

## BUILDINGS IN AND OUT OF THE CLASSROOM

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Recent concern over the quality of history teaching in schools and colleges and the grim reality of declining history enrollments have stimulated numerous experiments in the content and methodology of traditional courses and encouraged the creation of courses dealing with new subject matter altogether. However, many history teachers continue to depend on conventional visual sources for their own teaching and for student projects. By confining themselves to books, documents, even quantitative data, history teachers neglect some of the most obvious, to say nothing of the largest, teaching resources available when they neglect buildings. By looking at buildings as artifacts rather than merely or even primarily as expressions of aesthetic taste, historians can demonstrate how buildings reveal the cultural, social, even political attitudes of past societies and how they have, in turn, conditioned these societies.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, architectural study is particularly helpful in courses dealing with local or family history and in teaching about those groups who have left little documentary evidence of their experience.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes buildings have been overlooked as historical evidence and as potential teaching tools because of an implicit determinism about architecture. Buildings, at least until the late nineteenth or early twentieth century it is assumed, take their form at any point in time because of particular climactic conditions, available building materials, the level of technological sophistication, or the physical requirements of the site.<sup>3</sup> Certainly these factors are involved in constructing any building, but a closer look at architecture quickly reveals that culture is often a more important factor in determining form than are these others. Moreover, it is evident how buildings themselves can support and perpetuate a particular form of life and specific values.

In the Tidewater region surrounding the Chesapeake Bay, early settlers built farmhouses resembling those in the area from which they had originally come. Around 1660, however, a clear change in the form of farmhouses constructed occurred, and another house type found in the west country highlands of England became common. This change was not the result of available building materials nor climate. Rather the preferred new arrangement was selected because it was relatively easy to separate the quarters of bonded servants (and ultimately slaves) from those of the family. Clearly, then, the west country house plan suited the nature of the Tidewater tobacco society better than the domestic arrangement settlers had brought with them. Culture determined form and, in turn, form shaped culture as the nature of social interactions possible between masters and servants was patterned by the house itself.<sup>4</sup>

As a noted anthropologist has suggested, "Building a house is a cultural phenomenon, and its form and organization are greatly influenced by the cultural milieu."<sup>5</sup> Using this insight historians can build an element of excitement and discovery into their classroom teaching and into the student projects they assign. Although this essay points out the ways in which a consideration of architecture can be useful in general American history courses and especially in courses dealing with community or family history, the same approach can be adapted to non-American material.<sup>6</sup>

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There are several different ways in which the teacher might use buildings as a teaching device. One approach would be to focus on the types of buildings found in a single community at any one moment in time or at selected moments in time. The kinds of buildings in any community illustrate that group's priorities and values, as well as existing economic and technological restraints.<sup>7</sup> A series of slides to show what buildings do or do not exist (and this is often a most important point to convey), the numbers involved, and the character of the buildings themselves (size, elaboration, apparent function, etc.), can let students see the social and even political structure of that community and some of its values and choices. None of this demands a sophisticated understanding of style, for the focus is not on style but on buildings as physical evidence of the social and economic structure of the community and its cultural attitudes.

The appearance of a mid-nineteenth-century western mining town details the workings of this approach. Any visual exploration of its buildings quickly reveals the nature of mining society. The main street typically shows numerous saloons, a restaurant, hotel, perhaps a drugstore and smoke shop. In the rest of the town bordellos, shacks for the miners, perhaps a few permanent houses are found, but often no religious or governmental buildings. The ramshackle nature of most of the construction suggests the impermanence of gold mining society, the types of buildings its male orientation and worldliness, the scarcity of traditional or permanent structures its sexual composition and unregulated social nature. The buildings along the main street with their pretentious false fronts, and even wooden classical porticos, give yet another indication of the mixture of male sophistication and transiency typical of mining society.<sup>8</sup>

As students look at the physical character of a mining community, they can perceive the nature of mining life in a way which is impossible when dealing with verbal accounts, which often ignore the built environment. In terms of structuring this kind of exploration of the community, it is exciting if students have the opportunity to draw their own conclusions from the visual evidence without much initial explanation from the teachers. There will be some wild guesses and some overimaginative responses, but the exploration of the past will be underway.

