

## Preserving Women's Past: a Review Essay

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# Preserving Women's Past: A Review Essay

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*Reclaiming the Past: Landmarks of Women's History*, edited by Page Putnam Miller. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992. 256 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth.

*RECLAIMING THE PAST: Landmarks of Women's History* appears to have entered the market with little fanfare, but without doubt it is a benchmark in the literature of material culture. Conceived and edited by Page Putnam Miller, director of the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, this volume does precisely what it promises to do: "challenge two rapidly expanding fields—historic preservation and women's history—to work together in promoting a more comprehensive understanding of women's past" (7). It does so by providing broad contexts for identifying, studying, and analyzing the places where, and the ways in which, women have made contributions to American history.

In the introductory chapter, Miller explains that the book is a product of efforts begun in 1985 to redress the paucity of women represented in the National Historic Landmark (NHL) designations and, by extension, in historic sites in general. Another product is the Women's History Landmark Project, a collaborative effort to identify and nominate for NHL status those places associated specifically with women—"not only with famous and exceptional women but also with those more representative of their time and place" (17). Justifying the need for redress, Miller notes that when, in 1987, the National Park Service surveyed the 1,942 NHL units in its trust, it found that

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only forty of them had been designated because of their association with women! At the time the book went to press, the Women's History Landmark Project had resulted in twenty-three NHL nominations, with thirty more nominations pending. Interestingly, only two of the initial twenty-three sites are located in the trans-Mississippi West: the Mabel Dodge Luhan House in New Mexico and the Laura Ingalls Wilder House in Missouri. The eastern bias plausibly reflects the location and interests of those women who collaborated on the project, but it also indicates the extent of work remaining.

In the seven essays that follow Miller's introduction, the broader implications are evident. Each author summarizes the current state of scholarship in a particular area of women's history, integrating discussion of known places associated with specific women or particular groups of women who figure in that theme. The essays include "Women and Architecture" (Barbara Howe), "Women and the Arts" (Barbara Melosh), "Women and Community" (Gail Lee Dubrow), "Women and Education" (Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz), "Women and Politics" (Joan Hoff), "Women and Religion" (Jean R. Soderlund), and "Women and Work" (Lynn Y. Weiner). Given the selection of themes, a certain overlap is inevitable, yet there is no redundancy. Each author addresses a distinct body of literature, and thus brings a different perspective to the main topic. Overall, *Reclaiming the Past* achieves a remarkable synthesis of current scholarship in women's history and its reflection (or lack thereof) in the built environment.

The reason for focusing on National Historic Landmarks (NHLs), as opposed to addressing the need to achieve balance throughout all National Park Service programs, is never explained. NHLs constitute a relatively small portion of the designated historic places in the United States. Under guidelines developed by the National Park Service, NHL designation is reserved for those buildings, structures, sites, or objects that are of transcendent importance for their association with events, individuals, or ideals of national scope. NHLs in Iowa include the Amana Villages; the Van Allen Store in Clinton, designed by Louis H. Sullivan; the Old Capitol in Iowa City; and the Grenville M. Dodge House in Council Bluffs. The National

Register of Historic Places, however, provides much broader recognition of buildings, structures, sites, and objects that are important for their association with local, state, or national history. Many buildings and sites in Iowa either have been listed on the National Register or have been determined eligible for listing. Some National Register properties are privately owned and not open to the public, but many of them are administered and maintained by local historical societies. We should be concerned about the identification, care, and interpretation of *all* properties connected in some important way to our past at the local and regional levels as well as at the national level, and we should be particularly concerned about the interpretation of those places that are open to the public.

Otherwise, I find little to criticize in this work, although I am troubled by some of its implications. Miller devotes considerable space to the issue of historic architectural integrity, noting particularly how prevailing National Park Service standards have prevented many altered but otherwise worthy structures from being designated as historic places. The issue is a perennial one, with ramifications far beyond the scope of this book, and one with which cultural resource professionals continually wrestle. Miller calls for greater latitude in the standards, citing David Lowenthal's powerful "necessity of ruins" thesis.<sup>1</sup> "The primary issue for historic preservation policy," she writes, "should be toward developing strategies that will enable people to understand and appreciate their links to the past and should be less directed toward the fight to keep old buildings unchanged" (21). Still, focusing on integrity standards strikes me as a misplaced argument, in part because the National Park Service, through the National Register Program, already allows reasonable leeway in applying integrity standards, and in part because such a focus tends to draw attention away from the greater need for better site interpretation regardless of whether the sites are National Historic Landmarks. How many historic homes, for instance, interpret the life of a great man who dwelled there and ignore the woman or women who managed

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1. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York, 1989).

domestic affairs? As Lynn Weiner reminds us, such women often included more than wives: "Material reminders of the era when servants lived in private homes are the second staircases and the servants' quarters—extra rooms, often at the back or tops of houses—which separated the domestic lives of servant and employer" (202–3).

Certainly we can and must do a better job of educating the public through existing historic sites. Interpreting any historic place one-dimensionally disregards the complexity of life and, hence, the fullness of history. Nevertheless, the book's implicit critique of historic preservation is valid. Despite historic preservation's tremendous growth and maturation during the past three decades, historic sites still represent a highly selective past. If a building or structure does not have at least "interesting" design features, it is not likely to find preservation friends much less arouse curiosity about its historical associations. By the same token, visitors are more likely to patronize a historic place that has visual interest: the commonplace, the hard-to-find place, and the downright unattractive place rarely draw a crowd. The dilemma is painfully clear to those public agencies and private organizations responsible for maintaining our heritage with inadequate budgets. This does not mean, however, that we should despair of representing the past more inclusively—and that is the challenge of *Reclaiming the Past*.

This challenge, I sense, must be met on two fronts. First, we must pay greater attention to context, that is, the scholarly framework within which we (should) identify and evaluate sites, buildings, structures, and features for significance. As I reflect on my own involvement in recent projects, I realize that this may not be as easy as it sounds. Studying the built environment for important places associated with the history of transportation, for instance, is not likely to turn up many railroad stations, bus terminals, airports, automobile factories, bridges, and highways that are linked directly to women, either as individuals or as occupational groups. Nonetheless, if historic preservation has produced such skewed results, then it is time to reassess the motives and research questions that kindle the process.

Second, we must place greater emphasis on accurate, objective, and comprehensive site interpretation. Site restoration and

maintenance can require enormous effort and expense, yet that is only half the job. No matter how many "ifs" we may utter, walls cannot talk, and the eloquence of "mute testimony" is still silence. Just as an old place must be capable of telling an important story about our past in order to be historically significant, so, too, must that story be told and told well. In Iowa, for instance, the Althea Sherman Chimney Swift Tower, which the Johnson County Songbird Project is valiantly trying to preserve, offers a vehicle not only for explaining Sherman's scientific contributions to ornithology, but for interpreting the nature of scientific inquiry and the status of wildlife conservation during the early twentieth century as well. Similarly, the Rath Company meatpacking plant in Waterloo may be important for its industrial design, for its association with men who became community leaders, and for what it represents about an industry that changed dramatically during the course of the twentieth century. But it also can tell an important story about the people who labored within: the workforce segregated by gender and race, the tensions between labor and management, the labor hierarchy, and the conditions under which employees turned out products for a consumer market.

*Reclaiming the Past* not only presents a challenge, it provides a model for meeting that challenge. The essays contained within its covers can be used to frame better research questions, just as they can be used to interpret historic places more inclusively. If the book fails to incite better historic preservation, the fault will be our own.

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