ABSTRACTS

2020 Annual Conference
October 1-2, 2020

An asterisk (*) indicates that this presentation will not be available online for one-month after the conference. All other presentations will be available for one month via a log-in on SESAH’s website.
Session 1A: Rural Geographies: Spaces of Work and Culture


The focus of this paper is exploring the evolution of the cotton gin building, and identifying the twentieth-century cotton gin building as a building type. I will explore ways that cotton gins can be adaptively reused.

From the early nineteenth through the mid twentieth century, the cotton gin building (which housed the cotton engine machine) was the most important building in Mississippi. Through the 19th century and well into the 20th, Mississippi’s economy was almost totally reliant on cotton, and the cotton gin was an essential and the most expensive component of that economy. When settlers came to an area to establish planting operations, one of the first substantial structures constructed was the cotton gin building.

While early plantation cotton gins might take individualistic forms, by the early 20th century . . . . through the process of consolidation, cotton gins had become standardized. The cotton gin is a distinctive building type with the majority of extant gins constructed of steel post and beam construction and clad with corrugated metal. Most gins are side-gabled and feature a front post less gallery or a cantilevered gallery where cotton was unloaded.

Before the mechanization of agriculture was completed in the mid-twentieth century, every small farming community and large plantation needed its own cotton gin. In the 1960s and 1970s farmers began community gin co-ops. The majority of these buildings are no longer functioning as cotton gins sitting abandoned in a lonely field, overgrown in a forest, or sitting vacant in the industrial area of a small town. Once a gin building has been stripped of its equipment, it creates an extremely useful large and secure space. In many communities, these older gins are still the most significant structures, yet they sit vacant. These twentieth-century steel buildings are constructed in such a way that they can weather the ravages of time and can still be salvaged for adaptive reuse.

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Session 1A: Rural Geographies: Spaces of Work and Culture

“Haunted into Being”: Barns in a mythic landscape**

Preconceptions color things. Arguably, they define things more than objects’ physical characteristics do. If this seems hyperbole, think of “fashion” on the runways of Paris. It is almost never fashion in the sense of popular trend but instead is intentionally strange, expensive, and somewhat dysfunctional clothing perceived as fashion almost exclusively on the basis of who made it, where it is being shown, and what is said about it. Parallel but closer to the issue at hand, buildings that grace the covers of architecture journals are strange, expensive, and sometimes poorly functioning but gain the moniker “architecture” by expectation or linguistic preordination, often in spite of performance. Fashion, in other words, has little relation to clothing. And as many cynics suspect, architecture is a fairytale about buildings.

Dairy barns, particularly those concrete block and corrugated metal structures common in the southeast, occupy another extreme. They would seem as out-of-place on the covers of architecture journals as in discussions of Paris and runways – a type of counter example that our peculiar habit of place leads us to set aside as “real” or at best appreciate as “authentic,” if we appreciate them at all. Another set of preconceptions intervenes, in this case “non-architecture.” This is unfortunate. Language here too gets in the way and prevents us from evaluating the thing or understanding how language shapes architectural experience.

Mississippi is a haunted place. It is special in this regard. Words and images here cling to objects natural and manmade, good and bad. Framed by the essays of Walker Percy and the folk-art constructions of Reverend Dennis and Earl Simmons, I explore the ways in which a pervasive type is dismissed by preconception, by expectation, by language itself as a building and on rare occasions is haunted into architecture.

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Session 1A: Rural Geographies: Spaces of Work and Culture

“Community Connection with Rural Texas Landscapes: The Evolution of Social Encampments at the Turn-of-the-Nineteenth Century”

Human connection is a fundamental and basic desire, one that draws from our evolutionary past. Our cultural traditions are centered on human interaction and, as evidenced by social distancing measures during the current global pandemic, the need for connection is a fundamental component of our daily lives. Social movements during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries initiated large communal gatherings in rural settings over the course of several days, typically during summer months. The camp meetings of this era often focused on adult education, community interaction, political theology, and religious instruction. This paper will explore the shared cultural landscape characteristics of four historical encampments in Texas (Joseph E. Johnson Camp of the United Confederate Veterans near Mexia, Waxahachie Chautauqua Auditorium and Grounds, Booker T. Washington Park near Mexia, and the Paisano Baptist Encampment near Alpine). The four encampments are associated with religious, cultural, and educational movements in Texas and were sited within rural landscapes noteworthy for their natural features and vistas. A brief historical background of the movements associated with each site will be provided that discusses the cultural traditions unique to each property, how sites were selected and purchased by users, the typical meeting content and organization of the encampment, and identify temporary and permanent buildings and structures erected on the site to support the encampment. This background will help the reader to understand how a once-a-year activity transformed a pastoral landscape and supported the social interaction of specific cultural groups. A comparative analysis of the cultural landscape characteristics of the encampments will explore how cultural traditions shaped the characteristics of the encampments, and will note similarities and differences between each. The paper will conclude with a summary of the current state of preservation for the four cultural landscapes.

