

Signs, Streets, and Storefronts: A History of Architecture and Graphics along America's Commercial Corridors

By Martin Treu

Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2012

384 pages, 10 x 8 inches, 124 b/w illustrations, 39 color plates, \$49.95 hardcover

Reviewed by Peter Glaser

American signs, streets, and storefronts have had a colorful history—literally. Born of necessity, they have evolved, subject to a roller coaster ride of economic, political, and cultural forces. While some have thrived, many have languished, or have been demolished outright, but such is the nature of history—harrowing at times, life-affirming at others. In *Signs, Streets, and Storefronts*, Martin Treu, an architect and environmental graphic designer, explores the complicated 250-year history of signs and the commercial environment they inhabit with the goal of providing a “comprehensive, insightful examination of an oft-neglected yet major element of the American landscape.”

In his introduction, and to frame the ensuing narrative, Treu identifies the interest groups that have contributed to the sign-structure relationship, namely: the advertiser or business owner, the sign builder, the retail customer (at times a consumer, at others an ardent critic), and the architect. As we discover, the push and pull amongst these players in their temporal contexts would dictate the overall character of the American commercial roadside.

Organized chronologically into six chapters, the first, “The Making of Main Street: Transformation and Invention on the Commercial Frontier, 1700s-1899,” explores the roots of urban commerce as an outgrowth of English influence in the American colonies. In this generally pre-literate age, signs began as paintings depicting icons that conveyed the name of establishments. Presented as post signs, these commercial markers changed to wall or fascia signs by the 1820s and gradually shed their illustrative elements, becoming text-

reliant for communication as literacy rates in America improved. The emergence of dedicated retail architecture marks the middle of this period, which became commonplace in the railroad era with the ready availability of construction materials. As building forms evolved, opportunities for affixing signage fluctuated; for example, the use of expansive sheet glass after the Civil War placed constraints on where signs could be mounted, as did late 19th century ornamental architectural tendencies.

Chapter Two investigates the implications of electricity—specifically, the incandescent bulb—on the sign industry during the first two decades of the 20th century. This era was notable for early attempts at integrating graphics with facade design, a relationship that had until this time become increasingly incompatible. And yet, as Treu argues, two new commercial building types, the movie

theater and the automobile showroom, while particularly suited to the use of illuminated signage, surprisingly reflected little of this inspiration in the long run, their extravagant signs largely unreconciled to the building to which they were attached. This period was also marked by the “Great White Way” phenomenon where small towns, intent on civic pride, vied to connect themselves with the glamour of New York’s Broadway by showering their urban landscapes with lighting. The proliferation of increasingly larger metal box electric signs drew mixed reaction and prompted some progressive efforts at reform.

The Third Chapter, “Visions and Velocity,” covers the years 1918-1928, a period marked by a surge in the influence of media consumption, and the expanding

use of the automobile. Society was inundated by imagery that connoted a taste for the exotic while, as Treu notes, “architecture...was responding to the new speed and space that came with the growing use of the automobile.” This was a time in which architecture was freed from the confines of urban sites to take on vibrant and flamboyant forms. In suburbia, both sign and architecture could stretch and expand; in many cases the commercial building became as

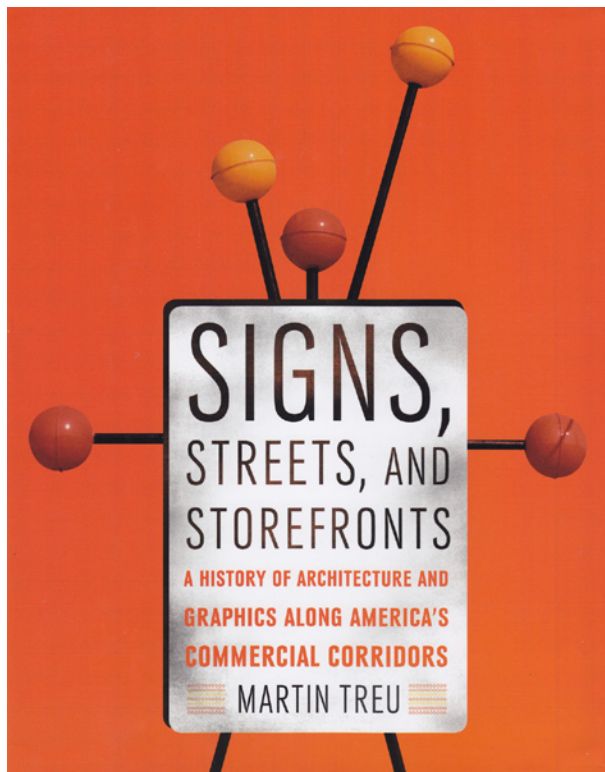
the sign. This trend was not universal as places like Santa Barbara sought an alternate civic identity, one that eschewed prevailing trends, legislating aesthetic goals to preclude what many perceived as eyesores—projecting and roof-mounted signs, for example.

