

2006

Representation and Spatial Incorporation of Iowa, 19th-20th c.

Marwan Ghandour

Iowa State University, marwang@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch_conf



Part of the [Architecture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ghandour, Marwan, "Representation and Spatial Incorporation of Iowa, 19th-20th c." (2006). *Architecture Conference Proceedings and Presentations*. 35.

https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch_conf/35

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the Architecture at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Architecture Conference Proceedings and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

Representation and Spatial Incorporation of Iowa, 19th-20th c.

Abstract

Driving on a highway in Iowa, corn cribs can be seen at a rate of approximately one crib every couple of miles. Corn Cribs are naturally ventilated timber structures used for storing the crop after the harvest. They are seen nowadays un-maintained, left to decay; announcing a dying facility that was replaced with the new storage buildings equipped with automatic temperature and humidity controls. Other than being technologically obsolete, these dilapidating corn cribs also announce the gradual disappearance of a way of life in the American Midwest. A way of life that is associated with the family farm, which is the main agricultural production unit. A family farm is defined as a "...family-owned farm with enough land to support the family and no more land than could be farmed by the labor force of the family.

Disciplines

Architecture

Comments

Published in *Proceedings of the 94th Annual Meeting of Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, Getting Real: Design Ethos Now, Salt Lake City-Utah, April 2006* (Washington, D.C.: ACSA, 2006). Pp. 309-315.

Representation and Spatial Incorporation of Iowa, 19th - 20th c.

MARWAN GHANDOUR
Iowa State University

Introduction

Driving on a highway in Iowa, corn cribs can be seen at a rate of approximately one crib every couple of miles. Corn Cribs are naturally ventilated timber structures used for storing the crop after the harvest. They are seen nowadays un-maintained, left to decay; announcing a dying facility that was replaced with the new storage buildings equipped with automatic temperature and humidity controls. Other than being technologically obsolete, these dilapidating corn cribs also announce the gradual disappearance of a way of life in the American Midwest. A way of life that is associated with the family farm, which is the main agricultural production unit. A family farm is defined as a "...family-owned farm with enough land to support the family and no more land than could be farmed by the labor force of the family. This implies that the family had no need to hire out family labor to supplement their income." (Headlee, 1991, p. 2). Most significantly, family farms are inhabited farms; they are home and work space for the entire family. From a preliminary observation, the landscape of Iowa follows closely the farming operation. The farmsteads, with their limited sized fields behind, are spread along the main roads to create a network of families that spatially aligns the social boundaries with the economic production boundaries. These farmsteads consist, typically, of a barn, a corn-crib, a house, a garage, and other crop storage structures. Main roads also link the farms to the towns equipped with the high rise grain elevators, which consist the storage and distribution facility, the hardware store, farming equipment facility, the pub and the convenient store. Eventually, all the roads in

the Midwest lead to Chicago as the main metropolitan hub of exchange between the Midwestern farms and the food industries and markets in the Eastern states and Europe.

Since the 1970's, family farming is being replaced by corporate farming and the landscape of Iowa is changing as farming is becoming in less hands with bigger operations. The small towns of Iowa are either forced to find other sources of income, such as to sell land cheap to attract big industrial facilities, or face extinction (Davidson, 1996). Numerous Iowan farmers are forced to sell their land, work as wage laborers or migrate to cities to become part of the ever growing American urban poor (Jackle & Wilson, 1992). My ongoing research aims to understand the dialectics of production between the social, ecological and the physical environment in the American Midwest. In this paper, I will focus on the state of Iowa to explain the concrete processes of production of the space of capitalism, or 'abstract space' as named by Henri Lefebvre (1995). I will first study the changes that occurred in the nineteenth century, which transformed Iowa from a native Indian towards an American capitalist landscape, with family farming as its major production unit. More accurately this period extended from the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, when the land of the Midwest was bought by the United States from France, till the time of the Homestead Act in 1862 during which the migration towards the West witnessed a major boom. I will attempt to explain the recent demise of family farming as a natural consequence of the capitalist processes established a century before. I will argue that to maintain the space of Iowa as a capitalist space requires the

destruction of family farming as a social unit. In building up my argument I will refer to the Midwest as a whole to discuss general concepts while I will refer to state of Iowa for specific dates and events. This is to avoid over generalizing as the American Midwestern states still retain their distinct history, even though they share a highly interlinked historical development. Finally, I will conclude by interpreting the processes through which capitalism structure the social environment and the tools used to preserve its continuity.

