

Fabian Tract No. 109.

COTTAGE PLANS AND COMMON SENSE

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Cottage Plans and Common Sense.

How to provide for the Housing of the People is a problem for which our larger municipalities are now being compelled to find some solution; and all over the country these bodies are busy preparing plans for housing schemes. Social reformers are generally agreed that the people must be housed outside the congested town areas; many, like the Garden City Association, advocating the creation of entirely new towns. Such thoroughgoing schemes are hardly yet practicable for municipal bodies; but under the Housing Act of 1900 they now have power to build outside their own districts: and in the following remarks on the character of the houses required it is taken that the best policy for the municipalities is to build attractive cottages on the outskirts of their towns, always having due regard to the reasonable accessibility from these houses of places of employment and centres of interest and amusement.

In building, that work is being done for the future rather than the present must never be forgotten. It is of the utmost importance that dwellings which are to last one hundred years or more should be of such a character as it is reasonable to suppose will be valuable dwellings during the whole of their lifetime. As a matter of mere financial justice to succeeding generations this is essential, especially in view of the demand for an extension of the time over which payment for the buildings can be spread. Obviously it is not fair to borrow on the future and build for the present only. It is not enough for a municipal authority to copy the house and arrangement which satisfies the average builder or speculator. Only the very best that is known and can be devised to-day is likely to stand the test of time; and this must be based upon the permanent and essential conditions of life and health, not on passing fashions or conventions established by the speculative builder.

Chief Purpose of a House. In designing any particular building it is generally very helpful to take the primary requirements and think out the problem from the beginning, as though no custom in connection with such buildings had ever grown up. Only in this way is it possible to separate the essential requirements and conditions from others which are merely conventional, and to get them all into some due perspective of importance. In like manner, to approach the question of cottage design and arrangement from the point of view of the original requirements, and develop from them, will probably be the best way to bring the various points into true relations. It is safe to assume that shelter from inclement weather, protection from predatory neighbors (human or otherwise), and comfort and privacy for family life, were the chief reasons which impelled men in the first instance to live in houses. Probably the seeker for house-room to-day is influenced by much the same considerations, although the second, protection, has lost some of its force. In satisfying this desire for shelter, comfort and privacy, one is at once confronted by a difficulty: the roof and walls which shut out the driving rain, the searching wind and the neighbors' prying eyes, at the same time exclude fresh air and sunlight, the full enjoyment

of which is one of the most necessary conditions of a healthy life. Against this difficulty it is a primary duty of the house-builder to be on his guard. The degree both of shelter and privacy must, in fact, be limited to what is compatible with a sufficiency of fresh air and sunlight.

Air and Sunlight. Modern building bye-laws have already done something towards securing air-space to every house, though, as will presently appear, there are methods of defeating their object, which they do not at present touch. But a sufficiency of air may be regarded as an acknowledged first condition for every decent house. The necessity for sunshine has still to receive the same public recognition; and there can be no doubt that our present knowledge of the importance of sunlight to health makes it needful to add to the first condition a second, that every house shall be open to a sufficiency of sunshine. Every house should at least get some sunshine into the room in which the family will live during the day-time. Into as many more of the rooms as possible let the sun come, but let no house be built with a sunless living room: and this condition must cease to be regarded merely as *desirable* when it can conveniently be arranged: it must be insisted upon as an absolute *essential*, second only to air-space: other things must, if need be, give way before it. At the present time, although for larger houses acknowledged as an important point, for cottages the question of aspect seems hardly to be considered; and, where thought of at all, a comparatively trivial consideration, such as the convention that a cottage should face to the street, is allowed to over-ride it. The essential thing is that every house should turn its face to the sun, whence come light, sweetness and health. The direction of roads and the fronting to streets are details which must be made to fall in with this condition, or to give way to it.

By no means the least advantage which will arise from giving to aspect its due weight will be the consequent abolition of backs, back yards, back alleys and other such abominations, which have been too long screened by the insidious excuse of that wretched prefix *back*. For if every house is to face the sun, very often it must also have "its front behind"—as the Irishman expressed it. The little walled-in back yard is of course somewhat firmly established in the public affection: entrenched behind the feelings of pride and shame, it appeals alike to those who are too proud to be seen keeping their houses clean and tidy, and to those who are ashamed to have it seen how unclean and untidy they are. To encourage pride is a doubtful advantage, while it is a positive disadvantage to weaken in any way the incentive towards cleanliness which shame might bring. Like lumber-rooms, too, these yards constitute a standing temptation to the accumulation of litter, far too strong for the average mortal to resist: old hampers, packing cases, broken furniture and such like find a resting-place there in which to rot, instead of being promptly disposed of. They are but wells of stagnant air, too often vitiated by decaying rubbish and drains. Back yards have, of course, their uses and advantages. They are convenient for the younger children to play in; but, alas! how very unsuitable! Too often sunless,