Chapter Four, “Sign as Storefront,” examines the years from 1929 to 1945, notable as a period of sign integration that saw a growing synergy between sign designer and architect, where graphics were realized as part of a full aesthetic composition. Aiding this was the arrival of European Modernism to commercial corridors, facilitated by a growing arsenal of new building materials and technologies—aluminum, metal alloys, structural glass, neon tube lighting—that were well suited to the visions of the streamline age. During the Great Depression, the federal government propped up a decline in construction with its “Modernize Main Street” program, providing insured loans to businesses to revitalize storefronts. Meanwhile, in the suburbs, new three-dimensional commerce in the form of round drive-ins and markets were emerging that employed bold pylon signage. Ultimately, though, as Treu points out, “the full design potential of the decade remained unexplored due to economic restrictions.”

Following World War II, America entered a 20-year period of exuberance, the subject of Chapter Five. As the suburbs took ascendancy, strip architecture and signage blossomed: “Signs reached, lunged, and commanded, with implied kinetic energy in their novel graphic arrangements,” carefully orchestrated to capture the attention of the motorist from afar. The disengagement of sign from architecture was also a feature of the post-war period, the pylon—often sculptural in form—becoming the prime focus of the sign designer, with neon taking hold as the dominant medium, despite the arrival of cheaper alternatives like plastic to the sign maker’s palate. The outlandish manifestations on the strip drew criticism that became a deafening outcry by the early 1960s. The antidote became the planned regional shopping center, a highly regimented form in which the excesses of the strip were purged. Control was akin to censorship, with the result that sign craft declined—acrylic sign boxes took a foothold, and ultimately neon suffered.

In Chapter Six, Treu documents the years from 1965 to 2010, a period he characterizes as

“reinvention,” where downtown sought to find its place in the radically changing commercial landscape. This typically meant the superficial facades or “slipcovers” that had cloaked many storefronts in the 1950s and 1960s were stripped away as communities realized that restored and rehabilitated commercial buildings attracted commerce. Tragically, municipal sign ordinances and short-sighted preservation movements (where the emphasis was on architecture, not the graphics), meant that numerous signs were lost. However, some preservationists realized that graphics could impart value to a jurisdiction’s identity. Treu cites the significant efforts of Peter Phillips’ Planning Advisory Service (PAS) Memo of 1988, and an important Preservation Brief from Michael Auer made to the National Park Service in 1991 which stated that, “Signs speak of the people who run the businesses, shops, and firms. Signs are signatures. They reflect the owner’s tastes and personality. They often reflect the ethnic makeup of a neighborhood and its character.... By giving concrete



details about daily life in a former era, historic signs allow the past to speak to the present in ways that buildings by themselves do not. And multiple surviving historic signs on the same building can indicate several periods in its history or use.” These documents were formal recognition that older signs have immense value, watersheds that championed respect for the past while promoting continuity to the present. With this, Treu indicates, “Signs were not just to be accommodated but protected with specific action.”

Martin Treu has produced an engaging book that does an admirable job of making sense of signs and streetscapes, the fabric of our commercial interactions. He has mined deeply, showcasing both geographical breadth, as well as an impressive range of perspectives and sources that inform a complex and dynamic subject. Detailed endnotes meaningfully extend the text, while a bibliographic essay offers an instructive interpretation of how this important book was written. *While Signs, Streets, and Storefronts* is richly illustrated, I felt it could have benefited from incorporating even more images as there were times when important description lacked a visual reference. Certainly, the book’s generous margins could have accommodated this without detriment to its length or layout.