In a similar fashion in a community or local history course, a teacher can set up a walking tour so that students can learn by observing the actual buildings themselves, rather than merely looking at slides or photographs of buildings. But in either exercise, it is important to make sure that all the types of buildings which existed at any moment in time are included or at least suggested to the students. Although art historians have dealt exclusively with the great and their buildings, the approach here seeks to illuminate the nature of an entire community and the texture of its life rather than that of its elite group. The use of architecture in history teaching should not turn into an exercise of illustrating the life of the elite or of editing the past. The privies, shanties, and shacks, which are nowhere to be found in a place like Williamsburg, give a romanticised and false view of colonial society, all the more misleading because it is so vivid. The history teacher should not try to create a similar misunderstanding of the past by excluding certain parts of the physical setting.

Another approach might focus on the changing forms of certain kinds of buildings in order to illuminate the relationship between cultural, economic, and social needs and technology. An analysis of the changes in the physical appearance and the internal arrangement of the church and its location would be one such exercise, but so too would be a study of apartment houses or movie theaters. The space between buildings and open spaces like parks are also means of exploring community values and norms, social



priorities, and technological expertise.<sup>9</sup> In every case, students can move from the concrete to the abstract, from what they can see to what it means. Teaching with and through buildings is an inductive exercise and one which does not demand great buildings or great spaces as the starting point.

The internal arrangements of buildings can yield a wealth of information about the past. Here domestic buildings of all kinds can become the focus for study and discussion. Most people probably realize intuitively that different kinds of rooms give different behavioral cues. The Victorian parlor, for example, demands one kind of behavior, while the twentieth-century family room demands another.<sup>10</sup> Individual rooms suggest accepted ideas of proper behavior just as clearly as books on manners, but they reveal behavioral norms for rooms and functions which the etiquette books avoid. The bathroom is the most obvious example of an important area of human experience always neglected by conventional sources. In the room by room approach it is, of course, most useful if rooms and their furnishings can be considered together. But here the teacher should beware of depending upon the overfurnished local house museum, which, in addition to having too much furniture, may have it improperly arranged. Old photographs and drawings, advertisements, and documentary evidence should be helpful in reconstructing interiors, however.

Domestic space can give many other clues to the texture of family life, family structure, and the ways in which the family relates to the outside world. Physical space shapes the way in which work can be done and the ways in which family or household members can or are likely to interact.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, internal space offers a kind of evidence about family life that most traditional sources do not reveal and is suggestive about the lives of groups about whom conventional sources have almost nothing to say.

Consider having students investigate the nature of kitchen space, how it relates to other domestic space, how these two factors change over time. Ask students to observe whether the kitchen is large or small, separated from other activities and spaces or the center of them. Is the kitchen the gathering place for the family or does it reinforce sexual and social distinctions? If exclusively a female space, whether that of housewife or servant, how does it relate to areas in which children might play? How is cooking actually done in such a space and with what equipment? Is the kitchen apparently the center of other economic activities in addition to cooking, as it was the center of laundry work in the small nineteenth-century working class row house (hence, the numerous child accidents and deaths resulting from scalding and burning)?<sup>12</sup> Encouraging students to ask these kinds of questions about individual rooms starts to make family experience in the past very real, and their insights have a basis in a very tangible reality.

