

Changes in the Construction Industry (c. 1880)

Abstract

Construction work underwent profound changes in the era of accelerating industrialization after 1871. This passage illustrates how the breakthrough of serial production, mechanization, and the growth of specialized supply industries partly displaced (and disillusioned) artisans who had previously overseen or been integrated into the entire production process. Prefabricated parts produced in large numbers allowed the construction industry to expand rapidly but diminished the opportunity for artisans to earn money through their skill and creativity.

Source

During Johann's apprenticeship, a change took place. Until then, construction had been entirely the work of the tradesmen. The profession of architect was just developing; prior to that the master bricklayer or master carpenter had managed the entire affair and coordinated with the patron. Now, the academically trained architect appeared more and more often; he was a distinguished gentleman and kept his distance from the craftsmen. Other details also ushered in the new era: joiners in the workshop no longer made windows and doors with the assistance of a few helpers. Instead, these products were obtained from a large joiner's workshop that used machines. It was really a factory, criss-crossed by transmission lines; in the factory yard a sawmill screeched as it peeled the veneer sheets off the logs, exhaust pipes emitted billows of steam into the sky with a bang—the operation was no longer part of an artisanal craft but belonged completely to industry. Stucco ornaments, too, were no longer applied by hand; cornices were not put up freehand. Instead, the forms were pressed in statuary pasteboard; they came from the factory, and the stucco plasterer attached them to the ceiling and walls with screws. The patterns were in stock at warehouses and picked by the architect from samples. Work became more impersonal all around. Certainly this did not fundamentally interrupt the workflow, but organic activity was replaced by something automatic. Living tradition was replaced by organization, and work methods were thus mechanized. Where, in the past, the carpenter had joined together a garden fence from rods he had planed himself, cast-iron railings were now delivered. The tradesman had nothing to do but mount the parts.

Source: Karl Scheffler, *Der junge Tobias. Eine Jugend und ihre Umwelt* (1927), new and expanded edition. Wiesbaden, 1946, pp. 190–91; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*. Munich: C.H. Beck, 1982, p. 127.

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: Changes in the Construction Industry (c. 1880), published in: German History in Documents and Images,

<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-474> [April 26, 2024].