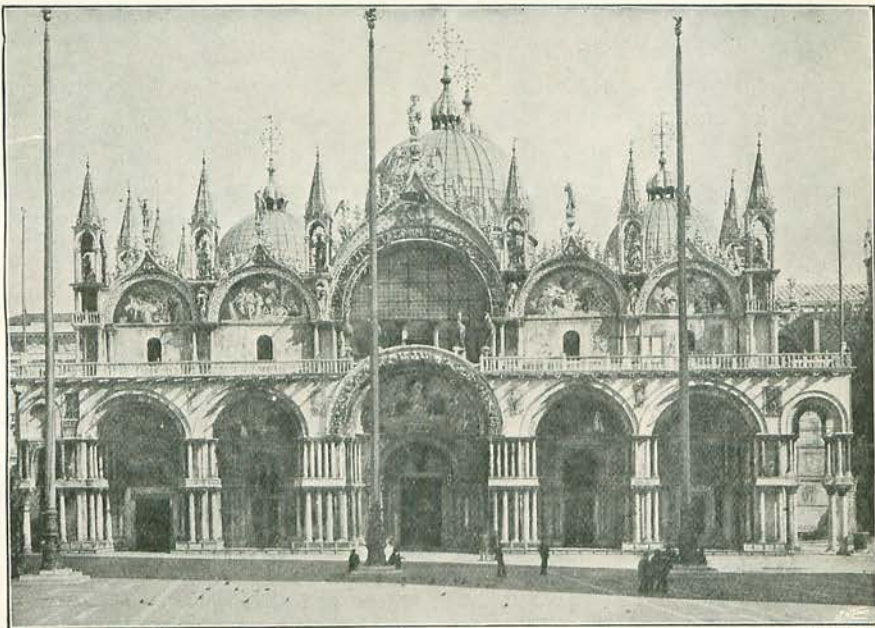
“Isn’t it possible that further research,

such as this Frenchman undertook, might reveal the architect’s name?”

“It is possible that it may be hidden in the stone somewhere about the building, but hardly probable, I think. As I have said, the Roman emperors were indifferent to their architects’ reputation. Hadrian himself has got the credit for several buildings, which were probably designed by him only in the sense in which a rich man of to-day is said to design his own house because he tells an architect what sort of house he wants. The name of only one of Hadrian’s architects—Apollodorus—has come down to us, and he is said to have been put to death quite early in the reign because he criticised too severely one of the Emperor’s architectural plans.”

I appealed next to Mr. Alfred Waterhouse, R.A., the designer of the Manchester Town Hall, the Natural History Museum (South Kensington), the National Liberal Club, and other noteworthy buildings of our time, who shares with three other R.A.’s and three A.R.A.’s the representation of architecture at Burlington House.

“This question—which do I consider the best of the world’s buildings? — is one, curiously enough, which has never been put



From a Photo. by]

ST. MARK'S, VENICE—EXTERIOR.
(Selected by Mr. Alfred Waterhouse, R.A.)

[E. Alinari.

There has been a church on this famous site since the ninth century. The present edifice may be said to have been built between the eleventh and the fifteenth centuries, by architects whose names have been mostly forgotten. Egypt, Greece, and the Orient generally were despoiled for the decoration of St. Mark's. Five hundred columns of porphyry and costly marbles adorn the interior and exterior. The bell-tower adjoining, which is 316ft. high, was built between 888 and 1150.

to me before," he remarked at the outset of my chat with him in his rooms at New Cavendish Street, W. "I admit its great interest, but at the same time it is exceedingly difficult—I am afraid I shall require still further time for its consideration.

"The names of so many different buildings occur to me as standing for certain qualities. For instance, I might mention St. Mark's, at Venice, for beauty of appearance, and St. Peter's, at Rome, for size. There is another stumbling-block in the difference of styles. When I was a youth, studying the archi-

again, architecture is not merely one of the fine arts. It has to do with the necessities and conveniences of life. These have both to be considered, and it is difficult, indeed, to judge between them in making such a choice as you would have me make."

Mr. Waterhouse, it will be seen, had taken the most stringent view of the question I had propounded to him. Of the other architects of eminence whom I had consulted in the meantime I doubt whether more than one or two would have committed themselves to one building as *the* finest in



From a Photo. by]

ST. MARK'S, VENICE—INTERIOR.
(Selected by Mr. Alfred Waterhouse, R.A.)