Building the Space of Capitalism in Iowa

Land is a means for accumulating power in its capacity to provide wealth upon controlling the food it may produce and the shelter it may provide. Using land for farming or real estate, marginalizes, with various degrees, its physical-spatial presence and optimizes its material productive value. In studying the transformation of the Midwest from a native to American Landscape, it is particularly important to distinguish between the conception of land as a means for production and land impregnated with symbolic associations borne out of its social history. Richard Manning argues in his article "The Oil We Eat" that farming, which is the main occupation of Iowa's land, was always about power; he writes:

Farming did not improve most lives. The evidence that best points to the answer, I think, lies in the difference between early agricultural villages and their pre-agricultural counterparts—the presence not just of grain but of granaries and, more tellingly, of just a few houses significantly larger and more ornate than all the others, attached to those granaries. Agriculture was not so much about food as it was about the accumulation of wealth. It benefited some humans, and those people have been in charge ever since. (Manning, 2004, p. 38)

Control over production is probably one of the major aspects that shaped Iowa's landscape in its colonized American form. Historically, colonial forces coming mainly from the Eastern states have eradicated the native prairie landscape in Iowa, erasing all forms of pre-colonial representational practices and traditions in order to transform the land into an agricultural production space. This

eradication can be understood as infrastructural works to incorporate the new comer and establish a state of finality to the space of the colonizer. These works are: surveying the land, mapping it into counties and townships, establishing a system of property subdivisions, and constructing buildings such as courthouses and silos, that make visible these, otherwise less visible, production processes. The transformation of the landscape from prairie to farming positioned the state in a network that extends to the Eastern American regions where the agricultural industries and markets are situated. In what follows I will discuss three stages in which the Americanization of the Midwest occurred: 'Negotiation the Land,' 'the Production of Maps,' and 'Maintaining the Cycle of Capital.'

Negotiating the Land

Farming did exist in native Indian Iowa, but a different form of farming. William Connor (1983) writes about the conflict that existed between the English and the native Indians in Seventeenth Century New England. The conflict was caused by the difference in farming practices between the two cultures. One main difference was the exclusive agriculture of the English where different crops were not mixed. The native Indians of New England planted diverse crops and moved their fields regularly to allow for the depleted soil to recover. This meant the lack of private ownership of land; native Indian ownership was associated with labor. This was applied to other forms of ownership such as cattle. For the native, an animal is owned only when it is dead which obviously conflicted with domesticated animals on English farms that required setting boundaries, which reinforced as well spatialized private property. Fences eventually, Connor elaborates, became a major legal requirement to ensure that animals and their production is privately protected and controlled.

The land of Iowa was incorporated officially by Americans with the Indian Cessions of 1832 through 1851. Iowa as a state was admitted into the union in 1846. The last attempt to resist this incorporation of space was the Indian uprising under the leadership of Black Hawk in 1832. Black Hawk is an Indian Sac Chief who went back to Western Illinois to contest an earlier treaty and reclaim his

people's land arguing that land cannot be bought or sold; only portable things can (Black Hawk, 1932; Cronon, 1991). The final defeat of Black Hawk at the Bad Axe battle announced the beginning of the final episode in the Americanization of the Midwest and the recession of the native Indian way of life. It is hard to summarize the reasons that caused the various native Indian cessions; they ranged between internal conflicts, military defeats and acceptance to change. William Cronon (1991) in his book "Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West," talks about the area of nowadays Chicago in which settler and native Indian towns alternate. At this time, native Indians were well known by American and European settlers; their way of life and political structure was familiar to them. It is evident from various accounts that native Indian way of life was meticulously studied by Americans. Even though they were battled with at various instances, Americans highly regarded native Indians as people of honor, bravery and stature. However, the Americans were determined to win this cultural confrontation for their way of life to prevail. In a letter written at the turn of the Nineteenth Century to William Henry Harrison, governor of the Indiana Territory, U. S. president Thomas Jefferson wrote:

