In 1894 the Tatler described how one cakewalk opened with a ‘buck dance’ performed by waiters and bellmen from all three of Flagler’s hotels in St. Augustine” (125–26).

In the detailed case studies, Braden demonstrates how these strategies were put into play within the architectural and management structures of the hotels. From the Spanish Renaissance style of Carrère & Hastings’ Hotel Ponce de Leon (1888) in St. Augustine to the Georgian Revival of the firm’s Royal Poinciana in Palm Beach (1894)—both of which were built by Flagler—to Plant’s L oorish Revival Tampa Bay Hotel (1898–91) by New York architect John A. V. ood, the Florida resort hotels developed and refined a winning formula that combined architectural fantasy with the latest in modern technology and a sure-fire appeal to their clients’ sense of superiority. References to historical European prototypes—signaled by palat- tial scale, expensive materials and fur- nishings, lavish ornament, and high staff-guest ratios—offered testimony to the arrival of civilization in this remote, treeless, and decidedly provincial world, and, not coincidentally, sealed the suc- cess of these ventures.

Braden goes to great lengths to unravel the precise meanings of the dis- parate elements that frequently appeared in a single project (sentences like “The American Renaissance and Beaux-Arts classicism helped inspire the popularity of the neo-Georgian aspect of the Colonial Revival” [211] unhappily reveal the amount of heavy lifting that confronts any historian intent on analyzing the sources of these pastiche designs), but her most significant contribution lies in revealing how skillfully architecture was combined with capital investment, improved transportation, ambition, and a large dose of theatricality to create a new building type and a new cultural environment. In the fantasy world of the late-nineteenth-century Florida resort, guests marveled over baskets of oranges, specially designed entrances and gal- leries for “ladies,” in-room intercoms (or “annunciators”), modern refrigerators, electric lights and nighttime illumina- tions, cavernous Roman-style swimming pools, and didactic exhibitions (such as might be found at the Tampa Bay Casino and Exhibition Building of 1896 by Mil- lar and Kennard, a local Florida firm) as they partook of the truly modern experi- ence of conspicuous leisure in fin-de-siècle American style. Like the Renaissance villa or the suburban ranch house, the Florida resort hotel came of age at a precise moment in time; like them, it is a building type invented to meet the complementary needs of develop- ers, architects, workers, and clients. Braden’s book establishes a firm founda- tion for future research and a model on which students of this fascinating topic can draw.

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Ronald E. Schmitt
Sullivanesque: Urban Architecture and Ornamentation

Ronald Schmitt defines his subject with admirable clarity (bless him) in his first paragraph: “SULLIVANESQUE ARCHITECTURE was based on an aesthetic derived from the designs of Louis H. Sullivan (1856–1924) and adapted to mass production” (1). He claims it was a genre distinct from the Chicago or Prairie styles, a striking ver- nacular evident chiefly in terra-cotta shopping-street façades of the teens and twenties common throughout the Mid- west. In this publication, he documents the phenomenon in its numerous if sometimes unglamorous manifestations; does the hard work of explaining mass building production in the broad Chicago hinterland through the identifi- cation and documentation of fabricators, developers, and local designers; and pro- vides a detailed history of the Midland Terra Cotta Company. The book ends with a thirty-two-page inventory of examples, state by state. Both Sullivan himself and contemporaneous admirers repeatedly insisted that he was merely setting an example to be followed; in Dwight Perkins’s words, “He is not the only Sullivan.” Schmitt’s book enables us to follow out one possible result—a Sullivan vernacular. This book will be profoundly important for preservation in the Midwest.

The author’s ambition is to give a history to miles of decent Midwestern shops and apartment buildings—street- front architecture—that emerged almost a century ago and are now threatened with demolition as a result of the effects of the automobile and shopping mall. Schmitt not only decries the negative social consequences of this pattern, but sees these old neighborhood streets as valuable and beautiful in their own right. Many of us are fascinated by the hints of imagination occasionally glimpsed in their architecture—hoping to discover some “mute Milton” or Michelangelo of the terra-cotta shop-front. Whole neighborhood streets may be saved because of the interest that Schmitt’s book may arouse, in the same way that renewed appreciation of Art Deco res- cued similar urban spaces in the South- west. As Sigfried Giedion long ago made us respect Seth Thomas clocks, so Schmitt makes us value these terra-cotta fronts. Bravo! Schmitt’s focus on what appears to be the most exotic and fasci- nating passages on these façades—“the Sullivanesque”—brings out these streets’ most simple claim for preservation—that they were works of sincerity and even, perhaps, genius.