[Brogi, Rome.

itecture of France and Italy, everybody was for Gothic, and I would hardly look at a Renaissance building, although I have lived long enough to recognise that the Renaissance style has its beauties and merits. But if I were to suggest a Gothic building for illustration in your article, probably not one architect in 500 would agree with me. No, you must let me think the matter over for a few days."

In a few days, accordingly, Mr. Waterhouse wrote to me as follows:—

"Though I have thought about the subject, I have to report that I have come to no decision as to a building to be preferred by me before all others. It seems so difficult to judge of a building on its abstract merits, independently of its associations. Then

the world. The building they respectively nominated for illustration in this article must be regarded—unless it otherwise appears from their conversation with me—only as exemplifying the highest achievement in architecture which they had seen. In this sense, therefore, I am justified in associating St. Mark's with Mr. Waterhouse's name.

Mr. R. Phené Spiers, F.S.A., F.R.I.B.A., Master of the Architectural School at the Royal Academy, had a chat with me one evening as he presided over his class.

"You ask me," he remarked at the outset, with somewhat forbidding severity, as though I trifled with a great subject, "to make a choice of one building, regardless of time



Photo. by]

THE MOSQUE OF ST. SOPHIA, CONSTANTINOPLE—EXTERIOR. [Sebah & Joaillier.
(Selected by Mr. R. Phené Spiers, F.S.A., F.R.I.B.A.)

This, the most important of the ecclesiastical buildings of Constantinople, dates from 532, being built as a Christian church from the designs of Anthemius of Tralles and Isidorus of Miletus. Ten thousand workmen are said to have been engaged, and the cost reached a million sterling, although the most valuable materials were obtained by the plunder of ancient temples. The interior is generally the more admired. The dome is 180ft. high.

or country. Well, I might mention one of the pyramids, although you would probably reply that the pyramids are marvels of human

Haddon Hall, Derbyshire ; Holland House, London ; St. Paul's ; Maison Carré, Nimes ; St. Sophia, Constantinople ; Amiens Cathed-

labour rather than of human art, a triumph of building construction rather than of architecture. I am afraid that the best I can do is to give you a list of twelve buildings which may be regarded as best exemplifying successive periods and styles."

With these words, Mr. Spiers took out a sheet of note-paper from his desk and, with some deliberation over each name, wrote out the following list : The Temple of The-
seus, Athens ;
Pantheon, Rome ;
St. Mark's, Venice ;



From a Photo. by]

THE MOSQUE OF ST. SOPHIA, CONSTANTINOPLE—INTERIOR.
(Selected by Mr. R. Phené Spiers, F.S.A., F.R.I.B.A.)

[Sebah & Joaillier.

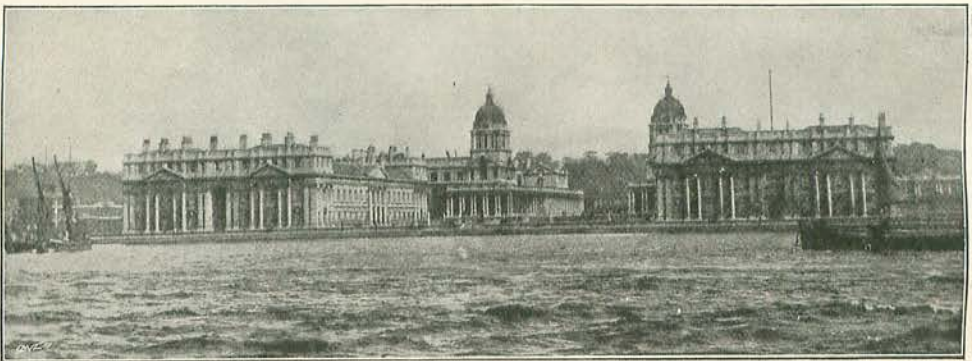
dral; St. Peter's, Rome; Blois Château; Houses of Parliament, Westminster.

"But can you not say which of these twelve you would spare if ruthless fate ordained that eleven were to perish?"

"As I would not have one destroyed I should hardly care to undertake that responsibility. But I daresay in general estimation the first place should be given to the Houses of Parliament—and Sir Charles Barry's work is certainly one of the best among that of modern architects. Mr. Norman Shaw, R.A., has, I believe, measured the whole building, the Houses of Parliament being probably the only modern building to

changed somewhat in favour of the Renaissance style of architecture, he has obtained a first-hand knowledge of the churches and palaces of Italy.

