

ARCHITECTURAL ABERRATIONS.*

No. 4.—THE PEDDIE MEMORIAL CHURCH, NEWARK.



WE have some hesitation in setting down the Peddie Memorial Church in Newark as an aberration, which in these pages has perhaps come to bear a somewhat invidious and condemnatory sense. This acceptance is borne out by the dictionary, which, indeed, goes so far as to define "aberration" in turn as "mental weakness" and "moral perversity." We have no sort of intention of imputing moral perversity to the designer of this edifice, nor even mental weakness. As was said by one character of another in a novel of Charles Reade's: "It is not from want of brains he is mad." There is, however, another definition which comes timely to our rescue: "that which differs from the customary structure or type." That settles it. After that no man can deny that the Peddie Memorial Church is an aberration.

The problem was a modern "auditorium church," and the designer of this edifice undertook to solve it by means of a circular church. That is a legitimate solution, doubtless, and might result in a very interesting edifice, though certainly in one differing

from the customary structure or type. There used to be a circular church in Madison avenue, which may or may not have answered its practical purposes. Architecturally it was a ghastly performance in corrugated iron, with no more ecclesiastical or other desirable character than a gas tank. A circular wall covered with a domical roof is the essential design of the Peddie Memorial, and comprises the auditorium. The form thus attained is objectionable, because having no angles and no features, it offers no points for architectural emphasis. The prototype of all circular domed buildings, the Pantheon at Rome, suffers from this defect, which it was there attempted to remedy by adjoining a portico to the building. But this fails to answer the purpose, and has been criticised with justice as a monument built in front of another monument, to which it is attached only mechanically and not architecturally. If the angles of the square in which the circle is inscribed were filled out with subordinate masses, an architectural form would result which would give the sense of stability and repose which is lacking to the circle, and the structure might become an architectural composition with a harmonious balance of masses and relation of parts. The entrances and staircases to the circular

* We are making a collection of "Aberrations," and shall present one to our readers in each number of THE ARCHITECTURAL RECORD.

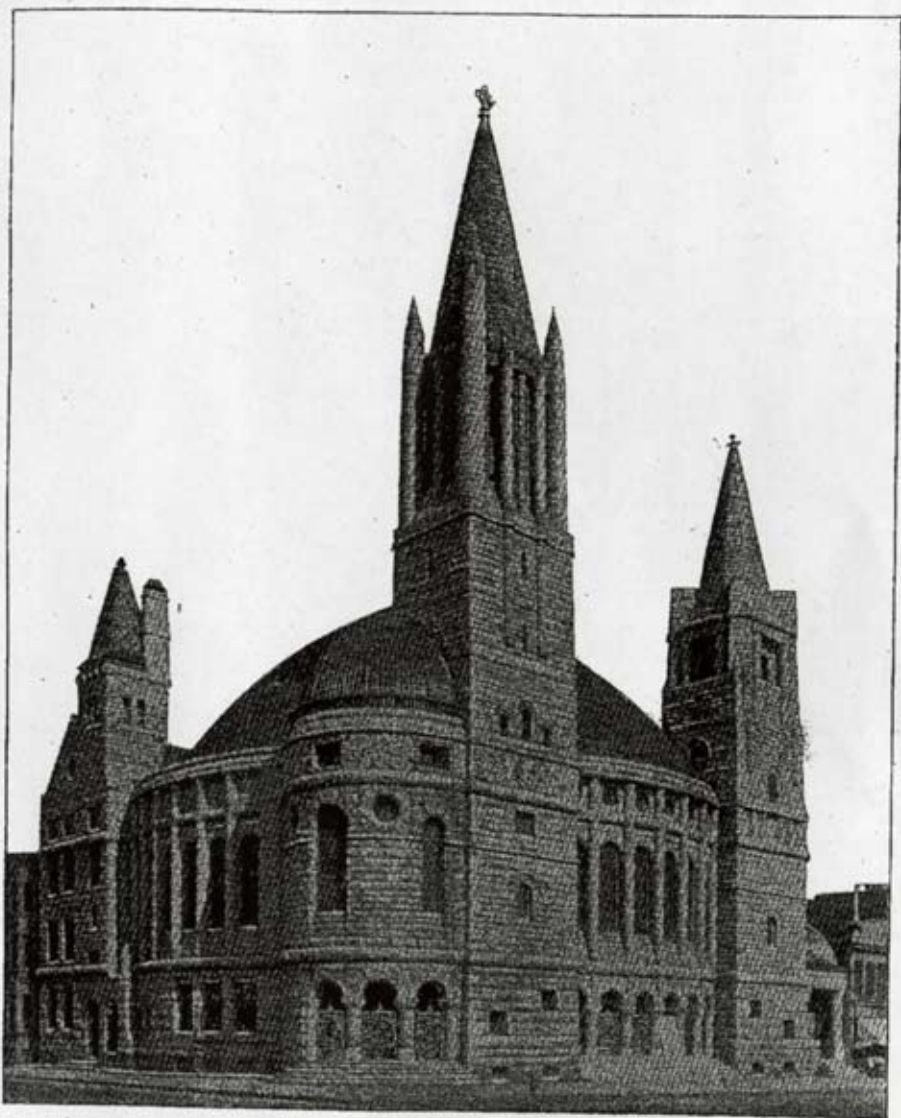
auditorium would naturally take their place in these outlying and subordinate buildings.

