Learning to Look: The Built Environment as a Resource for History Education

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In my course on the "Era of the American Revolution"—an upper-level course for undergraduates at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst—I want students to see all the ways that the world of the Revolution is palpably with us still, from enduring political debates and strategies of protest to the physical landscapes around us.

A "self-guided field trip" assignment helps address the challenge of getting students out of the classroom when the class is too large and the class period too short for organized field trips, and helps students learn to notice ways in which the built environment, in their hometowns, and their adopted college towns, offers ever-present evidence of earlier moments in U.S. history. In Massachusetts, the state historical commission maintains a database, MACRIS (Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System: http://mhc-macris.net/), that makes available cultural resource survey information from towns across the Commonwealth. It is possible to generate lists of properties that date from a particular period, or conform to a particular style.

And so it was simple for me to append to the syllabus lists of buildings in Amherst, which I have used in varying ways in this course. One year, I provided a list of a dozen dwellings built between 1740 and 1772, and two dozen erected between 1780 and 1800, and asked students to comment on the differences they observed as the heavy structures of the Georgian era gave way to the lighter, brighter feel of the Federal style. In other years, I have provided one set listing buildings from the Federal era, and another in the Greek Revival style, inviting students into the mindset of a young nation striving to establish a new democracy.

While I provide resources that enable them to complete the work in Amherst students may also opt to undertake this exercise in their hometowns, if they want to see how these trends played out on the streets with which they are most familiar. Whether in Amherst or elsewhere, students are asked to choose a set of buildings and do some close observation. What do you notice about the decorative elements of the structure? Do they feel heavy, or light? Is symmetry a value, or is it not? Where are the chimneys, and what can you deduce from their placement about the floorplan? What might that, in turn, imply about changing patterns of life within? As students return to the classroom with short (maybe two-page) papers gathering their observations (the widespread presence of smartphones now makes it simple to ask students to share in discussion photos of their subjects), we get to contemplate together why, say, families in the late eighteenth century traded center chimneys for center halls—a preference with implications in particular for relationships between residents and hired workers. We consider why homeowners in the early nineteenth century embraced the temple fronts, heavy entablatures, and pillared porticos of the Greek Revival. Sometimes, depending on what students have seen, we get to consider dooryards and entryways, noticing how entrances shift from the street to side elevations; what might this suggest about the history of households, and shifting relationships between family and community?

My aim here is to help students understand cultural changes of the Revolutionary era, but the exercise could work equally well in any era: the transition from the upward-reaching, visually complex preferences of Victorian-era architecture to the earth-seeking, simpler forms of the Progressive-era Bungalow, for instance. Students might consider what the popularity, in the early twentieth century, of Colonial Revival styles has to teach us about U.S.

nativism. Even a cursory familiarity with architectural style equips students to deduce the evolution of a community, and the rough period in which various neighborhoods emerged.[52]

There is no end to the historical content that can be explored through the landscape. But also, such forays also advance other more abstract or indirect goals, to help students grasp that an understanding of history helps them understand the world around them, and that if they learn a bit about the past, they are better equipped to understand the present.

[52] Good introductions to the evolution of architectural styles include Virginia McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses: The Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding America's Domestic Architecture* (New York: Knopf; Revised, Expanded edition, 2015), and Clifford Edward Clark, Jr., *The American Family Home, 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986). See also John R. Stilgoe, *Outside Lies Magic: Regaining History and Awareness in Everyday Places* (New York: Walker & Company, 1998).