"Greenwich Hospital, or, as it is now called, the Royal Naval College," Mr. Belcher remarks as he sits in his chambers in Hanover Square, "has a most admirable combination of qualities. The building has both external and internal beauty, the grouping is splendid, and it was excellently adapted, I should say, to the purpose for which it was originally erected. Sometimes an American visitor comes to me in London, and I always tell him to go and see Green-



From a Photo. by]

GREENWICH HOSPITAL.

[F. Frith & Co.

(Selected by Mr. John Belcher, A.R.A.)

Greenwich Hospital, which occupies the site of a Royal palace, was built partly in the reign of Charles II. (from designs by Inigo Jones) and partly in those of William and Mary and Queen Anne (from designs by Sir Christopher Wren). It was the residence of 3,000 naval pensioners until 1869, and is now known as the Royal Naval College.

which such a compliment has been paid. But my own dream, my own ideal, of architectural beauty has always been the church, now the Mosque, of St. Sophia at Constantinople, although I once spent a month drawing the Parthenon at Athens."

Mr. Spiers spoke with learned enthusiasm of the "Church of the Divine Wisdom," as the celebrated mosque was originally called when designed by Anthemius of Tralles and Isidorus of Miletus, the Emperor Justinian's architects, about 532 A.D.—of the bold span of the arches and the splendour of the dome, and of the rich variety of the decoration of the interior, with its marble pillars and mosaics.

Mr. John Belcher, A.R.A., had little hesitation in giving his verdict for Greenwich Hospital as an almost perfect example of architectural art. And this notwithstanding the fact that as a young man, when he shared the prevalent feeling for Gothic, Mr. Belcher travelled extensively in Germany; and in recent years, when his views have

with Hospital as an example of the best in English architecture. For my own part, I am never tired of going to see it. I have drawn it many times, and I have seen it under almost every imaginable aspect. As you know, we have an Academy dinner every summer at the 'Old Ship,' and once or twice, looking at the Hospital in the moonlight from the hotel windows, its misty-grey Portland stone has had as fine an effect as anything in Venice."

"I suppose Inigo Jones and Sir Christopher Wren may be said to have collaborated in the design of Greenwich Hospital?"

"Well, the west wing was built from designs by Inigo Jones in the reign of Charles II., and when Wren received his instructions under Queen Anne he had to plan a building with which this could be incorporated, and in doing this he showed, I think, extraordinary skill. Other architects have also had a hand in both exterior and interior. The oldest part, for instance, was rebuilt early in this century, and the chapel had to be rebuilt after a fire. But Wren's original design

has dominated the work of all his successors, and the different features of the building, the four separate blocks and the several quadrangles, the spacious frontage and the varying height, are still in perfect keeping with each other. On the other hand, the interior has suffered from the pulling-about caused by the change of purpose thirty years ago from a pensioners' abode to a naval college. The best general view of the building is undoubtedly to be obtained from the deck of a river steamer, and almost every Londoner is familiar with it, I suppose, from that standpoint. But it is necessary to go into the building to fully appreciate its external architecture, to say nothing of the handsome painted hall and other features of the interior."

I remind Mr. Belcher of the saying of one of our distinguished foreign visitors that "the English put their poor into palaces and their princes into poor-houses." The epigram had reference to Greenwich Hospital (when it was a home for superannuated sailors) and Buckingham Palace with its deplorable architecture.

Mr. Belcher, who was a pupil of Mr. Street, R.A., had illustrated his argument about Greenwich Hospital by several engravings of the building, taking them from a large cabinet full of such things. Among these souvenirs of his architectural studies at home and abroad are drawings of some of the many important buildings he has himself

designed, such as the Institute of Chartered Accountants in the City, and Lord Eldon's country seat, Stowell Park. I am also interested in one or two of his models, such as the clock tower of the town hall he is building at Colchester, which give me a clearer idea of the method by which an architect's mental conceptions are translated into bricks and mortar, marble and stone.

It is as an architect of private houses mainly that Mr. R. Norman Shaw, R.A., made his reputation, and not the least interesting of the many he has designed is his own residence in Ellerdale Road, Hampstead, where I had an after-dinner chat with him one evening on the subject of this article.

