
REVIEW ARTICLE

Squinting at the urban morphology of early American places

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James D. Kornwolf, with the assistance of Geogiana W. Kornwolf (2002) *Architecture and town planning in colonial North America*, 3 vols. (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, USA, 1770 pp. ISBN 0-8018-5986-7)

In many fields in the humanities and social sciences, knowledge and understanding advance through shifts in paradigm, shifts in fashion, and sometimes the simple display of extraordinary thoroughness and tenacity. As individuals, most scholars contribute within the limits of a single reigning paradigm and are fortunate if their careers outlast one paradigmatic shift. The more robust ignore the fickleness of fashion and with luck influence the reassessments of what were originally reassessments of the paradigms they grew up working within. While few grand perspectives come full circle, because the *Zeitgeist* does not repeat, certain inherent biases that tug fields first in one direction and then pendulum-like in the other can reappear with new force. This occurs particularly when scholars with staying power convert sustained efforts into written works of majestic proportions. They can have the last word (for the time being) simply by producing the most words on their chosen subject, especially when delivered with gravity. This would appear to be the case with James Kornwolf's devotion to the architecture of colonial America.

The history of colonial and early republican architecture in America was for a very long time held to be the history of high-style building design, and the main theme concerned the direct importation of polite architecture from Europe and its gradual enrichment with homegrown variants and occasional departures

in practice in light of American conditions (Morrison, 1952; Pierson, 1970). Then came the challenge from vernacular studies, in which the common building patterns of unremarkable people, unable to employ professional architects, were deemed the collectively representative theme in American building history (Glassie, 1975, Upton and Vlach, 1986). As this newer perspective gained legitimacy, if not dominance – it is never easy to overthrow the role of and subvert interest in cultural élites – study of architecture as artful design nevertheless continued. Kornwolf's *magnum opus* comes now as a resounding restatement of the value of seeing architecture as art. Style still very much matters. Architectural history is intellectual first, social only as afterthought. Because vernacular buildings lack artistic significance, say the Kornwolfs, 'vernacular architecture [their emphasis] is generally a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron' (p. 10).

The history of colonial and early national town planning in America has also been marked by its concern for well-known officials and actors in replicating certain features and principles underlying European urban layouts (Reps, 1965, 1972). The populist reaction in American scholarship to the dominance of élite and individualistic influence in town founding and design has to this day barely emerged, obviating the need for Kornwolf's treatment of the subject to seem revanchist.

Scope, organization, and content

Architecture and Town Planning in Colonial North America presents more than two decades of extensive and fastidious research, involving a full gamut of archival and field investigation. Encompassing virtually three centuries, from the late-sixteenth to (for some regional coverage) the mid-nineteenth, the three volumes of this work represent the most ambitious, comprehensive, and detailed exploration of what residents of North America built during this period, a grand history of formal design that takes social, political, and environmental context into account when deemed necessary.

The sheer breadth of geographical and cultural coverage of the work during the period examined demands comment. This is the first unitary study to give an account of building history across all of colonial North America, covering the activity of the Spanish, French, English, Germans, Native Indians, African Americans, Russians, Dutch, Swedes, post-revolutionary European-descended Americans, and even American missionaries in Hawaii. The sheer complexity and depth of the subject matter is revealed in the intricate assembly of material throughout this massive work. It is a single book, with a single pagination, even though of necessity bound physically as three volumes. The specific coverage of building activity, ten lengthy chapters, appear between two opening statements, a preface (14 pp.) and an introduction (35 pp.), and six rearguard sections: two appendices (73 and 51 pp. respectively), a bibliography (23 pp.), illustration credits, and two indexes (62 pp.). The work contains about 3000 illustrations, including happily not a few of European and even African precursor buildings as historical context. At twelve pounds, the book's weight will eventually subdue all but the stoutest wooden shelves (don't even think of particle-board planks!).

