

Naegele's Guide to the Only Good Architecture in Iowa

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Book Reviews and Notices

Naegele's Guide to the Only Good Architecture in Iowa, by Daniel Naegele. Ames: Culicidae Architectural Press, 2019. 274 pp. Photographs, maps, index. \$24.95 paperback.

Reviewer Laura Sadowsky is the State Historian with the State Historic Preservation Office/State Historical Society of Iowa. She oversees the National Register of Historic Places program in Iowa and has worked as an architectural historian in both Iowa and Vermont.

As we go about our daily lives, it is easy for us midwesterners to overlook the landscapes and buildings we see and use every day—if we even notice them at all. Silos, barns, campus buildings, and houses all seem unimportant compared to the places listed in history books and documented on television. Despite the common mindset that *history* and *architecture* are things that happen elsewhere, our own built environment is just as revealing about who we are and as worthy of deeper consideration as anywhere else.

Naegele's Guide blurs the lines between travel guide and travel narrative to address a common question the author has received over the years, which at times was probably posed more as a challenge than as a sincere inquiry. What is there to see in Iowa? Although organized like a travel guide, it is not a guide in the traditional sense with efficiently plotted itineraries and must-sees. Instead, it follows the author's past travels throughout the state and is meant to shift the reader's perspective on the seemingly mundane landscape on which real people live (and lived) their lives, encouraging deeper thought and noticing what generally goes unnoticed. The author admits up front that the word *good* as used in the title is subjective and that the collection found in the book is based on what he likes rather than some formula of what an architectural guidebook should be.

The guide begins with a foreword that establishes the author's approach. That is followed by an introduction that provides a succinct three-paragraph overview of Iowa history, types of architecture to be found in the state, and suggestions for how Iowa can better play to its visual strengths. Prior to launching into the collection of places, the author includes a "how to use" section with a few minimally detailed itineraries and a reminder to not take the book too seriously.

The heart of the book is its region-by-region and city-by-city exploration of the places that have caught the author's interest over the past 18 years. Landscapes and buildings are inextricably intertwined throughout the narrative, each informing the other, especially in rural areas where various agricultural structures seemingly arise from the land as though unbidden. Each regional section focuses mainly on rural, agricultural, and industrial resources such as silos, kilns, grain elevators, and the ubiquitous barn, but also includes houses in small cities. Several of Iowa's larger cities are represented by their own chapters, with collegiate buildings usually dominating those dedicated to cities with universities. Sprinkled throughout are little surprises many would not even know existed, such as the Hindu Temple Cultural Center near Madrid, a 25-foot statue of Pocahontas near the junction of State Highways 3 and 4, and the impressive number of Frank Lloyd Wright-designed residences scattered around the state. Following the Iowa entries is a short chapter on resources across the border in Minnesota and Illinois and a chapter on Omaha. The book then closes with the author's characteristic tongue-in-cheek humor about the vast number of falling-down barns constituting a building type of their very own and a plug for the rustic camp architecture found throughout the state.

The accessibility of this book to even the most casual traveler is perhaps its greatest strength. The author's humor, lighthearted curiosity, and refusal to embrace any sort of authority on the subject succeed in supporting as much curiosity about utilitarian structures as about architect-designed buildings meant to impress. More deeply, the book opens a window onto the history of Iowa as expressed through our built environment, showcasing the agricultural backbone and influences of early immigrant groups to rural areas on our culture: German efficiency, Scandinavian reserve, Yankee practicality, just to name a few. The entries for the cities and towns that arose from our agricultural successes illustrate a thought-provoking bridge between our roots and our reach into the wider world with an amalgam of organic architecture, murals depicting agricultural scenes, housing, and commercial and collegiate buildings linked to high-style design trends, all of which reveal how we saw our place in the world and our hoped-for role in the future. A few hiccups with facts and a missed entry for the southeast Iowa chapter in the table of contents, however, suggest that a bit more editing might have been warranted. Despite this and the author's self-admitted subjective focus, *Naegele's Guide* is an enjoyable read that encourages residents and out-of-staters alike to look upon the landscape of Iowa in a different light.