Like a skilled neon tube bender, Treu has crafted an expressive and colorful history of the commercial corridors of America by illuminating and interpreting meaning from a skein of contexts, players, and influences. While this book helps us understand why signs, streets, and storefronts look the way they do, it also reminds us how diversity and balance—the layering of history—contribute to enrich the commercial landscape in which we interact.

Peter Glaser’s grandparents built and operated the Felix Lunch in Toronto (currently a Starbucks), and for over two decades his great aunt and uncle owned and ran the Dutch Garden Restaurant in Santa Barbara (which carries on under different ownership to this day). Period photographs and family recollections indicate that both establishments had an assortment of carefully considered signs.

Made to Order: The Sheetz Story

By Kenneth Womack
Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2013
Paperback, 128 pp, \$24.99

Reviewed by Harold Aurand Jr.

The first time I ever saw a Sheetz was in Mifflinburg, Pennsylvania. I needed gas. I needed a rest room. The Sheetz was new, and as I pulled in I remember thinking, “there must be something wrong with this place.” The first thing I noticed was that there were 10 gas pumps out in front. That might not be much for a place along the interstate, but, unless you’re going through on a Penn State football weekend, you’re more likely to see Amish buggies than a traffic jam in Mifflinburg. The building also looked wrong. I’d been in a lot of convenience stores attached to gas stations, and usually the building is just big enough to hold the merchandise. The Sheetz had high ceilings like a grocery store. There was a lot of room between the aisles,

and people were ordering food from computer touch screens. I remember walking out wondering just what sort of place Sheetz was.

A few years later Sheetz moved closer, opening a branch right by the campus where I teach. I now have a loyalty card, order off their Made-To-Order menu, and know that my students consider it to be one of the best late-night hangouts. What did we do before we had Sheetz? Kenneth Womack’s book *Made to Order: The Sheetz Story* is the first history of the brand, explaining how they developed their unique blend of gas station, convenience store, and fast service restaurant. Those familiar with Arcadia Publishing know most of their books provide many photos but very little text. Womack, though, is a professor and associate dean, so this time the roles are reversed. He’s provided a good, high-quality history written in a popular style.

Womack describes how Sheetz grew through several steps. It started in 1907 when J.E. Harshbarger opened a dairy in Altoona, Pennsylvania. Using wagons and later trucks, he picked up milk at local farms, processed it, and distributed it door-to-door to the people of central Pennsylvania. As the company grew, Harshbarger brought in his relatives to help, including his son-in-law, Jerry Sheets. (He later changed his name to Sheetz because he thought it looked better.) By the 1940s people were moving from home delivery to buying dairy products in grocery stores. Harshbarger signed an agreement with A & P to supply their local stores.

Ironically, it was the grocery stores that kind of pushed Sheetz in the convenience store direction. Because of Pennsylvania’s Blue Laws, most large groceries had to be closed on Sundays. Shoppers who had forgotten items they needed could be stuck. The solution was a small dairy store, focusing on a limited number of items, primarily dairy, and selling ice cream treats. When Jerry Sheetz’s son, Bob, took over the dairy store in the 1950s he renamed it Sheetz Kwik Shopper, and adopted a new philosophy. To get customers to come in he sold some items at cost. His belief was if he lured them into the store for the specials they might buy something else. The key was to increase traffic. French bread stick baguettes, chipped ham, and the Sunday newspaper were early sales drivers.

As Sheetz added more stores, they began to experiment with adding gas pumps. Trouble, though, was on the horizon. By the 1970s Sheetz realized overly rapid expansion was causing cash flow problems. Worse, as Pennsylvania’s Blue Laws were repealed the Kwik Shoppers began to face competition from regular grocery stores. Finally, the Sheetz business model as a whole was coming apart. The chain had always focused on convenience foods that could be taken home and prepared. Now more people were eating out. The Sheetz family wanted to move to more take-out or even eat-in food. The question was would people want to buy food where they also bought gas?