The Kornwolfs meticulously define their terms. The erudite preface lays out what is to be studied, and how and why; the footnotes yield in many cases (especially nos. 15 to 22) mini-essays in the art and practice of

architectural history. The introduction defines the elements of the book's explicit and implicit title: North American, colonial, architecture, landscape design, town planning, and Renaissance influences. The section on town planning gives the first hint that understanding of American urban morphology in this book is ruled by aesthetics above function.

Besides the preface and introduction, Volume 1 contains three substantive chapters comprising Part I, covering the impact of Spain to 1821, France to 1763, and an omnibus grouping of the Netherlands, Sweden, and Russia to 1867, German settlements to around 1800, and African American housing to 1850. The prologue to this part stresses the spread of Italian Renaissance designs across Europe and to the American colonies principally via Spain and France.

Volume 2 contains Part II, entitled 'England in North America, 1585–1867', mislabelled since its chapters terminate in 1776. The prologue to this volume offers an overview of Renaissance and Baroque politics and an orientation to the legacy of Tudor and Jacobean architecture in England. The individual chapters take a regional approach, with pride of place given to the Tidewater states, followed by the Carolinas and Georgia, and then New England and the Middle Colonies.

Volume 3 presents Part III, covering Great Britain in Canada, 1610–1815, and the United States, 1776–1815 (chapters 9 and 10), together with an impressive pair of appendices. The prologue to these final substantive chapters concerns the artistic, political and economic revolutions of the late-eighteenth century. The Canadian chapter considers the full range of British architecture from St. John's, Newfoundland (founded 1610) and the Maritimes through the Hudson Bay settlements, to the post-1763 takeover of Quebec province and the development of Upper Canada. The last chapter on the infant United States stresses the role of romantic classicism in shaping architecture, garden design, towns, and country houses, as a way of uniting consideration of federal and Greek revival styles.

Then come two splendid *lagniappes* (a Louisiana Cajun word for extra little gift): Appendix A, giving potted biographies of 471 select architects, engineers, builders, craftsmen, and town planners working between 1564 and 1815; and Appendix B, a list of over 1500 structures and sites mentioned in the text, with locations, arranged geographically, should the reader wish to visit them. Rounding out the work are two extensive indexes, for names and places. The name index refers to individuals, groups and organizations, while the place index lists buildings, towns, and regions mentioned in the text, arranged geographically by state and province or country elsewhere. Glaringly absent – given the lavish attention to detail throughout this work – is a subject index, which would have greatly assisted the reader in searching within this massive work for the thread of concepts that weaves it all together, and would have simplified linking the myriad examples presented by their interpretive significance. The lack of concern for this intellectually desirable aid is hard to fathom.

Intellectual parentage

The work is dedicated to James Kornwolf's mentors, among whom he lists the architectural historians Walter Creese and Sir Nikolaus Pevsner. Kornwolf was first educated at the universities of Illinois and Wisconsin (where he wrote a thesis on French castles; Kornwolf, 1962) and then at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. Following his doctorate under Pevsner he obtained a post at William and Mary College in Williamsburg, Virginia, where he stayed for the remainder of his teaching career. He published earlier works on American dwellings, the art and architecture of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and the campus design of his college (Kornwolf, 1967, 1972, 1989). His interest in colonial American architecture arose from courses he began to offer in the field, and when Morrison's text on the subject went out of print Kornwolf thought he could write a quick substitute. The project took on a larger life, and he and his wife spent

twenty years on it, travelling to 32 states and five Canadian provinces for research in field and archive. Many of the sketches and drawings in the book stem from this on-site work.

Approach to architecture and other constructions

The organization of the volumes of this book, following the conceptual opening, are fairly standardized and very methodical. Introductory sections present the Renaissance European building traditions that stood as precedent – redolent with photographs of impressive cases, reminding the reader from what supremely developed environments the early architects and builders of the colonies came, and as backdrops for the usually much more modest structures they were charged with building in the New World that appear on the subsequent pages. The treatment is geographical, and visits each cultural region or sub-region.