always dreary, the typical back yard, shut in with walls and out-buildings, is about as sad a spot as one could offer to children for a playground. The coster may keep his barrow there, and the hawker sort his wares; while as open air washhouses something may be said for them. But some of these uses are occasional only, and too much must not be sacrificed for them, while the rest may be met in other ways. It does not seem to be realized that hundreds of thousands of working women spend the bulk of their lives with nothing better to look on than the ghastly prospect offered by these back yards, the squalid ugliness of which is unrelieved by a scrap of fresh green to speak of spring, or a fading leaf to tell of autumn.

Town or Country. How far the improvement of transit facilities and the solution of the land question would enable the whole of the dwellers in large towns to be spread out on the basis of about six houses to the acre, as at Bourneville, has yet to be proved. Undoubtedly, whenever at all possible of attainment, the majority of men would accept Mr. Ruskin's ideal of a house: "Not a compartment of a model lodging house, not the number so and so Paradise Row, but a cottage all of our own, with its little garden, its healthy air, its clean kitchen, parlor and bedrooms." Under present conditions in large towns such schemes seem beyond the reach of municipalities. It is the great suburban districts which have to be considered for the present, where, after all, the majority of working folk are housed, neither in the country nor in the city, but between the two: those vast areas filled with streets of houses where it seems impossible to secure for each cottage land enough for a separate garden, where houses are not six to the acre, but four or five times six, or even more.

Open Space. Some space to each house, however, there must be, even in towns. If, instead of being wasted in stuffy yards and dirty back streets, the space which is available for a number of houses were kept together, it would make quite a respectable square or garden. The cottages could then be grouped round such open spaces, forming quadrangles opening one into the other, with wide streets at intervals. Every house could be planned so that there should be a sunny aspect for the chief rooms, and a pleasant outlook both front and back.* At present it is too often the custom to draw out a cottage plan that will come within a certain space and then repeat it unaltered in street after street, heedless of whether it faces north, south, east or west. Nothing more absurd or more regardless of the essential conditions could be imagined. Every house should be designed to suit its site and its aspect; and this is not less necessary when dealing with small houses built in rows, but more so.

Quadrangle. There is something at once homely and dignified about a quadrangle which gives it a charm even when the buildings are quite simple and unadorned. There is a sense of unity, of a complete whole, which lifts it out of the commonplace in a manner that nothing can accomplish for a mere street of cottages.† Each square could have some individuality of treatment,

* See Plate I.

† See Plates II. and III.

the entrances could be utilized to produce some little central feature, and the effect of thus grouping small cottages to produce collectively a larger unit in the street, of a scale capable of assuming some dignity, would be such an improvement as will not readily be realized by any who have not seen what a few simple college quads may do for an otherwise commonplace street. An Oxford or Cambridge college is simply a collection of separate small tenements, built in squares, with some central common buildings. It is undoubtedly the most satisfactory arrangement for numbers of such tenements where the space is limited. In this manner from twenty to thirty houses, according to size, can be arranged to an acre, including streets; and this number should nowhere be exceeded except under very great pressure. Even if it must be exceeded, probably it is better to go up and make extra floors, let in flats, than to curtail the open space. One larger space of ground is more effective than a number of small yards. Squares, such as suggested, would always be sweet and fresh, being open to the sun and large enough to be airy without being draughty. The distance across, preventing the overlooking of windows, would ensure the essential privacy of the house, in spite of the want of back yards. The space in the centre would allow a few trees to grow, some gardens to be made, and a safe play place for the children to be provided, while it would afford a pleasant and interesting outlook for all the cottages.

In the planning and laying out of these squares it would be well to provide for all sorts of tastes, for it will be easy to get plenty of variety. In some cases the whole square could be filled with allotment gardens let to those who wanted them; in others the space might be devoted to a broad lawn for tennis or bowls; in some a band of small gardens might surround a children's central playground, and in others a public garden be established; in some cases there might be a roadway all round the quadrangle, while in others the road might run down the centre with gardens attached to the houses on each side. On some sites it would be possible to get three-sided squares open to the south. Where the cost of land makes it needful to build more than two storeys high it would be a great advantage if on the southern side the buildings were kept lower to allow the sun to get well into the court.

In some localities the corner houses of squares would not pass existing bye-laws; there would in such a case be an opening for small walled gardens, which would be a boon to break the monotony of the streets, while stores, laundries, warehouses, workshops, and other needful buildings might find sites on these corners.

