Ethnicity and Architecture

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The topic of ethnicity has enjoyed a revival over the past twenty years. Not only have scholars developed a new field of social history in the process of studying America's many ethnic groups, but public agencies such as museums, historic preservation offices, and folklore programs have found ethnic history and traditions to be worthy subjects for consideration. Throughout the United States, ethnic festivals are enjoying enormous popularity. The study of architecture has benefited from this interest in ethnicity. Many new studies define ethnic architecture as the folk architecture built by immigrant groups before World War I, but ethnic architecture can have a much broader definition. Although the term can encompass everything built by an ethnic or cultural group, it will be defined here as those structures built by an ethnic group, for use by the group, that relate in some architectural way to the culture of that group.

To study ethnicity is not merely to study a historical phenomenon, for ethnicity remains a vital part of our culture and is expressed in a variety of ways. Some expressions are overtly political, as seen in the example of a candidate who is the son of an immigrant giving a campaign speech on Ellis Island. Other expressions are more private and function less as a political declaration than as an expres-

sion of the group and the changes it has undergone. A Swedish-American family, for example, may eat a typical American diet except at Christmas, when they prepare a traditional holiday feast of Swedish foods to celebrate their ancestry. Ethnic architecture is similarly infused with meaning. Some buildings are political statements that are greeted with public discussion in newspapers and magazines. These buildings exert the political right of an ethnic culture to exist. Many other buildings escape public notice altogether and simply express the ability of a group to maintain its traditional culture.

In South Dakota, ethnic architecture includes the architecture of both immigrant groups and American Indians. By 1900, sixty percent of the state's population was composed of the foreign-born and their children. While the largest share of these people came from central and northern Europe, others came from such areas as China and Italy. To understand the symbolic and political use of ethnicity in American and South Dakota architecture, therefore, it is useful to look at what was occurring in Europe during the nineteenth century, a time of mass migration to America. Europe was in turmoil. War and social strife had torn apart political and military empires, and new countries had been formed. By midcentury, many areas once considered provinces within a larger country had agitated for political independence. To justify the cause of separate and autonomous nation-states, these provincial or ethnic groups pointed to their distinct cultural histories.

Many European artists were caught up in the nationalistic fever and turned to their traditional folk cultures for inspiration. In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, folk motifs appeared in dance, music, painting, decorative arts, and architecture. The Brothers Grimm, Elias Lonnrot, and Cecil Sharp, all of whom began documenting folk tales, oral traditions, or folk songs, gave impetus to the discipline of folklore or folk studies. Architects also turned to the folk tradition for inspiration. Architect Eliel Saarinen was one of those swept up by the National Romanticism movement,

3. The Brothers Grimm, who collected folk tales directly from German storytellers, published their findings as *Kinder-und Hausmarchern* in 1812. Elias Lonnrot collected Finnish folk tales, publishing them in an epic poem called *The Kalevala* in 1835; an expanded edition was published in 1849. Working in the British Isles, Cecil Sharp documented traditional songs, which he described in *English Folk Songs—Some Conclusions* in 1907.
as the wave of interest in folk culture was called. Before immigrating to America in 1923, he had already established a major reputation in his native Finland. An early and famous Saarinen commission was the Finnish National Museum in Helsinki, built between 1906 and 1912 and dedicated to the preservation of Finnish cultural history. Saarinen and his partners, Armas Lindgren and Herman Gesellius, selected many traditional and folk motifs for their design, including a striking brickwork pattern for the gables, reminiscent of medieval Finnish churches. The Finns thus chose a museum design that symbolically expressed a politically new, yet culturally old, country. In other commissions, Saarinen's firm used folk motifs in a self-conscious attempt to praise and celebrate Finnish ethnicity.

In the United States, Saarinen's work moved in a rather different direction, away from Finnish folk romanticism and toward the spare simplicity of the International style. European architects, primarily Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius, both of whom had fled Nazi Germany, brought the International style to America. Partly as a reaction to the extreme nationalism and ethnic racism of the era, these architects sought to create a universal style that transcended national boundaries and addressed universal concerns.