Chapters begin with the major towns in chronological order, discussing their early town plan, public buildings, and house and garden designs, follow with briefer coverage of selected smaller urban places, and finish off with a wide sweep through adjacent rural areas highlighting the most impressive of the country estates, churches and courthouses. Within the towns, the town plan garners first attention as a setting for the buildings that follow, public structures such as fortresses, governor's palaces, churches, market halls, and, where well-researched and still extant, the houses of residents. What conceptual issues inform the study appear in the introductory sections and in more scattered fashion in the detailed descriptive sections, but there are few concluding sections wrapping up the tour-like expositions: the chapters simply trail off into the copious footnotes following the last examples presented.

The approach to architecture in this work is formalist, stressing European and classical antecedents, and focusing on the aesthetics of classicism, reason and humanism as found

resurgent in the designs and building activity of the Renaissance. Yet the theoretical affiliation with high style is often relaxed in considering the architectural patrimony of particular towns and regions, though many of the examples of humbler structures are treated as necessarily simplified versions of what the élite could do rather than as embodiments of a distinct cultural milieu in themselves. The heart of the matter is that America's colonial architecture reflected cultural exchange and adaptation, and that, by extension, the continent was an architectural melting pot. This is an inescapable conclusion given the coverage of Volume 1, in which the sharp differences between the frequent ebullience of plastered Spanish designs contrasts with the restraint of French wooden and stone building forms, the distinctive gabled silhouettes and gambrel roofs of Dutch brick houses, and the heavy stone edifices of Pennsylvania German construction. Volume 2 bestows lavish attention on Southern architecture, particularly that of Virginia, perhaps from proximity, survival, or emotional affinity. In this volume, especially, the similarity to a field guide reminds this reviewer of Pevsner's indefatigable series, *The buildings of England*, albeit with far more generous dimensions and white space than the English version ever had. Volume 3, covering Canada and the American early national period, regionally, restricts itself largely to the work of prominent architects and officials imperial and public. In lieu of a capstone summing up, chapter ten closes with a spotlight on the public monuments of Washington, D.C., hinting at the distance that had been travelled from colonial implantation to upstart nationalism.

Striking is the spatial squint of the tradition in architectural history to which this work belongs: the overwhelming fixation on the solitary structure or unitarily-designed building complex. For stylistic purposes, contained within the self-presentation and commissions of client and architect, this is understandable, the more so in isolated rural areas. Throughout the myriad of photographs in this book devoted to urban scenes, however, what is apparent only contextually is the *sum*

of these parts, the townscape – as a *toute ensemble* with its own spatial patterning of types and styles otherwise susceptible to systematic analysis. The building ensembles and streetscapes of different urban sub-units are not the subject of systematic study here, far less the extent and composition of the *whole* urban fabric. Many illustrations containing more than one building are contemporary drawings, showing the artist's interest in the ensemble, but they are included here, one suspects, more for their value as rare iconographs showing specific building detail from the period. It can be argued that the physical looseness of American building density, even in colonial towns, and the paucity of surviving 'stands' of colonial buildings in any one district militate against a fair presentation today of the colonial American townscape through its architecture. Nonetheless, the overriding interest of the authors in townscape as contextual rather than central is evident.

Town planning and urban morphology

The inclusion of town planning as an integral part of the discussion in this work lifts it head and shoulders above all previous synthetic studies on American colonial architecture – or town planning, for that matter. That it is intimately associated with building forms in any thorough understanding of the physical character of American settlements is both obvious and welcome. The tradition of town planning history in the United States most closely identified with John W. Reps, to which the treatment of town plans in the Kornwolf's work bears a close resemblance, has already been noted. One senses that Kornwolf has largely appropriated Reps' formula here to enrich his own examination of architecture by situating it within the urban layout.

