

Houses and Homes: Exploring Their History/Public Places:
Exploring Their History/Places of Worship: Exploring Their History

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Houses and Homes: Exploring Their History, by Barbara J. Howe, Dolores A. Fleming, Emory L. Kemp, and Ruth Ann Overbeck. Nearby History Series, vol. 2. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1987. xiv, 170 pp. Illustrations, map, suggested readings, index. \$14.95 paper.

Public Places: Exploring Their History, by Gerald A. Danzer. Nearby History Series, vol. 3. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1987. xiv, 138 pp. Illustrations, suggested readings, appendixes, index. \$14.95 paper.

Places of Worship: Exploring Their History, by James P. Wind. Nearby History Series, vol. 4. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1990. xxii, 146 pp. Illustrations, suggested readings, appendixes, index. \$14.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY RICHARD FRANCAVIGLIA, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

The Nearby History series is gaining much attention for its focus on the commonplace—those aspects of everyday life that are woven into the fabric of culture: schools, businesses, religious institutions, housing. Editors David Kyvig and Myron Marty are producing a remarkable series that has been embraced in some circles and questioned in others (one of their colleagues has somewhat jokingly called the series “Nearly History”). The editors’ enthusiasm for history that reaches—and relates to—everyday lives is contagious. The books in the series are increasingly used in college public history courses and are commonly seen on the shelves of local historical societies. Local historians will find much of value in the series, which maintains a balance between methodology (“how to” do history) and historical interpretation (what the past means).

Each of the three books under review covers a fundamentally different subject, yet all three address the same challenge, namely, helping readers understand their subject’s historical and social context. [The first volume in the series, *Local Schools*, was reviewed in the *Annals of Iowa* 49 (Summer 1988), 438.—Ed.] Because each book offers an overview of a very complex subject, it can only touch on important highlights. Therefore critics will need to ask if the books provide enough instruction—that is, methodology—both to enable readers to understand the subject and to provide them with sufficient skills to begin investigating these (and other) subjects independently.

Houses and Homes starts by describing the relationship between a house and its setting, that is, how the house fits into the surrounding landscape. In the first section of the book, the authors set out a series

of clues that may be used to determine the origin of any particular home. Whereas the exterior and interior design of the home itself provides tangible evidence, the authors describe how to use other clues, such as written records and oral histories. The book's second major section focuses on interpreting the clues, that is, developing a chronological, social, and spatial context. This section is the most eclectic and general. Critics may find it somewhat superficial, but the authors will achieve their goal of introducing readers to different interpretations of house form if readers realize that they have offered visually based generalizations about buildings and their regional settings. Covering, as it does, a wide range of housing, *Houses and Homes* achieves its purpose of helping readers appreciate the variety of dwellings encountered in the United States. Despite its level of generalization, the book enables readers to better understand the relationship between exterior and interior, or public (or semipublicly viewed) form and private dwelling space.

Public Places, by Gerald Danzer, focuses on those spaces where people collectively interact (parks, open spaces, squares, streets) or collectively come to view as part of the urban fabric (monuments, buildings). With its focus on landscape architecture and urban design, it is the most visually oriented of the books in the series, and owes a debt to classics such as *Image of the City*, by Kevin Lynch. Like the other books in the series, *Public Places* is designed to introduce readers to a set of clues that will permit a better reading of the commonplace. It will also help readers to appreciate both the intentionally planned public spaces as well as those that develop unintentionally. Whereas *Public Places* concentrates mostly on historic (nineteenth- and early twentieth-century) streetscapes, readers may see parallels in today's public places (such as the rebirth of "Main Street" in the enclosed shopping center or "mall"). The book's orientation toward American cities and towns from the pedestrian's viewpoint will provide readers with a good overview of historic cityscapes.

In *Places of Worship*, James Wind explores the diversity of religious worship in the United States. He notes that "places of worship provide astute inquirers with thick slices of life—excellent observation platforms from which to watch how individuals, their beliefs and practices, their neighborhoods and communities change." Wind describes several places of worship and their congregations. Like the other books in the series, he begins with the tangible, the place of worship's geographic and social location and the actual form of the building occupied by the congregation. *Places of Worship* is (perhaps appropriately) the most philosophical of the three books reviewed, for it urges readers to confront first impressions and to actually interact

with the congregations being studied. This, he suggests, will help one read between the lines. Like most history, written congregational history only reveals part of the picture; it must be supplemented by other sources, including discussions with members and former members and firsthand observation of the congregation.

That, it seems, is the message of the series in general—that local history requires a new (or expanded), eclectic, hands-on approach. The focus of all three books is national, and yet they dwell on the validity, the importance, and the excitement of doing local history well. Although these books do not specifically address Iowa history, their approach and methodology should be welcomed by all local historians in the Hawkeye State.

Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, III, edited by Thomas Carter and Bernard L. Herman. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989. viii, 255 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$22.00 paper.

REVIEWED BY KEITH A. SCULLE, ILLINOIS HISTORIC PRESERVATION AGENCY

Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, III is the latest addition to a distinguished series of papers regularly selected for publication from the annual meetings of the Vernacular Architecture Forum (VAF). The papers in this volume are from the 1985–1987 meetings. Up until twelve years ago, local antiquarians dominated the study of vernacular architecture. It was the serious domain only of a school of geographers and occasional individual scholars in various disciplines. In 1979 scholars from numerous backgrounds, academic and applied, organized the VAF to foster interdisciplinary understanding of the diverse common buildings and landscapes known as “vernacular.” The VAF avoided defining the central term, “vernacular architecture,” in order to promote communication. For the same reason, the VAF did not begin a journal; rather it encouraged its members to publish in existing journals. With this liberal mission and mode, the VAF became a significant force for education about vernacular architecture. It is hoped the University of Missouri Press will continue to aid this work by publication of future issues of “*Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*.”

Given the growing significance of vernacular architecture for many—anthropologists, architects, folklife scholars, cultural geographers, architectural historians, social historians, and historic preservationists, primarily—it is not idle repetition to summarize some of the articles and categorize others for the curious but unfamiliar. The volume’s various approaches can be adapted to study vernac-

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