6. The International style, introduced in the 1930s, is characterized by asymmetry, large windows, an absence of moldings, and a preference for the color white. Pevsner et al., Dictionary of Architecture, pp. 253-54. Good discussions of the style can also be found in works on individual architects. See, for example, Peter Blake, Le Corbusier: Architecture and Form (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1960). For information on Saarinen's equally famous son, see Aline B. Saarinen, ed., Eero Saarinen and His Work (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1962).
During this period, Suomi College, a small Finnish Lutheran institution in Hancock, Michigan, selected Eliel Saarinen to design its new Nikander Hall building. In making its selection, the board of the college faced a decision much like the one the governing board of the Finnish National Museum had encountered. America in the late 1930s, however, was a different place than Finland had been in 1906. In the political climate of the thirties, many Finnish-Americans did not want to call attention to their separateness. Finnish-Americans of a more conservative bent, such as those associated with Suomi College, were sensitive about the involvement of many immigrant Finns in radical politics. It was an embarrassment to them that so many had joined the American Communist Party and other leftward-leaning political organizations. The church-supported conservatives at Suomi College therefore wanted a building that was stylish, up-to-date, and anything but separate; in a word, they wanted a symbol that was "international." When Saarinen's plans were unveiled, the local newspaper proclaimed the

7. A growing body of literature describes the role of Finnish immigrants in the communist, socialist, and radical labor movements as well as the tension between radical and conservative immigrants. See, for example, Michael G. Karni, Olavi Koivukangas, and Edward W. Laine, eds., *Finns in North America: Proceedings of Finn Forum III, 5-8 September 1984, Turku, Finland* (Turku, Finland: Institute of Migration, 1988).
building "modern in every detail." Saarinen himself had been a perfect choice. He was an immigrant who had "made good," he had a national reputation, and he had designed major buildings such as the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield, Michigan. Thus, the college managed to express ethnic pride without appearing backward, rebellious, or partisan.

Ethnic pride and National Romanticism did not find their way to America solely through the Finns. The same trend is evident among the Swedes in Nebraska. In his study of the Salem Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wakefield, David Murphy discovered that architect Olaf Cervin was aware of the Scandinavian National Romanticism movement and freely adapted the style and spirit of the movement in his work. A Swedish-American himself, Cervin worked within a Swedish-American context and had traveled to Scandinavia. He expressed Swedish National Romanticism most clearly in the free and exaggerated use of Gothic detailing on the gable and narthex and in the exaggerated height and semidetached nature of the steeple. Both were reminiscent of detailing found on churches built in Sweden during the National Romantic period.

These examples demonstrate how architects translate motifs and traditional design elements into new designs. However, symbolic ethnic architecture can exist in other forms as well. For example, in the 1970s, the Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum moved a traditional log Norwegian house from Norway to the museum grounds in Decorah, Iowa, to show visitors what life had been like in Norway. The Valdres House also serves a second purpose, that of illustrating fine Norwegian craftsmanship in wood building. In this way, the house makes a direct connection to the history of Norway and exemplifies a cherished craft tradition.

In Rapid City, South Dakota, Norwegian-Americans commissioned two new buildings based on Old World models. Stave churches are one of the national treasures of Norway, but South Dakotans desiring to celebrate their origins could hardly have transplanted the Borgund stavkirke, for example, to America. Instead, they hired architect William Bentziger of Spitznagel and Partners to design a re-

The Salem Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church of Wakefield, Nebraska, shows the influence of European National Romanticism in its semidetached steeple, which is similar to the Swedish freestanding steeple bell tower.
production. The church is remarkably faithful to the original design, in large part because of the carvings executed by craftsmen Erik Fridstrom, a Norwegian, and Helge Christiansen, a Danish-American. Next to the church stands a traditional Norwegian outbuilding, a stabbur, which serves as the visitors’ center. Norwegian immigrants to America did not build elaborate stavkirker and stabbur, but when

the originators of the Chapel in the Hills stave-church project chose emblematic architecture, they selected buildings from their cultural heritage that exemplified a sense of uniqueness and architectural skill. Like the Finns at Suomi College, their pride rested not in their immediate immigrant history but in the best and even the most exotic aspects of their country of origin.