Self-contained Houses. Before passing on to internal arrangement it is necessary to refer to the plan of building small houses with long projections running out behind, which, common in all towns, is almost universal in London. These projections effectually shade the rooms from such sunshine as they might otherwise get, and impede the free access of fresh air. Some municipal flat-dwellings afford a depressing example of this. In these houses the living rooms, which are only about ten feet square, face each other across a narrow space between such projections, and are only eleven

feet apart.* That a municipality could build living rooms at the top of an alley 24 ft. long, with windows only 11 ft. from the face of the opposite house, and could call that "clearing the slums," affords surely some measure of what slums must be. From such rooms the sun is effectually excluded, whatever their aspect; little fresh air will penetrate to the ends of those blind alleys; and a drearier outlook one would hardly have thought it possible to conceive. But, alas, it *has* been conceived; and on a fine estate near London there are to be found houses of this type having kitchens (sure to be used as living rooms) the windows of which look into alleys only 10 ft. 3 in. wide; these windows project, and the fronts are just 6 ft. 3 in. apart, while between them rise blackened wood fences exactly 3 ft. from each window! These houses are specially planned to accommodate two families, being provided with two living rooms and two outlets to the back.† To realize how bad this type of house is, one has but to consider how they would appear in the light of the most lenient building bye-laws if the doors from the main buildings to the projections were built up, making each house into two cottages technically, as already it is two virtually. Some municipalities would then consider themselves almost justified in pulling down such projecting cottages, to let air and light reach the others. They are virtually "back to back" houses opening on to 11 ft. wide streets with a dead end. Where houses must be built in rows, it is difficult to get enough air and sun to them in any case; and it is only possible to do this when all projections which can cause stagnation or shade are avoided. Every house in a row should contain all its rooms and offices under the main roof, and present an open and fair surface to sun and air on both its free sides. If so built it matters not which side is to the street, or which to the court; both are alike presentable; the aspect can govern the arrangement of the rooms unhampered by superstitions of front and back.‡

The self-contained house is not only better but more economical. A given cubic space can be built more cheaply when it is all within the main walls and under the main roof. A somewhat greater width of frontage is needed, and where streets are already laid out there might be extra cost of ground due to this which would be greater than the saving in the building. But the narrow house with straggling projections requires greater depth; and the deeper the houses the greater is the expense of the side streets which has to be divided among them. Where land is to be laid out, if the quadrangle arrangement is adopted, there need be no waste in side streets, because the houses face all ways, and this would about balance the extra cost of street per house due to the wider frontage, while the saving of detached outbuildings and back yard walls would mean a considerable economy.

Under present rates of ground rents, cost of building Cottages must fit the life of occupants. and wages of occupants, we must reluctantly admit that it is hardly possible to give to every cottage all that is in the abstract desirable. But, far from being a reason why the ideal of cottage accommodation should be left out of

* See Plate IV.

† See Plate V.

‡ See Plates III., VI. and VIII.

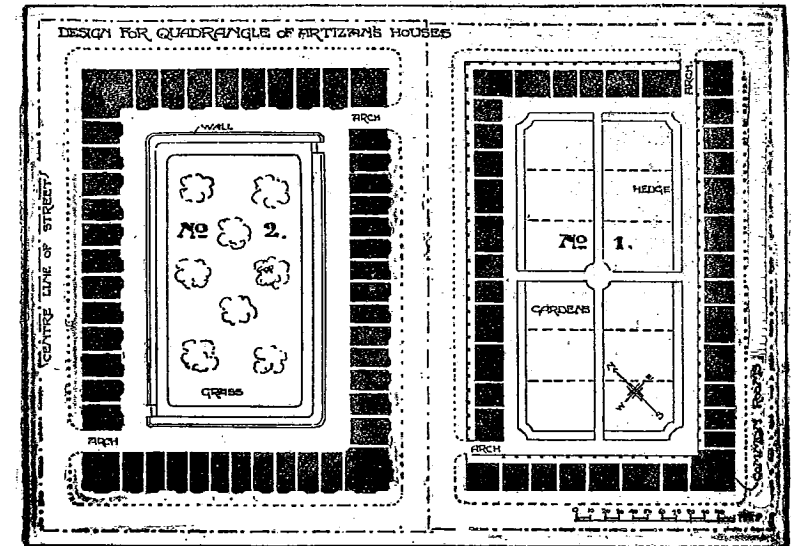


PLATE I.

