

## *Review Essay*

# **The Buildings of the United States**

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*BUILDINGS OF MICHIGAN.* By Kathryn Bishop Eckert. New York: Oxford University Press. 1993.

*BUILDINGS OF IOWA.* By David Gebhard and Gerald Mansheim. New York: Oxford University Press. 1993.

*BUILDINGS OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.* By Pamela Scott and Antoinette J. Lee. New York: Oxford University Press. 1993.

*BUILDINGS OF ALASKA.* By Alison K. Hoagland. New York: Oxford University Press. 1993.

A number of years ago, the Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) initiated a bold project: nothing less than the documentation of the architectural heritage of the entire United States. Modeled somewhat on Nikolaus Pevsner's *Buildings of England*, the greater scope of the American effort—as well as the expectations set for it—makes it an even more daunting task than that undertaken by Pevsner, whose English series (published between 1951 and 1974) consists of forty-six volumes. The American series (four books so far) is expected to require anywhere from fifty-five to seventy volumes, since each state and a number of the nation's major cities will be documented individually, with some requiring more than one volume. Also, each American volume will include a substantial number of maps and illustrations and provide considerable background information about

the developmental history of the individual states and cities, in addition to the annotated catalog of buildings.

The task of documenting a representative portion of a state's architecture, or that of a large city, typically takes a lot of time and inevitably requires the efforts of more than one person; thus, a program to produce scholarly surveys which will cover the entire nation will involve a sizable number of people, each expert in the architecture and history of one or more of the areas to be documented. To achieve this goal (and publishable manuscripts) requires considerable planning, a process that began some twenty years ago. A number of the Society's members were involved, including William Pierson, Jr. and Adolf Placzek—the founding editors—who took on the demanding job of making certain that momentum would not flag during the critical early years that followed the Society of Architectural Historians' commitment to sponsor the *Buildings of the United States* (BUS). Special funds had to be raised, and in 1986 an NEH grant was awarded, followed by grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Graham Foundation. By then, a number of authors had been recruited and manuscripts were being prepared.

While sponsored and edited by the SAH, the BUS is published by the Oxford University Press. The first volumes—on Michigan, Iowa, District of Columbia, and Alaska—appeared in 1993. They demonstrate that the Society and its publisher are able to produce quality guides to American architecture, books which also serve as highly dependable reference tools. That achievement, visible in the first volumes, received early recognition: awarded the R. R. Hawkins Award for the outstanding scholarly publication of 1993 by the Professional and Scholarly Publishing Division of the Association of American Publishers, and the American Institute of Architects' 1993 Citation of Excellence in International Publishing. These awards not only recognize the work of the several authors, but also the efforts of the current coeditors-in-chief, Osmund Overby and Damie Stillman, and the quality of the physical product provided by the Oxford University Press.

The initial volumes, despite sharing many common characteristics, are sufficiently different from one another in their approach and scope to permit a fair assessment of the importance of having a multi-volume, scholarly survey of the nation's architecture, intended "to identify and celebrate the rich, cultural, economic, and geographical diversity of the United States as it is reflected in the architecture of each state." Moreover, the BUS volumes will not be limited to "the highlights and the high points," for they will "deal with the very fabric of American architecture, with the context in time and in place of each specific building, with the entirety of urban and rural America, with the whole architectural patrimony." And that includes both modern architecture and pre-Columbian and Native American remains.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the BUS series is intended to provide not only a truly representative record of the nation's architecture at the end of the twentieth

century, but also considerable commentary on the forces (and people) which have influenced the shaping of the built environment over an extended period of time.

The heart of each (octavo) hardbound volume is the catalog of buildings, regionally organized, with entries that provide documentation of the selected structures as well as relevant commentary. Entries (arranged in double columns) are given unique alpha-numeric designations. Pictorial support comes from illustrations (for half or fewer of the entries), plus a fair number of maps to orient the reader (and, in some cases, noting exact locations).

Other standard features include a brief “users guide” and an “introduction,” both written to serve the volume at hand. With the first, the editors and authors provide information concerning the coding and organization of the entries. In the second, a moderately lengthy narrative by the author(s) orients the reader to the development of the state (or city) and its architecture. Such information provides a useful context for the catalog’s condensed commentaries and for the short, descriptive passages that head regional sections. Finally, each volume provides notes, a bibliography, a substantial glossary, and an index.