"My choice," said Mr. Shaw, almost immediately, "is St. George's Hall, Liverpool. I don't see why one should not prefer a building in one's own country if this is possible. I have been all over the Continent, and I have certainly seen nothing finer in its way than St. George's Hall, if as fine. Of course, the Palace of Justice, in Brussels, for instance, is incomparably bigger; but St. George's Hall, although less ambitious in its design, is more successful than some of these Continental edifices. Its simplicity makes it the more impressive, and, whilst striking to the eye, the design is full of refinement. Although people generally don't seem to realize it — not even Liverpoolians — we have in St. George's Hall, Liverpool, a building for all



From a Photo. by]

ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LIVERPOOL.
(Selected by Mr. R. Norman Shaw, R.A.)

[Brown, Barnes, & Bell.

St. George's Hall was erected in 1854, when the assizes were removed to Liverpool, and is one of the largest buildings in the country. The law courts open into a hall 169ft. long, 87ft. wide, and 74ft. high. It has granite columns and marble balustrades and pavements. The designs for St. George's Hall were open to competition, Mr. Harvey Lonsdale Elmes being the first prizewinner. Owing to his premature death, however, the building was finished by Mr. C. R. Cockerell, R.A.

time, one of the great edifices of the world."

"Of course, it enjoys a splendid site?"

"Yes, in that respect I suppose it must be said to be exceptional among our English buildings. But, on the other hand, it is to the credit of the two architects, Mr. H. L. Elmes and Mr. C. R. Cockerell, R.A., that they were able to erect a building worthy of so exceptional a site. The original design was by Elmes, who was successful in a competition, but he died before the building was far advanced—killed, it has been said, by the anxieties of the undertaking—and it was finished by Cockerell. It was originally intended to have two buildings—a music hall and law courts—and his plan for a combined building had not been fully worked out at the time of his death. But Cockerell in his ideas was in full sympathy with Elmes, and the building must be regarded as the joint work of both men."

"You have seen St. George's Hall many times, I suppose?"

"Yes, and as recently as last year, when I took my son all round it and over it. The first time I saw it was forty years ago—about six years after its completion, when the stone was not so black as it is now. I was visiting the Manchester Exhibition, and I went over to Liverpool especially to see St. George's Hall. It was the day of the Gothic style, of course, and I was then regarded as a heretic by most of my professional friends, who could not understand why I should admire this Pagan thing so much. But I stuck to my opinion all the same, and made a point of getting a good look at St. George's Hall every time I went to Liverpool."

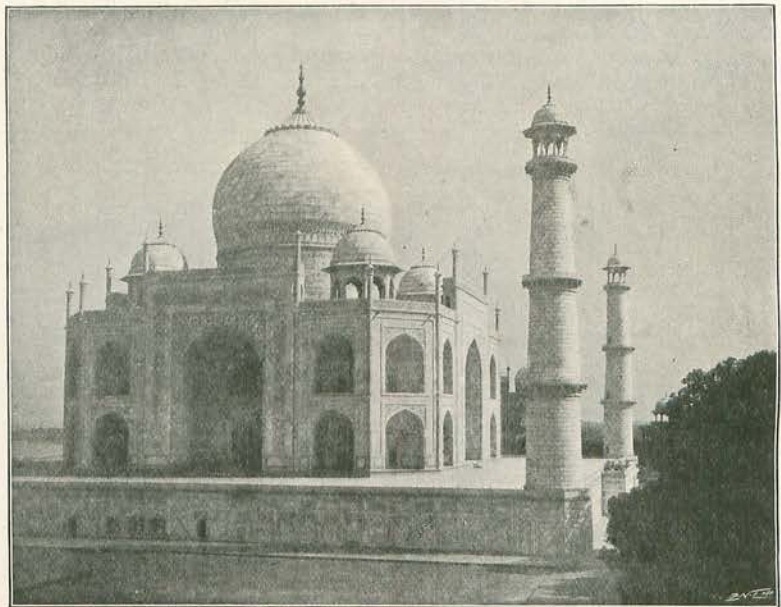
"Do you consider the interior equal to the exterior, Mr. Shaw?"

"Yes, I do.