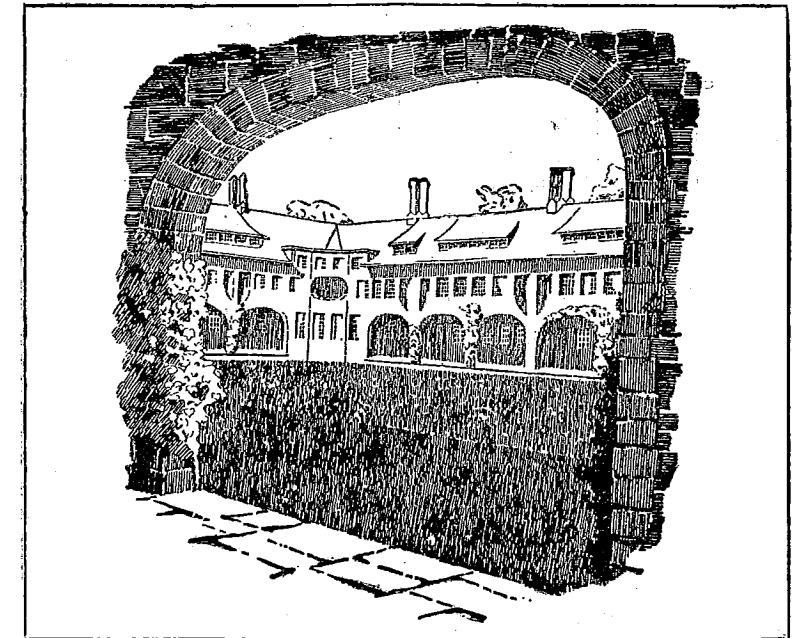


PLATE II.

View in Quadrangle No. 1, Plate I. Showing Common Room at the angle.

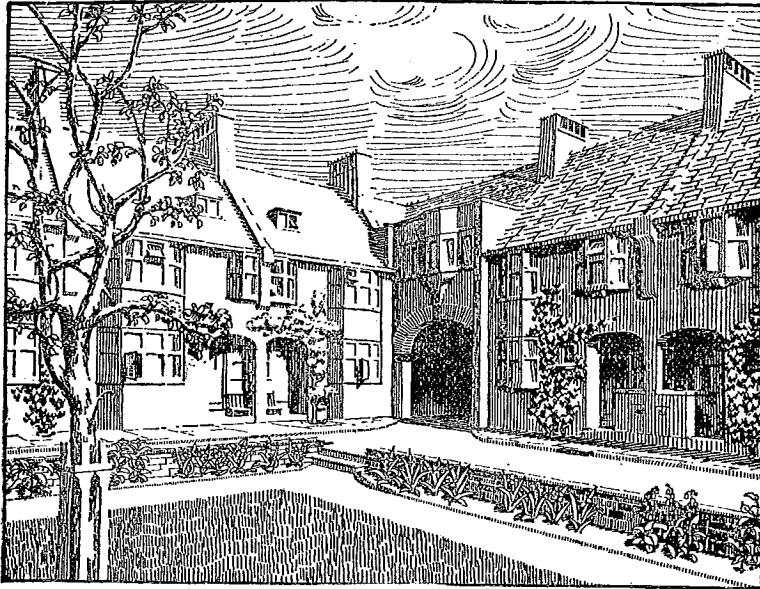


PLATE III.

View in Quadrangle No. 2, Plate I. N.B.—The fronts of some cottages and the backs of others are shown.

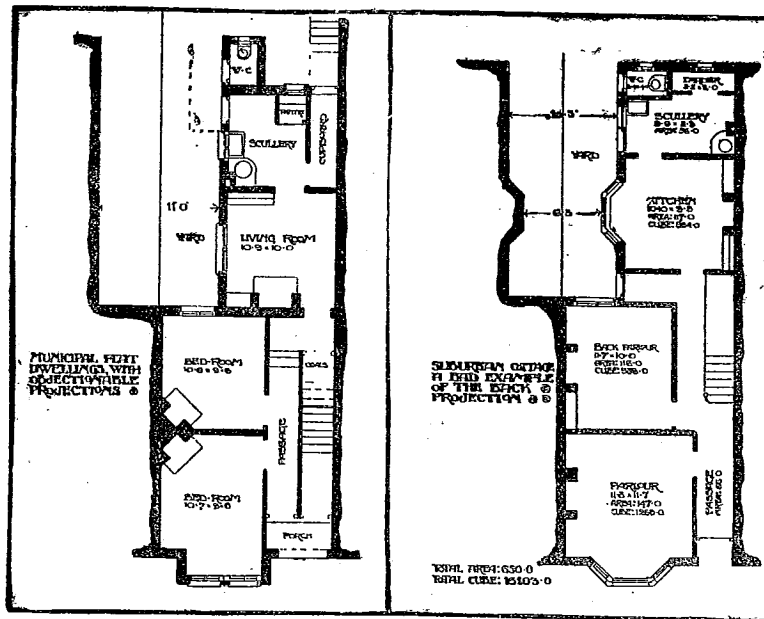


PLATE IV.

