

## Houses of God: Region, Religion, and Architecture in the United States

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1998 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

---

### Recommended Citation

"Houses of God: Region, Religion, and Architecture in the United States." *The Annals of Iowa* 57 (1998), 392-394.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.10222>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

women, as the sponsors turned more and more toward promoting vocational education, scientific approaches to social problems, and welfare capitalism. Still, club membership peaked at about thirty thousand in 1920, reflecting the popularity of a turn toward leisure activities and recreation. Increased membership was accompanied, Murolo suggests, by an expanded national bureaucracy that minimized the autonomy of local units, and by an improvement in the social status of women workers. But this same success, combined with financial cutbacks, led to decline. By 1928, when the National League of Girls' Clubs dissolved, the organization had become anachronistic.

The narrow focus of this book is both its strength and weakness. Voices of working women and their sponsors resonate clearly, and the inner workings of the organizations are nicely presented. However, it might be useful to see greater comparative discussion of other cross-class organizations for young working women, such as boarding homes, travelers' aid societies, Young Women's Christian Associations, and settlement houses. The notion of a united womanhood, while ably discussed in the context of the changing national discourse on race and labor, also might have profited from being set more firmly in the context of other reform activities of the times. Finally, the author's attention is captured mostly by the clubs in the large cities on the East Coast. Interesting questions remain about the nature of working girls' clubs and activities in such "outposts" as Iowa and other areas of the Midwest.

Still, this book contributes to the understanding of this period of women's labor history, work culture, and cross-class interactions. In the end, working women used the club movement for three reasons: to achieve respectability, to assist each other on their own terms, and—not least—to have fun.

*Houses of God: Region, Religion, and Architecture in the United States*, by Peter W. Williams. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997. xv, 321 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographies, index. \$34.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY PATRICIA ECKHARDT, IOWA CITY

*Houses of God* is Peter W. Williams's attempt, inspired by a photographic exhibition on the theme of regionalism and American religion, to address the relationship between region, religion and architecture. To manage this vast topic, Williams combines two methods. First, he divides the United States into seven regions (placing Iowa in the "Great Plains and the Mountains" region). Religious architecture

is then set within the contexts of individual religions or Christian denominations. Second, he depends on architectural historical literature, a literature with limited national scope, for organizing architectural styles and periods.

Each chapter is self-contained, with an introduction and conclusion, bibliography, and set of photographs, but the content is uneven. The chapters devoted to the eastern United States contain lengthy and thorough discussions of religious groups and their architecture. Remaining chapters, such as those devoted to the midwestern and western regions, examine fewer architectural examples and provide less religious history. In the introductory paragraphs of chapter five, "The Great Plains and the Mountains," Williams makes clear his lack of awareness of midwestern ecclesiastical architecture by saying, "this entire region can be characterized negatively for our purposes as one which though humanly interesting, has produced little distinctive or noteworthy by way of religious architecture" (210). This is most certainly not true. The only distinctive development Williams identifies in this region is the architecture of the Church of the Latter-day Saints. Another architectural development in the West, Spanish Colonial architecture, is treated in a separate chapter. The final chapter on the Pacific Rim consists of a collection of descriptions of unrelated religious structures representing the diversity of religious groups in the region.

*Houses of God* does not effectively present the religious architecture of the entire United States. The author's equating of religion with social class and his focus on colonial architecture and Christian denominations with British origins prevent him from examining the architecture of all religious groups equally. Moreover, as the United States expanded and religion diversified over time, religious tradition and regionalism diminished as influences on religious architecture. This does not make religious architecture in the middle and western regions of the United States less interesting or important, but it is harder to relate individual structures or styles to a particular religious tradition. In spite of this loosening of the ties between religion and architecture, there are a number of topics that Williams could have explored. He could have balanced his discussions of churches inspired by Gibbs or Wren and the influence of the ecclesiologist movement, influences from England, by discussing other developments of a similar nature involving other theological movements and architectural trends. He could, for example, have explored the complex ethnic and religious influences that informed the development of the American Victorian Gothic church. Williams's thoughtful dis-

cussions examining the differences between Congregational and Anglican religion, tradition, and architecture could have been paralleled, for example, by a discussion of the differences between Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism, differences so obviously revealed in their architecture. While there is some new information in the book about the relationship between region, religion, and architecture, the book will disappoint Iowa readers looking for information about religious architecture in the Midwest.

*Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900–1932*, by Juan R. García. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997. x, 292 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY LOUISE A. KERR, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO

In *Mexicans in the Midwest*, Juan R. García has done an admirable job of uncovering, digesting, categorizing, and arranging materials about the history of Mexican settlement in the Midwest, which he defines as the region including the states of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin. He is limited to studies that have already been done and by materials available to him for research, which results in uneven coverage of some of these states. Histories of Detroit, East Chicago (his own and others'), Kansas City, and Chicago made the early twentieth-century history of those areas considerably easier to describe than were those of either Nebraska or Iowa. In addition, it is evident that he has added a great deal of his own research to the work of others.

Most of the available research concentrates heavily on the period covered in this book (1900–1932). Still, it was no easy task to find a workable organizational framework for the plethora of primary and secondary material, which has significant gaps in topical coverage as well as in geography and chronology. The strategy he uses is to take a modified chronological approach and supplement it with coverage of topics for which there was sufficient information to draw inferences about the experience of Mexicans across the Midwest, whether urban or rural, whether in large barrios or small communities. Thus there are chapters on housing, women, Mexican consular activity, organizational efforts, and mutual aid societies. Much of the information for these sections comes from newspapers of the period as well as from primary reports—apparently derived from the secondary sources. García acknowledges the sketchiness of some of the information in the chapter, "Social and Cultural Life of Mexicans in

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.