

# PRESERVATION EDUCATION & RESEARCH

VOLUME 9 | 2017

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR  
PRESERVATION EDUCATION

**NCPE**

PER is published annually as a single volume. Copyright © 2017 *Preservation Education & Research*. All rights reserved. Articles, essays, reports and reviews appearing in this journal may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, except for classroom and noncommercial use, including illustrations, in any form (beyond copying permitted by sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law), without written permission.

ISSN 1946-5904

Cover photograph credit: Amalia Leifeste

## PRESERVATION EDUCATION & RESEARCH

### VOLUME 9 EDITORS

**Gregory Donofrio**, *University of Minnesota*  
(donofrio@umn.edu)

**Chad Randl**, *Cornell University*  
(cgr5@cornell.edu)

### ADVISORY EDITORIAL BOARD

**Steven Hoffman**, *Southeast Missouri State University*

**Carter L. Hudgins**, *Clemson University/College of Charleston*

**Paul Hardin Kapp**, *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

**Ted J. Ligibel**, *Eastern Michigan University*

**Vincent L. Michael**, *San Antonio Conservation Society*

**Andréa Livi Smith**, *University of Mary Washington*

**Michael A. Tomlan**, *Cornell University*

**Robert Young**, *University of Utah*

### NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR PRESERVATION EDUCATION EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

**Paul Hardin Kapp**, Chair,  
*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

**Amalia Leifeste**, Vice Chair and Memberships,  
*Clemson University*

**Andréa Livi Smith**, Vice Chair and Web Site Editor,  
*University of Mary Washington*

**Steven Hoffman**, Secretary,  
*Southeast Missouri State University*

**Douglas Appler**, Treasurer,  
*University of Kentucky*

**Cari Goetcheus**, Internships,  
*University of Georgia*

**Michael Tomlan**, Special Projects,  
*Cornell University*

**Lauren Weiss Bricker**, Chair Emerita,  
*California State Polytechnic University, Pomona*

**Robert Young**, Chair Emeritus,  
*University of Utah*

*Preservation Education & Research* (PER) disseminates international peer-reviewed scholarship relevant to historic environment education from fields such as historic preservation, heritage conservation, heritage studies, building and landscape conservation, urban conservation, and cultural patrimony. The National Council for Preservation Education (NCPE) launched PER in 2007 as part of its mission to exchange and disseminate information and ideas concerning historic environment education, current developments and innovations in conservation, and the improvement of historic environment education programs and endeavors in the United States and abroad.

**Editorial correspondence**, including manuscripts for submission, should be emailed to Gregory Donofrio donofrio@umn.edu and Chad Randl at cgr5@cornell.edu. Electronic submissions are encouraged, but physical materials can be mailed to Gregory Donofrio, School of Architecture, University of Minnesota, 145 Rapson Hall, 89 Church Street S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA. Articles should be in the range of 4,500 to 6,000 words and not be under consideration for publication or previously published elsewhere. Refer to the back of this volume for manuscript guidelines.

**Books for review**, and book reviews, should be sent to Gregory Donofrio, School of Architecture, University of Minnesota, 145 Rapson Hall, 89 Church Street S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA. E-mail donofrio@umn.edu.

**Subscriptions** are US\$60.00 per year. Payments can be made online at the NCPE Store (<http://www.ncpe.us/storemembership>) or send a check with name and mailing address to PER, c/o NCPE, Box 291, Ithaca, NY 14851, USA.

# BOOK REVIEWS

---

Daniel M. Abramson. *Obsolescence: An Architectural History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016, 208 pp., 68 black-and-white photographs and illustrations, hardcover, \$35.00, ISBN: 978-0226313450.

An illuminating new history shows how the underexplored concept of obsolescence—that is, quantifiable architectural decline over time—yielded potent physical, economic, and ideological consequences for the twentieth-century built environment. Architectural historian Daniel Abramson carefully tracks both the idea of obsolescence and the trail of its impact across the long twentieth century, from accounting practices through architectural design. Although he locates obsolescence’s heyday in the 1960s, Abramson ultimately reveals the concept’s enduring significance to the rise of sustainability today.

Abramson begins by charting the ascendance of obsolescence, primarily in the United States. Throughout history, durability has been the architectural norm, with physical deterioration understood to be a slow, regular phenomenon. Starting in early twentieth-century cities like New York and Chicago, however, boom and bust cycles yielded rapid demolition of commercial structures. Real estate experts and the National Association of Building Owners and Managers (NABOM) attempted to quantify the useful life of various building types, and the tax code increased the impact of that thinking. Such practices helped naturalize obsolescence, while also making the apparent destructiveness of capitalism seem progressive instead.

From the 1930s through midcentury, obsolescence expanded from individual commercial buildings to the urban residential scale. In places like Boston’s West End, the term became synonymous with blight, which public health officials and real estate assessors carefully mapped with scientific precision. Nevertheless, obsolescence remained largely political, with urban renewal providing the policy tools to facilitate its eradication. Countless buildings and neighborhoods fell as a result.

