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Book Review: The American Statehouse: Interpreting Democracy's Temples

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Nebraska State Capitol

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Employing three conceptual frameworks or lenses, Charles Goodsell provides an illuminating examination of the singular American architectural creation called the statehouse. He uses these lenses to offer a social interpretation of the architecture of our fifty state capitols. The first lens seeks concepts or values embedded within the building proper. The second looks at the impact of a statehouse on current political behavior. Finally, his third lens provides the broader impressions these buildings have on society in general.

Goodsell examines the relationship between state politics and the architecture that not only houses this function but provides the stage on which it is acted out. Thoroughly researched, Goodsell's study describes the historic governmental and architectural evolution of this building type, starting from our colonial period, to early nationhood, and then through two later periods of statehouse construction—essentially the six decades following the Civil War. Parallel to his evaluation of the exterior and interior form of the buildings are the political concepts and values that both unite the democratic process at the state level and help define some of the differences in each state's political and legislative procedures.

Except for the new Florida statehouse, a creation of the 1970s, however, little reference is made to the change in architectural form of the statehouse that occurred in the early twentieth century. Of the eleven states that are wholly or largely a part of the Louisiana Purchase, the three newest statehouses—in Nebraska, Louisiana, and North Dakota—were the first to incorporate an office tower within their design. Yet little mention is made architecturally or governmentally of this significant shift in built form or governmental structure. In the broader assessment of when state governments physically outgrow their historic statehouses, the statement "What was originally a gemeinschaft relationship of intimate community under one roof... became a gesellschaft social model of distant communication between separate buildings" may be true in ninety percent of states where this condition exists. Goodsell did not consider, however, the ten percent of state capitols that still house the principals of all three branches of government.

The American Statehouse gives substance to the paraphrase of a Winston Churchill quote, well known among architects: "We make our buildings and afterwards they make us. They regulate the course of our lives." The book contributes to a deeper understanding of the multi-layered image statehouses portray. Goodsell's political and social science analyses give a different architectural perspective: how a statehouse's history, its form, iconography, interior ornamentation, and artifacts affect our lives in unique ways.

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