Significantly, town planning is secondary to architecture in the book's title, and very much so throughout the text, even though it often opens discussions of major towns. This is revealing. To Kornwolf town planning means the simple spatial setting within which

buildings are placed – a general arrangement, primarily of circulation spaces (streets and open public areas), within which buildings may be geo-referenced. The interest is twofold: noting the individual circumstances in which towns received their layout so that their individuality is recognized; and providing a means of situating prominent buildings within the town's area in relation to obvious features such as rivers and defensive works. The urban plans presented are of two types: reproductions, usually superior in quality, of historical plans when possible from the period under discussion, and the author's sketch maps of a town's major street system dating from the colonial era upon which, guide-like, singular buildings (often then treated in some detail) are identified by numbers, as if assigned by Baedeker. This offers sufficient spatial clarity to give an inkling of the geographical structure of the townscape in colonial times, but it does not lead in the text to any recognition of the full morphological content of the town plan, far less any systematic examination of it as a spatial complex every bit as revealing of urban form as the design of the town's principal buildings. In short, the view of town planning here is pictorial rather than processual. There is some interest in design influence carried over from one town to another, but none in the complex interacting processes that produce the full cultural complex of the townscape (M.R.G. Conzen, 2004).

Kornwolf's main theoretical anchors in treating colonial town planning in North America are to remind us that the urban grid goes back far beyond the Renaissance to classical Greek practice, and to suggest that some American planners (William Penn, for example) drew inspiration from the *cardo* and *decumanus* of the Roman *castrum*. Even though the distinction between the uniformity of Greek streets and the hierarchy of Roman ones is noted in the opening conceptual section (p. 28), subsequently Kornwolf shows little interest in pursuing this distinction as an analytical means of learning more about colonial town planning practice in North

America. While many plan reproductions show highly varied plot patterns and block arrangements – raising many questions – only a few, such as those in Savannah, find mention, and even fewer an explanation. Whereas more detail and finer illustrations about the planning of some early Georgia towns is available here than in Joan Niles Sears' study, conceptually there is more to be gained from the latter, in which an explicit town plan typology permits one to follow shifting planning practice in Georgia over the region's first century (Sears, 1979). For Kornwolf, as for Reys, the momentary interest lies in initial plan character rather than the evolving morphological complexity of townscape structure over time (e.g. M.P. Conzen, 1990). This is nicely demonstrated if one contrasts Kornwolf's treatment of St. Augustine (pp. 79–98) with one offered by the planning historian Warren Boeschstein (1999, pp. 259–78).

Kornwolf may be unaware of the field of urban morphology and may have rather little to say about the comprehensive urban morphology of colonial settlements in North America, but that is not to say the urban morphologist cannot gain a great deal from this book. Urban morphological literature on American cities is not large, and its conceptual development is still very fluid (M.P. Conzen, 2001). What Kornwolf offers is a wealth of carefully assembled and judiciously chosen examples of colonial buildings and contemporary plans and pictorial views that beg examination from the perspective of systematic, integrated spatial analysis. (For a hint of what can be gleaned of morphological process initiated during the colonial period in a portion of Saint Louis, see Sandweiss, 2001.) Kornwolf's questions simply are not aimed at the comprehensive and spatially complete character of urban form but rather those portions of it that can be said to be of interest to the art historian. It is this limitation that invokes the impression that in this work we are only squinting at North American urban morphology.

Conclusion

From any perspective, however, this work is a landmark piece of scholarship. And as a contribution to the study of American urban form in the colonial period it is immensely welcome. The breadth of substantive coverage, the geographical sweep of territory covered, the depth of research undertaken in field and archive, the care and consistency with which the work has been put together, all speak to a reference work without parallel for this period of the continent's history of buildings. The patience extended and the book design contributed by the publisher have added materially to what is likely to be a work of enduring value.

It might seem ungrateful to ask for more, but the lack of a subject index remains for this reviewer a frustrating failure to optimize the utility of the book for others. There is, for example, an intriguing but not fully convincing argument made for the early replacement in American construction history of the casement window by the sash window (e.g. pp. xxiii, 1081), but if one came to this work with that or any other specific conceptual issue in mind, there is no index to help find relevant discussion of it in what is a massive, regionally rather than topically structured treatment of the subject. This absence will obscure for many readers, unprepared to burrow badger-like through these weighty volumes, the many well-modulated arguments and interesting insights sprinkled through them about how architectural ideas spread across time and space, and with what geographical and social time-lags.

