

The “New” Architectural History

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The “new” architectural history unites the study of buildings of all styles and functions with current trends in social history, historical archeology, and folklife research, all of which stress the broader interpretation of American society and culture.¹ The most obvious analogy to the new architectural history is the new social history which arose in the 1960s and seized as its purpose writing “history from the bottom up,” a credo embracing the experiences and values of all Americans.² Practitioners of the new architectural history pursue a comparable mission through a working premise that architecture and landscape provide material evidence about the ways in which people historically perceived their world and organized their relationships to one another and their environments. The artifact as evidence, as a means to formulate new kinds of questions and develop new strategies of inquiry, stands at the center of this enterprise which might best be described as object-driven social and cultural history.

One of the most significant resources for pursuing the goals of the new architectural history in the United States is the National Register of Historic Places, which essentially promotes a material culture approach to American history through the assertion that “the spirit and direction of the nation are founded upon and reflected in its historic past” and that both “spirit” and “direction” are represented by buildings, structures, sites, landscapes, or districts.³ Early National Register nominations, however, promoted an object-centered history where the primary intent was to write compelling arguments for the significance and integrity of nominated properties that justified the singular importance of each property with little attempt to place it in larger comparative contexts. Buildings simply functioned either as historic stage sets for past events and people or as illustrations of works of art set in chronologically ordered style periods. The larger connections between buildings, landscapes, and sites and broad trends in American social, cultural, and architectural history remained asserted rather than demonstrated.

As part of a program to bring registration concerns into accord with comprehensive cultural resource planning programs and the contextual concerns of social history and historical archeology, the National Register took several initiatives in the late 1970s which were eventually summarized and codified in the *Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic*

Preservation and clarified in subsequent technical bulletins. Central to these standards is the need to identify historic contexts that are established on the basis of place, time, and historic theme. This historic context approach addresses two key policy needs in National Register research. First, the historic context provides a well-defined research focus that emphasizes an assessment of all the properties related to a particular historic theme within a given time frame and within a clearly identified geographic area. Historic properties can be identified with a historic context in two ways. On a functional level, properties directly address specific aspects of the theme; on an associative level, they address the theme indirectly. For example, “Dwellings of the Rural Elite in Central Delaware,” a historic context and multiple property nomination, identified late-18th-century houses as functional property types, and evaluated farm complexes, public buildings, and churches as associative property types.

Second, the historic context approach encourages comparative studies that examine all the related historic properties as a group and evaluates them within the framework of their historic relations in a specific landscape. Thus, the properties listed under the historic context of the “Dwellings of the Rural Elite” were drawn from a

comprehensive review of all surveyed historic properties which met the conditions of time (1770-1830) and place (central Delaware). The review process depended not only on an architectural assessment of each property but also on a process of record linkage where the information gleaned from all available sources—material and documentary—is synthesized within the larger historic context.⁴ The goal is to reveal as much as possible about the significance of each property under consideration and to establish the kinds of multifoliate relationships connecting individual properties and their

owners and users in historic settings.

Recognition of these relationships in the Delaware example led to associative and architectural registration requirements. Associative requirements for the “Dwellings of the Rural Elite” included, for example, the owner’s placement in the top 20% of the taxable population, ownership of land in excess of 200 acres, livestock holdings representing capitalization rather than subsistence, and possession of objects representing categories of time keeping, literacy, specialized professions (such as surveying or medicine), and farm machinery. Architectural requirements stipulated that each eligible site must clearly represent the period of significance through attributes of plan, form, construction, decorative finishes, siting, and setting. Taken together, these requirements provide a basis for National Register research to identify and recognize historic properties as both expression and agents of social class formation in a specific rural landscape.

While the historic context approach to the National Register draws on approaches and methodologies bor-



Windsor (ca. 1760) in New Castle County, DE, denotes “the construction of a stair-passage plan brick house which materially and symbolically linked its original owner with the particular community of central Delaware’s rural elite.” Photo by Max Van Balgooy, Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering, University of Delaware.

rowed from a variety of fields, the overall process follows a clear and flexible protocol. The first step in preparing the “Dwellings of the Rural Elite” nomination began with the comprehensive review of all surveyed properties within a specific geographic area. The review of all surveyed properties led to the identification of multiple categories of properties determined by factors of date, construction, and known historic associations. The theme of the housing of the rural elite from 1770 to 1830 was identified as one such category. With the theme, place, and time period suggested by the buildings themselves, we implemented a research framework which began by reconstructing specific property histories and then established broader relationships between all the properties and their historic owners and occupants. To achieve the second goal, we applied established social and economic history research strategies to architectural history.