During the postwar decades, the entrenchment of obsolescence in both the public and professional imagination yielded multiple design responses. Some architects openly embraced obsolescence’s potential. Reyner Banham, for

example, celebrated an architecture of expendability. More pragmatically, Richard Llewelyn-Davies, having resigned himself to obsolescence’s existence, researched ways to accommodate it in efficient hospital design. Avant-garde architects like Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Cedric Price, and the Metabolists promoted throwaway architecture. Still another set of figures tried to “fix” obsolescence. Albert Kahn and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe designed factory sheds that could be adapted over time. John Weeks’s indeterminate architecture permitted future growth. Kenzo Tange attempted to accommodate changeable cities in his megastructures. And Peter Cook’s designs tried to visually fix the fleeting image of obsolescence by capturing continuous transformation.

Yet another group of architectural respondents resisted obsolescence, rather than endorsing its inevitability. They critiqued the logic of obsolescence and pursued its reversal through historic preservation, vernacularism, salvage architecture, and adaptive reuse. Still others sought architectural permanence through concrete brutalism, postmodernism, and deconstructivism. Abramson concludes by situating contemporary sustainability as an outgrowth of some of these negative responses. Yet he provokes readers to view sustainability through the lessons learned from obsolescence, seeing it as both useful as an architectural stimulant, but also saddled with ideologies and contradictions of its own.

*Obsolescence* is a richly dense and enlightening book that expands how we conceptualize the built environment. Abramson identifies common cultural and economic currents that have united seemingly disparate building practices and forms. By mining business literature, social scientific surveys, architectural writing, and building designs, he compellingly applies recent scholarly interest in the history of capitalism to architectural terrain. Of particular relevance to readers of this journal is his unearthing of an important prehistory of historic preservation, exposing both quantitative and qualitative logics behind the rise of modern building destruction.

Architectural history, as indicated in the book's subtitle, is Abramson's primary focus. Yet the project's diverse disciplinary explorations—particularly in the early chapters—tempt readers to ponder the implications of obsolescence for the postwar built environment at an even more urban scale and vernacular scope. Where is suburbia in this story, with its sometimes short-lived shopping malls and surprisingly adaptable mass-produced homes? The voices of developers and builders appear in trade literature of the prewar decades, but what were their organizations saying about building

life spans in the postwar era? Further, how did obsolescence figure into the engineering and maintenance of infrastructure like highways? These remain questions for another study. But they are just some of the compelling research paths opened up by this thoughtful history of a decidedly unobsolete architectural past.

**FRANCESCA RUSSELLO AMMON**

*University of Pennsylvania*

*Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (USA)*

Virginia Savage McAlester. *A Field Guide to American Houses (Revised): The Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding America's Domestic Architecture*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013, 848 pp., black-and-white line-art sketches and grayscale photographs, paperback, \$29.95, ISBN: 978-0375710827.

In 2013, Virginia Savage McAlester published her second edition of *A Field Guide to American Houses*, subtitled *The Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding America's Domestic Architecture*. In 2015, Alfred A. Knopf produced the paperback version of this book. The first edition of *A Field Guide to American Houses*, first published in 1984, was authored by both Virginia Savage McAlester and her husband, Lee, unlike the second edition that notably has a single author. For nearly thirty years *A Field Guide to American Houses* has been a staple reference book within the historic preservation and American architectural history curriculums, used by more than a generation of students and practitioners. McAlester has done a very much needed update and expansion of her first work.

The bulk of what Virginia and Lee McAlester had in the first edition carries over into the second. As advertised on the front cover, the second edition has been “revised and expanded to include homes built after 1940 and a new section on how to ‘read’ a neighborhood,” which occurs in the first section of the book, titled *Looking at American Houses*, following the chapter titled

“Structure.” The “Neighborhoods” chapter discusses the types that can be found according to transportation infrastructure, density, design patterns, and land subdivision, and is complemented with illustrations that assist the reader in understanding the material. Besides this, other noticeable additions and changes include a chapter on manufactured housing from circa 1930 to the present within the *Folk House* section of the book. Within the *Colonial* section the chapter on the Adam[s] architectural style has been renamed “Federal.” “English and Anglo-American Period Houses” and “French Period Houses” are now separate subsections of the *Eclectic Houses (1880–1940)* section, though the number and titles of the chapters remain the same. These changes reflect more of an editorial reorganization of material carried over from the first edition.

The bulk of the new material within McAlester's second edition is in the section *Modern Houses (1900–present)*, which before was a subsection of *Eclectic Houses*. The new section on *Modern Houses* includes four subsections: “Early Modern,” “Bankers Modern,” “Mainstream Modern,” and “Styled Houses Since 1935,” each having