

The Form in European Architectural
History:

An essay for Arch. History 504 for
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Preamble

I'm going to be writing chronologically here. This is to track not only the subject development, but my own level of progressive comprehension of the subject matter. I am attempting to construct a genealogy of "farm architecture" from the 15th to the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries in Central and Northern Europe. My interest here is to see whether the massive shift in perception and action in and of the world is reflected in the architecture of the peasant majority. This essay will consider the nature of my research, materials and forms with respect to geography, and design with respect to the operative social hierarchies and broader architectural periods (which I had learned later is a nearly impossible approach). *Nicely stated*

Whether in the Italian Renaissance or the French Baroque or Republican France, everybody had to eat, and the relationship between classes and their architecture is of particular interest to me. As popular interest in issues of sustainability are influencing people of every "income bracket", and the demand for architects is possibly at its proportionally lowest point in history (on this continent especially), I see the architect of the sustainable present and future as needing to reintegrate not only the elements of the superficial structural design of architectural fabrics (using appropriate materials local^{ly} expressed in their vernacular dialect), but of the social (construction and consensus) and ecological (energy and materials) structures as well.

Indeed any farmer today can build and design a barn or a house (albeit a relatively uninspired barn or house), and the mass of 'farm' books (citing all manner of construction techniques and historical forms for particular farm types and climates) is a testament to the grand range of skills the farmer is required to know and employ. So what farmer needs an architect? And the same goes for all of history! But the farm is not merely about the 'peasantry', as the squire's farm, stables, farms of monastic orders and dukedoms reveal other levels of class relationships in the historic past which may serve as a lens to visualize the role of architects in the design of the farm. In fact the country estate, as the preferred residence of the elite in Northern Europe (see classnotes re. paris/england and the picturesque), has the farm as an integral component.

So to what extent has the architect, or at least trends in architecture, ^{been} manifested in the design of the farms of the past? And a question growing from the midst of this pile of books arrayed about my laptop; What happened to the breathtaking detail and care taken in the construction of the farm buildings of Europe only two centuries ago? Why are the farm buildings of even early North America so plain?

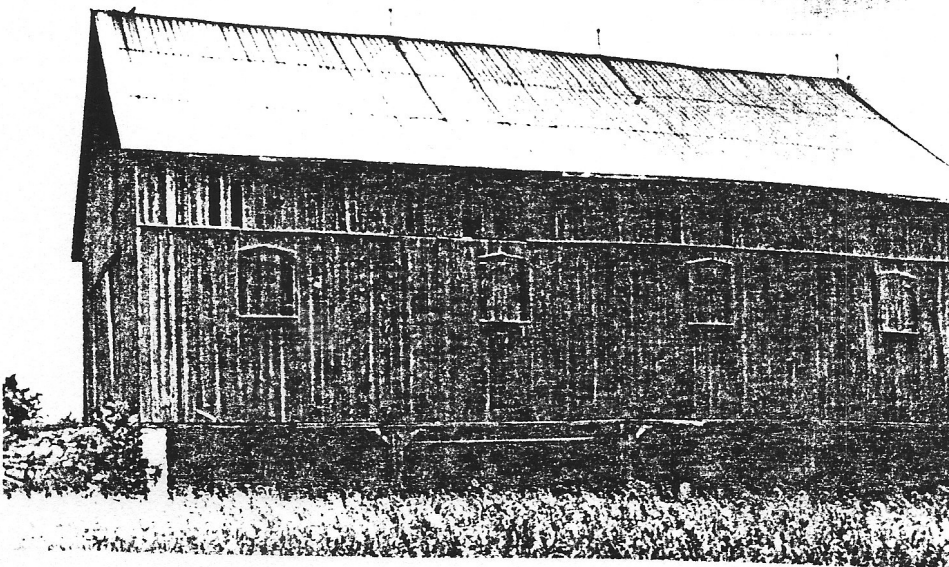


Illustration 1:
The American Barn.

Research

To cover this broad a period of so many distinct regions, where the peasantry was so parochial that dialects from one locality rendered the same base-language with a neighbouring dialect practically incomprehensible, is a largely superficial approach. And although it is a superficial approach, it may provide rewarding insights into numerous general trends which - hopefully - can be woven together with a the graphic narrative and my own personal experience of these places and farm life in Europe.

Interestingly enough, the greater majority of information from the abstracts of periodicals pertaining to historic farm buildings in Central Europe are articles in prestigious architectural and architectural history related magazines, chronicling 15th, 16th, 17th century farm complexes. They are articles on period buildings that have been 'adapted for reuse' as country estates with scant reference to agricultural practices taking place there. They are very likely outrageously expensive properties and are owned by quite sufficiently endowed 'professionals' (firstly to be designed by architects and secondly to be published in journals...).

Relatively early in the search, numerous references surfaced pertaining to the difficulties of research in this field. On the one hand, the buildings are difficult to date, and on the other, few historians until recently had bothered to consider the farm as 'as good a place as any' to concern oneself with. Interest in the study and classification is cited as being a relatively recent, due partly to "the realization of the rate of loss of Historic Farm Buildings" together with the "Postwar interest in HFB's develop(ing) as part of the remarkable increase of interest in agrarian history which started in the 1950's and came to include landscape history and industrial archeology," which are recognised as "...important sources of knowledge and understanding of the past."¹ Another author remarks in his preface to a very thorough book on the Traditional Farm Buildings of Britain, that his 'eyes were opened' to the study of vernacular architecture by his mentor in architecture school - himself a former farmer and architect - and which at the time (1952) was just beginning to be realised. It was then considered that the inclusion of merely domestic buildings in the study of the vernacular was insufficient

Social Context

It is a commonly thrown about statistic that the rural to urban populations have done a major teeter-totter from 90 percent-plus in rural areas *before* the 19th century, to 90 percent in the urban areas in the 20th.

On the historically predominant and long stable teeter side of this phenomenon lies the fact that "At all points between 1400 and 1789, the French peasantry constituted an enormous mass of population: 15 million people in 1500 (nearly three times the total population of contemporary England), and almost 26 million in 1800. Throughout the period they made up about 90% of the French population. France only ceased to be a primarily rural society in the late nineteenth century, well after the onset of the industrial revolution."³

So if only for the sake of visualization, one were to construct a model of the volume of "architectural space" apportioned per capita among 'elite' and 'peasants', the member of the 'elite' would require a volume ten times the size of the 'peasant' for the volumes to come out even - which is plausible enough. But one has also to consider the sheer areal size required of farm

