

REMODELING THE NATION:

The Architecture of American Identity, 1776-1858.

Duncan Faherty,
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Reviewed by John S. Pipkin,
Department of Geography and Planning,
University at Albany, Albany, NY.

Readings of the material built environment once connoted to geographers a reductive “traits and diffusions” version of the cultural. But symbolic, aesthetic, and discursive turns have powerfully remodeled cultural geography, leading it toward a rich encounter with historical, cultural, and literary studies of landscape. Duncan Faherty is with the Department of English at Queens College and CUNY Graduate Center. *Remodeling the Nation* is a nuanced exploration of the built environment as both representation and expression of American social and cultural identity before the Civil War. (The time span in the title is somewhat arbitrary. Faherty attends carefully to cultural transactions with the pre-Revolutionary world. The terminal date of 1858 marks Lincoln’s “A house divided” speech.) The focus is mainly on domestic architecture, but Faherty is not concerned to draw firm lines between private and public, personal and civic, or masculine and feminine. Instead he shows convincingly how the physical and conceptual boundaries of the house and the domestic formed a protean, contested, and metaphorically fertile register of American identity.

The point of departure is Lincoln’s comparison of the Union to a house threatened by politically disingenuous “remodeling.” The book pushes this metaphor to its limit and perhaps beyond. It is hard to dispute that Americans came to believe in causal connections among material culture, landscape, and political values, but perhaps one resists the scope of the claim that the house “became the means by which the nation conceptualized its own history” (p. 6). At any rate, Faherty’s brilliant and provocative reading refocuses all manner of social, political, and cultural anxieties through the lens of making and remodeling buildings.

The book is organized chronologically and regionally, moving from Revolutionary Virginia, to Philadelphia, the Hudson Valley, New York City, the New York frontier, to a conclusion in New England. This is not a systematic treatment of the social evolution of domestic architecture. In fact, considering that the volume announces itself as architectural, it is not much concerned with fine stylistic discriminations (for example between the Federal and Greek Revival). The book is episodic and very wide-ranging; it does not possess the clear theoretical arc of, say, Bushman’s (1993) account of material culture and middle class refinement, or Cosgrove’s account of symbolic landscapes (1984). In advanced classes it would provide an excellent complement to such works.

What the book does achieve — and this is why it deserves close attention from geographers — is an extraordinarily rich traversal of real and literary landscapes, probing the writing and the actual domestic worlds of canonical and lesser-known writers (including Irving, Melville, Hawthorne, Poe, James Fenimore and Susan Cooper, and Charles Brockden Brown), explorers, artists, and visitors (Lewis & Clark, Thomas Cole, de Tocqueville), and three Presidents (Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln). Thus the interiors and exteriors of Mount Vernon and Monticello reveal the contrasting ways in which Washington and Jefferson sought permanence, obfuscated slavery, and tried to reconcile old-fashioned ideals of social deference with the demands of the endless visitors attracted by their fame. We are alerted to anxieties surrounding failed and abandoned settlement enterprises (e.g., in the work of William Bartram) set against triumphalist narratives of wilderness subdued. There is a wonderfully penetrating account of the worlds of three generations of Coopers as refracted in their writings. By regulating house-lot size in Cooperstown, Faherty shows, magnate William Cooper was in effect mandating a social division of labor. Again and again, the public world and the market intrude threateningly into domestic interiors. Thus Edgar Allen Poe meditates on the national purport of domestic furnishings from his transgressive site as a male marginalized from commerce, writing in a rented room. Thus Hawthorne explores the surveillance that annihilates the public-private boundary in *The Scarlet Letter*. Thus Melville reads the introduction of two hearths into houses as a disruption not only of domestic but also of “patriotic” loyalties.

Faherty is very perceptive on the many transactions between the house and the wild, the domestic and the natural. He often sets an isolated house against “nature,” as on the book’s cover illustration, or in Poe’s Landor’s Cottage, or Washington Irving’s Sunnyside — sites where the shaped wilderness and the naturalized house converged in the picturesque aesthetic. One price of this fluent recrossing of the boundary between house and nature is the elision of the intermediate ground, the townscape or urban morphology. Aggregate townscapes have causal effects and cultural resonances that are simply not reducible to architecture however elastically defined. One might point to Herman Melville’s reading of the Manhattan street space (Kelley 1996) or to Mary Ryan (1997) on public space and the management of difference, or to the copious geographical literature on urban morphology. The period covered saw the great change in American ideals of urban form, from the neobaroque vistas, hierarchies, articulations, and subordinations of Annapolis, Williamsburg, and the iconic city of Washington DC (barely mentioned here), to the speculative grid, with its triumph of rational equality over hierarchy, but also of exchange value over use value. The Manhattan gridding exercise of 1811 is briefly mentioned, but, in contrast to the thoughtful account of the Greek Revival styles the grid contained, the consequences of the new morphology itself are barely adumbrated. This caveat notwithstanding, *Remodeling the Nation*, is an extraordinary accomplishment, an exemplary interweaving of literary, historical, biographical, and cultural analysis.

References

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