

Andrew Dolkart. Biography of a Tenement House in New York City: An Architectural History of 97 Orchard Street. Santa Fe, NM: Center for American Places, 2006, 160 pp., 14 color and 47 b/w illus. \$35.00, ISBN 978-1-930066-57-1.

Jan Jennings. Cheap and Tasteful Dwellings. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2005, 332 pp., 135 b/w illus. \$48.00, ISBN 1-57233-360-X.

Both the promise and difficulty of the study of vernacular architecture lie in the source material. Where plans, working drawings, designers' sketches and notes have formed the heart of architectural historians' archival resources, scholars of vernacular architecture must turn to other evidence to examine the making and meaning of the daily landscape. In studying the ordinary environment—the accumulation of buildings, additions, and renovations of owner-builders or speculative developers—a scholar may have to do without such evidence and rely on more quotidian sources such as building permits, probate inventories, deed transfers, or may have only the site itself to investigate. Each of these authors deals with the problem of sources in a fascinating way necessitated by the topic of the study.

Andrew Dolkart's Biography of a Tenement House in New York City, published in conjunction with the 2006 annual meeting of the Vernacular Architecture Forum, starts with a single building. 97 Orchard Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan now serves as home of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, but from its construction in 1863 until 1935 the five-story building with a raised basement housed up to 111 residents, largely recent European immigrants, in cramped, dark, mean, and utilitarian confines.¹ Dolkart's work begins and ends with the tenement itself, one of thousands like it built in post-bellum and Gilded Age New York. He traces the obscure and varied history of the building through field research on the site, archival sources such as maps, census data, contemporaneous periodicals, and oral history to bring a seemingly anonymous, unremarkable building alive to the reader.

Like other biographical works, Dolkart's book exhibits many of the peculiarities of the genre. Central to this framework is the effort the author makes to build a narrative at the expense of developing an argument. This choice yields a close examination of the structure at 97 Orchard Street, one that may become an important reference work for researchers seeking information on this urban mixed-use building type. At any particular stage in the work, we know of demographic changes in the building and neighborhood and of upgrades to the building's mechanical systems or other architectural alterations mandated by building codes.

What Dolkart sacrificed by offering such scrutiny to a single building is a means for understanding the relationship of the tenement to broader issues affecting the urban landscape in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Fortunately, such work has been carried out by other historians of the urban landscape of New York, providing context for the story Dolkart tells in Biography. This volume draws upon Richard Plunz' history of housing in New York City, the architectural survey of the varied housing types that proliferate throughout the five boroughs. Additionally, recent books such as David Scobey's Empire City and Keith Revell's Building Gotham provide clues to the larger civic, cultural and capitalist structures in New York and American Victorian society that regulate, invest in, create, and inhabit such neighborhoods as the Lower East Side and buildings like 97 Orchard Street.²

As a real estate investment, the tenement at 97 Orchard Street served the capitalist system well. Enduring as a residential building for 70 years and accommodating retail ventures for well over a century, the building filtered down the real estate scale as it aged until resurrected as the

Lower East Side Tenement Museum the 1980s. As an artifact, it attests to both the prevailing development and design ethos of Civil War-era New York, modified through the years by the increasing power of state intervention into housing. Now, as a cultural institution, it is preserved to interpret turn of the century urban immigrant residential and commercial life, lest we forget the character of the built environment that housed much of the population of New York and cities like it in the past.³

Dolkart places the building at the center of his narrative while any trace of the tenement's designer is lost to the historian. Jan Jennings, in Cheap and Tasteful Dwellings, places the building and designer in just the opposite roles, concentrating on the designers and their plans while placing the built work outside the scope of the study.

Following the recent work of such scholars as Mary Woods, Jennings turns an eye to the profession of architecture, investigating how emerging designers participated in design competitions to promote themselves and spread professional design ideas to the public.⁴ Their mechanism and the focus of the book is a set of competitions within the journal Carpentry and Building from 1879 to 1909. While Carpentry and Building seemed to be "an absolutely ordinary trade magazine," it was widely read by builders and later became The Building Age, a journal well-known to historians of suburban development in the early twentieth century (xxi). In this roughly thirty-year period, Carpentry and Building conducted forty-two competitions ranging from plans for an \$800 house in 1884 to a modern bungalow in 1909. In this era, Jennings notes, the adjective "cheap" described a virtue, "epitomiz[ing] American traits such as straightforwardness and simplicity," rather than the pejorative connotations it holds today (137).

