Minnesota Buildings and Landscapes: A History and Guide

Abstract
This proposal focuses on field research for a book that will be the definitive introduction and guide to Minnesota’s architectural heritage. Each of the four co-authors is responsible for a particular chronological, geographical, or typological selection of the state’s buildings, cities, and landscapes; my portion deals with examples outside the metropolitan areas of the Twin Cities, its suburbs, and Duluth. Specifically, the proposal seeks funding for travel during Spring 2010 to more than 300 buildings throughout the state, assess the accuracy of their National Register nominations, and to execute publishable photographs of them, all to be executed by the grant applicant alone. The book, which is under contract with the University of Minnesota Press, will contribute to the education of our students, the mission of our university, and, above all, to the citizens of Minnesota who are interested in its architectural heritage.

Proposal
1. Category Justification
Category 5 — there is little external funding for a project on Minnesota architectural history. Most of previous research was executed with personal funds. Although its subject differs from my previous publications in both time and geographic location, it still is considered within the purview of an architectural historian. Thus I consider it ineligible for Category 6.

2. Present Status of Knowledge
This proposal for field research funding is central to the completion of a new guide and history to Minnesota’s architecture and landscapes. My co-authors are Jane King Hession, an independent scholar now living in Alexandria, Virginia, Michael Koop of the Minnesota Historical Society, and Katherine Solomonson of the University of Minnesota. Each of the co-authors will be responsible for a particular chronological, geographical, or typological selection of the state’s buildings, cities, and landscapes; my portion will focus on examples beyond the metropolitan areas of the Twin Cities and Duluth.

David Gebhard and Tom Martinson’s A Guide to the Architecture of Minnesota, was published in 1977 by the University of Minnesota Press. At the time of its appearance it was greeted as the only comprehensive guide to the architecture of Minnesota, and it remains so to this date. Although the book served its purpose well, three decades of continuous change have radically altered Minnesota’s architectural patrimony and our understanding of it. To Gebhard and Martinson, style was what characterized buildings, and in the end it became an obsessive and stifling concern. Vernacular structures without a pretense to style were scrupulously avoided. The book’s appearance was in some ways unfortunately premature, appearing as it did before the wave of skyscrapers that radically changed the appearance of downtown Minneapolis and St. Paul. Nor could have its authors foreseen the emergence of Frank Gehry, who designed the Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, as well as a new generation of Minnesota-based architects like Vincent James, Julie Snow, and Joan Soranno.

In the last three decades, much of American architectural history has been rethought and rewritten. In the broadest sense, it is now inclusive rather than exclusive, a sentiment that we share. In 1977 the architectures and settlements of Native Americans did not merit serious consideration by architectural historians. The landscape and urbanism scarcely fared better. Thus we wish to discuss landscape design ranging from the Olmstead-inspired parks and parkways of the Twin Cities to the
rugged earthworks of the pit mines on the iron range. Urbanism is another topic meriting identification all its own, ranging from the monumental, classically inspired forms of the Duluth Civic Center to the distinctive neighborhoods of Minneapolis and St. Paul. The natural partner of urbanism is suburbia, itself a distinctive type with its own monuments (shopping centers, the Mall of America) and form (ring-like pattern of growth). A particular concern of ours is to render comprehensible how architecture in its broadest sense relates to our smaller cities and rural towns. This will be reflected in the organization of our book, which is based on human activity and identifiable geography, and not the four points of the compass as in the 1977 publication. The book that we propose is more than simply an update of the 1977 publication; it is an altogether new and different book in almost every conceivable way.

Another new consideration is whose architecture should we discuss. Nowadays Minnesota is a more populous state, having grown by 34 percent since the 1970 census. In terms of the distribution of its citizens, the state has become less rural and emphatically more suburban. Nor is Minnesota exclusively the preserve of individuals of German or Scandinavian descent. The Latino presence in Minnesota, which dates back to the early decades of the previous century, is now more visible and pronounced in both the Twin Cities and in rural areas. In the last decade of the 20th century, Minnesota’s Asian population nearly doubled in size, a growth rate far in advance of Asians elsewhere in the U.S. The rapid growth of the Hmong population has attracted nationwide attention, but similar expansions can be detected in other groups of South Asian origin. Literally, the face of the architectural consumer is changing, and the focus of that consumer’s ethnicity is only beginning to be recognized.

Who are our intended readers? By virtue of the circumstances of its publication, vocabulary, and insider mentality, the ideal reader of the 1977 publication would have been an architect familiar with the works of his co-professionals and seeking more of the same from the present and past. We again seek something different in our attempt to expand readership.

What differentiates our proposed guidebook from other examples of its genre? The real distinction lies in the breadth of its outlook. Our proposed publication is not about buildings exclusively, and it would fit uncomfortably into the Buildings of the United States series edited by the Society of Architectural Historians. Our decision to include aspects of urban growth, landscape, and preservation in addition to Minnesota’s notable buildings is what makes our state’s architectural heritage so rich.

