Abstract

One Man’s Trash Is Another Man’s Treasure: The Transition of Clinker Brick From Disposable To Decorative

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The exact origin of the name clinker brick is unknown, however it is said that the name may have been derived from the “quality imparted by vitrification, which causes them to give a clinking sound when struck.” In England, the 1836 Penny Cyclopedia described clinkers (also known as burrs) as “black-looking masses of vitrified brick...” The historian, Charles Thomas Davis described them as “ruptured” and by 1912 the closest definition to its current form, was given by Geologist Heinrich Ries who called the brick “roughened, discolored, and distorted.” Historically, the accidental formation of clinker brick was caused by being situated too close to the heat source of a stationary kiln. This resulted in a loss for brick makers forcing them to discard the material. In the late nineteenth century, as brick production became more uniform, clinker brick were eliminated. However, simultaneously an aesthetic shift occurred, embracing the irregularity of the brick. This phenomenon was witnessed in the architecture of the Arts and Crafts Movement and Tudor Revival. Architects of these styles believed in an anti-industrialist ideology, emphasizing craftsmanship and the use natural local materials that embodied roughness, variation, and irregularity within architecture. They used the warped features of clinker brick to impart what they believed was a rustic aesthetic and an instant sense of age to a structure. In major cities, the popularity of clinker brick was illustrated through its implementation on apartment buildings especially “garden apartments” during the construction boom of the 1920s. The material was used in conjunction with varied architectural styles (apart
from the two it was primarily associated with). The misshapen brick allowed for builders to
differentiate residences in an increasingly growing metropolis of similar structures.

Though the brick embodied the ideologies of the Arts and Crafts and Tudor Revival
visually, philosophically their use was contradictory. The two styles emphasized unaltered
natural materials however, as clinker brick rose in popularity they became a mass produced
commodity, heavily monitored to achieve a perfect distortion. This eliminated its natural ability
to mirror the textures of nature, but instead it was forcefully used to *stage* such an aesthetic.
Additionally, the Arts and Crafts movement sought after making crafts affordable to the average
person. However, because of clinker brick’s popularity and time consuming production process,
its price rose significantly higher than the average common brick. Despite the philosophical
irony in the use of clinker brick, by the early twentieth century, the material was highly popular
and produced by various brick manufacturing companies throughout the country.