The Vesterheim Norwegian house and the stave church represent the most straightforward architectural attempts by Norwegian-Americans to create a symbolic tie to Norway. Significantly, these buildings were not erected or reerected to serve the same purposes that similar buildings had served in Norway. Instead, they function as tools for learning, often, and significantly, by non-Norwegian-Americans. In these examples, traditional elements were not translated into new and functioning buildings, but, rather, the buildings were abstracted into art objects or historic artifacts.

Ethnic churches built in South Dakota to serve active congregations provide yet another example of ethnic expression. Architects used cultural or ethnic symbols in these buildings in a less complete and more fragmented manner than in the Vesterheim Norwegian house or the stave church. By the time the immigrants came to America, they had already cast off some aspects of the Old Country and adopted features of the new. Therefore, these buildings owe more to an established American architectural tradition than to Old World models.

Nevertheless, certain elements from the Old Country survived. Geographer Robert Ostergren wrote of immigrant churches in the Upper Midwest and Great Plains area: “Although most churches varied relatively little in their basic structural characteristics...their decoration could be unique and symbolic of a particular past or culture....[In most ethnic churches this] linkage was most often accomplished in a minor way on the exterior of the American church and more intensively in the decoration and arrangement of the interior.” In contrast to the stave church and the Vesterheim log house, in which the entire ethnic tradition was embraced and presented, in these churches the congregations were quite clearly planted in America but were still making some reference to their home country. The altar painting in the old Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lead, for example, which was painted by miner Charles Alaniva, was based on the altar painting in the artist’s home-parish church. The interior decoration and stylistic details of Saint

Anthony’s Church in Hoven were derived from the Bavarian churches that were familiar to the parish’s Bavarian priest, Father Anthony Helmbrecht. Other churches, such as Our Savior’s (Danish) Lutheran Church in Viborg, still display altars and paintings that use the Danish language.

Although some religious ethnic institutions underwent an adaptation and transformation in America, others found a totally new expression. As a result, some ethnic religious architecture is unique to America but represents a distinctly ethnic immigrant phenomenon. A good example is the design used by the Finnish Apostolic


The altar of Our Savior’s Lutheran Church of Viborg exhibits a strong Danish influence.
Lutheran Church. Apostolic Lutheranism originated among the Finns in the Swedish area of Lapland but functioned as part of the strong, centralized state church, which permitted its members to express themselves only in cottage meetings and other less formal gatherings. When the Apostolics came to the United States, they broke away from the church and formed their own denomination. In reaction to the elaborate churches of Finland, this group stripped their churches bare to reflect their religious simplicity. Examples of Apostolic architecture in South Dakota include the Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church of Savo Township in Brown County and the Old Apostolic Church west of Lake Norden. The radical simplicity of these churches distinguishes them from their historic antecedents and symbolizes the new-found identity of the sect. The symbol is not one of ethnic continuity but of abrupt change and rebellion, for while Apostolic Lutheranism existed and still exists in Finland, it did not receive architectural expression until it came to America.¹⁴

It is in the area of church architecture that another uniquely American influence can be seen. In South Dakota, American Indians account for approximately six percent of the population, and their religious practices cover a wide spectrum of traditional, Catholic, Protestant, and Native American Church beliefs. The churches on the Sisseton-Wahpeton Indian Reservation, for example, were built by Catholics, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians in a missionary effort to the Santee Sioux. The missionaries did little to accommodate Sioux culture, instead expecting these native peoples to adopt a new religion completely. Seemingly, then, the churches cannot be considered symbols or expressions of ethnicity but rather of power over

an ethnic group. Upon closer examination, however, there is some evidence of accommodation. For example, the Presbyterians gave both Sioux and English names to their churches. Over the years, Sioux designs have appeared on South Dakota church vestments and on church walls. The Church of the Sacred Heart in White River, for instance, is decorated with American Indian designs. There, ethnicity has emerged as a symbolic component of the architecture.

