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Review of *Contemporary Native American Architecture: Cultural Regeneration and Creativity* By Carol Herselle Krinsky

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Contemporary Native American Architecture: Cultural Regeneration and Creativity. By Carol Herselle Krinsky. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. Photographs, notes, selected bibliography, index. x + 277 pp. \$45.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

American architectural writing has generally slighted non-western cultures, though this is changing. When Native American-built environments have been considered, as in Nabokov and Easton's *Native American Architecture* (1989), the emphasis has been on "traditional" forms, usually at the expense of contemporary work and culture-specific design. Yet this neglect begs important questions about the possible role of built environments in expressing cultural identity. Thus the subject Carol Herselle Krinsky addresses is timely, important, and relevant to broader conceptual and theoretical issues. Unfortunately, a number of flaws make her book less useful and convincing than her subject merits.

Lacking a conceptual or theoretical framework regarding culture, cultural change, and identity—and how buildings might express these—the book falls short of its potential as a useful case study of a world-wide issue. Also neglected is the context of buildings, such as settlement forms, which may be more important than buildings; among the Navaho, for example, the emphasis on the hogan—especially when large, multi-storeyed, serving different purposes, and using different materials—may be questionable. The book's emphasis on "political correctness" leads to the identification of individuals' Native American origin (by asterisks next to names) and to the assumption that something must be "designed by a Lakota or part-Lakota architect" or that a tribal museum director cannot be Euro-American.

Because criteria for evaluating projects are never established, statements claiming a project is "culturally sensitive," "culturally appropriate," or "fits well into the modern Midwest" are merely assertions. Architects' statements about the validity and achievement

of projects are accepted rather than evaluated critically and compared with contemporary "vernacular" examples. The question becomes: What is Native American about the material? Since Krinsky offers photographs, too many verbal descriptions, too few plans, no analytical diagrams, and little analysis, this is difficult to answer. When Sun Rhodes, whose Spring 1993 article in *Native Peoples* is cited frequently, writes about his Great Plains house design, he considers behavior, activities, and "furnishings," and uses analytical diagrams, whereas Krinsky merely illustrates the house. Moreover, many of the attributes Sun Rhodes considers are found in many other cultures.

Krinsky implicitly assumes that shapes and features are more significant than the organization of systems of settings, domains, or activity systems. Yet most examples illustrated could be anywhere; they are really hypotheses that should be studied systematically, rigorously and critically, but never are. Krinsky suggests, rather, that it is "not for the outsider to assess the power of the symbolic designs produced for Native Americans, but the proposals can be described and local opinions can be recorded," although even the latter are generally missing.

Organized by topics and building types rather than regions, the book's references to the Great Plains are scattered. Moreover, the process of syncretism seems not just Native/Euro-American but occurs among various Native American groups. Regional identity is thus far from evident and building forms are used outside their original locations. The discussion of the Great Plains in Nabokov and Easton, which is organized by regions, agrees with Krinsky about the importance of circle motifs (also found outside the Plains) and the tipi (a strong visual symbol likewise used elsewhere). Earthlodges and grass houses, some not circular and others not tipis, also occurred in the Great Plains. Thus the precise role of Great Plains cultures is difficult to discern.

Can contemporary built environments communicate high-level meanings, such as cultural identity? Though useful in drawing

attention to the question, Krinsky's endeavor shows how difficult the attempt to use buildings to express such meanings visually can be. Only rigorous research will reveal whether an answer is even possible.

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