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Session IIB: The Long Italian Renaissance

“Hollow Mass, the Concept of Density in Louis I. Kahn’s Work”

The architecture of Louis I. Kahn changed radically in the 1950s. Such was the transformation that it is difficult to find its unmistakable mark in works so different like the miesian Parasol House (1944) or the palladian Fleisher House (1959). Leading architectural critics have widely recognized all these differences, and some of them even venture to place that process of change while he was at the American Academy in Rome between 1950 and 1951. They are right in terms of time and place. Nevertheless, the real question arises when it comes to establishing the reasons for such a radical change in his short stay in Rome. The answer, however, is more difficult....

The three months that Kahn spent in Rome as a Resident Architect (RAAR) were intense. Contrarily to what one might think, he was more a college friend than a Professor. His job allowed him to travel and also encouraged him to do so, so Kahn used to do it a lot. Some of these trips were nearby, but he also made a far journey that got him to Egypt and Greece. This Mediterranean journey is also widely known because of the great drawings he made. Some architectural critics even point out that this trip may have had a potential influence on his late work. However, no one has dwelt upon it so far.

This paper will unfold the origin of the concept of density, or "hollow structures," in Louis I. Kahn's late work. First, the text will dissect Louis Kahn's stage at the AAR, and especially his Mediterranean trip. Second, it will explain the lessons learned by Kahn during the trip, especially the constructive lesson. Finally, it will analyze the architect's work done just after his return from Rome to show the origin and development of the "hollow mass," or the concept of density, in his work.

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Session IIB: The Long Italian Renaissance

“Loggia Legacies: The Modern Afterlife of Renaissance Porticoes”

The urban loggia or portico enjoyed a post-classical heyday in late medieval and early modern Italy. While not unknown elsewhere in Europe, the Italian portico was particularly successful in emboldening citizens to take pride in new lifestyles and to embrace economic and political change in a visual and public manner. Even so, its time on the squares and streets of Italy’s cities was limited to about the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries. Changes in program only partly account for their demise; it seems instead that a definitive shift in how space was deployed for social change and control had taken place. Yet, in spite of change, and perhaps in some cases because of it, the loggia had a circumscribed, but compelling afterlife in modernity. The stand-alone loggia was resuscitated in revivalist copies to celebrate themes as diverse as civic-minded monarchy and labor-championing dictatorship in modern Europe. Moreover, the street portico might be seen as re-emerging in a somewhat altered form as the glass-roofed arcade or passage in Western cities.

An investigation of the modern legacies of the porticus might well begin with a focus on events that revolved around the buildings rather than the buildings themselves. If Renaissance loggias had been shuttered, what took their place socially-speaking on the city streets? Two issues are worth pursuing in the space of this conference paper. One is the status of ritual in the modern era: Had public rituals not kept up with modern modes of political expression and the symbolism it deployed? Second, the history of the social experience of looking: How might faith in the visual experience of things, as statements of cultural values, or the manner in which the public consumed them, have changed as a new era in European history dawned? The discussion centers on three monuments: the Feldherrnhalle, a very close copy of Florence’s Loggia dei Lanzi erected in 1837–44 in Munich by King of Bavaria Ludwig I; the Loggia of the Merchants in Pistoia built in 1911–13 but demolished in 1939; and a literary monument, Walter Benjamin’s Passagen-Werk (Arcades Project) of 1927–40, which explained a novel visual dynamic based on what Benjamin called dialectical image.

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Session IIIB: Midwest in the South: An Architectural Exchange

“Building Delta Plantations: Indiana Carpenters in the Mississippi Delta”

The Lakeport Plantation, an antebellum, Greek Revival house on the Mississippi River in southeast Arkansas, highlights the role of Northern builders and materials in constructing the Mississippi Delta’s built environment. Built in 1859 for Lycurgus Johnson, a Kentucky-born planter, the house anchored his 4,000-acre cotton plantation worked by 155 enslaved laborers. Careful restoration by Arkansas State University, archival research, and comparative architecture suggests the same group of carpenters from Madison, Indiana constructed several Greek Revival and Italianate big houses for Johnson relatives in Chicot County, Arkansas and Washington County, Mississippi in the late 1850s. This paper will examine the evidence that Kentucky planters in the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta reached back to the Ohio Valley (Kentucky and Indiana) for materials and builders of their iconic “Southern” homes.