In their introductions, the authors make clear the significance of a region’s geography (physical and economic), and summarize the state’s demographic history while pointing out the influences that affect the distribution and type of building done (and, less directly, factors affecting survival). The introductions also enable readers to appreciate why each volume, despite many shared features, has a decidedly individual character. This can be seen in even the two most similar volumes of the four at hand: Michigan and Iowa. Those on Alaska and the District of Columbia are understandably even more idiosyncratic. Finally, the shaping of a manuscript inevitably reflects an author’s persona as a working historian and his experiences with architecture.<sup>2</sup>

While hardly substantive evidence of the influence exerted by these several factors, some simple statistics are suggestive of the diversity we can expect to find within the BUS:

Michigan: 624 pp.; 363 halftones, 42 maps; and 769 catalog entries.

Iowa: 565 pp.; 367 photos, 51 maps; and 1,501 catalog entries.

Alaska: 353 pp.; 230 illustrations, 28 maps; and 324 catalog entries.

District of Columbia: 480 pp.; over 360 photos, drawings and maps; and 486 catalog entries.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, authors have some leeway in the determination of a manuscript’s length, in the number (and types) of maps and illustrations used, and in the number of catalog entries. A comparison of the four volumes reveals considerable variation in how to divide a catalog into regions, what topics merit space in the narrative text that appears in an “introduction” or within the catalog section

independent of commentaries under individual entries. Some flexibility also exists in how the alpha-numerical code is used for the identification of entries (though in all cases the alpha portion represents regional designations). Choices exist in the types of illustrations used and, to some degree, their number. Historic views, often of buildings no longer standing, usually are placed in the introduction, and their presence, regardless of location, reminds the reader not only of what once existed, but the value of engaging in a systematic program of documenting the nation's architecture.

Carefully done, such documentation and accompanying narratives provide us with easily used and reliable records of the nation's architecture, at least as it existed in the closing years of the twentieth century. Commendable as that might be, who will be served by this rich resource? What will that clientele seek within the BUS volumes?

As someone who is frequently the target of inquiries dealing with the architecture of a metropolitan area that sprawls into two states, I am certain that the BUS will—in time—attract a rather diverse audience, most of whom will be seeking answers to rather narrowly framed questions intended to extract quite specific information about a building, such as the date of construction or the architect. Though the BUS volumes are representative rather than comprehensive surveys, they are a good place to begin—and perhaps end—a search.

We can, however, expect a more sophisticated level of use, as when an investigator is concerned with some issue or problem that requires making comparisons, when a great deal of data will be analyzed and interpreted. Such a person will no doubt be experienced in the visual and technical vocabulary associated with architecture, and thus be able to appreciate the significance of historical factors affecting a particular region, and capable of sensing trends or patterns within the compact mass of data provided in a BUS volume. The series should even help non-specialist scholars in understanding architecture's place in the social and cultural history of a city, state, or the nation.<sup>4</sup>

Some examples drawn from the four volumes currently at hand suggest the range of usage. At the most basic level—the narrowly framed question—the quest for names and dates is typical. Example: when was the balcony added to the south front of the White House? The answer is found in the D.C. volume, within the WHO3 entry. However, once there, the reader will also have access to other facts, and the introductory narrative for the “White House and Lafayette Square” neighborhood (with a map) places the President's mansion in a context that includes a number of other buildings and some monuments.<sup>5</sup> If the reader shifts to the United States Capitol, a ten-page narrative for that entry (CHO1) summarizes the complex history of that building. Here, too, a map, plus background information and several illustrations, provide an introduction to the “Monumental Capitol Hill” neighborhood. In other words, this BUS volume is much more than a guidebook to the architecture of Washington D.C., for it functions as a mini-encyclopedia for at least the major neighborhoods and principal public buildings in the city.