Yes, the different parts, law courts and music hall, are well arranged and well adapted to the purposes for which they were designed. The music hall is said to be bad for sound—that is, for the singing voice—but I believe that at first it was only intended to be used for organ recitals. Unfortunately it has been partly spoilt for the time being by some recent addition. I noticed on my last visit that a floor had been laid down for dancing, and this has injured the beautiful symmetry of the proportions, whilst the fine black marble at one end is now hidden by an orchestra. But these things could be removed in a day or two at the cost of a few pounds, and really do not affect the enduring value of St. George's Hall as our finest example of the Greek style."

Mr. William Emerson, the President of the Royal Institute of British Architects, has enjoyed the advantage of becoming personally acquainted with the principal buildings of India as well as of Europe.

"I returned from India," he told me in his offices at the Sanctuary, Westminster, "convinced that the 'Tāj' at Agra was the finest building I had ever seen. This was twenty-four years ago, and when I revisited



From a)

THE TĀJ MAHĀL, AGRA, INDIA.
(Selected by Mr. William Emerson, P.R.I.B.A.)

[Photo.

This famous mausoleum, erected by the Emperor Shāh Jehān for his favourite wife, was begun in 1630, and is believed to have occupied 20,000 workmen for seventeen years at a cost of about three millions sterling. It is magnificently decorated with precious stones from various parts of India and the East. It has a charming foreground of gardens and fountains. The name of the designer has not come down to us.

the country several years since I was of the same opinion, although I had travelled through all the European countries except Russia and Spain."

"What is it in the 'Tâj' which appeals to you so strongly?"

"The 'Tâj' is difficult to describe in a few words, although I spent a fortnight looking at it, and made drawings of large parts. But photographs give some idea of its unique beauty. The fascination of the building is greatest under moonlight. You feel then that there is nothing to compare with it in Western civilization."



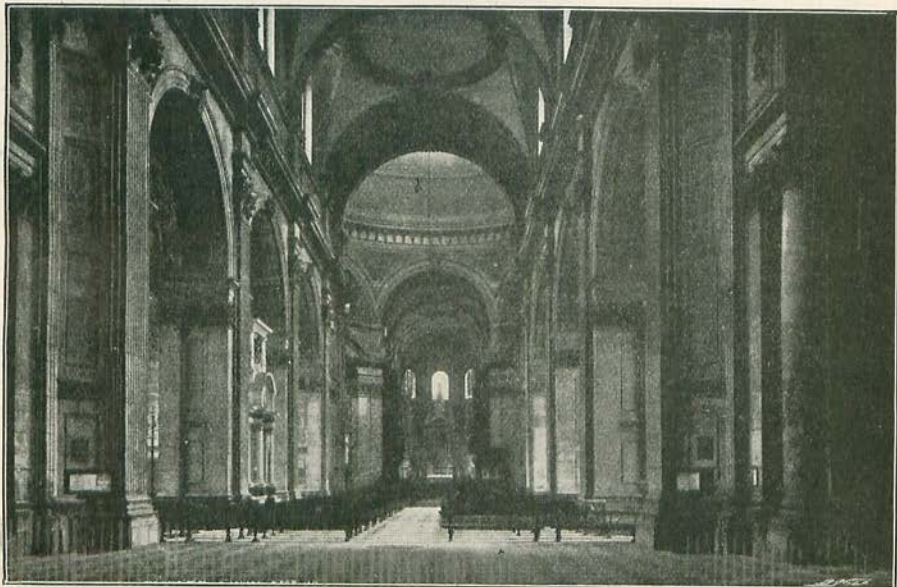
From a Photo. by] ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL—EXTERIOR. [J. Valentine.

(Selected by Mr. Thomas E. Collcutt, F.R.I.B.A.)

The present is the third cathedral erected on the site, the first being founded in 610. Sir Christopher Wren designed it in 1673, seven years after the Great Fire of London destroyed the second. The building was finished in 1697 at a cost of £747,954. The total length of the Cathedral is 500ft., its extreme height 404ft., and the width of the transepts 250ft.

Mr. Emerson, I may add, is by no means the first authority who, having seen the famous Indian mausoleum, has spoken of it in such terms. Architects who have seen it only in photographs are more sceptical, and attribute much of the enthusiasm it excites to the atmospheric effect of its environment.

"Why not St. Paul's?" was the question with which Mr. Thomas E. Collcutt, the designer of the Imperial Institute and other stately piles, met me at his house in Bloomsbury Square.



From a Photo. by]

ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL—INTERIOR.

(Selected by Mr. Thomas E. Collcutt, F.R.I.B.A.)