...our system is to live in perpetual peace with the Indians, to cultivate an affectionate attachment from them...the decrease of game rendering their subsistence by hunting insufficient, we wish to draw them to agriculture, to spinning and weaving... when they withdraw themselves to the culture of a small piece of land, they will perceive how useless to them are their extensive forests, and will be willing to pare them off from time to time in exchange for necessities for their farms and families... (as cited in Ernst, 1979, p. 222)

Upon looking at the same Midwestern Landscape, Americans and native Indians saw two contradictory spaces. The Native Indian saw a land full with grazing grounds, large enough for free roaming herds. Land that allows for farming fields to migrate to allow for the soil to recover its nutrients. They saw a vast natural landscape fully inhabited with their social symbols. The Americans, on the other hand, saw an empty land, no visible

boundaries of ownership; be it public or private. They saw a land with no documented prohibition on use, hardly populated and an unpredictable life cycle that needed control. Americans also saw streams that hold opportunities of vast irrigation and transportation networks, a soil that is rich for food production; an environment with uncultivated resources. Thomas Jefferson understood clearly the different world views Americans and native Indians adopted, and had a plan to make sure that his world view prevailed. I want to suggest here that it is not the taking over of the land that marginalized native Indian culture but actually the production of new representations of the land, which assimilated the American Midwest into American/European capitalist space, made it impossible for native Indian culture to re-emerge. For the Americans, Midwestern land was incorporated in the capitalist cycle since the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. For the Native Indians, the cycle has started once they started negotiating the land with material acquisition, which resulted in the various cessions, rather than on battle grounds. It was only a matter of time for the total transformation to happen. Once Iowa's land acquired an exchange value, it initiated the need for that value to be accumulated and maintained within the capitalist production cycle. The war of 1932 with Black Hawk was the last major event in which resistance to the American world view was staged.

On the one hand, Midwestern land could be seen as additional capital that gave a boost to American economy in the world. Yet it is land that has to be tamed and incorporated. On the other hand, the suppression of alternative cultural practices with their subsequent ecological and environmental considerations made it possible to de-historicize the land and maximize its capital production. A major tool that suppressed alternative practices was the surveys that mapped the land, first relying on Indian trails only to create a system of geographical units that erases those trails. Native Indian space gradually receded as the production of maps re-presented the Midwestern land in a American/European form of representation.

The Production of Maps

The land surveys and production of maps of Iowa were carried between 1837 and 1859

(Lokken, 1942), lagging few years behind the Indian cessions treaties. The United States government was keen on making quick surveys of the land acquired so that transactions can be recorded and land can quickly deliver the deemed profits. The map enabled the dissociation between the space as lived and the space from which land managers, or the eye of power, operates. Subsequently, land is quantified and abstractly conceived. Michael Martone in his essay "Correctionville, Iowa," imagines Jefferson at the time of the commissioning of the land surveys:

I think of him sitting on top of his mountain in Virginia, not in the squat fireplug mansion of Monticello with its collections and contraptions, but in the little cubic cottage out back, the honeymoon house, the first building he put up after balding the hill. Through the mullioned windows he watched his slaves tend the lattice work of gardens that stretched along the ridge, square beds divided into smaller squares. Before him he had a rough map of the territory under consideration. For his purposes, it didn't matter how accurate that map was. He had never been there, though George Washington had toured Ohio and even surveyed a few miles there. With a ruler, Jefferson drew a straight line north from the falls near what is today Louisville, Kentucky. The Lakes, the rivers, the hills did not deflect the line. From his original meridian, he began to lay out squares of space that would eventually add up to new states that needed naming. (Martone, 1978, p. 158-159)

