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Naegele's Guide to the Only Good Architecture in Iowa

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POCAHONTAS
State Hwy 3, Pocahontas
W.C. Ballard, designer
Built by Marcell Moritz
1956

Twenty-five feet high, 7.5-feet wide, and constructed of painted wood and fiberglass on a steel frame and concrete base, this statue of the legendary Indian princess from Virginia—here surveying the highway while looking out over adjacent farm fields—marks the eastern entrance to this small town. In 2014, she was awarded a tipi of painted wood and concrete, too small for her to inhabit but perfect for a couple of benches, a picnic table, and a big trash can. This is Iowa’s unparalleled surreal moment and not to be missed. It’s highway kitsch at its best, but kitsch that catalyzes the state’s greatest amenities: its big sky and its ever-present horizon. Given the gush of diversity, ethnic and gender issues in the 21st Century, this terrific, monumental statement deserves far more controversy than it has received.

GRAIN PILE, COVERED
just south of U.S. Hwy 30
Jefferson

A colossal, conical pile of grain held in place by a circle of battered walls and covered with a silver tarp that expands as the pile grow, the beauty of this temporary storage under light rivals that of any Egyptian pyramid.

In Iowa, it’s rumored that the pile is only the exterior cover of a four-level underground city. The top level houses a Masonic Temple. This is above Harry Potter’s school; the school is above a bomb shelter; and the bomb shelter is above a mausoleum for the real remains of Einstein, Newton, Goethe, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Herbert Hoover, and Henry A. Wallace. Rumor has it Pocahontas, Chairman Mao, and probably Mahatma Gandhi and Mae West are down there, too.
Named after the legendary Irish-born Kate Shelley (1863-1912) who risked her life in 1881 to stop a passenger train bound for disaster when a railroad bridge washed out, the 1901, half-mile long, 185-feet high, steel trestle bridge, with elaborate x-bracing and stone foundations, brought Cartesian line and perspective to the serene Des Moines River valley. A brown rumbling between blue and green, the heavy freight trains seemed magically to streak through the sky. Bridge enthusiasts from the around the world came to watch. In 2006, in the same visual space as the old bridge, the Union Pacific constructed a new, double-track bridge of concrete and steel. It’s rumored that the venerable Iowa architectural firm of Hu, Dunnit, and Wran was responsible for the design. The best show in Iowa was turned off. Nobody said a word.

PALESTINE CEMETERY
Highway 2, west of Leon. Decatur County 1855 – 1915

A typical Iowa small-town burial ground, Palestine is marked with a silver-painted, gently arched, metal proscenium on which are shown the dates and name of the cemetery in large numbers and letters. A chain-link fence brings boundaries to the rectangular grounds and a wheel-track gravel road facilitates vehicular access. ‘Cemetery-type’ is inescapable at Palestine. Each evening at dusk, a golden light washes over this small parcel, highlighting it as prototypical—a universally understood final resting place. Laid to rest next to the cornfield, under the big sky, near a tree, and with telephone poles and the horizon line within view: what more could one ask for?

WHITE HOUSE
548 West 7th Street, Dubuque 1856

The six, very tall, triple-hung windows on the front façade of this wondrous little White-House-on-the-bluff belie its antebellum origin. The street facade is symmetrical and debonair, albeit it a little beat up. Though petite, it is distinguished by a big idea: a semi-circular porch projection carried on four Tuscan columns and a continuous wood rail at its flat roof. The house sits close to the ground and road. The portico leads one both to the entrances and to the rear of the house which overlooks the city.
Tall, lean, and with a gabled roof, this tower is entered through a metal door sixty feet above grade and reached only by ladder. Its costume of corrugated-metal panels—nineteen high by twelve wide and arranged in a running bond pattern—is its most distinguishing feature. Weathering has brought out the individuality of each panel, adding an arresting rhythm to the façade, endowing it with an authenticity and weight that a cleaner structure would not have.

WOODBURY COUNTY COURTHOUSE
Sioux City
William Steele with William Purcell & George Elmslie (designing architects)
1914 – 1918

William Steele won a competition for this courthouse with a Neo-Gothic design. He then invited his friends, George Elmslie and Bill Purcell, to assist him with the execution. They changed everything. Their brick-on-steel-frame, 8-story administration tower on a 60-ft. high courtroom base was the biggest Prairie School building ever built and Iowa’s most eloquent and significant contribution to American architecture. The elegantly restored tour de force is symmetrical and somewhat colonnaded. Complete with flying walls that flow the corners; dressed in a brownish ceramic-faced brick; adorned in Alfonso Iannelli, quasi-religious reliefs; and maintaining a dignified prominence fitting to its purpose, it is relaxed just enough to encourage one to enter into its domed center.

But does the tower really sit on top of the cube-courtroom base? And doesn’t this ‘sit’ violate the principles of logical construction mandated by Modernism? Complete with plump, glazed terra cotta (and thus fireproofed) columns, end-of-the-Great War murals, and with a stained-glass domed ceiling that confers both governmental authority and centrality on the situation, the balconied lobby resolves the tower-over-cube conundrum. The penthouse banquet room is a truly great interior, and perhaps the only one the fire marshal has seen fit to shut down—for the benefit of mankind, I’m sure. The views from its terrace are second to none.
The corrugated Quonset hut took the place of the community-raised wood barn after the Second World War. Simple, low cost, easy to erect; of predictable, off-the-shelf, man-made materials, the Quonset hut was Iowa’s favorite storage structure for half a century. Its size was about right for the various purposes to which it was put, and the darkness of its deepest interior spaces mattered little when the building was used for storage. Made of arched, open metal web beams on concrete buttresses, this far larger new shed—no longer vaulted, really—is covered with a translucent plastic fabric.

