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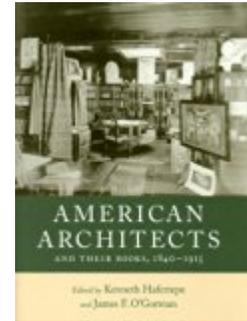
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kenneth Hafertepe, James F. O’Gorman, eds. *American Architects and Their Books, 1840-1915*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007. Illustrations. xxvi + 303 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-602-6.

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The Architect’s Shelf: Books and Print Culture in the Making of a Profession

The history of the book is a now well-established line of inquiry for historians. Since 1983, the American Antiquarian Society has pioneered the study of the book and of print culture as an interdisciplinary approach to understanding American culture. The Rare Book School, now housed at the University of Virginia, was established the same year, and sees the book as an artifact, important in itself and not simply for the ideas it may contain. Interestingly, scholars have looked to the book as a window onto the worldview of individuals. Book inventories in colonial probates enable scholars to talk about early American literacy and the intellectual proclivities of various individuals. When Alan Taylor investigated the library borrowing patterns of William Cooper, he understood Cooper’s genteel aspirations and struggles (*William Cooper’s World: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier in the Early American Republic* [1996]). Joan Shelley Rubin similarly profited by her attention to book culture in the early twentieth century and plumbed a middle-class milieu where books became symbols of middling respectability (*The Making of Middlebrow Culture* [1992]).

It is a welcome addition, therefore, to see the fine volume of essays assembled by Kenneth Hafertepe and James F. O’Gorman. Their book, *American Architects and Their Books, 1840-1915*, is a fascinating contribution to the history of the book. In the twelve essays collected here, a distinguished group of scholars circle around a common theme: the value of books to the lives and work of Amer-

ican architects. In exploring this theme, these scholars connect to a variety of important topics central to our understanding of nineteenth-century American history. The result is a coherent and rich discussion of book and print culture and the role it played in forging the architect’s profession.

Books as an aide to professionalization, indeed, emerges as one of the leading themes in this volume. Many of the architects profiled pursued a similar educational path. As Daniel D. Reiff notes in his sketch of Enoch A. Curtis, most budding architects had to rely on self-education for their training. The first university school of architecture opened at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1865 followed by Cornell in 1871. Prior to that, architects often began as builders and carpenters. Curtis, for example, was a carpenter in western New York whose access to architectural books provided a course of study and served for his forty-year career as an “inspiration” for his own designs. Others gained a jump by apprenticing in the offices of architects. Thomas Ustick Walter apprenticed with his father to learn brick masonry, then secured a position in the office of William Strickland, the architect who designed the Second National Bank. Walter’s relationship with Strickland was formative; he gained access to Strickland’s important library of architectural books, developed his skills as a draftsman, and significantly, notes Jhennifer A. Amundson, observed the professional culture of an architect’s office. For all the architects profiled in these essays,

books became points of entry for the profession and their means of education. They learned the history of architecture, the rudiments of design, the vocabulary of style, and the practices of the building arts. Without formal schools, books became their professional training.

Books were central to the self-education and professional development of these men. They read and used these books as reference works and guides. Several works described European architectural styles and provided detailed illustrations of ornamentation, elevations, and plans. Often these books traced the history of various styles. They also provided designs for different types of buildings, from domestic dwellings to churches and other civic and commercial structures. The lavish illustrations were invaluable as most of these architects would never see the real buildings. Thus, many of the works did double duty. They provided a history of architecture and a primer on style, and they also served as models for these builder-architects to use in creating their own designs. We see these men picking and choosing elements from various buildings and incorporating them into the design of buildings that they had been commissioned to create. Most of these men, however, did not merely replicate buildings they saw in books. As the authors make clear, these men used the knowledge of these designs to inform their own work. Earle G. Shettleworth Jr., for example, notes that John Calvin Stevens's architectural library enabled him "to absorb the vocabulary of the architectural styles in his books and then create his own expression, rather than making precise copies" (p. 229). Similarly, Charles Sumner Greene, whose career is described ably by Edward R. Bosley and Anne E. Mallek, read widely in a number of fields and drew inspiration for his own architecture and interiors. He was attracted not only to the fine and applied arts but also to religion and mysticism. He read the *International Studio*, a magazine reporting on the arts of the period, which Greene annotated and returned to for ideas and techniques. The same might be said of Frank Lloyd Wright. Elaine Harrington describes Wright's passion for books and notes that his reading provided an inspiration for his work rather than a template for copying. Wright owned a number of books about the arts and crafts movement and Japanese art and culture, two aesthetics that figured into his own designs.