The answer started to come together after a series of focus groups with customers. They called it “Total Customer Focus,” and it emphasized fast and friendly service with quality products in clean and convenient locations. The result was the Sheetz we know today, with larger sites, more gas pumps, and more parking places. The stores would have clean restrooms, large glass windows, better lighting and more room. Another aspect of Sheetz’s success is how it deals with the general public and their workers. Sheetz’s response in 2004 when pre-sliced tomatoes led to a salmonella outbreak is considered to be a model for the industry. As soon as Sheetz realized there was a problem, they held a press conference and announced they would reimburse every customer for their medical bills and wages lost during recovery. A dedicated call center was set up to handle questions. There was no attempt to deflect blame. In 2012 Sheetz ranked as the 16th best place to work in Pennsylvania, and was listed even higher in Ohio and North Carolina. For a convenience store, those rankings are almost unimaginably high.

Today Sheetz has come a long way from its dairy roots in Altoona. Management prefers to describe their business as a convenience restaurant that sells gas on the side. The success they have had raises questions for other businesses. Would a McDonalds do better if it also sold gas? Will other convenience stores

follow the Sheetz model and expand beyond bare, utilitarian facilities?

Harold Aurand Jr. has been a professor of American Studies and History at Penn State-Schuylkill Campus since 1992. He became interested in commercial archeology and roadside architecture because he always enjoyed it, not as part of his academic life.

The Big Roads: The Untold Story of the Engineers, Visionaries, and Trailblazers Who Created the American Superhighways

By Earl Swift
New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011
375 pages, hardcover, \$27.00

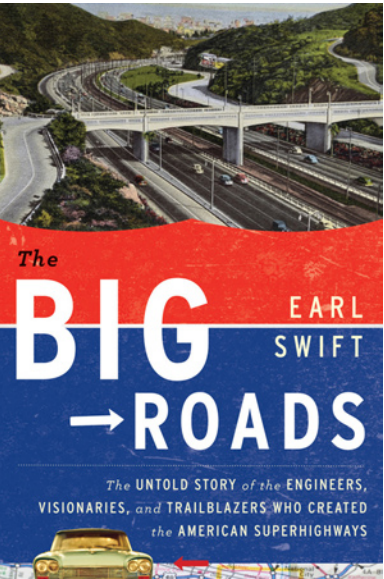
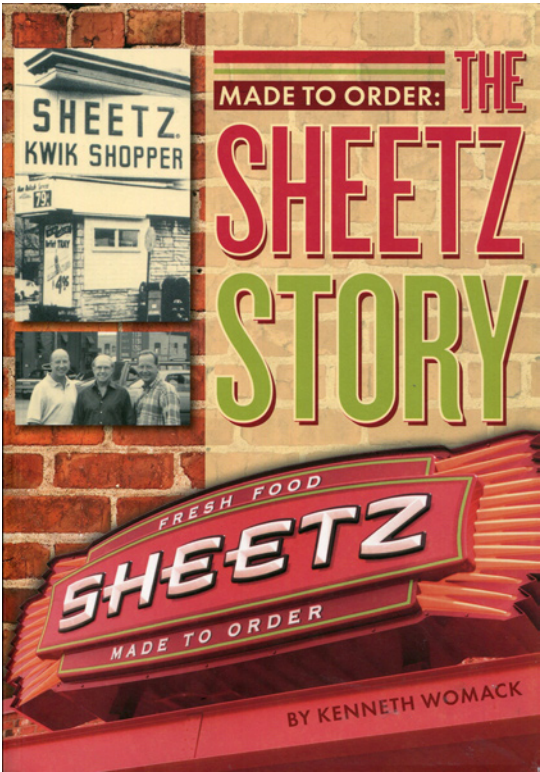
Reviewed by Steve Haack

Late nineteenth-century Americans had three modes for moving produce and passengers. Local and short haul transport took the form of horse-drawn wagons. Long haul transport of goods and passengers used rivers and rails. The history that takes us from dirt roads to our system of several million miles of paved surface including 47,000 miles of interstate highway is fascinating indeed.

It begins with an unlikely protagonist, the bicyclist, and a predictable antagonist, mud. Mud was, of course, hard on horses and wagons as well, but it made bicycling nearly impossible beyond well-maintained city streets. Enter Carl Graham Fisher. As a young man with several bicycle shops in Indianapolis, he understood quite well that the future expansion of his sales would be virtually limitless if roadways were improved. He was an early proponent in the “good roads” movement and his interest continued as he moved from selling bicycles to cars. He would become quite wealthy by investing in the Prest-O-Lite headlamp, which used compressed acetylene gas to provide the first practical headlight for automobiles. Fisher used his wealth and sales acumen to bring national attention to the need

for improving road surfaces. Automobile manufacturers and dealers, petroleum companies, and the tire industry soon joined the effort.

