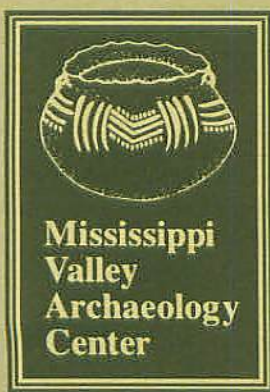


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This year's Archaeology Education Program Newsletter theme is Architectural History. This issue focuses on Residential Architecture. The April issue will focus on Agricultural Structures. MVAC's Architectural Historian, Barbara Kooiman, provided content information.

Commercial Architecture

Introduction

One of the defining features of any village or city is that it has a commercial hub or center, where the majority of the stores, gas stations, service businesses and offices are located. The size of the community will dictate how many different kinds of businesses it can support, but the variety of types of businesses, as well as stylistic preferences, influence the appearance of these buildings. This issue of Archaeology Education will look more closely at the property type "commercial buildings."



The Doerflinger Building at 4th and Main Streets in La Crosse, Wisconsin, ca. 1910.

Early Commercial Buildings

Early commercial buildings in the upper Mississippi River valley were log buildings, and were no more than trading posts. As communities were settled, commercial buildings were usually built along either side of the main street in town, first constructed of wood. Because the land value in commercial districts was generally high, they were built close together, even touching, which often led to catastrophic fires. Most towns in Wisconsin passed ordinances by the 1880s that required "fireproof" materials, such as brick or stone, in commercial districts.

Later Commercial Buildings

Because of higher land values, often commercial buildings were more than one story, with storefronts on the first floor, facing the street with large plate glass windows to entice customers. Upper floors were usually designed for business offices, doctor or dental offices, and apartments. In cities where land values were extremely high, by the late 19th century the skyscraper was introduced to make the greatest use of a small portion of land.

Styles

Styles and building materials for commercial buildings varied throughout the decades. Styles often followed regional and national tastes, including Italianate, Queen Anne, Romanesque Revival, and Neo-classical Revival styles. Materials were first wood, then later stone and brick. By the early twentieth century, poured concrete was a popular material, conducive to the Art Deco and Art Moderne styles.

Understanding the Commercial Historic District

Commercial historic districts are a group of buildings with a similar general function (commercial function) and make up a cohesive streetscape, yet they are made up of individual buildings which each have their own unique style, form and function. These exercises will help the students understand commercial historic districts better.

Styles:

Look at the different styles of buildings in the district. Do different kinds of businesses tend to lean toward a particular style of building? For example, do the retail stores tend to be more decorative styles, such as Italianate or Queen Anne. Do buildings such as banks and post offices tend to use classical styles such as Neo-Classical Revival or Romanesque Revival? Check out the books in our resource section to help identify styles. Discuss these differences.



The State Bank building on the right is an example of a Romanesque Revival building, ca. 1910.

Materials:

Have the students identify as many different kinds of building materials in either a single commercial building or in an entire commercial district.



The Bodega Lunch Club at 4th and Pearl Streets, ca. 1925.

Read a building:

Have the students each pick a commercial building (either an actual building, or one in a photograph) and write at least 10 facts about each.

Changes throughout time:

Have the students look at commercial buildings, and figure out, if any, what kinds of physical changes have been made to the building throughout its history. Has the brick or stone been painted? Has the storefront been closed up or altered? Are there architectural elements that have broken or been removed? Has the signage been changed?



Clocks and street lamps are examples of Street Furniture. 400 block, north side of Main Street, ca. 1910.

Find the Street Furniture:

Have the students go to a business district (downtown La Crosse is good for this exercise) and locate as many kinds of street furniture as they can.

All images used in this section are of building from downtown La Crosse. Photos courtesy of Barbara Kooiman.

Glossary

Adaptive Reuse: The use of a historic building for a purpose other than that which it was constructed. Adaptive reuse sometimes involves physical changes to the historic building, especially on the interior.