PLATE V.

EXAMPLE OF ARTISAN'S
HOUSES FOR QUADRANGLE

BARRY-PARKER &
RAYMOND-DUNN
ARCHITECTS-BUXTON

Total area, 506.0'0"
Ground per house, including
50.0'0" streets = 22.4 yds.
Total cube, 12,650.0'0"
No. of houses per Acre
including 50.0'0" streets = 21

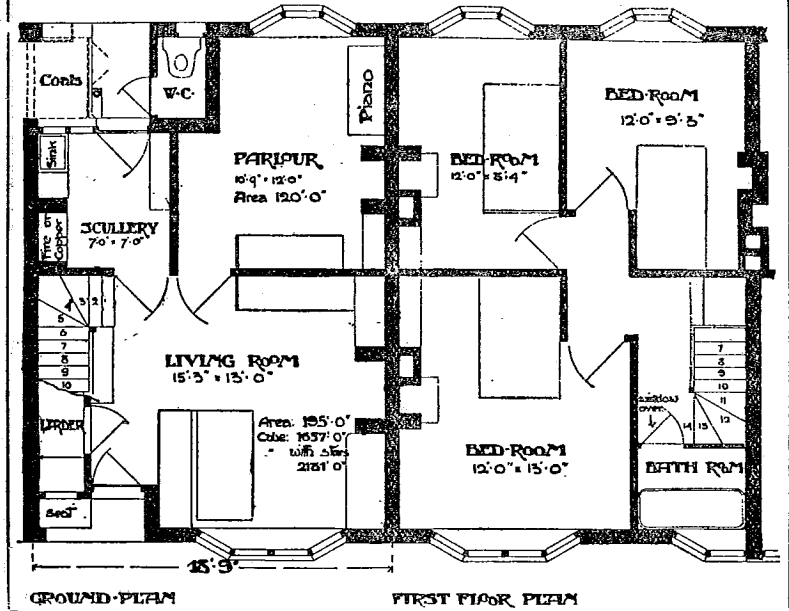


PLATE VI.

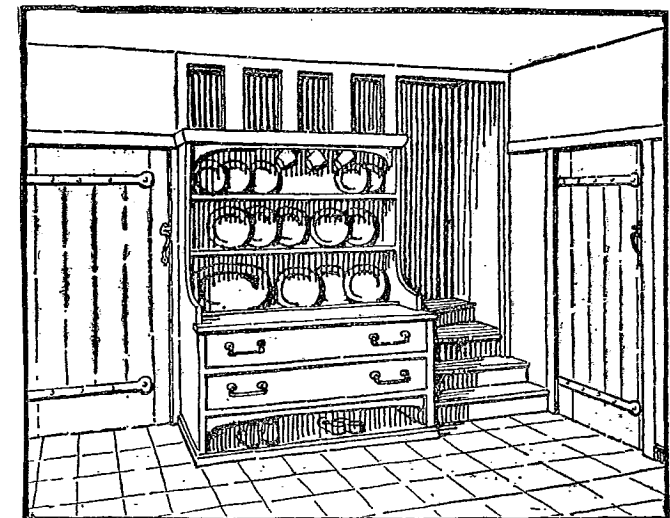


PLATE VII.