Martone's description highlights the possibility to establish control over the land without the need to set foot in it. The map provides the tool through which the hand of power reshapes the land. It begins with a ruler, a pencil, a map; a diagram of lines that soon becomes lines of political negotiation and differentiation. Privileging global references of American mapping procedures positioned the land within the American circuit only to marginalize the history and daily practices of local social groups. Joseph W. Ernst (1979) discussed elaborately the strategies used by the U.S. surveyor general in the American Northwest from 1785 to 1816. All these surveys aimed at establishing an abstract

system to which all newly acquired land can be treated equally and accordingly distributed. The township system, which was the basis for the surveys, originated in 1620 in New England (Pritchard, 2004). A township was conceived as a 6X6 miles rectangle with a congressional church in the center in order to facilitate communication among the township community. This system was perfected in the surveys of the Northwestern region surveys that Ernst (1979) details and was rigorously applied in the Midwest. Accordingly, the surveys of Iowa subdivided the land into 6X6 miles grid, consisting the townships. These townships were divided into 1X1 mile sections, which are then divided into four 160 acre subsections which are sometimes divided into two 80 acre or four 40 acre subsections. The surveys quantified the land and the resulting maps reduced the land into numbers and geometric configurations. These maps became the new representations through which the 'new comers' understand the space of Iowa and the way they settled the land. Eventually, forms of ownership followed these lines as a way of redistributing the 'new comers' in accordance with the new geometric divisions. Whatever is not included on the map is bound to be erased with the new farms that activated the material value of the land at the expense of the unperceived symbolic value of the native land. The grid lines were the guides that constituted the counties which became the American administrative units within which new forms of social and political belonging emerged. Accordingly, abstract geometric surveying lines get consolidated and personalized through daily living and individual interactions that occurred across these new edges of differentiation.

The production of maps established a distance between the space of action and the hand of power. This distance allowed the erasure of native Indian social space and the possibility of the birth of a new space undeterred by the place's history. Preserving the distance between who lives in the space and who commands the space is essential to the understanding of the more recent events that again marginalized social space for the sake of capital production.

Maintaining the Cycle of Capital

With the surveys, space became quantifiable and hence it was open for exchange. Migration

from the East was accelerated. Families from New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania and other states as well as new European migrants, interested in the new agricultural opportunities, settled Iowa. Various Federal laws ensured the quick transformation of the Midwestern space. First, declaring the land as federal, after every Indian cession, opened up the way for squatters and settlers which are citizens of the United States to claim ownership. Then the land sale was opened, \$1.25 per acre. Land was bought by farmers but equally by Eastern speculators who saw an opportunity for investment in a virgin land that, for the experienced eye, promised to yield great wealth. (Bogue, 1994; Lokken, 1942; Swierenga, 1968) Land was also distributed by the federal government to war veterans who either settled or sold their claims later. Settlement boomed with the expansion of the railroad system in the Midwest from 1848 to 1860's that linked farms of Iowa to Chicago, which in turn linked the Midwest to the East Coast. (Cronon, 1991) The final 'blow' is the Homestead Act of 1862 which ensured 160 acre to be granted to any U.S. adult citizen who is willing to settle on it and is capable of cultivating it for five years. Land, accordingly, is valued in what it produced, nothing else matters!