As America entered the 1910s, it was clear that the automobile was no longer a toy for the rich. Sales of trucks as well as cars grew exponentially and the vehicles were becoming an important element in moving products, even if it was just from the point of manufacturing to the rail lines. It was becoming clear that road quality had an enormous and growing impact on American life. A study of short stretches of “object lesson” roads, later known as “seed highways,” showed that an improved road surface chopped the cost of moving freight in half and increased rural school attendance by a third. Such numbers were



hard to argue with. The federal government knew it had to act. States were encouraged to build highways among their major hubs of population and industry with matching funds from Washington, D.C. In 1914, the American Association of State Highway Officials was born, one of its goals being to connect each state’s highways with those of surrounding states, encouraging interstate commerce and tourism.

In most cases, the process of locating state highways was chaotic with towns competing for them as they had for railroad lines in the century previous. State highways remained for some time a mishmash of isolated stretches running hither and yon with no comprehensive plan. The Bureau for Public Roads was created and, in 1919, a quiet, stern young engineer from Iowa named Thomas Harris MacDonald took the helm. MacDonald was a numbers man. He loved data. From the comparative economics of cutting roads through hills versus going around them, to the period of time a car spent in the oncoming lane when passing, to the performance of various road surfaces in various climates under various loads, he loved data and it drove all his decisions. He would hold his office until 1953. Under his direction, the system began to take form.

Needless to say, the logistics were challenging. The engineers were always chasing a moving target. No matter how well they designed and built, the burgeoning number of vehicles on the road tested their capacity. The population was growing, the standard of living was increasing, and cars were becoming cheaper. Like a forest fire creating its own weather, highways brought mobility, which spread the population, which required more highways. Many urban environments became hopelessly congested. The beltway was offered as a solution. Instead of running traffic through the middle of an urban area, why not divert it around the city’s periphery? However, as soon as the beltway was built, businesses crowded its shoulders offering the driver gas, food, lodging, attractions, and any kind of product imaginable. All of these businesses needed access drives, slowing traffic and increasing danger. Soon, the beltway itself was a congested mess. Something had to be done.

For long distance travel, the “townless highway” emerged: wide, smooth, divided highways with no on-grade intersections and only large-radius curves. Junctions with other major highways would take the form of cloverleaf interchanges where incoming traffic would merge seamlessly. Exits would take the traveler off to nearby towns and cities. Though this system served the cross-country traveler well, MacDonald understood that the vast majority of traffic was local and most construction continued to serve population centers. It was the interfacing of the highways with the urban centers that remained troublesome.

The post-war building boom made the problem of urban traffic control worse. Thousands of suburbs sprouted up, their inhabitants making daily trips into the city and back. The relentless construction to accommodate the automobile was starting to get some pushback. Sociologists, urban designers, and architects were voicing complaints, with writer Lewis Mumford leading the pack. He understood

quite well that technology was a two-way proposition. As surely as we constructed our environment, our environment turned around to reconstruct us. Yes, the automobile was convenient and economically necessary. It also split neighborhoods, rendered large expanses hostile to pedestrian traffic, belched out tons of toxic fumes, and produced a persistent racket. No city planning could proceed without addressing how it would accommodate motor vehicles. The slave had become the master. Moving and parking cars topped the list of headaches in most large cities.

Then the social upheaval of the 1960s arrived. An odd confluence of influences came to bear upon the issue of efficiently moving people around. The Vietnam War brought into question the notion that the government always knew what was right and the Civil Rights movement made concerned parties more prone to vocalize their displeasure. This was especially true with residents of the inner cities which were often targeted for expressway construction because land values there were low. The environmental movement was adding its perspective to the problem as well. Many technocrats did not know what to make of this. They had dedicated their lives to the safety and convenience of the American driver and their efforts were now held in scorn. Francis Cutler Turner, head of the Federal Highway Administration, could make sense of it in only one way. He wrote, “It is an age of hippies, of pot, of LSD, of dropouts, of teachers’ strikes, of race riots, of looting. It is a period of the breakup of the home, the abandonment of morals, or at least the adoption of a different moral code than we have known and respected for centuries. In a time when even religion is questioned, then it is understandable that the value of the highway program should be questioned, too.” He would soften this appraisal with time, but the problem of urban traffic control would remain contentious.

