Architecture and The Great Plains: An Introduction

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AN INTRODUCTION

The four essays in this issue of the Great Plains Quarterly were originally presented at the seventeenth annual symposium of the Center for Great Plains Studies held in April of 1993 at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln under the title, “Architecture and the Great Plains: The Built Environment, Past and Present.” They provide a sampling of the conference’s broad range of inquiry into the character of architecture within the Great Plains region.

David Murphy’s essay, “Jejich Antonie: Czechs, the Land, Cather, and the Pavelka Farmstead,” examines one of the icons of the Great Plains, a modest rural farmstead. But as the reader will soon discover, Murphy’s penetrating typological study of ethnic influences displayed in the farmstead and particularly the farmhouse is informed and enriched by interpretations of selected writings of Willa Cather and considerable knowledge of Czech culture. The several threads of his study, as highlighted in the title of the essay, are woven into a tapestry of interrelated themes that produces a result greater than the sum of its parts. Murphy guides the reader on an enlightened tour of the Pavelka farmstead, which he regards in both fact and fiction as “a kind of middle landscape; present horizontally between the old and new Czech worlds and vertically in between the earth and the heavens.” His detailed examinations of the farmstead layout and evolution of the farmhouse plan expose building patterns associated with both Anglo-American and Czech cultures. Then with Willa Cather as his inspiration, Murphy concludes with an imaginative and poetic interpretation of the farmstead that illuminates and celebrates its mystical and transcendental qualities.

The more romanticized versions of Great Plains architecture are often characterized by the sod house and grain elevator, both commonly regarded as symbolic testaments to the inhabitants’ stubborn persistence, hard work, and self-reliance. “The Best Kind of Building: The New Deal Landscape of the Northern Plains, 1933-42” by Carroll Van West brings the reality of the situation into sharper focus. Van West cites formidable statistical evidence to show that the northern plains landscape was significantly affected by massive federal expenditures on a variety of public works programs. Acknowledging the more well known Works Progress Administration
(WPA) and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Van West’s essay also brings to light work of several lesser-known but influential New Deal agencies, including the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and the Public Works Administration (PWA). Van West demonstrates that these New Deal programs were initiated to fulfill two basic missions, relief and reform. The former were intended to react directly to the effects of the depression and drought by building dams, improving the rural infrastructure, and constructing new and repairing existing public facilities. The latter were “to reform the landscape through better conservation, forestry practices, and new buildings that spoke boldly and directly of ‘the shift of government from neutral arbiter to social welfare activist.’” As Van West notes, the more aggressive posture assumed by several of these New Deal agencies did not match the values of many northern plains residents, but the legacy of these federal programs is, nevertheless, a significant feature of the physical environment of the region.

The character of Great Plains architecture is examined from a literary perspective in the essay by Ann Romines titled, “Writing the Little House: Architecture of a Series.” Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House series of seven novels provides the source material for this study. Romines observes that “probably no writer of her generation has provided such a complete evocation in words of Great Plains houses, outside and (especially) in.” Throughout the series houses become the vehicles for probing questions of gender. “Male traditions of buying and building” are contrasted with “female traditions of furnishing, arrangement, preservation, and housekeeping.” Romines demonstrates that the gender balance of the series shifts toward the female sphere in the later books. The physical processes of house building (the frame and exterior enclosure) give way to a more conceptual idea of “home,” portable and imperishable. While the exterior shell of the house changed from place to place in the course of moving, building, and remodelling, a stability of sorts was achieved by differentiating and controlling the interior space using the “traditional appurtenances of women’s culture,” furniture and textiles. Romines convincingly relates this idea of home to both Wilder’s personal experiences and the larger cultural context. She concludes by observing that none of the actual houses portrayed in the series has survived, “but Wilder’s novels, more durable, still stand.”

H. Roger Grant’s essay, “Living in the Depot: The Two-Story Railroad Station on the Northern Plains,” examines a building type closely identified with the railroad era on the Great Plains. Grant shows that two-story depots with living quarters were, however, neither particularly representative of Great Plains architecture nor unique to the railway age in America. Even with the spread of railroads in this country, two-story depots with living quarters were not universally accepted by the railroad companies. Grant observes that they usually appeared in the more remote regions of the lines. The building’s balloon-frame construction enhanced the possibilities of prefabrication and portability, two qualities that the railroads found particularly appropriate to their rapid expansion on the empty prairies. As Grant points out, railroad management also recognized that the depot with attached living quarters had other distinct advantages. By providing housing, the company offered an incentive to attract and keep married agents who were found to be steady and reliable. A continuously occupied station also virtually guaranteed better service and fewer maintenance problems for the company. But living in the station was another matter, indeed, and it is through his description and anecdotes pertaining to daily life in the depot that Grant adds a new dimension to our knowledge and understanding of this building type. He concludes that while the two-story depot served a special need, it “went the way of dugouts and sod-houses, replaced either by more desirable buildings or nothing at all.”

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