An example of a symbolic and robustly romantic expression of American Indian ethnic pride can be found elsewhere in South Dakota. Following the Wounded Knee confrontation of 1973, Oglala Sioux tribal chairman Al Trimble conceived the idea of a new tribal headquarters in the center of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. He wanted the tribal center, called Piya Wiconi, to symbolize new life. A number of smaller tribal buildings, called decentral buildings, were built in other locations on the reservation. The architectural firm of Thomas Hodne in Minneapolis designed all these buildings with assistance from many people, including Dennis Sun Rhodes, an American Indian. In the design, the architects translated the eagle

Designed by the architectural firm of Thomas Hodne, Piya Wiconi incorporates the symbol of the eagle into its design. The building now serves Oglala Lakota College.
and the hawk, symbols of traditional Oglala Sioux culture, into architectural forms. The symbol of the circle, derived from the traditional Plains tipi, was also incorporated into the decentral buildings, called "Prairie Hawk" in recognition of the secondary status of that bird to the eagle.\(^\text{16}\)

Unlike the architect-designed buildings discussed to this point, ethnic folk architecture is more thoroughly tied to traditional ar-

\(^{16}\) Thomas Hodne, telephone conversation, 1 Apr. 1988.

The Church of the Sacred Heart in White River displays American Indian ethnicity in its exterior wall decorations.
Those who construct folk buildings learn their techniques through direct observation and verbal instruction, a method that all but requires the apprentice builder to be an intimate member of the cultural ethnic group. Folk-architecture structures are not usually built for explicitly political or symbolic purposes; yet, the history of the group and its distinct cultural traditions can be traced through it. By observing the elements of form, construction, use, and stylistic trim, we can examine the evolution of folk structures to determine what it expresses about the changing nature of an ethnic group.

Geographer Matti Kaups and others have observed that all American immigrant ethnic architecture represents a simplification of Old World models. Nowhere is this simplification more evident than in the two-story Finnish house at the Buskala Ranch. In 1890, its builder, Henry Buskala, emigrated to Lawrence County, South Dakota, from Raahe in the northern part of the Ostrobothnian area of Finland. For several centuries, the Swedes had occupied Ostrobothnia and heavily influenced its culture. There, many large, rectangular, two-story Swedish manor houses still dot the countryside. A large number of the Finns who migrated to America had worked on the large estates whose manor houses were occupied by Swedish landowners. Not surprisingly, immigrant Finns wanted to emulate that symbol of economic success in the United States, and two-story, manorlike houses are found in a number of Finnish-American settlements. As in the Buskala house, however, the form, size, and ornamental decoration of these Finnish-American houses are greatly simplified. Although the simplification was probably effected by economic considerations, there was an American aesthetic at work as well.¹⁷

The folk architectural designs brought to America were thus not always the product of a continuous cultural tradition. For example, the German-Russians are actually a cluster of German-speaking groups who moved to Russia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When circumstances there proved unfavorable, they moved to Canada and the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of these German-speaking groups, the Mennonites who lived in central Europe, took with them

to Russia a traditional architectural feature called the Russian oven or black kitchen, a small room with an attached furnace/bake oven. While in Russia, the transplanted Germans picked up from their Ukrainian neighbors the use of decorative trim and the skills for building with earth or puddled clay. Immigrants brought all of these features to America, where they appear in many South Dakota houses. As folklorist Christopher Martin has shown in North Dakota, the German-Russians and Ukrainians continued to borrow architectural designs from one another even after they settled in the United States.  

Among ethnic groups in South Dakota, a distinctive cycle of building occurred. During the initial settlement stage, immigrants built temporary houses, some of which undoubtedly had Old World origins, others of which were the ubiquitous soddie, claim shack, or dugout. During the second stage, some immigrants built traditional folk buildings, while others chose to adopt American prac-

This photograph of the Russian oven, or black kitchen, at the Deckert House Museum in Freeman shows the firing box for the furnace/bake oven at the rear and the cooking range on the left.