Art Deco: This style was popular in the 1920s, and was often made of reinforced concrete, sometimes accented with glazed tile. Generally simple buildings, they were decorated with imprinted, stylized designs of geometric patterns or artistic versions of flowers or vines. This style was used for department stores and office buildings.

Art Moderne: This style followed the Art Deco in popularity, and was developed in the 1920s and 30s. It features materials such as reinforced concrete and glass, and often has ribbons of windows and curved, streamlined corners. It was used often for office buildings and Greyhound bus depots.

Central Business District (CBD): The principal business street or streets (depending upon the size of the community) of a town, where stores, offices, other businesses, and governmental buildings such as courthouses and city halls were historically located. Also known as "Downtown" and "Main Street."

Commercial Historic District: A collection of commercial buildings in a village or city which have distinct boundaries, and have retained enough of their historic appearance to be considered part of a local or National Register of Historic Places district.

Italianate: an 1870s style derived from the villas of Italy, this commercial style is generally two or more stories tall, with overhanging eaves with decorative brackets, and elaborate window hoods which are different on each floor.

Neo-classical Revival: this style was popular in the 1890s into the early 1900s. It is generally made of brick or stone, with prominent front columns and a classical pediment on the facade, giving the appearance of a Greek or Roman temple. This style was popular for banks and schools, to impart the feeling of permanence and intelligence.

Party Wall Construction: A method of construction in which neighboring buildings share the same side walls, which is common in most commercial districts.

Queen Anne: popular in the 1880s and 1890s, this commercial style features pedimented, ornamental cornices, decorative window hoods, and often an upper floor bay window. This style was favored for retail stores, restaurants and taverns.

Romanesque Revival: a style popular in the 1880s and 1890s, it is generally made of stone or brick, with heavy archways, and often uses rusticated, or rough-cut stone. This style was preferred for banks, to give a sense of strength and permanence.

Storefront: The lower story of the facade of a commercial building, containing the entrance and display windows.

Street Furniture: Utilitarian and/or ornamental items placed along the street. Examples include benches, street lights, clocks, planters, etc.

Streetscape: The appearance and relationship of a group of buildings and street furniture which stand on the same block.

Architectural History Resources

These book reviews, websites, and historic places in Wisconsin can be used to supplement historic architecture lessons.

Let us know if you have found any great resources we can share with our readers.

Book Reviews

Title: *Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture*

Author: Richard Longstreth

Publisher: The Preservation Press, Washington, D.C.

Age Range: 12 to adult

Excellent source to describe and identify a wide variety of commercial architectural styles.

Title: *The American Family Home, 1800 - 1960.*

Author: Clifford Edward Clark, Jr.

Publisher: Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986.

Age Range: 12 to adult

A good book to explain why people live in the kinds and styles of houses that they do, and what influenced their decisions.

Title: *City of La Crosse, Wisconsin Architectural and Historical Intensive Survey Report*

Author: Joan Rausch, Architectural Researches, Inc.

Publisher: City of La Crosse, Wisconsin (LaCrosse Public Library, reference)

Age Range: 12 to adult

The only comprehensive source available for looking up particular historic buildings in La Crosse, with narrative sections on architectural styles and area history.

Web Sites

Society for Commercial Archaeology www.sca-roadside.org

This site is the Society for Commercial Archaeology homepage, which is a group dedicated to roadside commercial architecture, including diners, motels, gas stations and other architectural forms which are typical of the main highways and byways of the United States.

State Historical Society of Wisconsin www.shsw.wisc.edu/sites

This site gives information about all of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin's historic sites, including Stonefield Village.

Places to Visit

La Crosse Commercial Historic District, located in downtown La Crosse, between Second Street, State Street, Fifth Avenue and Jay Street. Featuring commercial buildings constructed between the 1860s and the 1940s, this commercial historic district was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1994.

Stonefield Village, located at Cassville, Wisconsin, is a State Historical Society of Wisconsin site. It is a reconstruction of a circa 1900 Wisconsin main street in a living history environment, where visitors may visit the blacksmith, the general store, and the local jail, among other buildings.