First, we approached the sum of the properties through a process of collective biography, “the investigation of the common background characteristics of a group of actors in history by means of a collective study of their lives.”⁵ The “actors” under consideration, however, were buildings. Second, using basic quantitative methods, we analyzed a series of local tax lists which provided the necessary framework in which to determine where the properties under consideration fell within the area’s historic wealth structure—a process which enabled us to identify the houses with an economically-defined rural elite.

Economic wealth alone, however, is an insufficient basis to assert elite social status. Consequently, we turned to inventories, wills, deeds, census records, private papers, and other sources to assess factors such as occupation, associational culture, kinship networks, and other lifestyle markers. These findings were related back to a reassessment of the buildings which sparked the process. The overall National Register project produced two key results: first, the nomination identified and listed a number of individual properties within a coherent theme; second, the process united a variety of research strategies into an interpretively more expansive architectural history.

Architectural historians who have used the National Register for research purposes have generally done so in search of particular examples of buildings or to gain more in-depth information on individual structures. Although the increased use of the historic context approach continues to provide the same sort of factual information, it offers a much more exciting potential. First, context-based National Register nominations enable researchers to deal effectively with both the historical and architectural issues the National Register was initially established to address as well as with the increasingly complex and litigated planning problems the National Register has come to evaluate as an instrument of federal environmental policy. For the “new” architectural history, the National Register is emerging as

a vital, innovative, and integrated research approach which makes sophisticated use of buildings as evidence and uses that information to assess a wide array of historic themes relating to all geographic areas and historic periods.



Multiple property submissions like “Dwellings of the Rural Elite in Central Delaware” include documentation of contextual resources such as landscape, land use patterns, and secondary structures and sites, such as these agricultural outbuildings associated with Green Meadow Farm (ca. 1789). Photo by Max Van Balgooy, Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering, University of Delaware.

The National Register as a research strategy places buildings at the center of historical inquiry, and raises their significance from association with an individual, event, or style to their active role in signifying changing human relationships defined through interpretive categories such as class, ethnicity, occupation, environment, technology, and landscape. This is architectural history with a large agenda. Buildings tied to social and economic change provide tangible links with the past on one level and connect that past to present on another. We find in these linkages the insight that helps us grasp why the landscape today looks the way it does and what it

says about the historic origins of our own conflicted values—at least as they are represented in an American culture of property.

Notes

- 1 Thomas Carter and Bernard L. Herman, “Introduction: Toward a New Architectural History,” in Carter and Herman, eds., *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, IV* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991), 1-6.
- 2 The current interdisciplinary image of the “new” is represented by a more holistic and dynamic notion of context. See, for example, Richard Beeman, “The New Social History and the Search for ‘Community’ in Colonial America,” *American Quarterly*, 39: 4 (1977), 422-43; Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 118-78; Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 323-57; A. L. Rees and Frances Borzello, *The New Art History* (Atlantic Highlands, N. J.: Humanities Press International, 1988); Dell Upton, *Holy Things and Profane: Anglican Parish Churches in Colonial Virginia* (Cambridge: MIT Press/The Architectural History Foundation, 1986).
- 3 “An Act to establish a program for the preservation of additional historic properties throughout the Nation, and for other purposes,” *Public Law 89-665* (October 15, 1966).
- 4 For a discussion and demonstration of record linkage combining documentary and material evidence, see Bernard L. Herman, “Multiple Materials/Multiple Meanings: The Fortunes of Thomas Mendenhall,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 19: 1 (1984), 67-86.
- 5 Lawrence Stone, “Prosopography,” *Daedalus: Historical Studies Today* 100 (Winter 1971): 46; Billy G. Smith, *The “Lower Sort”: Philadelphia’s Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 201-3.

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