Let one illustration, the early New England house, show how much information can be discovered by studying the allocation of space. Typically an early seventeenth-century dwelling was small, with two main rooms side by side. One of these, the hall, was used for cooking and numerous other activities; the other room, the parlor, was nothing like its Victorian descendant, but was often a sleeping room for the heads of the household and perhaps others. Above the two rooms there might be a simple loft, also used for sleeping. Sometimes a lean-to built onto the rear of the house gave more space to the family. By showing floor plans with the appropriate dimensions, by suggesting demographic information about the numbers of people likely to live in this kind of a house and the ages of the members of the household, and by describing the kinds of artifacts typically found there, the teacher can go on to ask students to speculate on the relation between men and women, adults and

children, the living experience possible in such a house, and attitudes towards privacy, sex, and community which the house reflects.

Students will, doubtless, be quick to notice the lack of differentiated space, the crowded sleeping arrangements, the absence of hallways, and the necessity of passing through one room to reach another. They may comment on the failure to provide space especially for children and the necessity of living in the hall during the cold winters. They will realize the hall was in reality a multipurpose room. From these observations about functions and spatial patterns, they can see how family life was structured by space. Crowded living conditions suggest constant family interaction, and the density of family experience the necessity for watchfulness and organization, both of which were reflected in Puritan emphasis on the family and order. The lack of privacy among household members, the difficulty of avoiding contact are clear. Early attitudes towards sexuality are revealed by tracing traffic through sleeping spaces. After such an exercise students should have no trouble distinguishing Puritan ideas of sexuality from those of the Victorian period.

The status of colonial women and their copartnership with men are reflected in the house arrangement where the hall was the center of various female activities, as well as the locus of family life, rather than a separate area. The ways in which children were integrated into family life is also suggested. The relationship between family and community takes on substance when students see the way in which the visitor, welcome or not, stepped into the center of family life, an arrangement which was quite impossible in the houses built in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. A variety of other cultural ideas beyond those directly concerned with the family and its community can be discovered (such as the relationship between the man-made and natural environment and what this suggests about concepts held about man and nature). But enough has been said to indicate how many possibilities using buildings as a teaching device exist.<sup>13</sup>

More obvious perhaps is the way in which buildings can be used to show the process of regionalization, settlement, or urbanization. Local variations of national styles are vivid clues of the relationship between regional and national levels; the different regional building styles in any community attest to the origins of settlers and suggest some of the tension and dynamics of community building. Again with some consideration of style, students in an urban area can study house and building façades to work out the rough stages of urban growth. A more ambitious project would involve using city directories in combination with a rough stylistic analysis to trace the development of social and occupational segregation in the nineteenth-century city.<sup>14</sup>

There are, then, many possibilities and opportunities for incorporating architectural material into an American history curriculum. As some of the examples have suggested, many of the assignments and activities have the added benefit of bringing students into the community to work and to study. One assignment, in particular, the one house assignment, has proved useful in creating links between students (and their schools) and local communities. Students are asked to select one building in the community and to do an architectural and historical analysis of it. This analysis can often fuse with local historic preservation efforts. Many historic preservation groups are trying to document all the buildings in their communities and are doing so with an inadequate staff; student research provides welcome assistance.

If students cooperate with local survey efforts, they will investigate their building's ownership and occupancy pattern back to the approximate date



of construction, the use and changes in use which have occurred, the building's architectural features, and its significance, whether visual, architectural, historical, or social. In the process of doing survey work, students get a good sense of evolution of the community, of the utility of the built environment as a community resource. They make a valuable contribution to historic preservation efforts. They also learn to use a variety of primary documents, ranging from wills, land deeds, and court cases to maps. Oral history is another one of the starting points for any study of a building. But perhaps most important of all, students make a kind of identification with their research which is rare in most of their academic work. The buildings become "theirs" and the phrase "my building" replaces addresses or house names within a few weeks or even days.