3. Plan of Work for Spring Semester 2010
The field research will be conducted during a single semester leave in Spring 2010 for which I have prepared an application (if not granted, the research will be completed in Summer 2010). The selection of the semester was dictated by two factors: less disruption to curriculum and teaching responsibilities, and, of course, better weather for travel and photography. This application is built on a foundation of preliminary research that has been ongoing for the last four years. Initially, I was invited by Jane Hession to join her and Michael Koop in the project; we then invited Katherine Solomonson, whose assistance left an indelible mark during the book’s planning stage, to join us as an equal co-author. Since then I have already completed drafts of some one hundred entries and traveled 20,000 miles throughout the state to ascertain the condition or existence of the buildings in Gebhard and Martinson. At the same time I visited buildings on the National Register of Historic Places to determine if they were worthy of inclusion on the base of their architectural, historical, or cultural merit. Serendipity played an important role; sometimes buildings or landscapes were discovered that evaded Gebhard and Martinson or the National Register. Professional development funds from the College of design covered the costs of several overnight trips, but the great majority of travel expenses were paid with personal funds.

The proposed research differs from my earlier work in that selection of buildings will be definitive, their factual information and condition will be checked a last time before publication, and
the new photography will be of publishable quality. It will be composed of seven trips, each four
days in length, to be completed during the second half of the semester. It will be preceded by an
intense perusal of the nominations for all Minnesota properties listed on the National Register of
Historic Places, which are in the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. During this period
the preliminary drafts of entries will be checked, and new individual entries will also be written, both
at home between the trips and on the road.
The trips will roughly correspond to the chapters I plan to write: the river towns of central and SE
Minnesota, the central corridor and its branches, the southwest farmlands, the Red river valley and
northwest border, the central and southern lakes, and the central corridor of cities from Albert Lea to
Saint Cloud. Ideally, southern counties with their warmer weather will be visited first, followed by
northern counties later in the semester. No doubt the climate will cause variations to this schedule
and thus plans will have to be flexible. The goal--the completion of the entries for my portion of the
book--is easily within reach and can be completed by the end of the semester.

Field research is a crucial component of the project. Not only does it ascertain the existence
and condition of buildings, it documents their sites, subsequent transformations, visibility and
accessibility to visitors, and physical contexts--all important criteria for selection. Thus, we can
identify our buildings and landscapes only after the completion of the field research

Sample Entries
Beltrami
Bemidji
Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox
3rd Street and Bemidji Avenue
Cyril M. Dickinson (Paul Bunyan) and Jim Payton (Babe the Blue Ox)
1937
The two colossal statues depict the most important deities in Minnesota mythology. Originally
created to promote the 1937 Winter Carnival in Bemidji, the statues of the fabled lumberjack and his
bovine companion were among the earliest examples in the state of a vogue for colossal roadside
sculpture. After the conclusion of the carnival Paul, who stands almost five feet taller than
Michelangelo’s David, was placed in his present location in a lakefront park. On the other hand,
Babe migrated throughout the nation, the result of attaching his figure to the chassis of a Model T
Ford. At this time he briefly acquired automobile headlights for eyes. The two companions were
finally (and permanently) reunited in Bemidji in 1938. Paul eventually learned to speak Minnesotan
(through a public address system, now removed).

Roseau
Poplar Grove Township
Lodge Boleslav Jablonsky No. 219
Located on an isolated, thinly populated strip of farmland, this small wooden structure resembles the schools or township halls found throughout rural Minnesota. An excellent example of folk architecture, the lodge was constructed entirely by its members. Architecturally, the building demonstrates its own sophistication by its two nested gables, the asymmetrical location of the main entry in an otherwise symmetrical façade (the result of placing a ticket booth within the entry box), and the tiny fragments of the hall’s roof that peek out from behind this false front. Although the hall was conceived as a place where its Czech members could “visit in their own language,” it played a greater role by sustaining their culture and language with music and plays performed on its small stage. Few buildings in Minnesota convey the difficulties of rural life and the determination to overcome them as well as this one does. It still serves its real function: a means of sustaining community when the nearest town is miles away.

Statement on Past Leaves
Insofar as I can remember, I have been granted one single quarter leave and one release from teaching. Neither has been within the last five years. The documentation for these leaves and their dates were lost in a computer failure several years ago. Both leaves contributed to publications. The research coming from the single quarter leave resulted in a talk on the Villa Giulia Drawings in Stockholm at the 1991 SAH Annual Meeting and its subsequent incorporation into my 1993 monograph on Vasari’s architecture. The research from my release from teaching was incorporated into the book on 16th Century Italian architecture that I co-authored with Colin Rowe.

4. Budget Justification
The research proposal is exclusively composed of travel expenses within Minnesota: lodging, meals and incidentals, and travel costs.

5. Need Justification
Neither the College of Design’s Professional Development Funds (which are mainly used as conference funding) nor the Imagine Fund for faculty in the arts, humanities, and design provide sufficient resources to support an ambitious plan of research that must be completed within a single semester leave. A $500 annual travel subvention from the University of Minnesota Press is also insufficient. I have applied to the Imagine Fund for field work in Summer 2009 in areas of the state not covered by this proposal (Arrowhead and Iron Range, part of the central lakes, and SE corner.

6. Items 2-3 Word count: 1635