Nevertheless, the Kornwolfs have opened a vast window through which to gaze backwards in time to the building accomplishments of communities of all kinds throughout early America. This panoramic view of town and country, of town layout and buildings, of gardens and public spaces, is rich and detailed, moored in painstaking research spread over two decades, during which judgments and conclusions have matured with assurance. The work's intellectual foundation is not beyond challenge, as none ever really is, but its sheer

weight of evidence and graceful presentation do much to sustain the value of the artistic approach to architectural history. It may be the best approximation we have yet to an American Pevsner guide.

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Ville Recherche Diffusion

A number of publications of interest to urban morphologists are available from Ville Recherche Diffusion, Ecole D'Architecture de Versailles, 5 avenue de Sceaux, 78000 Versailles, France (internet site: www.versailles.archi.fr/VRD). Among the publications advertised are:

- Blanc, J.N., Bonilla, M., Herbert, J-L., Tomas, F. and Vallat, D (1999) *Les grands ensembles d'habitation et leur rehabilitation. 3ème partie: la fin (1973-1999)*
- Bowie, K., Texier, S. and Bonnefoy, I. (2003) *Paris et ses chemins de fer*
- Bruant, C., Blain, C., Genaille, G. and Sellali, A. (2003) *Architecture et formes urbaines en villes nouvelles: enquête bibliographique sur les sources écrites*
- Caniggia, G. and Maffei, G.L. (2000) *Composition architecturale et typologie de bâti, 1: lecture du bâti de base* (translated by P. Larochelle)
- Capillon, N. (2000) *Oulan-Bator: transformations urbaines et architecturales récentes*
- Castex, J. (2001) *Une typologie à usages multiples: classer, comprendre, projeter*
- Cléménçon, A-S. (1999) *La fabrication de la ville ordinaire. Domaine des hospices Civils de Lyon, rive gauche du Rhône, 1981-1914*
- Costa, L. (2000) *La carte en archéologie: l'expérience du service départemental d'archéologie du Val-d'Oise*
- Davisme, L. (2001) *Centralité émergente: la fonction miroir de l'île de Nantes*
- Doutre, M. (2003) *Modalités de transformation de la ville au début du XIX^e siècle en Auvergne l'édifice public et son espace urbain – pouvoirs et conflits*
- Ducos, L. (2005) *L'aménagement des terrasses de Saint-Julien et des Carmélites à Tours au XIX^e siècle: un projet urbanistique et architectural en décalage*
- Gauthiez, B. (2003) *Recueil de textes*
- Gauthiez, B., Zadora-Rio, E. and Galinié, H. (2003) *Village et ville au Moyen Age: les dynamiques morphologiques*
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- Jaquand, C. (2003) *Le grand Berlin et l'anticipation américaine: infrastructure, paysage et forme urbaine du II^e au III^e Reich*
- Lambert-Bresson, M. and Térade, A. (2002) *Villes françaises au XIX^e siècle: aménagement, extension et embellissement*
- Malfroy, S. (2001) *L'approche morphologique de la ville et du territoire*
- Nasr, J. and Volait, M. (eds) (2003) *Urbanism: imported or exported*
- Navarina, G. (2003) *Plan et projet: l'urbanisme en France et en Italie*
- Petiteau, J.-Y. and Chérel, E. (2004) *L'émergence du récit comme révélateur du processus de renouvellement urbain: ou l'urbanisme contemporain se réinvente-t-il à partir de l'art?*
- Robert, S. (1999) *Etude des formes paysagères du centre de Cergy-Pontoise*
- Robert, S. (2003) *L'analyse morphologique des paysages entre archéologie, urbanisme et aménagement du territoire: exemples d'études de formes urbaines et rurales dans le Val-d'Oise*
- Severo, D. (1999) *Ancien et moderne: idées d'architecture pour le bourg médiéval de Pietramontecorvino*
- Soppelsa, C. (2005) *L'action publique en matière de voirie en France au XIX^e siècle: l'exemple de Tours à travers le plan général d'alignement de la section de Saint-Etienne (1865)*
- Texier-Rideau, G. and Darin, M. (2003) *Places de Paris: XIX^e - XX^e siècles*