That richness of information for the major buildings will not be likely in other city-volumes and will be impossible for a state-volume. Generally, catalog entries consist of single paragraphs, about six to a page. Yet, that is enough to provide a considerable amount of useful data. For example, consider the ten entries in the Michigan volume which document buildings by Frank Lloyd Wright. The index furnishes the relevant page numbers and lets us know which entries are illustrated. The entries themselves provide a capsule introduction to residences by Wright, especially the later work, and where in Michigan one can see buildings by him. Of course, other more comprehensive guides to Wright's architecture are available, but he is the great exception when it comes to easy access to a wide range of publications on a given architect. Consider Albert Kahn. The Michigan index lists twenty-five buildings, suggesting a career of some significance—at least in Michigan. He was, in fact, an architect of some importance outside the state, and he is known to architectural historians. But many other architects with significant careers remain, at best, shadowy figures, even to specialists in the field. The BUS volumes will at least help in making them known to wider audience.

Shifting our focus to building types, the Iowa volume's index has headings for barns, mills, libraries, and service stations, to name but a few categories. Alaska, too, has a heading for barns, but also for barracks and for concrete, among others. One should not, of course, assume that the best approach to a BUS volume is through its index. The study of the architecture of a given state should begin with the introduction. Then, as one leafs through the pages of the catalog, sampling here and there, insights will be encouraged as one gains an appreciation of what was done and why, and of the circumstances that led to the placement and construction of buildings. A case in point is the first paragraph of the introduction to the Michigan volume. There we learn that the state has over 3,251 miles of shoreline, 36,050 miles of streams and rivers, and 10,688 lakes.

To understand how the aqueous environment relates to the built environment, one must reach past such simple, hard facts and look more closely at the narrative text and catalog entries. Or, if the author makes the point that lumbering, mining, and the automobile industry were/are important, as in the case of Michigan, we are being alerted to start making some connections, which should include streams and shorelines, among other things. For Alaska, we are informed that different cultures (Native, Russian, and American) are important in the history of the shaping of that state's built environment. In Iowa, European settlement by various groups was important to the shaping of the state's architecture, an influence regularly repeated elsewhere in the United States. Thus, as we read and look and ponder, the serious student can't help but generate more complex questions than those easily answered by discrete facts.

What the first volumes tell us is that the *Buildings of the United States* will provide more than hard data. We will discover that there are various criteria, which "experts" use in deciding what of our architecture merits attention, or how

many examples are needed to provide a truly representative cross section of the total found in a state (or city), while being careful to “deal with more than the highlights and the high points.” Moreover, no single approach to the explication of why architecture is important to our understanding of “American culture” will suffice. This awareness will only increase as volumes are added, for they will come from a growing number of scholars. I find that exciting rather than confusing. Just comparing four volumes in the *Buildings of the United States* has encouraged me to adjust some of my ideas about American architecture, to see things differently than I would by concentrating on just one volume at a time. Yet, I suspect most of us will tend to use the BUS primarily as a convenient source with which to answer specific reference questions. However, the potential is there for the curious and careful reader to enrich his or her understanding of architecture’s place in our social and cultural history, and help one appreciate buildings (even modern ones) as historic documents. Since the editors of the BUS have made the vehicle for this education attractive and accessible, it should not be too difficult to extract some gold from the quantity of ore provided.

## Notes

- 1 . Excerpts from the colophon page and the editors’ “Foreword,” common to all volumes.
- 2 . Eckert (Michigan) is the State Historic Preservation Officer; Gebhard (Iowa) is Professor of Architectural History at the University of California, Santa Barbara; Mansheim (Iowa) is an independent architectural historian; Scott (D.C.) is an independent architectural historian; Lee (D.C.) is a historian at the National Register of Historic Places; Hoagland (Alaska) is Senior Historian for the Historic American Buildings Survey.
- 3 . Data extracted from an Oxford University Press sales catalog, plus the reviewer’s analysis of the entries found in the volumes’ catalogs. Some entries include a group of buildings related in some way, such as being placed in a campus-like setting, with each building typically having an individual commentary. The frequency with which authors use multiple listings varies considerably.
- 4 . Previous to the BUS project, publications of in-depth architectural surveys have tended to concentrate on individual cities, or parts thereof, rather than on large regions or entire states. However, the scope of a survey will not significantly alter its potential of being subjected to several levels of usage.
- 5 . Regional divisions in the case of the D.C. volume are based on neighborhoods.