The main defect of the Peddie Memorial Church in general composition is that the angular and rigid masses which are needed to assure the eye of the stability of the mass are, in the first place, set not at the outer angles of the including rectangle, but, with the exception of the subordinate building at one end, are set so as to cut the circle in the plan; and in the next place, that they are developed into towers and crowned with spires. The effect of this disposition is to confuse the motive that generates the whole structure, and to leave the dome no longer a single or a crowning feature, but to cut it up into bits and belittle its importance. The builders of the mosques acted under a much truer feeling in detaching the slender minarets that if incorporated into the domed structure, would have injured its effect, which is enhanced by their isolation. It is to be gathered, indeed, that the designer's purpose was to "stablish" and fortify his building by strong and stark masses at the angles, that at the outer corner being the largest and strongest, as the most important in the principal perspective view. But this purpose cannot be said to have been artistically carried out, and the impression actually conveyed is of a domed circular building, obscured by incongruous towers, of which one, the little tower built up against a house gable, and pretty plainly without any function, except to correspond with the tower at the furthest corner, even betrays a defective sense of humor.

Very much more, of course, is to be pardoned to an architect who is working out something "differing from the customary structure or type," than to one working upon the lines of an accepted type, but the intrusion into a circular church of the double towers that properly flank a gabled front seems clearly a solecism. The general treatment of the circular building itself and of its outlying features, seems to us very happy. The happiest point in it is the division of the wall into three parts vertically, a basement, a principal story and a low attic, by means of the

large roll-mouldings that cross it and that traverse also the towers and the subordinate building, so as to ally them as much as possible with the main building. The round wall that emerges at the front between the two towers is in itself a very satisfactory piece of design. Its three members are happily proportioned; the bull's-eyes of the attic give a meaning and force to the crossed mouldings that frame them and the upright rolls justify themselves by the depth they add to the openings and by the vigorous batter at the bottom of these, by which they are receded from the plane of the lower wall. In the side the treatment is less successful, the trellis of mouldings in the attic looks capricious, being no longer explained by the openings, and below the sufficient lintels of the openings of the basement are other lintels merely inserted in the openings and without visible means of support. But one thing must be said in high praise of the whole exterior, and that is that the architect was evidently building a structure of masonry, and not merely making a drawing to be afterwards translated into masonry.

Of the detail a general criticism may be made that for its purpose it is unnecessarily rude in character and that its rudeness is by no means wholly justified by the untractable granite in which it is wrought. This rudeness is partly in the design, as for instance in the omission of the abacus over the capitals of the columns throughout, an omission which involves the projection of the capitals themselves beyond the piers they carry, and in the aborted capitals at the impost of the arcade. It is even more a matter of scale, which is exaggerated in the detail throughout, and becomes positively gross in some features, especially in the frieze which takes the place of the attic in the belting of the towers. The towers themselves, incongruous and confusing as they seem, are designed with a vigor that does not escape rudeness, and with a massiveness that is evidently misplaced when it walls up almost solidly all the openings of what seems to be a belfry. The church, with its aberration "from the customary structure or type,"

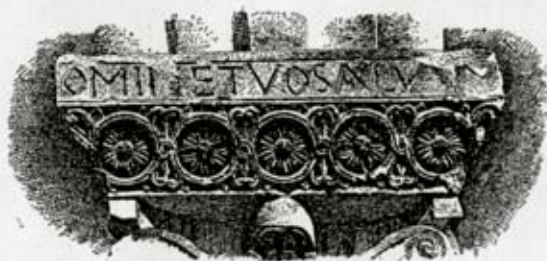


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and with the incongruities and shortcomings that prevent it from establishing a type of its own, is nevertheless an interesting and suggestive performance, and a second attempt by its author in the same direction would doubtless attain a still higher success.

The interior is by no means so successful as the exterior. It is very full, almost too full of cleverness, for the architect apparently did not realize in designing it that an architect's smartness is given to him to be trained and brought into subjection. It would be impossible to carry a circular roof over so large a space without a construction that would be capable of an interesting architectural development, but it does not appear here what the construction

is. There are arches at the sides that may represent trusses of metal, and perhaps the curious soffits of paper framed in wood are meant to suggest such trusses. But the apparent arches are long voussoirs of pine boards, the roof is sheathed into invisibility, and the feature of the interior is an enormous piece of wooden tracing that has no structural significance whatever. The detail by no means represents the same knowledge and skill in carpentry that the exterior does in masonry, or the same idiomatic treatment of material. The best of the detail is in stonework or in metal, but of this there is little; and the absence of a sense of humor, which upon the outside is noticeable only at one or two points, is here injuriously pervasive.



There are beauties that die with the dawn,
 As glorious quite
 As those of the light
 That come in with the Dawn;
 Silence has charms that are broken
 By the sweetest word spoken;
 All things are born at a cost;
 They come, and lo! something is lost.