If architecture presents many teaching possibilities, it is also clear that using buildings in teaching requires careful preparation. It takes time and often ingenuity to put together effective and suggestive slide presentations or walking tours. Existing walking tours or house museums can be useful, but they may distort the past too. Architectural studies, old photographs and drawings in historical societies and libraries, atlases, maps, and the more familiar primary and secondary sources may all have to be consulted in order to provide students with enough information to do the kind of thinking which the visual material is designed to stimulate. The preparation, then, may be difficult. But the payoffs, in terms of teaching and personal development, can be most rewarding.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Amos Rapoport, House Form and Culture (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1969), 16, 48.
- <sup>2</sup>Dolores Hayden and Gwendolyn Wright, "Architecture and Urban Planning," Signs, I (Summer, 1976), 927.
- <sup>3</sup>Rapoport, House Form, 46.
- <sup>4</sup>Cary Carson, "English Vernacular Architecture Gone Native," Society of Architectural Historians Journal, XXXIV (December, 1975), 298-299.
- <sup>5</sup>Rapoport, House Form, 46.
- <sup>6</sup>See, for example, Richard A. Goldthwaite, "The Florentine Palace as Domestic Architecture," American Historical Review, LXXVII (October, 1972), 977-1012, and Eric Mercer, "The Houses of the Gentry," Past and Present (May, 1954), 11-32.
- <sup>7</sup>See Harold Kirker, "Building America: History as Revealed Through Architecture," a course syllabus prepared at The National Humanities Institute, New Haven, Connecticut, June, 1976.
- <sup>8</sup>Alan Gowans, Images of American Living: Four Centuries of Architecture and Furniture as Cultural Expression (Philadelphia, 1964), 7.
- <sup>9</sup>Thomas J. Schlereth, "The City as Artifact," A.H.A. Newsletter, XV (February, 1977), 7, and Elizabeth S. Blackmar, "The Urban Landscape," in Stephen Botein, et al. (eds.), Experiments in History Teaching (Cambridge, 1977), 44.
- <sup>10</sup>Dorothy E. Smith, "Household Space and Family Organization," Pacific Sociological Review, XIV (January, 1971), 68-69.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 53, and Hayden and Wright, "Architecture," 927.

<sup>12</sup>Papers delivered by Susan J. Klineberg and Eileen Boris at the session on "Impact of Architecture, Planning and Housing on Women's Experience," The Berkshire Conference for Women Historians, Bryn Mawr College, June 11, 1976. See also William D. and Deborah C. Andrews, "Technology and the Housewife in Nineteenth Century America," Women's Studies, II (1974), 309-328; David Handlin, "Efficiency and the American Home," Architectural Association Quarterly, V (Winter, 1973), 50-54; and Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "The Industrial Revolution in the Home: Household Technology and Social Change in the United States," Technology and Culture, XVII (January, 1976), 1-26. Also helpful as a bibliographic aid is Walter B. Edgar and Julie Roy Jeffrey, "Historical Preservation Projects," The Newberry Papers in Family and Community History, Paper 78-5 (January, 1978).

<sup>13</sup>John Demos, A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony (New York, 1970), 27-33; David H. Flaherty, Privacy in Colonial New England (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1972), 24-60, 70-73, 76, 80; Smith, "Household Space," 55; Ann Oakley, Woman's Work: The Housewife, Past and Present (New York, 1976), 24-25; Henry Glassie, Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts (Knoxville, Tennessee, 1975), 121; and Barbara Laslett, "The Family as a Public and Private Institution: An Historical Perspective," Journal of Marriage and the Family, XXXV (August, 1973), 487. See also Clifford E. Clark, Jr., "Domestic Architecture as an Index to Social History: The Romantic Revival and the Cult of Domesticity in America, 1840-1870," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, VII (Summer, 1976), 33-56.

<sup>14</sup>Fred Kniffen, "Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion," Annals of the Association of American Geographers, LV (December, 1965), 549-577; Raymond Gasril, Cultural Regions of the United States (Seattle, 1975), 71-74; Robert W. Bastian, "Architecture and Class Segregation in Late Nineteenth-Century Terre Haute, Indiana," The Geographic Review, LXV (April, 1975), 166-179; and John E. Rickert, "House Facades of the Northeastern United States: A Tool of Geographic Analysis," Annals of the Association of American Geographers, LVII (June, 1967), 211-238.