Settlement in the Midwest follows the idealized form of the family farmer who combines two contradictory attitudes towards the land: that of the yeomen and that of the planter. The first is about the independent farmer who plowed the earth with care to preserve its long term production. The latter is an expansionist that spreads his slaves over large pieces of land for maximum production at the expense of the soil. Planters had to continuously acquire new land with 'fresh' soil to keep production (Kennedy, 2003). Both attitudes are personified in the character of Thomas Jefferson who, as a planter, expanded his land several times, leaving worn out farms behind at the same time that he wrote and preached for the independent family farmer (Kennedy, 2003). While family farming is usually romanticized as the self-sufficient way of living, the growth of Midwestern family farming was highly dependant on the East coast as the major destination for its goods and a major source of agricultural industrial material, such as pesticides and nutrients (Headlee, 1991; Jackle & Wilson, 1992). To retain its position within an aggressively

competitive market, family farming was sustained by maximizing production. This required family farming to specialize in crops and move towards continuous development in farm machinery, farming techniques, crop constituency and industrialized processes of production and consumption. Accordingly, Jeffersonian democracy, which sees independence at the center of democratic behavior centered around the self sufficient family farm, is completely compromised by the dependency of these farms on the capitalists that control the American food industry and trade. The well being of the family is not ensured by the farm production but by what that production translate into capital which linked the Midwest into the larger United States economy.

One can only imagine the amount of clearing that happened in preparing the prairie lands of Iowa to become farms, the landforms that were transformed and the native plants that were weeded on a daily basis. Living in Iowa is like living in the belly of a crop production machine; spatialized for optimal performance. It is this landscape of production that will shape the subjectivities of the sons and daughters of the nineteenth century Iowan settlers. Family farms, which are the result of the weeding of native culture, developed a new form of social practices that signified arguably the non-violent capitalism in which class struggle is minimized. (Headlee, 1991; Davidson, 1996) However, this continuous development of family farms towards more efficient and cheaper production meant: same land, more production, and fewer people. The current situation of the transformation of family farming into corporate farming in Iowa can be understood as a second eradication or weeding out of social symbols of Iowa's landscape to allow for more 'productive' land. These symbols emerged out of the history of establishing and inhabiting the farmland with family farms. As a production space, Iowa is part of a network of capital flows that resists all forms of locality and historicity; capitalists work on keeping space devoid of symbolic structures to enable its quick transformation and adaptation to abstract (Lefebvre, 1985) and new forms of capital flows. The preservation of the space that family farming produced at the end of the nineteenth century required the destruction of family farming as a social - economic way of life a century later.

The world as a farm: Weeding out difference

In this section, I conclude with arguments about abstract space of capitalism and its modes of operation. These arguments project the historical study above into a theoretical study on space and capital, which remains a subject for further research. To that effect, the sustainability of the current space of Iowa is dependent on the preservation of the capital flow diagram that operates on representations of the land and necessitates the reduction of bodies into points with their respective production power. The diagram of capital flow is spatialized by the bodies that labor on a daily basis, to facilitate and maintain the flow. Being different, that is laboring against or outside the flow, risk being weeded out through policies of inefficiency and lack of productivity. The sustainability of abstract space is in keeping space quantifiable to preserve its exchange value. This is done on a macro scale by representations and production of maps that allow the dissociation between the lived space which is full of symbolic associations and the space of power in which the physical alteration of the land is made. It is interesting to note here that capitalistic transaction privileges the plan view; the view that operates by establishing boundaries, zones of specialized bodies, objects and materials. Lines in plan are set to separate and organize entities, land, people, and resources in order to control or make their interactions, with each other, predictable. The plan view is the view of discrimination.

On the micro level that sustainability is ensured by daily practices that literally weed out all phenomena that are not identifiable within the market. An example of the latter is not only the weeding of the fields to ensure the health of a single crop for production purposes but also the 'yard works' which most Midwestern families do over the weekend to ensure that the backyards and most importantly front yards keep their homogenous lawn. It is in the daily toil of pulling up weeds inserting plants only where they are supposed to grow. The weeding out process allows urban environments to stay within the circuit of capital by accumulating their real estate value, through preserving identifiable marketable entities. The sustainability of abstract space is not

necessarily about spatial quality but rather about the fluidity of space, with the possibility of abandonment. Abstract space is about preserving the possibility of the transformation of lived space into abstract capital which can be relocated elsewhere; it is habitation with a sense of loss. Hence, the built environment is not ecologically bounded to any specific cultural environment, but it is geographically fixated in relationship to the production circuits as they are drawn on the surface of the earth. Henri Lefebvre describes abstract space, the space of capitalism as follows:

Abstract space is not defined only by disappearance of trees, or by the receding of nature; nor merely by the great empty spaces of the state and the military – plazas that resemble parade grounds; nor even by commercial centers packed tight with commodities, money and cars. It is not in fact defined on the basis of what is perceived, It ... relates negatively to something which it carries within itself and which seeks to emerge from it: a differential space-time. It has nothing of a subject about it, yet it acts like a subject in that it transports and maintains specific social relations, dissolves others and stands opposed to others. It functions positively vis a vis its own implications: technology, applied sciences, and knowledge bound to power. Abstract space may be even described as at once and inseparably, the locus, medium and tool of this 'positivity.' (Lefebvre, 1995)

Within the landscape of capital flow, marketable social symbols have no specific location in space, even though they are spatial in character. Since these flows are continuous and increasingly global, there are no geographic boundaries that can stop them. These flows do not necessarily dictate the absolute form but the relational one; they are adaptable to various global environments as long as those environments do not interrupt the flow. The cycle of capital has the capacity to transform every space it touches by voiding it out of its local social symbols and preserving the ones that are marketable for a global audience. Some of these operations happen on the drafting boards of designers and developers and is manifested in the choices they make in shaping the landscape. Global capital fails to recognize difference that

challenges its spatial fluidity; that is difference that is bounded to geography and its respective cultural practices. Global capital weeds those differences, realigns space with the flow diagram, dissociate them from their social and cultural geography and thus become less specific and more exchangeable. Within this framework, social practices that can survive are the ones that can be transported, while place specific social practices are weeded out through daily labor that maintains the flow of capital within space and preserves its abstraction.

Acknowledgement

I want to thank the Center for Excellence in the Arts and Humanities at Iowa State University, for granting me a summer fellowship to complete the writing of this paper. I also want to thank Clayton Aronson who, through his passion to the Iowan corn cribs, introduced me to the richness of family farming way of life in Iowa.

References

- Black Hawk (1932). *Life of Black Hawk, Ma-Ka-Tai-Me-She-Kia-Kiak*. Iowa City: State historical society of Iowa.
- Bogue, A. G. (1994). *From Prairie to Corn Belt*. Ames: Iowa State University Press.
- Cronon, W. (1983). *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Cronon, W. (1991). *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Davidson, O. G. (1996). *Broken Heartland: The Rise of America's Ghetto*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Ernst, J. W. (1979). *With Compass and Chain: Federal Land Surveyors in the Old Northwest, 1785-1816*. New York: Arno Press.
- Harvey, D. (1985). *The urbanization of capital*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Headlee, S. (1991). *The Political Economy of the Family Farm: The Agrarian Roots of American Capitalism*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
- Jackle, J. and Wilson, D. (1992). *Derelict Landscapes: the Wasting of America's Built Environment*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.
- Kennedy, R. G. (2003). *Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause: Land, Farmers, Slavery, and the Louisiana Purchase*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lokken, R. L. (1942). *Iowa Public Land Disposal*. Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa.
- Lefebvre, Henri. (1995). *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc.
- Manning, R. (2004). The Oil We Eat. *Harpers Magazine*. February 2004, 37-45.
- Martone, M. (2000). *The Flatness and Other Landscapes* Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.
- Pritchard, M. B. (2003). Claiming the Land. In Pritchard, M. B. and Taliaferro, H. G. (2003). *Degrees of Latitude: Mapping Colonial America*. Williamsburg, VI: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
- Swierenga R. P. (1968). *Pioneers and Profits: Land Speculation on the Iowa Frontier*. Ames: Iowa State University Press.