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During the third stage, almost all groups built distinctly American houses. Despite the strong tendency to turn to American architectural models, however, not all ethnic groups looked simply to their American or Americanized neighbors. In Bon Homme County, for example, some Czechs who lived close to German-Russian settlements appear to have borrowed the idea of the batsa or adobe brick from their neighbors. They chose not to use the brick in exactly the same manner as did their German-Russian neighbors, who used it for full walls. Instead, the Czechs used the batsa as a layer of insulation above the plate and between the rafters in the axial walls. This detail suggests that immigrants were not so totally immersed in American architecture as we sometimes think.

Although ethnic folk buildings were built on recognizable Old World models, changes in building practices occurred quickly. The changes were not made simply to fit in with the host culture, but also for practical reasons. The nineteenth century was not only a

period of political turmoil but also a time of rapidly expanding manufacturing. Many building products that had not been available during the eighteenth century became available in large quantities and at relatively inexpensive prices by the late nineteenth century. One example is Portland cement, which was manufactured in South Dakota beginning in 1889.\(^2\) German-Russian houses in southern South Dakota built prior to 1890 used a puddled-clay and lime-stucco veneer. In northern South Dakota, however, German-Russian houses built after 1890 contain cement in the traditional clay veneer. By the end of the building cycle, cement had replaced puddled clay in many areas of the structure.

These products were not only incorporated into building techniques but also directly replaced elements in the buildings. Roofs, windows, and doors were among the first items to give way to new American-manufactured or prefabricated products, and the Russian oven/black kitchen disappeared from ethnic folk buildings. In German-Russian houses, earth walls gave way to stud-frame construction, the components of which could be purchased in a lumberyard. For some time, however, the German-Russians merged the old and new techniques by filling the spaces between the studs with batsa brick. The Czechs made a similar adaptation, filling the walls in a stud-frame house with brick-and-earth nogging. Eventually, these ethnic groups abandoned all earth-building techniques and built their houses completely of frame, even though they continued to use a traditional Old World form.

One last detail in the transition from Old World to New World building practices may be seen at the Jacob Frieden farm in Campbell County, where a traditional German-Russian earth-and-stone barn stands side by side with an American L-plan house. The house, despite its American appearance, has puddled clay as a stucco or veneer over the stud-and-lathe walls. Small elements of the tradition were carried on, even though the stucco was covered with wallpaper in the finished house.\(^2\) Although this detail is expressive of architectural and ethnic change, it was never intended as a visible symbol.

Ethnic folk-building practices in South Dakota declined sharply by World War I. As happened generally among immigrants and ethnic groups, they began to consider their traditions undesirable.


\(^{21}\) Michael Koop and Carolyn Torma, “Jacob Frieden House and Barn,” South Dakota German-Russian Historic Inventory Form, Campbell County, 1983, HPC.
Folk architecture, especially, was seen variously as old-fashioned, symbolic of low economic status, unenlightened, and even unsanitary. Despite these attitudes, a few traditions have survived into the present. One is the Finnish sauna or steambath, which has also made the transition into the larger American culture. Another survivor is the American Indian sweat lodge, which has played a vital role in the history of that ethnic group. By and large, however, folk houses, barns, and outbuildings have passed from use.

Ethnic awareness and pride have survived the changes in folk architectural practices, but as the years passed ethnic groups could no longer express all aspects of their traditional culture. Ethnic groups became more selective and deliberate in their expression of ethnicity, as seen in the example of the Finns, who selected modern architecture as a means of displaying ethnic pride in the 1930s. Since the late 1960s, however, more interest has been shown in the immigrant and American Indian experience. This shift in ethnic awareness has led to an appreciation of ethnic folk or vernacular architecture. The phenomenon of ethnicity expressed through the preservation of folk or vernacular architecture is found
throughout South Dakota, in the German-Russian Deckert House Museum on the campus of Freeman Academy in Freeman, the Czech Holy Trinity Church in Kimball, the Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church of Savo Township near Frederick, and the Czech Chervat log house-barn in Tabor. The United States may even be in the midst of an Ethnic Romanticism movement that is similar to the earlier National Romanticism movement but that emphasizes preservation over reinterpretation.
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