We do, in fact, owe the people who designed and constructed our system of roads a debt of gratitude. If we currently suffered the same rate of highway fatalities, in terms of deaths per miles traveled, that we did in the early 1920s, we would lose 650,000 citizens every year to traffic accidents; the equivalent of America’s losses from its four years of Civil War.

Earl Swift has written an engaging, enlightening account of the history of the American highway system. Such a story, embedded as it is in legislative initiatives and squabbles over finances and taxation threatens to be boring, but Swift keeps the narrative well-paced and interspersed with interesting anecdotes about the people who created the system and those who took advantage of it. The inclusion of more maps would have made some of the text easier to follow, but the book is a fine addition to the library of anyone interested in the history of transportation in America.

Steve Haack is an independent researcher whose current projects involve the history of the West. He and his wife live in Lincoln, Nebraska, and enjoy exploring back roads and small towns with their two Standard Poodles.

Corn Palaces and Butter Queens: A History of Crop Art and Dairy Sculpture

By Pamela H. Simpson

University of Minnesota Press

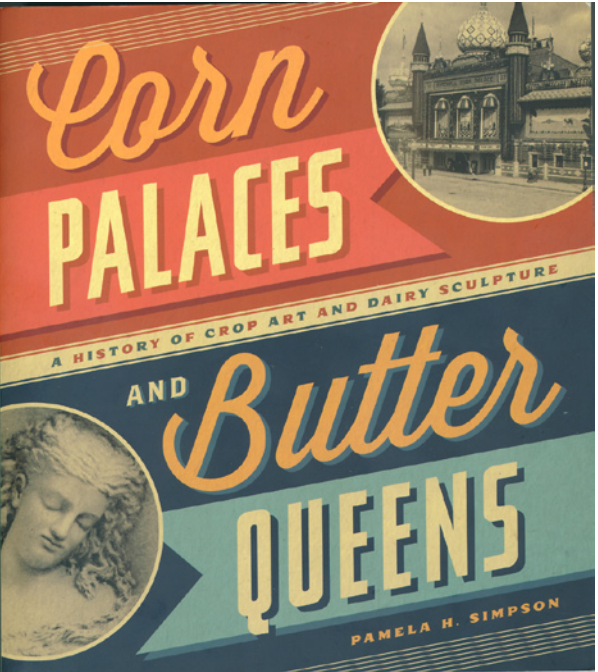
284 pages, paperback, \$29.95

Reviewed by Erika Nelson

Giant corn palaces and roadside attractions. Embellished vehicles and exaggerated postcards. Portraits created in edible media. These are a few of my favorite things ... which inexorably drew me to the book, *Corn Palaces and Butter Queens: A History of Crop Art and Dairy Sculpture*. This is the first comprehensive look at two marginalized forms of expression common throughout the Plains states in the last part of the 19th and early part of the 20th century: the creation of sculptures out of butter, and the display of agricultural products in architectural construction. Pamela Simpson explores the background, history, development, and meaning of corn palaces, crop art, and butter sculpture from 1870 to 1930, as well as the cultural context of the subjects through the lenses of post-Civil War recovery, the Gilded Age, the Progressive Era, and the Great Depression.

Over a decade of research went into this investigation, drawing from a broad range of source material, and overlapping into other areas of interest including railroads shaping the West, histories of World’s Fairs and/or Expositions, and State Fairs. These examinations all contribute to a well-rounded look at the development of these oft-overlooked expressions of artistry. The subject of food art was treated as a quirk or an oddity in the former well-trodden research paths, despite the intricacies involved in the construction of these displays, and their popularity at fairs.

“Corn palaces, crop art, and butter sculpture, if considered at all in the literature on fairs and festivals, have usually been presented as humorous novelties, fun and folksy but not really worth serious consideration,” Simpson writes. This hole in the cultural record spurred her to dig deeper, seeking out additional information to help fill in the story, and create a fairly complete timeline of development. For her research, Simpson utilized period newspapers, government reports, and historical collections across the Midwest and archival and photographic collections in libraries in the US, Canada, and Britain. She notes that “another surprisingly helpful source was eBay [where she obtained] postcards, advertising cards, and stereo views that now illustrate this volume.”