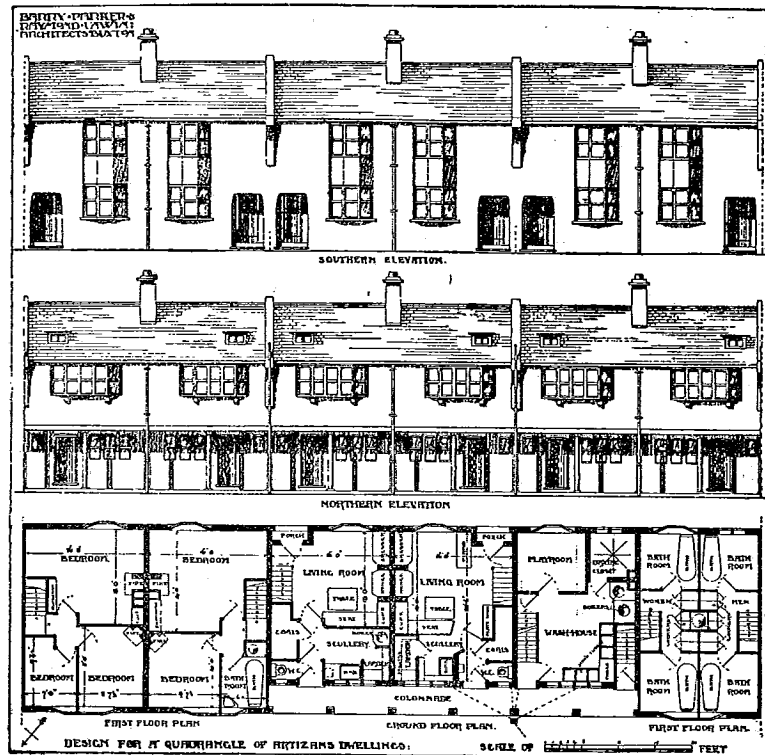


PLATE VIII.

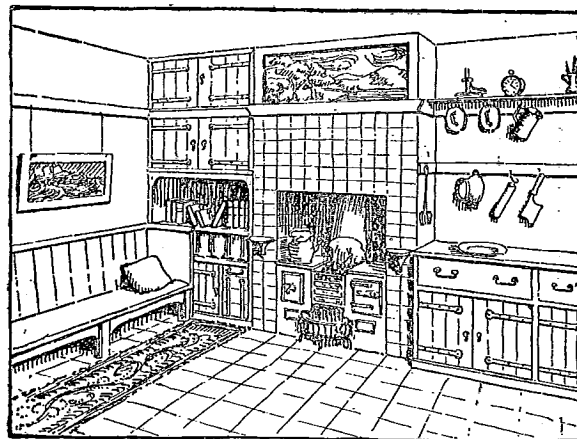


PLATE IX.

consideration, this is really a most cogent argument for its careful study. For the less the accommodation it is possible to give, the more important it is that what is given shall be so carefully apportioned that the house may approach as far as possible to the ideal. Although we all probably hope and strive for some change in one or other of the restricting conditions, for the time being it is needful to remember that a certain limited rent will only pay for a certain limited space. Except by a very careful study of the life which that space is to shelter, it is not possible to design the house so as to properly fit and accommodate that life. And it is only by making the house fit the life of its occupants that a right and economical use of the space can be obtained. The available room must be most liberally given where it will be most thoroughly and continuously used. When mankind first took to living in houses these consisted of one room; perhaps the most important fact to be remembered in designing cottages is that the cottager still lives during the day-time in one room, which for the sake of clearness is best

Living-room. called the living-room. In the vast majority of cases the housewife has neither time nor energy to keep more than one room in constant use, and, during the greater part of the year, the cost of a second fire effectually prevents another room from being occupied. This living-room, then, will be the most thoroughly used and in all ways the chief room of the house; here the bulk of the domestic work will be done, meals will be prepared and eaten, and children will play, while the whole family will often spend long evenings there together. The first consideration in planning any cottage should be to provide a roomy, convenient, and comfortable living-room, having a sunny aspect and a cheerful outlook. In it there should be space to breathe freely, room to move freely, convenience for work, and comfort for rest.† It must contain the cooking stove, some good cupboards, and a working dresser in a light and convenient place.* No box 11 or 12 feet square should be provided for this purpose. Such a place cannot be healthy when occupied by a whole family, nor can it be other than inconvenient and uncomfortable.† In a very small room neither door nor window will be kept open except in very hot weather, because there can be no avoiding the direct draught. It is very important to plan a living-room so that the doors or stairs may not destroy the comfort, or even the sense of comfort. They should be kept away from the fire, and, above all, should not open across either the fire or the window. By far the most comfortable arrangement is to have the outer door set inwards a little, in a shallow porch, leaving a window-recess on the same wall; if the room is a fair length, say not less than 15 feet, the door can then be wide open, and yet the light side of the room be free from draught. The common arrangement of an inside porch with the inner door opening at right angles to the outer one, directs the draught straight across the window to the fire, and largely destroys the sense of comfort in the room, while cutting it off more effectually from the fresh air. The chimney extracts a very large volume of air continuously from the room, and this must be made good

* See Plates VII. and IX.

† See Plate VI.; also VIII.

from outside. The more easily this air can come in the less keen will be the draught. It is not sufficiently realized that what has to be done is not to exclude cold air, which is impossible in a room with a fire, but to admit it in the way which will give the best ventilation with the least discomfort. In planning the room the furniture should always be arranged and drawn in, to make sure that provision has been made for work and rest, for meals and play. Many a room is ruined because the dresser, the table, and the settle, have not been tried in on the plan.

