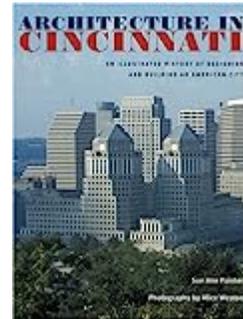




**Sue Ann Painter.** *Architecture in Cincinnati: An Illustrated History of Designing and Building an American City.* Additional text by Beth Sullebarger and Jayne Merkel. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006. xvi + 352 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1700-3; \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1701-0.



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## Buildings in a Changing Context

Beautifully conceived and well produced, *Architecture in Cincinnati* is at once a coffee-table book and something more ambitious. Its authors aim to place architectural history within its context, and they often succeed. Rather than scrutinizing building forms and reciting a list of construction styles through the centuries, they give the architectural achievements of Cincinnati new life by recognizing the changing historical backdrops that framed the buildings. The architecture they consider stretches from the mounds built by the natives who occupied the region before the arrival of Europeans all the way to the twenty-first century earthworks designed to evoke them. The authors provide a narrative that matches the splendor of the city.

If this is a volume to peruse and display, it supersedes its genre with the sheer quantity of lovely images—352 pages of lavish illustrations—as well as its attention to the historical narrative. Sidebars accompany each chapter, and these two-page analyses of specific buildings often offer insight by choosing surprising structures. Cincinnatians will find this book a treasure, but it does more than satisfy hometown hunger. It elevates the keepsake

genre of illustrated architectural history, using history as a context and framework for the building arts. Along the way, the authors combine archival images with modern photographs, many of them produced specifically for this volume. As a result, the authors bring together a surprisingly wide selection from Cincinnati's built form and examine the historical settings that witnessed their construction.

The book contains ten chapters, each corresponding to a coherent period of Cincinnati history. Architectural history fills the sidebars. These include not only aesthetic analyses of the structures, but also the coverage of firms and personalities, the characters and institutions that matter so much to art and architectural historians, as well as to historians of landscape architecture and urban planning. Combining these specialized sub-disciplines with local and national narrative history is a worthwhile goal, but in this volume, the two types of history usually remain separate, in their respective chapters and sidebars. History occupies the foreground, and it remains the framework for the architecture of Cincinnati.

In certain circles of urban history, architecture itself

provides the evidence for new historical interpretations, ones that examine the built form as the result of competing interests. Such approaches borrow their emphasis on varied stakeholders from the social-construction methods and actor-network theories of science and technology studies. These authors wrote a different book, however, and limited history to context for their analysis. In doing so, they have avoided historiographical debates and sidestepped opportunities to break new ground for urban historians. They do, however, succeed at their goal, and put a fresh face on the illustrated volumes of appreciation for the building arts.

The first chapter describes Cincinnati growing from “Frontier City to Regional Capital” between 1788 and 1829, though this periodization is somewhat misleading. The book actually begins with the geography of the region, both natural and human-made, reflected in the patterns left by glaciers and remnants of the Moundbuilders’ culture. The next chapter, “Queen of the West,” spans the decades 1830 to 1860, and the title captures the period of Cincinnati’s dramatic growth and, arguably, greatest status. “Building Civic Pride through Engineering, Architecture, and Art” is the awkward title for the Civil War and Reconstruction periods, but the authorial effort at historical context here does a good job identifying the technological and organizational shifts of the era, and discovering their manifestations in the city’s buildings and infrastructure. If this interpretation lacks nuance, it does suffice. More nuance could have been achieved by considering the impact of the war on the city’s economic prospects and the relationship between local, state, and federal governments. The postbellum and twentieth-century chapters, however, face some difficulty in attempting to balance the use of history with the celebratory mode of illustrated gift books.

Indeed, “The Paris of America” may be too strong a description for the era that spanned 1876 to 1895: the beautiful Music Hall was built, but the explosion of population and the corrupt political systems such growth inspired made the city a messy experience. At the same time, many markers demonstrated that Cincinnati was already sinking in comparison to the newer Midwestern shock city, Chicago. Bowing to the transitions of the age, the next chapter explores “The New Order of Things” between 1893 and 1919. Its introductory subheading, describing an “Era of Big Business, Big Government, Big Buildings” attempts to capture the scope of change in terms of scale: big everything. The chapter’s frontispiece image illustrates the interpretation on which the authors rely. The photograph is of a graceful stone pier, an intake

mechanism for Cincinnati’s waterworks, located down the river from the city, at California, Ohio. This long arm of sanitation and city government provides the authors’ evidence that the building projects of the era demonstrated faith in progressivism—even under boss regimes. City government in the Progressive Era was once a subject that generated historiographical debates; however, whether the transition from boss to reform politics was a significant change, or more of a continuum, remains a contested subject.

