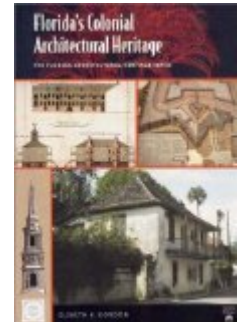


Elsbeth K. Gordon. *Florida's Colonial Architectural Heritage.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. 352 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-2463-9.



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Florida's Architectural Contribution

The evolution of America's architectural tradition had been acknowledged as being a phenomenon based on forms developed in the English colonies of the eastern seaboard during the colonial period. This text recognizes the importance of Florida's architecture to the understanding of a more inclusive archetype for the building style designated as Colonial American. Elsbeth Gordon enhances the scope of the historiography available to scholars wishing to grasp the diversity of the built environment which arose out of the colonizers' efforts to recreate a European aesthetic. The inclusion of the existing Amerindian architecture, which Europeans borrowed from and utilized, gives this text a broader base for further analysis of how material culture reflected the syncretic nature of the colonizers' experience. The seminal work by Alfred Manucy, *The Houses of St. Augustine, 1565-1821*, had been up to this time the text which scholars relied on for information on Florida's architectural motifs.[1] Gordon's extended range, as far as geographic and cultural influences go, helps to fill the gap which exists in de-

termining the nature and importance of all the contributions which created the material environment of the New World.

Elsbeth Gordon worked from a variety of sources, but her strength lies in her ability to use primary sources from Florida's Spanish and English periods. This enables her to fit the development of Florida's architecture within the social and political context of the colonial period. Her inclusion of proposed plans for structures as well as actual surviving plans shows the compromises made in order to accommodate the vicissitudes imposed by the frontier experience. Gordon's sketches of sites which no longer exist also help to elucidate the changes over time which occurred due to climatic events and strife between the colonial powers. Many of the documents on St. Augustine used by the author had been included in Manucy's text, but it is her research on Pensacola that provides correlations between determinants which made the architecture of the period mutable as the various circumstances dictated forms to the builders.

This text encompasses the long period in Florida's history designated as colonial. This includes the government of two of the most powerful colonial powers: Spain and England. The arrangement of Gordon's findings begin with a look at the Amerindian remains which have been resurrected through archeological sources. The contribution of the early inhabitants to the colonizers' building efforts began with the earliest contact between them and the Spanish. This portion of the text presented the greatest challenge as extant buildings by the Amerindians no longer exist in Florida and sources from the Europeans were sketchy at best. The advancement of the various forms which developed on the peninsula are treated according to the natural sources available in the region. This allows the author to emphasize the prevailing motivations for the adaptations which occurred in the structural systems of the Europeans' construction. Early wood usage eventually led to stone compositions as its susceptibility to the elements and disasters such as fire became evident. The concept of a St. Augustine style (chapter 5) cements Gordon's premise that Florida had a unique architecture which came out of a confluence of various aesthetic beliefs and adaptations to the frontier. This text also explores the British influence on the region as well as the architecture which grew out of defense, agricultural and religious institutions. The author's argument that the earliest colony on the North American continent, Florida not Plymouth, needs more attention in the scope of scholarly inquiry is reinforced by the excellent descriptions of buildings and their historical origins.

Gordon's work also raises some interesting questions as it covers such a long period: from 1528 to roughly the beginning of American interests in the region. It seems the question of Amerindian contributions may remain unsolved at this point as Gordon has to acknowledge that she anticipates ongoing archeological research will shed more light on this subject (p. 24). The chapter which deals with indigenous architec-

tural forms combines a discussion of the early Florida natives with the Seminoles who came into the state after the arrival of the Europeans. How well do these two groups fit together as a set of early contributors to the colony's building form? This grouping may confuse new scholars who are not conversant with the complexity of the area's migratory patterns. Questions of architectural preservation and its goals in the state also remain a concern of the author throughout this work. The emphasis in her dedication to the protection of the vanishing architecture of Florida may at times hinder the flow of this work because this concern becomes an overarching message that need not have been repeated after the introduction. The final chapter examines the defense measures taken by the inhabitants and government of the colony; this was an important aspect of the experience of all the colonizers of the New World. A comprehensive analysis, after that chapter, of all the methods and motifs used throughout this long period would have enhanced the initial premise that Florida's architectural heritage demands the attention of historians and art historians looking at the multitude of forces which shaped the built world of the North American colonies.

Elsbeth Gordon has made an invaluable contribution to the understanding of the development of Colonial American architecture. Her use of written primary material and tangible material sources proves that inquiries which employ traditional and non-traditional avenues of research make for a greater understanding of the syncretism fostered by the arrival of Europeans to the region. Florida's relevance to the early colonial experience in North America has been neglected in the historiography of the past. Its multinational character, which may seem contradictory to Plymouth as the premier example of the American experience school, may be a better indicator for the development of the nation after the colonial era. The mistake should not be made that this text only deals with the aesthetic aspects of Florida's architecture, because it also explains

some of the subtexts which existed behind the dominant trends exhibited in the remains left by earlier inhabitants.

Note

[1]. Albert C. Manucy, *The Houses of St. Augustine, 1565-1821* (St. Augustine: St. Augustine Historical Society, 1962).

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