[J. Valentine.

"I consider St. Paul's to be the finest Renaissance Church," said Mr. Colcutt. "Yes, finer than St. Peter's at Rome. Of course it cannot be compared with St. Peter's in size, but the detail is more perfect, and the proportions better. The dome of St. Peter's is dwarfed by the extent of the foreground. Apart from the site, St. Paul's is the more impressive building. And if any nation but ourselves had St. Paul's they would take care that it had a worthy site. If it were in Paris they would clear the ground around it of the drapers' shops and so forth, in order that the whole world might come to see it. You speak of the cost—but the French would take a more Imperial view of the whole matter."

"Perhaps a beginning has been made with the widening of Ludgate Hill," I ventured to suggest.

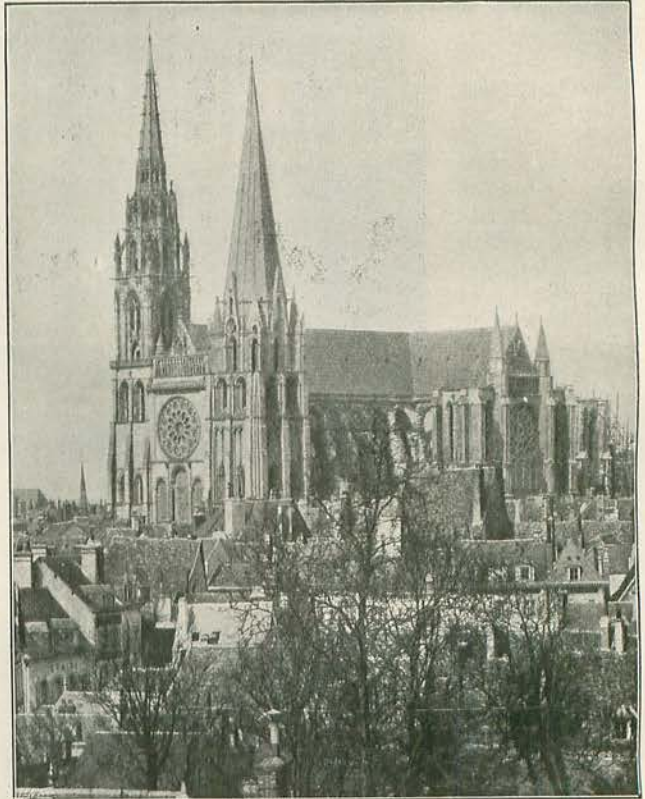
"Well, I am not sure that the view from Ludgate Hill was not better before. The widening was only half done, and I fancy that the narrow glimpse from the bottom of the hill, which I remember to have had when I first came to London as a boy of seventeen, was more picturesque than the larger but still partial view of the cathedral which one now has. Ludgate Hill should have been widened to the whole width of the cathedral front, just as the whole space should be cleared between it and Newgate Street, if the beauty of St. Paul's is to be seen to the best advantage."

"How do you think the interior compares with the exterior?"

"It is, perhaps, not quite so good. For one thing, as you know, the cathedral has a masked wall—a thing for which Wren has often been severely, and, as I think, unjustly criticised. I don't like the decoration which the interior has recently undergone—in my opinion the cathedral was best cared for by Penrose when he was architect to the Dean and Chapter. But speaking of both exterior and interior, and notwithstanding that I have seen a good deal of architecture on the Continent, I have no hesitation in suggesting St. Paul's. I am glad that nowadays students

draw St. Paul's a good deal; in my student days it was comparatively neglected. I was with Mr. Street, and he always used to send his pupils to Westminster Abbey."

Chartres Cathedral, which is fifty-four miles from Paris, was the choice of Mr. Thomas Blashill, F.R.I.B.A., who lately resigned the position of Architect to the London County Council.



From a

CHARTRES CATHEDRAL.

[Photo.

(Selected by Mr. Thomas Blashill, F.R.I.B.A.)

The Cathedral of Notre Dame, Chartres, fifty-five miles from Paris, was founded in the eleventh century. It suffered severely from fire in 1194, and was rebuilt in the main between that date and 1240. The Cathedral is 420ft. long, and one of the two spires measures 375ft., the other 350ft.