Such simplification is the order of the day when history is invoked merely to add context; later authors may someday find in architecture the means to reimagine the city’s history, using its built forms and technological systems as evidence for original interpretations, rather than as illustrations. Still, the sidebar on “The Factory Beautiful Movement” has eye-opening views of industrial heritage. The “Modernism and Reform in City Building” chapter, too, covers the period between 1920 and 1933, and that choice of dates papers over any difficulties in distinguishing reform from bossism. The climactic construction of the city’s beloved Union Terminal, which opened in 1933, provides a reasonable terminus to the age of reform, although the Great Depression, with its reformist reaction to economic catastrophe, is the subject of the next chapter.

The chapter on the Great Depression does a terrific job of incorporating history into architectural history. It demonstrates the importance of federal funding as well as the locally instigated nature of most building projects financed by the New Deal. The authors also seamlessly connect the institutional history with the evolution of the architecture, as the “need for efficiency of design during difficult economic conditions” fed the growing international style (although the authors acknowledge the limited impact of the stylistic transition until after World War II) (p. 199). Yet, the unfortunate timing of the international style with the construction of public housing, leading to soulless, uninspiring housing projects in place of former lively if poverty-stricken slums, receives little consideration. What was modern and appealing in the Lazarus Department Store exterior, the old Coca-Cola Bottling Plant on Dana Avenue in Evanston, and the General Electric Aircraft Engines plant (then the Wright Aeronautical Corporation) was uninviting in Lincoln Court and Laurel Homes. The story of public housing in Cincinnati, now demolished and rebuilt in town-house form, only makes the point more poignant.

Indeed, in light of this unity between economic im-

peratives and the building style that dominated so many large building projects during the 1930s, the structures of the Cincinnati park system require some explanation. Though its buildings date from this era, its builders avoided international styles in favor of rusticated buildings more reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright than the Bauhaus. Does history provide any explanation for two such different styles in the different forms of public accommodation built at the same time? The authors do not probe deeply enough. Their faith in the Progressive model continues to the end of the twentieth century.

The postwar era receives its coverage in a chapter called "Modernizing the City" that covers the decades between 1945 and 1964. As befits the decline faced by the city while the rest of the nation boomed, this is a short chapter, with only ten pages of text, and only a few buildings covered (Swifton Shopping Center and the Kroger corporate offices downtown), outside of the surprising and excellent suburban sidebars devoted to the Gibson Greeting Card Company in Amberley Village and Saint John's Church in Clifton, alongside the expected Procter & Gamble headquarters on the edge of downtown. "Toward the Bicentennial" chapter has an interesting perspective on "late modern departures from the modernist box," including the Central Trust (now PNC) Center and the headquarters of Federated Department Stores, both downtown (p. 252). Yet, the authors accept the preservationist impulse, and its costs, when "New Development Takes Its Toll on Historic Buildings." They take the historical narrative at face value when the "dense and dilapidated housing" of the "old residential neighborhood," the West End, "was erased through urban renewal and interstate construction" (pp. 224-225).

Indeed, classifying "Historic Preservation and Adaptive Reuse" as "Postmodernism" is somewhat surprising, though it does allow the sidebars to include grand architecture from earlier eras, including (again) the Procter & Gamble headquarters, and the 1907 Elephant House at the zoo (pp. 261, 274-75, 280-81). While the authors deal with the "Unintended Consequences of the 1964 Plan" in a subheading devoted to how the Skywalk system for downtown revitalization began to "unravel" when its centerpiece department store closed, they remark that planners could not have known where growth would oc-

cur (pp. 264-65). It is hard to know what the public should expect of planners, if not a reasonably informed vision of the future.

There is a tidy transition into the last chapter, "Dynamic Mix of New and Old," which ends the volume on an upbeat note. The "civil disturbance in 2001" provides a seamless transition to the expectations and opportunities provided by new projects (p. 293). The authors retain the faith that the city's plans for the troubled, historic, and now again gentrifying Over-the-Rhine neighborhood will finally prevail. The text illustrates the belief that the mid-century city plan (that ordered the floodwall, the Serpentine Walkway, and the stadium and coliseum built) has succumbed to new plans, which intend to reconnect the city to the river with new footbridges over the downtown arterial highways, while the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center returns the scale of the city back to the days when the river lapped at the open-space Public Landing.

The sidebars for this chapter quite rightly include examples of Cincinnati's recent showplace structures: the new Contemporary Arts Center that was the first U.S. commission of Zaha Hadid; and Frank Gehry's Vontz Center for Molecular Studies, along with Michael Graves's Engineering Research Center, both on the University of Cincinnati campus. Studying the campus allows the authors to make a happy ending out of the landscape design that mirrors the prehistoric earthworks that characterized the region before incorporation in 1788, and to turn the university's recent demolition of the business district on Calhoun Avenue and through the Fairview Heights neighborhood into revitalization projects.

Such is the history of Cincinnati, where architecture against a backdrop of historical context becomes the history of urban planning. Cincinnatians will find much to ponder in the approaches initiated in this volume. Architectural historians will no doubt gain much from forging links between the history of buildings and the history of the city. But those who want to know how building the city affected its history, as well as how the history of the city affected its buildings, will have to wait for future publications.

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