A colony of these enormous tents has been grown on the south edge of Iowa State’s campus forming ISU’s finest architectural ensemble. In the glistening sunlight it is a wondrous site to behold even from a great distance. Breathtakingly marvelous, the buildings are not for Iowa State students to inhabit, rather they are homes for thousands of tons of compost.

Both big box and animal house, the barn is only a few feet from the road. It’s horizontal wood siding, deep shadows, and delicate hardware are standard components of this building type. Once hand-built of wood by men with few machines and of a size and shape appropriate to its function as house and storage shed, today the barn is being replaced with larger structures of lighter, stronger, highly processed materials—structures that are mass-produced, shipped long distances, and assembled by trained teams of itinerant hired hands. The wooden barns are left to decay. Collapsing, they form novel architectural space.
Trained as an architect, Alfred Caldwell (1903-1998) worked for the great landscape architect, Jens Jensen, from 1926-1931. As Dubuque Superintendent of Parks from 1933-1936, he designed Eagle Point Park on a rocky plateau overlooking the Mississippi. The park and his pavilions—all made of limestone in the vein of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Taliesin—have been described as “a near-perfect summation of ‘organic’ landscape architecture.”

In 1936, Caldwell moved to Chicago where he designed the Lincoln Park Lily Pond and where Mies hired him to teach Landscape Architecture at IIT from 1944-1959. In 1958, he designed the landscape for Mies’ Lafayette Park in Detroit.

The bandstand, with subtle vibrato but fitting Caldwell’s theme, was added twenty years later.

Titled “Spillville circa 1895,” the 60’ long x 20’ high mural is on the sidewall of a bank, one of but a few buildings in the town’s 2-block center. It depicts “Spillville circa 1895,” just two years after the famed Czech composer, Antonín Dvořák, spent a summer there with his relatives. Homstad shows the Bohemian-settled community all in a line: farm fields in front, treed hills behind, a dominant horizon, and regularly spaced clouds in a benevolent sky. Under a certain light and from a certain vantage point, the illusory scene aligns exactly with reality.
Few agricultural buildings in Iowa are so obviously female as this pointed arch, ‘Gothic’ corn crib. Its vertical sidewalls are of horizontally-oriented wood, slatted to allow the stacked corn to dry. These are extended to the two, near-identical fronts of the building to form cheeks that flank the sliding doors. Other wood on these symmetrical fronts is run vertically and is of finer grain and hung tighter.

The crib barn is not painted. In fall and winter, its gray patina harmonizes with harvested fields and overcast skies.

DOUGLAS GRANT RESIDENCE
3400 Adel, Marion (near Cedar Rapids)
Frank Lloyd Wright
1946-1951

Leaving the commercial thoroughfare, climbing through dense woods to the top of hill, one drives down a gently sloping cul-de-sac to find an expansive vista of distant hills, big sky, and a simple rectangle of wafer-thin stone in a single, straight line. Lodged in the earth, it looks out to the horizon and seems to wait.

The visitor is drawn intuitively to the entrance to the house, a recess in its great stone wall. Inside, within the stone’s cavity and almost in the dark, the floor unfolds, moving downward to a light-filled expanse at a great distance. Through the walls, through the heavy cold throat and down into wonderland one moves, arriving at a great high room of glass walls in a magnificent new world. You are now suspended above the valley, immersed in the trees, moved forward and backward onto terraces, and all at one and the same time.

You move from earth to sky, from up to down, from darkness to light. The house insists one dwell both within the hill and at the same time, within the universe. It is magical—its passage a great lyrical moment in architecture.

Modest, yet of great grandeur and delight, Wright’s creation in Cedar Rapids is a metaphor for life itself. An overlooked masterpiece of the Master Builder, it is a highpoint of Iowa architecture.
This small stone Gothic Revival chapel sits atop a wooded hill overlooking the Luxembourgian community of St. Donatus. A tiny agricultural town near the Mississippi River, St. Donatus was begun in the 1850s and is comprised of wonderful stone houses and barns, a scene that suffers from a heavy dose of recently constructed, audaciously screaming commercial buildings.

The chapel is accessed only by foot and holds a large wooden Pieta. It is the profoundly beautiful terminus and climax to an 1861 hillside path along which are fourteen stations of the cross, each in a small brick house—Iowa’s Sacro Monte. From the chapel one can see across the hilly agrarian countryside, and below to the cemetery and old stone church of St. Donatus.

Traversing the Mississippi between Burlington, Iowa and Gulf Port, Illinois, the bridge is a double-track rail line comprised of five, 250-foot fixed trusses and one 370-foot vertical lift truss span.

Its massive steel members are rusted and dark. It sits on low, squat concrete piers, just above the river’s surface: a giant snake with raised head.