Jennings has undertaken years of work researching interior design in the United States. Part of her broader work on interior design theory, Cheap and Tasteful Dwellings is, according to the author "really about the competitor's attempts to apply an interior architectural theory to houses." (p. 205) Arguing that architects underwent a fundamental shift in their conception and design of residential buildings, Jennings claims that the competition participants worked "to elevate interior design to the status that exterior form had claimed for centuries" (205). While she asserts that design professionals changed from exterior-focused artists to practically motivated interior designers, this change seems to embrace the values and process that scholars such as Henry Glassie have attributed to vernacular designs throughout the ages – practical interior spaces influencing, if not defining, the exterior massing and fenestration of a residence.⁵

Though Cheap and Tasteful Dwellings may emphasize the importance of residential interiors, it is about much more. Jennings, in discussing the 86 design competition winners from the three decades of competition, helps provide a better picture of the Victorian-era architectural profession than we have seen to date. Mary Woods' From Craft to Profession developed a framework for understanding the origins of the architectural profession by emphasizing leading lights of 19th century architecture such as Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the firms of leading designers such as H. H. Richardson and the office of McKim, Mead, and White.⁶ Through archival research and oral histories and a sociological drive to understand the features and subtleties of the profession a century ago, Jennings broadens our view of architectural education, life in a firm, and the tension between professionalism and business sense that faced architects of local, regional, and national stature through her research into this cross section of designers.

Following these many architects throughout their careers, Jennings argues two interesting points about this "middle group of ordinary architects" (204). First, these competition winners were future notables in their profession, judged by the number of their executed buildings on the National Register of Historic Places. Though architectural historians may not have revered their

work, certainly preservationists found their designs valuable to community building traditions, practical architecture, and civic statements.⁷ Second, Jennings argues that the proportion of nineteenth century buildings designed by architects is much greater than previously recognized, indicating a more robust role for the architectural profession in this period. Comprising eastern and western practices; urban, suburban and rural projects; and serving clients from the upper class to skilled craftsmen, professional architecture must be considered as part and parcel to not only civic building in the Victorian era, but to everyday middle class residential life.⁸

Like their more prominent counterparts, Jennings' architects served as tastemakers, lending cultural authority to their clients even as they designed for convenience and practicality. Offering taste as one of their commodities for market, architects provided clients and competition judges plans and elevations that eschewed the innovation and utopianism of designers in later years.⁹ Instead, these men and a few women abided by enduring ideals of style for cottages and suburban homes, preaching to apostles of taste no less than prominent mid-century architects like Andrew Jackson Downing, building demand for their services and promoting the growth of the profession.¹⁰

Jennings' project in Cheap and Tasteful Dwellings is largely successful. The number and depth of her subjects—both competitions and competitors—provide a look into the values, aims, and participants of the profession most historians have been forced to confront piecemeal in their own work. The book poses a few difficulties, however. The parade of heretofore unknown architects can prove difficult to keep straight. In addition, the choice to give intense scrutiny to the competitions of a single periodical and its operations brings with it emphasis on details that stand in the way of the larger thrust of the work. Both Biography of a New York City Tenement House and Cheap and Tasteful Dwellings should prove useful as references for scholars of vernacular architecture, historic preservationists and for more traditional architectural historians, but the latter will likely find more use both for the ambitious scope of its work, the broader relevance of its material, and Jennings' investigation of interior design theory. Taken together, these books illustrate the dramatic social and economic disparities of the Gilded Age and Victorian Era, the grounding of architecture and building in a larger system of real estate economics and cultural aspiration, and help bridge the gap between the study of the everyday environment and that of high design. In reality, they were (and are) not so far apart.

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¹ Thereafter only its commercial space was occupied.

² Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City: Dwelling Type and Social Change in the American Metropolis*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). David Scobey, *Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002). Keith Revell, *Building Gotham: Civic Culture and Public Policy in New York, 1898-1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

³ Ironically, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum was embroiled in controversy in 2002 as it worked to acquire the building next door, 99 Orchard Street, in conjunction with the Empire State Development Corporation through use of eminent domain powers. The use of eminent domain to demolish urban neighborhoods like the Lower East Side has been criticized in such works as Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, and Robert Caro's *The Power Broker*.

⁴ Mary Woods, *From Craft to Profession: The Practice of Architecture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁵ Glassie terms the transition one from organic design to geometric design in vernacular architecture, placing it in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Henry Glassie, *Vernacular Architecture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 58-59.

⁶ Woods, *From Craft to Profession*.

⁷ Jan Jennings, *Cheap and Tasteful Dwellings: Design Competitions and the Convenient Interior, 1879-1909* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 115-16, 203. Notably, the most financially successful of the competition winners were T. F. Schneider of Washington, D.C., and Charles Insko Williams of Dayton, Ohio, both of whom made their wealth not from architectural practice but from real estate investment.

⁸ While the work of historians of suburbia has examined architecture and urban form, few have examined the role of lesser-known but locally prominent architects in such syntheses. See, for example, Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), Ann Durkin Keating, *Building Chicago: Suburban Developers & the Creation of a Divided Metropolis* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1988), Sam Bass Warner Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

⁹ See, for example, Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Le Corbusier, and Frank Lloyd Wright*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977).

¹⁰ David Schuyler, *Apostle of Taste: Andrew Jackson Downing, 1815-1852* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). Dell Upton, "Pattern Books and Professionalism," *Winterthur Portfolio* 19 (1984): 107-50.