The Chamberlain Highbury Trust

JOHN RUSKIN & J.H.CHAMBERLAIN

Functionality

Ruskin drew his architectural principles largely from the study of mediaeval churches and Venetian palaces. There were a lot of churches built in the 19th century, including a few by Chamberlain, which followed Ruskinian principles. But the 19th century was also a time of the invention of new building types which had little or no precedent in mediaeval times. In Birmingham, Chamberlain designed water pumping stations, police stations, public libraries, board schools and office buildings. For all of them, he was able to adapt Ruskin's principles of design to new functions.

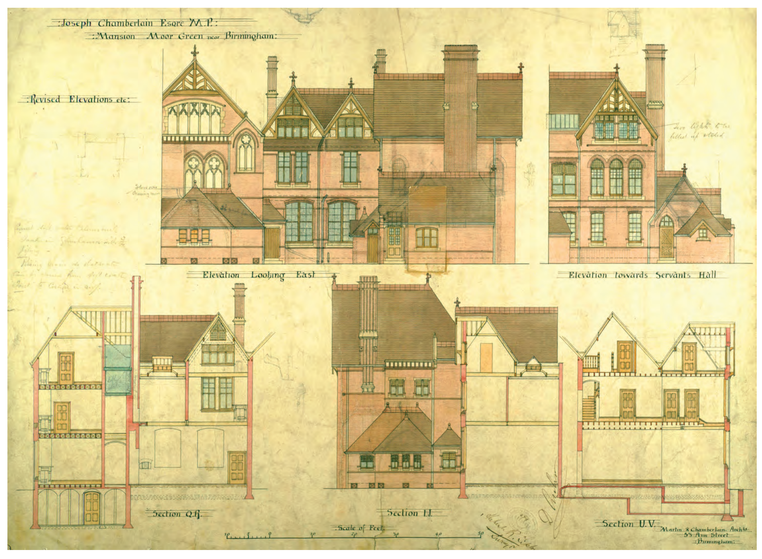
One of the reasons for Ruskin's advocacy of the Gothic language was a functional one. Unlike the neo-classical language, governed by inflexible rules, Gothic employed a series of forms "of which the merit was, not merely that they were new, but that they were capable of perpetual novelty" (*The Stones of Venice*). Chamberlain deployed the language of gable, buttress, lancet window, tower and apse to achieve endless variety; not as an end in itself, but to meet the needs of widely differing programmes. This reflected Ruskin's belief that "Gothic is not only the best, but the only rational architecture, as being that which can fit itself most easily to all services vulgar or noble" (*The Stones of Venice*).

The functional responsiveness of Chamberlain's buildings is an expression of Ruskin's principle of Changefulness, "the great system of perpetual change" which Ruskin found in nature.

Chamberlain designed 29 schools for the Birmingham School Board, and no two were identical. He composed schools from a consistent vocabulary of elements, to fit different sites and varying programmes. He clearly had compositional preferences; for instance, the main elevations of Highbury and the School of Art both have three dissimilar gables, the right-hand one a storey taller than the other two.

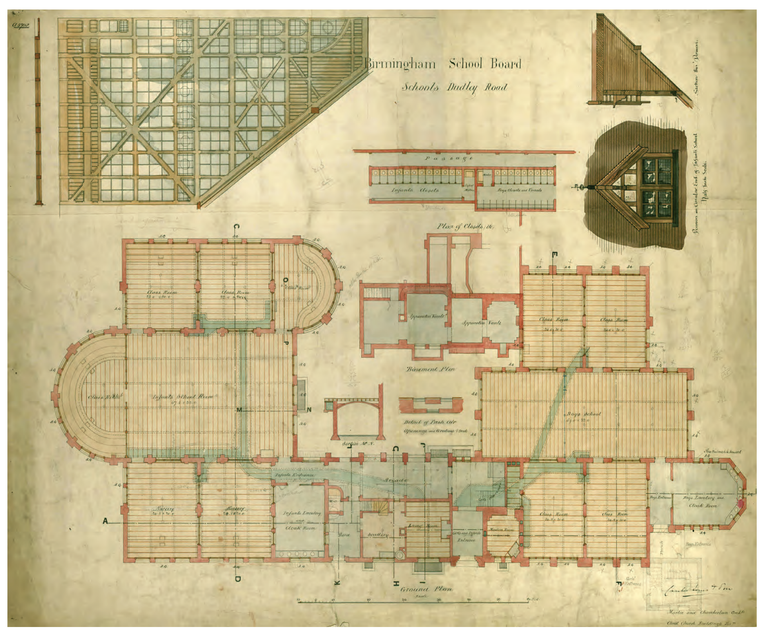
At Highbury the height was caused by a late addition of second-floor rooms to the brief, but at the School of Art the extra height is to enable northern daylight to enter the painting studios on Edmund Street. The constant asymmetry and irregularity of Chamberlain's compositions are continually a source of visual delight, but they always have a functional purpose, or at least a justification.

The south front of Highbury, 1879



Working drawings for Highbury

Birmingham School of Art, Margaret Street, 1885



The ground floor plan of Dudley Road School, 1878

Left to right: Four ventilation towers of Birmingham Board Schools. Dixon Road, 1879; Dudley Road, 1878; Icknield Street, 1883; Oozells Street, 1878 (tower rebuilt 1997)