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Session IIIB: Midwest in the South: An Architectural Exchange


Virginia contributed to modernism? Frequently ignored by scholars because of its location in Virginia and the home of the Colonial Revival, Hollin Hills was recognized in the 1950s by architecture and home magazines along with Life. The AIA list it one of the ten buildings for the future. Hollin Hills was a revolutionary scheme for the emerging suburbia. Created in a rolling landscape in Alexandria it was composed of 458 single family houses. Robert Davenport a DC area developer hired Charles Goodman, a young modern architect and they laid out the curving roads following the topography and sited the houses at angles and not just on the street front. Later the landscape architects Bernard Voight, Dan Kiley and Eric Paepcke aided in the planting of trees and siting of houses so to “make the community look as if there were no individual lots but a beautiful park.” Goodman’s about 50 different house designs included slightly pitched, flat and butterfly roofs, concrete floor slabs, prefabricated wood frames, big glass walls, open floor plan and no ornament. They were “modern.” Davenport arranged for residents to order modern furniture and household accessories from Knoll and other suppliers. Hollin Hills differed greatly from the more standard flat landscape and pitched roofed houses of Levittown and others.

This paper will treat the development of Hollin Hills, the landscape and architectural elements, and the work of Charles Goodman, an important Washington, DC architecture who is largely ignored. A small comparison will be made with contemporary modernist developments such as Eichler of California and the Case Study project.

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Session IVA: Concrete as a Modernist Statement

“Designing for Nuclear Quarantine: The Wooten Fallout Shelter and Cold War Survival Architecture”

Between 1961 and 1963, radio executive Hoyt Wooten designed and built a private 5,600 square foot fallout shelter on his estate south of Downtown Memphi, Tennessee. Comprising multiple rooms including sex-segregated dormitories, entertainment spaces, and a morgue, the Wooten Fallout Shelter was designed to house up to sixty-five people for a month to protect against deadly fallout in the event of a nuclear attack on Downtown Memphis. The shelter’s construction attracted the attention of federal officials, the press, and even the Soviet Union which described the shelter as “the atomic fortress of Hoyt Wooten.” This paper will examine the architectural and engineering design of the Wooten Fallout Shelter and how it represents Cold War-era design theories for survival of a nuclear attack. The paper will consider the shelter’s materials, layout, and systems to illustrate the techniques believed to ensure physical survival. The paper will also consider the psychological effects of longtime underground isolation and examine how the shelter’s interior design sought to address those effects and increase the likelihood of occupants’ compliance with the requirements to remain underground.

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Session IVA: Concrete as a Modernist Statement

“Agents of Modernization in the Florida Keys: FERA, The American National Red Cross, and the Concrete Hurricane Houses”*

The use of steel-reinforced, cast-in-place concrete for Hurricane Houses, the single family dwellings built between 1935-36 in the upper Florida Keys, upended the labor force, oversight, and resources traditionally associated with timber house construction. Houses built using an imported labor force, overseen by national organizations, and employing new construction techniques brought house building practices closer in line with major civil building projects such as the Florida East Coast Railway Key West extension. Historian Amy Slaton has examined how the use of concrete brought mass production practices to construction. The change is particularly remarkable for house building, given its tendency towards one off, owner-built production. This paper draws from contemporary historic sources to examine the decision-making processes of the key groups and personalities behind the building effort, including national organizations, politicians, construction foremen, immigrant and migrant labor forces, and a woman project manager. Absent evidence of coherent top-down design directives, these houses appear to have been a true collaboration between multiple interests. Any future best efforts to expand the recognition of these houses beyond their limited inclusion in the Florida Keys Heritage Trail would mention the diverse participants involved and the way that their efforts contributed to the modernization of home building practices. This paper also expands on previous research by the author relating to the construction of Florida Keys Hurricane Houses as a novel type of vernacular architecture and on the logistical and organizational background of the building effort.

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Session IVB: Finding Late 19th Century African American Builders, Architecture, and Landscapes: A Texas Case Study

“Black Placemaking, the Primitive Baptist Denomination and the African American Community in Mexia, Texas”

Reverend Lee Wilder Thomas, a Texas freedom colony native, was responsible for organizing the St. Thomas Primitive Baptist Church in the community of Summit, Oklahoma. Summit was established in 1922 by Rev. Thomas and is now one of thirteen Black towns still in existence in Oklahoma. Though he had much influence in the field of black placemaking in Oklahoma, it was his Limestone County, Texas, roots that helped develop him into the altruistic figure he was within the community and region. Rev. Thomas was one of the prominent landowners who struck oil during the 1921 oil boom in Limestone County. One of his greatest accomplishments was being a trustee and integral part in the establishment of Saint Paul Normal and Industrial College, the historically black college in Mexia, Texas. Rev. Thomas, was involved in the Primitive Baptist Association at both the state and national level. For this reason, it is no surprise that he partnered with the Texas Educational Primitive Baptist Convention to establish this educational facility. Additionally, Rev. Thomas was closely tied to Sardis Primitive Baptist Church, founded in 1870, which played a pivotal role in his calling to preach the gospel. This paper explores the vernacular contributions of these historic educational and religious structures. Visual analysis of photographs and content analysis of newspapers and various grassroots archives mentioning the construction of both the school and church were utilized as the primary methodological practices of this paper. Not much remains of the historic footprint of the school, and the church has since been rebuilt. However, the lasting impressions of both of these structures influence the cultural and historical significance within the African American community of Mexia, Texas. The impact of the two structures being discussed is also vital to bringing visibility to this exemplary community advocate and leader.

