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Architecture, Mysticism and Myths in the Works of Outstanding Architect William Richard Lethaby

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Abstract

An architect, historian and architectural theorist – William Richard Lethaby - was an outstanding representative of the English Movement ‘Art and Craft’ and he was a remarkable personality in the fields of architectural practice, education and science in England at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. This article presents an analysis of the book ‘Architecture, Mysticism, and Myth’ of architect William Richard Lethaby. The book deals with a number of interesting historical fragments, the author’s erudition goes without any doubts, but it makes a dual impression for a today’s reader and cannot be considered to be a scientific source. However, it arouses a doubtless interest as a fact in the history of architecture and architectural science. The book reveals a new stage in the development of architectural science related to the research of not only material but also artistic, imaginative and symbolic aspects.

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1. Introduction

An architect, historian and architectural theorist – William Richard Lethaby – was an outstanding representative of the English Movement ‘Art and Craft’. He was also a close friend of William Morris and Philip Webb who were

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the leaders of this movement. Besides he was quite a remarkable personality in the fields of architectural practice, education and science in England at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. He started his architectural carrier in 1871 and became an assistant of the most famous and productive architects of those times – Norman Shaw - in 1879. Lethaby participated in many Norman Shaw's works including his contribution to design of the most well-known project – the New Scotland Yard building in London. He started to work on his own in 1889 and constructed a number of buildings in the medieval 'English-Dutch style'. However, his most famous construction was a residential building in the town of Birmingham (1900) which English researches considered to be an anticipation of the functionalism of the 20th century. The last building constructed by Lethaby was an All Saints Church (Herefordshire, 1902). After that he dedicated his life to decorative and applied arts, conservation and restoration of the cultural heritage-listed architectural monuments, theory and teaching the history of architecture. And these very activities made Lethaby a famous and authoritative person in the professional community of Europe. (Thus, Lethaby consulted Hermann Muthesius on his prominent book 'The English House' which made a great impact on the European architecture) [1-5].

2. Origins of the Lethaby's outlook

The biographers refer the beginning of the Lethaby's research activity to 1885. His first book «Architecture, Mysticism, and Myth» was issued and went out to the world in 1891. It appeared to be the most considerable evidence of those new outlooks on architecture which were outspread in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Before we consider the content of this book the origins of this architectural concept innovative for its time, which was suggested by the author in his research study, should be indicated.

Lethaby supported the movement of English Artistic Culture which was the 'brainchild' of the romantic reaction to the French Enlightenment ideology. The Enlightenment philosophy stated the priority of the sense over a medieval traditionalism consecrated by the church, challenged an issue of conventional public relations and aesthetic principles. The Great French revolution, which was the very picture of the Enlightenment ideals in fact, entailed a bloody nightmare of the revolution Terror in France and All-European War instead of an anticipated 'realm of the sense'. Romanticism, which was a reaction to the French bourgeois revolution in fact according to Marx, represented a refusal from the Enlightenment ideology and its opposite reflection in many aspects. Romanticism characterised by anti-bourgeois features declared the Middle Ages, medieval public relations, religious architecture and arts to be ideal. Keeping a pace with the Romanticism a so-called 'feudal socialism' - a predecessor of the «scientific socialism» further - appeared in England in the beginning of the 20th century.

3. Romanticism and the theory of architecture

The evolution of Romanticism can be divided into three periods. The first one is Romanticism itself (the end of 18th – beginning of 19th up to the 40th) claiming against the Enlightenment ideology and academic classicism. The second one can be named as Late Romanticism (40th – beginning of 80th) being opposed to positivism and realism of the arts. The third period is Neo-Romanticism in the end of 19th and beginning of 20th standing against decadency and symbolism impacts. The second period was the most significant for the future of English arts and architecture.

This period was associated with the activity of John Ruskin who was very close to 'feudal socialism'. It was based on the Christian morality and its shrew criticism supporting existing contemporary position, which was perceived with duly sympathy by many artists, and it is still up-to-date nowadays. Thus Ruskin was the first art critic who pointed at ecological consequences of an unlimited industrial production, negative impact of division of labour in the industrial field and disastrous commercialisation of artistic activities. According to Ruskin the decline of morality accompanied by capitalism could have been overcome on the way to revival of the aims and means of medieval arts and artistic workshops including decorative and applied arts and architecture.

The Ruskin's follower, William Morris, was keen to put these ideas in practice. He became an organizer and a head of the Movement 'Art and Craft' which affected architecture development in Europe and the USA to a significant extent. It created a leading trend in architecture of the Victorian period. One of the most remarkable

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