Furniture. Furniture should always be arranged and drawn in, to make sure that provision has been made for work and rest, for meals and play. Many a room is ruined because the dresser, the table, and the settle, have not been tried in on the plan.

Bay Windows. Windows facing the street are much less depressing if slightly bayed to invite a peep up and down as well as across; a projection of a few inches in the centre, with some advantage taken of the thickness of the wall to set back the sides, will suffice to add very much to the outlook.*

Fittings. With regard to windows, doors, cupboards, and all other fittings, it should not be forgotten that when a quantity is required, as is usually the case in housing schemes, no extra cost is entailed by having them well designed, and of good proportions. Money is often spent in bad ornament, which but detracts from the appearance of the buildings; but an elegant mould or shaping costs no more than a vulgar one, and a well proportioned door or mantel is as easily made as one ill-proportioned. That nothing can be spent on the ornamentation of artisans' cottages is no excuse whatever for their being ugly. Plain and simple they must be, but a plain and simple building well designed may be very far from ugly.

Bedrooms. After the living-room, the sleeping-rooms must be regarded as next in importance, for these will be occupied all the night. Of these it is only needful to say that they should be as large as can be provided, and as well ventilated as possible. There should be plenty of windows, easily opened, and everything possible done to encourage the opening of them. If the rooms can be arranged so that there shall be a comfortable corner between fire and window, where a quiet hour with book or pen can be spent, this is very desirable. For there is no real reason why the accommodation of the small house should not be increased by a more general use of the bedrooms for these purposes.

Larder. A small larder with direct light and ventilation should be provided for every cottage, the window of which should not be exposed to the heat of the sun. A cupboard in the living-room, even when ventilated, is hardly a fit place in which to keep food.†

Scullery. A scullery, to relieve the living-room from the more dirty work, should be the next consideration. This must have a glazed, well-drained sink, under an opening window. If the washing is to be done in each cottage, there must be a copper or set-pot and space for a small mangle to stand. When it can be arranged, a little cooking-stove, just large enough to be used in hot weather, will be a boon. But it is not well to put the main cooking-stove in the scullery, for the result will inevitably be

* See Plates VI. and VIII.

† See Plates VI. and VIII.

that, for the greater part of the year, the family will live with the fire, in the tiny scullery, and the more airy living-room will be left vacant, and will, in fact, become a parlor.

Parlor. However desirable a parlor may be, it cannot be said to be necessary to health or family life; nor can it be compared in importance with those rooms and offices which we have been considering. There can be no possible doubt that until any cottage has been provided with a living-room large enough to be healthy, comfortable, and convenient, it is worse than folly to take space from that living-room, where it will be used every day and every hour, to form a parlor, where it will only be used once or twice a week.

If this is true of the parlor, how much more true is it of the passage? To cut a piece three feet wide off the end of a small room, for the very doubtful advantage of having two doors between the inmates and the fresh air, or to obtain the occasional convenience it may be for a visitor or member of the family to be able to pass in or out without being observed, is surely an extreme instance of valuable room and air space sacrificed to thoughtless custom and foolish pride.* Any one who has known what it is to occupy a large airy house-place will not readily sacrifice its advantages for either a needless parlor or a useless passage. For the question is not whether it is an advantage to have either a passage or parlor in addition to a decent living-room, but whether it is worth while to have either at the sacrifice of the living-room. A desire to imitate the middle-class house is at the bottom of the modern tendency to cut the cottage up into a series of minute compartments.

Stairs and Landing. In small houses, such as we are considering, the 500 or so cubic feet of air space which are usually shut up in a staircase and landing, would be much more useful if thrown open to the living-room. That there is any advantage at all, either to that room or to the bedrooms, in having this "buffer state" of stagnant air between them, seems extremely doubtful; while there can be no doubt at all of the immense gain of having an extra 500 feet of air in a room which contains, perhaps, only 1,400 feet altogether, and many rooms contain less. The space should in any case have ventilation, and direct light is, of course, desirable. The extra height which would be obtained by throwing stairs and landing open to the living-room would greatly help in keeping that room well ventilated, as also would the possibility of having a window open so far from the occupied parts of the room.

To complete the self-contained cottage, there must be found some place for coals, some small receptacle for ashes and rubbish, to be emptied every few days, and a water-closet or properly fitted earth-closet. A porch opening from the scullery provides a suitable place for these, so that, while within the main building, they may still be entirely in the outside air. The facility afforded for inspection, and the general tendency which even the less enthusiastic have to keep clean the outside which shows, would prove valuable advantages of this plan.†

* Compare Plate V. with Plates VI. and VIII.