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Session IVB: Finding Late 19th Century African American Builders, Architecture, and Landscapes: A Texas Case Study*

“‘Faith without Works is Dead’: A Case Study of St. John Missionary Baptist Church's Historic Preservation Journey”

“Faith without Works is Dead” emerged from an eighteen-month longitudinal study of St. John Missionary Baptist Church (SJMBC) in Missouri City, Texas, and the ways in which preservation efforts served as a site of faith in action. In this paper I expand my discussion to explore the work done by Friends of St. John, a non-profit affiliate of SJMBC, to push back against preservation practices that do not, or tend not, take into consideration the narratives of African American communities. Through oral history interviews and an analysis of meeting minute notes, I explore the collaborative projects of SJMBC, Friends, and other stakeholders from 2015-2020 to argue that these efforts served as ministry and mission work to the participants. The preservation efforts put forth by the grassroots organizations in these communities faithfully work to remind us that history without preservation is lost.

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Session IVC: Attracting Tourists through Design

“Spa City Modernism: Imperiled Postwar Architecture in Hot Springs, Arkansas”

On the evening of February 27, 2014, a fire destroyed the oldest building in the sprawling historic Majestic Hotel complex in Hot Springs, Arkansas. The remaining wings were summarily demolished soon after, including the removal of a 1926 addition and, most conspicuously, the curved Lanai Tower that, since 1963, formed the perceptual terminus of Central Avenue, leaving a void yet to be filled.

On Christmas Eve, 2015 a backhoe ripped through the last remnants of the recently-shuttered Howard Johnson Express Inn. The DNA of the modernist, concrete motor court elevated over parking was barely perceptible after previous modifications smothered the once-airy complex beneath large hipped roofs. Sited at the intersections of Central and Grand Avenues, at the south end of downtown, this motel could have been considered a bookend, with the Majestic, of an urban stretch typically celebrated for its Bathhouse Row, Arlington Hotel, and other pre-World War II buildings. This zone also contains an assortment of postwar works, a 1969 Edward Durell Stone-designed bank serving as a notable centerpiece of the array. Also included are modernist buildings such as the Downtowner Motor Lodge and the Aristocrat Motor Inn, both listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The series perhaps begins north of the Majestic site with the long-abandoned, 1946 Mountainaire Hotel, a pair of threatened Moderne structures.

This study attempts to chart the evolution and precarious status of modern architecture in the Spa City. In addition to the individual buildings, this history encompasses the attendant socioeconomic context—such as the forceable end of tolerated gambling in 1967—and urban design visions such as the Forty for the Future plan that sought to sanitize the downtown in parallel with the gaming crackdown. Residing within a National Park, this unique downtown contains an as-yet unexplored and tattered modernist legacy.¹

¹For instance, the otherwise excellent and recent Buildings of Arkansas fails to include any downtown Hot Springs buildings completed after 1931. Cyrus Sutherland, Buildings of Arkansas (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2018), 159-66.

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Session IVC: Attracting Tourists through Design


Expositions typically form thin, but often impactful, layers of the *palimpsests* of the sites on which they are held. Most of the dozens of pavilions built for these events are designed to be transient with their grandeur remaining as only fleeting memories after closing day. However, like military battles and other historic events, expositions can have a significant influence on a place well into the future, including shaping the psychogeography, spirit, and use of the grounds in ways that range from the symbolic, with the event imprinted on the local collective memory, to the physical, with remains of both structures and landscape elements clearly visible for years. While some recent former fairgrounds have been well transformed into dynamic districts by their host cities, in other cases the large, once vibrant sites have turned into desolate, underutilized tracts of land, scattered with remnants of the spectacular events in various states of use and decay. The post-event conditions of late twentieth-century expositions, which prominently projected sustainability-related themes, serve as vivid illustrations of the disconnect between the focus of the fairs and the often-dystopic realities of these transient events and legacies they leave behind. More recently, expositions that incorporated post-fair use in their initial designs either have failed in their initial attempt to shift uses, like Expo 2015 in Milan, or the design of the exposition has been detrimentally shaped by the site’s expected post-fair use, as at Expo 2017 in Astana. This paper explores the disconnect between the utopian ideas promoted at the “sustainable” expositions of the recent pastWorld and the dystopic realities of their fairgrounds after the close of the events.

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