While collecting and reading books on architecture played a central role in shaping the careers and self-identities of these men, writing books on architecture confirmed their place in the profession. Elspeth Cowell notes in her excellent essay on the work of Samuel Sloan that his two-volume book *The Model Architect* (1852-53)

aimed to promote the interests of architects. At first blush, *The Model Architect* is like other books of its type: a pattern book whose utility for builders is obvious. It provides designs for sundry domestic buildings along with "explanations, specifications, estimates, and elaborate details" for each (p. 96). One might think that Sloan was giving away professional secrets. Why then hire an architect? Sloan used his book, however, to showcase the architect's talents. In this way, he aimed to draw a distinction between the architect (who realized the design) and the builder (who executed the design in three dimensions). Sloan emphasized the architect's superior understanding of taste and design. He offered a warning: building a house is challenging and even practiced professionals make mistakes. Would you dare trust the building of your home to anyone but a professional who understands the principles of taste, and who has the experience to manage the project and a thorough knowledge of construction? This appeal reminds one of *Sensible Chic*, an HGTV show. Beginning with an "inspiration room" conceived by a high-end designer, the show attempts to recreate the look of the room in someone's home for a fraction of the cost. The designer's tricks are revealed but the resulting room is always a disappointing and pallid copy. The subtext of the show seems to be: hire a designer. Sloan likewise provided the tricks of the trade (including detailed plans), but to pull it off, he indicated that the client had better hire the architect or face inevitable disappointment.

As with any edited collections, some contributions are stronger than others. Ted Cavanagh's essay deserves mention because it is a finely crafted discussion of the antebellum work of Oliver Smith whose career points to the necessity for historians to pay more attention to the rural influence on American architecture. Smith was an itinerant architect-builder, like others profiled in this collection. He worked in western New York, then a "frontier" region. As Cavanagh notes, Smith had a knack for simplifying the building of structures, perhaps from necessity. Importantly, Smith collected rural building practices, which he described in the books he wrote. Cavanagh is especially effective at embedding Smith's story into its nineteenth-century context.

The most playful and imaginative essay in the collection is perhaps O'Gorman's essay titled "Wright and Melville's Chimney." O'Gorman argues that, in his "prairie house" designs, Wright pursued a "democratic architecture." The low profile of the prairie house, like the plains for which it was designed, bespoke a style at once anchored on the landscape and integral to Ameri-

can individualism and freedom. O’Gorman suggests that the prairie house emerged from a set of ideas Wright construed as American. The books he read armed him with ideas he could embody in buildings. For Wright, says O’Gorman, “architecture is a language” (p. 259). O’Gorman then draws a parallel between the hearth, so important to Wright’s designs, and the ode to the chimney Herman Melville penned in 1856. In “I and My Chimney” published in *Putnam’s Monthly*, Melville’s narrator exalts his home’s central hearth as the soul of the house and develops a paean to the rural life. These, says O’Gorman, are sentiments Wright, and it should be said, many others, shared. So while he cannot suggest Wright

was influenced by Melville’s story, O’Gorman does point out the parallel. It is speculative but highly entertaining.

This entire collection, in fact, is a joy to read. It is also a joy to look at, as the book includes more than one hundred illustrations depicting building plans, architectural details, interiors, and portraits of the architects. Several essays also include helpful appendices listing architects’ book inventories. No women appear here, no doubt a reflection of the nineteenth-century reality, but nearly all the architects were reared and worked in the North or Midwest. Surely southerners lived in houses, and one wonders who designed and built them.

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