

Architecture in Your Neighborhood

by
Susan McDanel



*W*hat style of house do you live in? When was your house built? What architectural features are in your neighborhood? These and other questions like them were addressed in a course I took several years ago sponsored by the local area education agency. Focusing on local history and architecture, this class inspired in me a renewed interest in local history. I became aware of the architectural heritage within my own community and I learned to take a closer look at local structures. Some had become so familiar they were nearly invisible.

As a result of this experience, I developed a teaching unit that encouraged students to examine and explore the architecture of our community, the town of Centerville, Iowa. To connect this unit to my United States history curriculum, I scheduled this unit

concurrent with our study of the early 1900s. It didn't focus on the unusual structures alone, but rather provided the opportunity for students to take a closer look at the familiar buildings common to their everyday experience. These buildings, those that we encountered everyday, held within their detail, hints that linked the present to the past. Because students needed to be aware of the historical and cultural resources in their area, this unit used familiar historic structures in the community to develop the critical thinking skills of students.

The first step was to become familiar with the various building types and styles. Any local library or historical society can provide a number of books on this subject. A Field Guide to American Houses by Virginia and Lee McAlester, Clues to American Architecture by Klein and Fogel along with "A Glossary of Old-House Parts" from The Old-House Journal will give the beginning student a great start on learning about building styles. A variety of videos are likely to be available from the local area education agency. Some online sources are also available. The following provide illustrations of various building styles and some also list books that may be helpful in identifying specific architectural styles:

- **THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE AND ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN, 1850-1920**
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award97/mhsdhtml/aladhome.html>
A Library of Congress collection of approximately 2800 lantern slides of American buildings and landscapes constructed between 1850 and 1920. You can view slides of cities, specific buildings, public and private parks and gardens, as well as plans, maps, and models. Special features include a history of Boston's Park System, an exhibit on New York City Parks in Use in 1912, and a history of lanternslides.
- **THE GREAT BUILDINGS COLLECTION (Architectural types)**
<http://www.greatbuildings.com/types.html>
Provides a comprehensive listing of various architectural styles with illustrations classified according to categories such as Building Types, World Architectural Timeline, American Architectural Timeline, Special Places, Construction Types, Climates, Contexts and Architectural Elements.

- **A DIGITAL ARCHIVE OF AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE**
http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/fnart/fa267/contents.html
Developed at Boston College, this Website provides illustrations of various architectural elements organized by the century from the 17th to the 20th. It also provides links to Architects, Building Types, Comparative Materials, Chronology, Location and Styles.

Once students were able to distinguish one architectural feature from another, they practiced identification. First, I went around the neighborhood and took pictures with a digital camera. Then as a class we looked at the pictures in the computer lab identifying important details. After that we walked the neighborhood looking at the same structures. Because students had previously seen these buildings in the slides, they were able to focus on specific details to a greater degree. Each student was provided a map of the neighborhood. As specific sites and styles were identified according to particular architectural details, they were marked on the map. Then we visited the county Recorder's office so students could learn how to conduct research on a building or property's past.

When this research was completed, students individually applied this knowledge by compiling an architectural scrapbook. They started with a list of building types and architectural details. Then they went on an architectural treasure hunt of Centerville and Appanoose County collecting photographs, drawings and other information pertinent to local architecture. This kind of research often led students in unpredictable directions. For example, by looking carefully, students could conclude when electric saws came into use. As materials were placed in scrapbooks, students identified and labeled such details. In many cases, the photographs they collected and drawings they created also illustrated more than one architectural aspect. For example, eclectic Victorian-era houses often combined elements of Romanesque, Gothic and Neo-Classical architectural styles. The development of these local architectural scrapbooks not only extended their knowledge of architecture but also helped them refine their sense of historical perspective. From this experience they developed the skills of historical investigation, analysis, comparison, inquiry and generalization.

Years later they still remember the architectural knowledge they gained and the places in the local community they studied. Former students often return to tell me about the ranch style, bungalow or Italianate house they live in or a particular building they have seen. Years later they are still able to recognize and label the brackets, bargeboard or even the bay window on their house.

This unit is not only educational but also very motivating for students. Each time I introduce it, not only do I learn something new but students begin to investigate an area most have never previously explored. Historic places as local primary sources are a legacy from past generations, a legacy that must be kept alive. It is on this foundation local preservation efforts begin and the classroom is a great place to start.

Biography

Susan McDanel teaches 10th grade U.S. History (1880-present) and 12th grade U.S. Government at Centerville High School. She graduated from Central Missouri State in 1976 and received her master's in Education and Curriculum Development from Drake University in 1992. After 23 years of teaching she continues to develop new learning experiences for her students. This fall she will teach a course on street law with a team member on the local police force.