This attention, devotion, and endless curiosity about her subject resulted in a resource that ties the subjects in to the very fiber (and grain, and fruit) of the Plains.

Originating in trophy displays, transitioning to industrial fairs, the Cereal Architecture tale is told through biographies of early crop art pioneers, including Henry Worrall, a master designer responsible for creating the Kansas Building display of agricultural prowess at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876. Local harvest festivals and similar agricultural celebrations grew (ha!) into corn palaces, some of the most fantastic from Sioux City, an Iowa town that annually built palaces that covered many blocks, from 1877 through 1891. These traditions faded somewhat in modern times, but are still evidenced in the permanent Corn Palace structure in Mitchell, South Dakota created in 1921.

Butter sculptures, still a staple of State Fairs across the heartlandl, had their origins in the work of Caroline Shawk Brooks. Her exhibit of a bas-relief portrait of “Dreaming Iolanthe,” made from butter and chilled by bowls of ice, at the Women’s Building at the 1876 Centennial Exposition churned the popularization of the butter displays (as well as the development and refinement of modern refrigeration techniques) in exhibitions and dairy conferences across the continent.

Most exhibition-based crop architecture displays were sponsored by the railroads to promote Western expansion. Butter sculptures, too, were products of industry, with dairy companies providing the raw material for production of the sculptures, as well as popularizing the displays through advertising cards. The cards extolling the purity of

the dairy industry (and its superiority over that dreaded substitute, oleomargarine) served another role by becoming inadvertently a primary source for Simpson’s research. “These ephemeral items often provided names of artists who had been forgotten to history, along with subjects, dates, sponsors, and locations that helped build a chronology.” Ephemera produced by the railroads in conjunction with their agricultural displays did the same, as well as illustrating the boosterism of that era that drove Westward expansion.

Simpson wraps up her research with a look at the implications for today in the continuation of the traditions (butter sculptures are still a part of State Fairs) but also in the shift in attitudes of the American public towards sustainability. These displays of abundance create waste and an agricultural exhibition of the magnitude of the Exposition era offerings would, today, be met with questions of utilizing food for art.

Corn palaces and butter queens are related, yet distinctly separate topics. In the structure of the book, it sometimes seemed as if two research projects were forcibly interleaved, chapter by chapter. At first distracting, this back and forth narrative worked once the groundwork was laid as ties and overlapping themes started to emerge. The publication expanded my appreciation for the connections that occur and/or emerge when one delves deeply into subjects that have been overlooked by other researchers.

The book reads as a resource, sometimes a little too academically, with the introduction laying out the concepts presented and examined through the rest of the work, and chapters following a pretty rigid format. While the presentation structure is sometimes a little too evident, it does make for a very functional resource, set up for ease of information retrieval. That being said, it's an engaging narrative, with insightful connections to the happenings of the times providing the cultural context that not only informed, but was illustrated by these buttery tableaus and architecturally based displays of abundance.

The "Notes" section also provides an amazing compilation of resources, acting as a conduit for further investigation. These 30 pages alone are a treasure, and again reflect the amazing journey that research often takes authors on in the creation of a new anthology of knowledge.

One major regrettable component of this work is the untimely passing of the author. With such a wealth of history and information, such a breadth of worlds that funnel through the topics of butter sculpture and cereal architecture, I often found myself wondering what other obsessions she had, what other amazing circuits and webs of connections she'd uncovered and unraveled in her explorations, what other niches Pamela Simpson would have written in the next ten years....

All in all, the book is an incredibly well-crafted look

at two ephemeral forms of food-based art-making. Pamela Simpson has assembled an amazing resource for subjects that otherwise would have remained undocumented. As Simpson writes, "Piece by piece, the elements fit together to form a story that, to date, has never been fully told."

Erika Nelson is an independent artist and educator, exploring the fringes of art and culture as experienced on the back roads and offbeat roadside attractions that dot the American landscape. She travels the country in a permanently altered Art Car, and exhibits the World's Largest Collection of the World's Smallest Versions of the World's Largest Things in a portable Sideshow Extravaganza. ●

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