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Michael Olmert. *Kitchens, Smokehouses, and Privies: Outbuildings and the Architecture of Daily Life in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. Illustrations. xvi + 286 pp. $27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4791-4.

Reviewed by Matthew H. Jennings (Macon State College)
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Small Buildings Remembered

In *Kitchens, Smokehouses, and Privies*, Michael Olmert takes readers into the backyards behind the great houses of the Chesapeake. In these spaces behind the homes of the wealthy, Olmert illuminates a world where the sometimes dirty work of food preparation, the clean work of dairying and laundering, and the necessary work of the necessary was carried out. The book's main argument is that we should take these buildings seriously, because they can teach us about the society that built them. Olmert lays out the reasons convincingly, and with great skill, and in the process provides a valuable service to general readers and scholars alike. *Kitchens, Smokehouses, and Privies* is beautiful, thoroughly researched, and written with grace and humor.

The book begins by asserting that "every building is a text" (p. 1). Historians of material culture have been laboring under this assumption for some time, but Olmert phrases it in a concise and, as far as I can tell, original manner.[1] If buildings are texts, then they are fair game for interpretation by a wide range of historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and literary scholars. When considering artifacts of the past, in fact, a fluid, interdisciplinary approach works well. Olmert is ideally positioned for such an approach: he teaches English literature at the University of Maryland, writes for television (and wins Emmys), and has authored numerous magazine articles as well as *The Official Guidebook to Colonial Williamsburg* (1985). Many of the outbuildings treated in the book are in Williamsburg, where Olmert has accumulated a wealth of experience and knowledge.

After an introduction that defines terms and frames the general goal of the project, which is to find out what we can learn about eighteenth-century America from its surviving outbuildings, the book consists of eight chapters, each treating a specific sort of structure: kitchens, laundries, smokehouses, dairies, privies, offices, dovecotes, and icehouses. The work concludes with two appendices, each a meditation on a prevalent shape in early American architecture: octagons and hexagons.

The chapters work well together, but any one of them could stand alone and prove a useful, discussion-provoking addition to a history, English, archaeology, or art history syllabus. Each chapter probes the deep roots of the building, picking out references to the structure in English and American literature. Every chapter contains a wealth of detail about the surviving examples of its particular sort of building in the Chesapeake. Olmert also accounts for how the buildings were used. In this project, he is aided by those who practice "archaeology by experiment," trying to understand the past through using its "materials, tools, and techniques" (p. 9).

Each chapter fascinates and contains valuable insights. Readers may be surprised to learn that it was social distinction more than fire safety that moved Chesapeake kitchens apart from the main house. This way, the hard work of preparing meals was physically separated from the pleasure of consuming them. We also learn the right methods for cleaning the various fabrics worn in the eighteenth century, salting and smoking meat, and making such beverages as Everlasting Syllabub and Syllabub from the Cow (mixtures of wine and milk, and hard cider and milk directly from a cow's teat, respectively). The privy chapter narrates substantial differences, and even some similarities, between eighteenth-century notions of privacy and appropriate bathroom behavior and our own. Bathroom reading was known in early America, though being alone in the privy was apparently a rare luxury, as many privies contained multiple seats, and some even had lower benches for children. Though most of the outbuildings were private, offices occupied a space in between. Most had a public room for meeting prospective business partners or clients, and then a more clut-

tered chamber where the papers were pushed. The dovecote chapter outlines the myriad uses of doves: "Imagine an engine that provides an endless supply of goods and produce–meat, eggs, down, fertilizer, and even gunpowder" (p. 173). Wealthy eighteenth-century Americans might use ice to chill bottles, but would probably not put pieces of the frozen Potomac into their beverages. Snow might do the trick, though. The two appendices, on octagons and hexagons, are reminiscent of John Demos's *Circle and Lines* (2004), and reinforce the notion that we would do well to consider the cultural patterns and beliefs buried so deep that people felt no need to explain them to posterity. The book would have benefited from a formal conclusion that drew the various chapters together.

Backyards were scenes of struggle and negotiation. *Kitchens, Smokehouses, and Privies* does not avoid this fact, and Olmert mentions slavery, servitude, and other forms of inequality at various points throughout, but these might have featured more prominently. The influence of John Michael Vlach's *Back of the Big House* (1993) is evident in the introduction, and Olmert notes that "the culture of outbuildings was made possible by vast class differences, economic hardships, servitude, and slavery" (p. 1). Readers get a lot about what went on in the buildings, but less about what they meant to the people who worked in them. Of course, many of these stories are unrecoverable and the result would be speculative. But recent work by Anthony Kaye, author of *Joining Places* (2007), has shown that much can be done to recover the differences in the ways slaves and owners perceived space.

A certain class of sticklers is likely to be disappointed that Olmert eschews traditional footnotes or endnotes in favor of a "Notes & Further Reading" section at the end of each chapter. All of the book's sources, both primary and secondary, however, are clear, and the short bibliographic essays allow Olmert to demonstrate his knowledge of the literature and to draw attention to the people who helped him in more informal ways, such as demonstrating eighteenth-century dairying techniques.

Most American history teachers have probably come across the images archived as part of the Historic American Buildings Survey.[2] Perhaps the starkly beautiful black-and-white photographs have accompanied your in-class presentations, allowing students to witness past architectural developments at the same time as they confirm your good taste in photography? Scores of photographs, many drawn from the survey, grace the pages of *Kitchens, Smokehouses, and Privies* and drive home Olmert's points in a visually striking manner. Older engravings, paintings, and floor plans round out the volume's illustrations.

Olmert's writing style is one of the great strengths of the book. It is at once learned and savvy when it comes to modern times (Tony Soprano and global warming appear in the introduction), and very, very funny. Olmert quotes Ivor Noël Hume lamenting our limited knowledge of Williamsburg "pisspottery," and declares grandly of the elite necessaries: "these are not spartan quarters for unspeakable acts, but prestige surroundings in which the movers and shakers of bygone societies still demonstrate the reach of their power and control. These are throne rooms" (pp. 129, 143). Olmert's work is a combination of serious scholarly inquiry and fun that is all too rare in the academic world.

Kitchens, Smokehouses, and Privies deserves wide readership, and deserves a spot on the shelf with James Deetz's *In Small Things Forgotten*, Leland Ferguson's *Uncommon Ground* (1992), and Vlach's aforementioned work.[3] Like these works, Olmert's borrows liberally from the best that historians, literary scholars, and archaeologists have to offer, and rests on thorough research. "Outbuildings talk to us," Olmert reminds us in the introduction (p. 9). That is true, but it helps to have a skilled interpreter like Olmert to tell us what they have to say.

Notes

[1]. Robert Blair St. George, James Deetz, Cary Carson, Dell Upton, Jules David Prown, and Betsy Blackmar have approached the history of material culture in a similar way.

[2]. http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs_haer/.

[3]. Deetz's work first appeared in 1977, with a revised edition coming out in 1996. The review title is borrowed from chapter 6 of the revised edition: "Small Things Remembered."

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