† See Plates VI. and VIII.

Bathroom. A bathroom for every cottage is an ideal which some day will surely come to be regarded as essential. In small tenements where the cost of this ideal may still be prohibitive, there seems no reason why there should not be provided at least a bathroom to each quadrangle. One of the great advantages of substituting open courts for narrow streets would be the ease with which some little corporate feeling might be fostered in them. In municipal housing schemes, which spring from the co-operative effort of the whole town or city, it

Co-operation. would seem specially fitting that something should be done to foster associated action among the tenants. And this is the more urgent because it is only by such association that we can hope to provide for the many some of the most desirable conveniences of life which wealth now enables the few to secure for themselves individually. We have already pointed out what advantage would arise from the associated use and enjoyment of the small plots of land which are all that can be given to each cottage. It has been found quite practicable in very many flat-dwellings to have a considerable amount of associated usage of wash-houses, sculleries, drying-grounds, etc., even among the most unenlightened tenants. There is no reason why the same arrangement should not be made with cottages. Quadrangles lend themselves peculiarly to the provision of small laundries, baths, reading-rooms, and other such simple and easily managed co-operative efforts.

Wash-house. A well-fitted wash-house having a plentiful supply of hot and cold water laid on to all the tubs, a proper washing and wringing machine, and a heated drying closet, is out of the reach of even the well-to-do cottager. But there is no reason why one or two such should not be provided for each court of houses; no reason why every little scullery should be blocked up with inadequate washing appliances; why every woman should have to spend a whole day toiling at the weekly wash which she could do with less labor in an hour or two if she had the use of proper apparatus; or why every living-room should be encumbered with clothes-horses or made uncomfortable with steam.* The capital cost that would be saved by not providing space for, and fitting, washing appliances in all the sculleries, would pay for the one co-operative wash-house. And a very small addition to the rent would allow for the provision of hot water and heat for drying. To such a

laundry should be attached a small room divided from it by a glazed screen, where little children could play under the mother's observation. The want of such a place prevents many a mother from using a public laundry, as also does the distance from home, and the necessity of conveying clothes to and fro through the public streets, objections which would not be present in the case of the quadrangle with its small laundry. One

or two baths, heated from the same source, could be provided; and it might be found possible to lay on a hot water supply to each cottage from the same centre. This has been done by the Liverpool Corporation in their Dryden-

street houses, where a constant supply of hot water is provided to every sink at a charge of twopence per week to each tenement. This arrangement would greatly simplify the problem of providing baths to each house, as it would save the cost of the separate hot water installations. It is very desirable that a bath should have hot water attached, but one with cold water only is a great advance on none at all; and, in plans for artisans' houses, every alternative arrangement should be well considered, and every effort made to provide a bath of some sort. A bath-room adjacent to the scullery, or even a bath placed in the scullery, may sometimes be contrived when space on the bedroom floor is out of the question. And there are several alternative arrangements for getting a supply of hot water from the copper or side boiler direct into the bath. Where, however, a bath-room to each house is out of the question, one or two baths could easily be worked in connection with the laundry.* Add to these a recreation or reading-room (also being tried at the Dryden-street houses) and there would be in each quadrangle a small co-operative centre, the attendance on which might easily be arranged to be undertaken by the tenant of the next cottage, for a small payment.

Communal Centre. Such a centre would, by associated effort, provide for each cottager many advantages which he could not hope to secure for himself by his individual effort, and all for the payment of a few pence per week extra rent. Beginning with the laundry and baths, the most necessary and well-tried items, such co-operative centres would undoubtedly grow, as experience taught the tenants the advantage of association in domestic work; the common-room to supply somewhat the place of the individual parlor, the bakehouse, and even the common kitchen would be matters only of time and the growth of self-restraint, and the co-operative spirit. As the communal centre grows in importance, it will begin to affect our architecture, forming a striking feature in each court and giving a more complete sense of unity to it. At some point it may become worth while to have a covered way from the cottages to the common rooms—care being taken, of course, to put this only where it will not shade any sun from the house. But this is, perhaps, wandering too far into the future, leaving the immediately possible for the ideally desirable. None the less, it is along these lines that we must look for any solution of the housing question in town suburbs which shall be satisfactory from the point of view of health and economy, and at the same time afford some opportunity for the gradual development of a simple dignity and beauty in the cottage, which assuredly is necessary, not only to the proper growth of the gentler and finer instincts of men, but to the producing of that indefinable something which makes the difference between a mere shelter and a home.

* See Plate VIII.

* See Plate VIII.

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