"I suggest Chartres Cathedral to you," said Mr. Blashill, in explaining this choice over a cup of coffee in his study at Tavistock Square, "because no other building I have seen has such an interesting variety—it may be said, in its several parts, to illustrate the best in architecture between the thirteenth and the sixteenth century. There has always been ample money for the building and maintenance of the cathedral, and it has always been judiciously spent.

"I first visited Chartres in 1871, and I

have seen the cathedral many times since. On our Continental holidays we have made a point of breaking the journey, not at Paris, where one has a rush night and morning between the station and the hotel, but at Chartres, which can easily be reached in good time the same night."

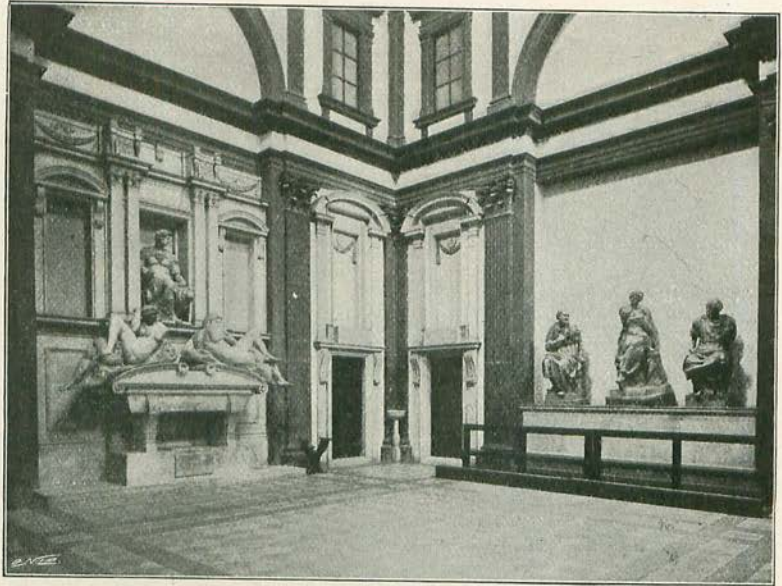
Mr. Blashill then proceeds to show me some of the numerous drawings which he has made on these visits of various parts of the cathedral. I am also permitted to look into a diary, illus-

trated by photographs, which he had kept of a French architectural tour. In this he speaks of the "unforgettable" day when he first saw Chartres Cathedral, whose principal merits he sums up as "massive, strong, and graceful in outline." He adds that it is "a school of art of the best kind," with its thousands of statues and 160 windows, "the like of them nowhere else to be seen."

"Of course, Chartres is Gothic," Mr. Blashill remarks as I lay down the volume, "and Gothic has gone out of fashion. More's the pity."

Mr. Walter Emden, L.C.C., is widely known as a specialist in theatrical architecture, several London theatres having been built from his designs. But it was of a church, not a playhouse, that he spoke when I called upon him at his offices over Terry's Theatre.

"I don't think there is a theatre," he said, "which can be quoted as an example of the finest in architecture, and I have seen most of them in Germany, France, Austria, Holland, and Italy. On the Continent the theatres, of course, have been largely built with municipal or State aid, and some of



From a Photo. by

MICHAEL ANGELO'S CHAPEL, FLORENCE.
(Selected by Mr. Walter Emden, L.C.C.)

[Brogi, Rome.]

This example of the great painter's powers in architecture dates from about 1525. It was erected as part of the Church of San Lorenzo by order of the Pope Clement VII., one of the great Medici family, whose mausoleum he intended it to be. The chapel is adorned with statuary by the same artist.

them will certainly take rank with municipal buildings in this country. But I cannot mention one theatre great enough for the purpose of your article, not even the beautiful 'Pergola' in Florence.

"There are two buildings I must mention to you—the Palais de Justice, at Brussels, and Michael Angelo's Chapel in Florence. The Brussels Law Courts would be a perfect building, in my opinion, if they had not stuck a crown at the top. Of course, I have no objection to crowns, but a crown at the summit of such a building is atrociously out of place.

"The chapel in the Church of the Medici, designed by Michael Angelo, is very small in comparison with a building like the Brussels Palais de Justice. But although small it contains a great amount of beautiful detail, and every detail is perfect. There is nothing very striking, it is true, about the design—many people probably pass it by without giving it a second look. But then I think the best and most refined building never does 'hit' you, so to speak. In architecture, the highest excellence, in my opinion, is obtained when the style is suited to the occasion and the proportion to the surroundings."