The problem with the book, for me, lies in two areas: Schmitt’s definition of what “the Sullivanesque” might be, and the impact this work might have on Midwestern urban architectural preser- vation. The buildings caught in his net are those bearing terra-cotta ornament imitating Sullivan design—it is “Sulli- vanesque” if it looks like Sullivan, liter- ally. Although admirable in its clarity, the definition is too simple, for a variety of reasons. Although Schmitt often extends his purview beyond street façades, the fronts are clearly his focus and he has
trouble integrating into his argument house design, buildings where ornament is absent (like those of the Sullivan student Irving Gill), the work of Sullivan’s early collaborators (John Edelmann and Louis J. Millet), or—and this is most important considering Schmitt’s theme—terra-cotta street façades appearing Gothic, classical, or in some original style not immediately derivable from Sullivan’s ornament. He also has little of importance to say about Frank Lloyd Wright.

Schmitt states in his first paragraph:

“It [the “Sullivanesque”] successfully integrated ‘high art’ with functional construction. Although it diluted the high art of Sullivan, the Sullivanesque nevertheless retained a surprising vitality. The style was embraced by architects and speculative developers and gained a popular, mostly regional appeal that lingered for decades. The gap between the refined art of the originator and the ‘low art’ of the imitators was relatively narrow. The adoption of the Sullivanesque style generally improved the design caliber of the speculative building and the resulting urban fabric” (1). Here emerges the eternal point of friction in the discussion of vernacular and “high” design: how much each owes the other and how this might be determined.

Schmitt’s difficulty in finding a more elastic definition of his subject, “the Sullivanesque,” lies in his assumption that it is a static style rather than an active, evolving practice. This obliges him to privilege the vernacular, in which there is little original thought but instead merely cannibalization of Sullivan’s paradigms, as the author scrupulously documents. Cannibalization is not what Sullivan himself urged in his talks before the Chicago Architectural Club, in his Kindergarten Chats, or in his System of Architectural Ornament. On the contrary, what he made clear was that he was presenting a practice of geometric elaboration so strong and rich in its internal relationships that it would push all received memories of historical architecture out of the student’s mind and free him (always a “him” for Sullivan) to build form freely. Although the examples he presented in his System at the end of his life look like building decoration (but at what scale? for what purpose? located where on the façade?), the “powers” they were to “develop” were equally applicable to any architectural problem on any scale—house plan, façade motif, or even city plan, as at Canberra.

If Sullivan’s ornament was indeed a practice rather than a style, then a study of its generalization should have broader parameters than those of this book. First, it should embrace the compositional approaches of Sullivan’s contemporaries, whether framed by the same conceptions as those of his first collaborators Edelmann and Millet, or produced by his competitors, notably John Wellborn Root, or again conceived by his more original admirers like Claude Bragdon, Emil Lorch, and Irving K. Pond—or even Alfred Shaw in his slavish if unsuccessful reproduction of the auditorium in the Chicago Civic Opera building—not to mention Wright. To this Schmitt might reply that his objective is to distinguish the “Sullivanesque” from the Chicago school of Root and the Prairie school of Wright and his studio helpers, but here is the crux of the distinction between style and practice. Sullivan participated in all three of these modern categories, and the geometric practices he explored underlie all of them. Such compartments are a modern imposition; they are not historically based or watertight. They are similar practices directed to the same end, the escape from tradition into a functionalist progressivism. To insist on considering only one of them is, again, to confine oneself only to motifs.

A broader definition of Sullivan’s enterprise might permit deeper discourse, both in terms of Sullivan’s origins in traditional European practices and in relation to his mobilization of them to create a freer architecture—one sensitive to function and society—at the edge of civilization in Chicago. I do think that the vernacular counts here, manifest in houses and shopping streets. Ingenuity and originality in such con-texts is much of what is interesting about Chicago. Yet this is not simply a matter of motifs but one of a larger whole, which Schmitt’s book does not really address.

And, in my opinion, a price is paid: it is the street as an entity, as a place in which to walk and talk, that matters, not just certain façades, distinct from others, which for their anomalous character might all the more quickly be demolished. It is the spaces that they define that count. Nor are the “Sullivanesque” façades necessarily better than the Gothic or Greek (or Egyptian or just plain “invented”) ones—this book tells us nothing about the alternatives offered in the Midland Terra Cotta Company’s catalogues. A stroll with friends on Devon Avenue makes it clear that each may have his or her favorite, his or her argument for why one or another is admirable, his or her glimpse of genius. The implication of this volume is that individual examples of a style should be valued, not the vernacular landscape of which they are an integral part. There is a tremendous amount of important work presented here, but in his attempt to meet the two objectives of exploring the impact of Sullivan’s design techniques and telling the story of the noteworthy terra-cotta-clad neighborhood street front, Schmitt shortchanges both. Nevertheless, he has pushed research several steps further.

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Notes
1. Dwight Perkins quoted in Inland Architect and News Record 33, no. 5 (June 1899), 43.
2. Philippe Boulou has written extensively on this basic distinction, especially in his Introduction à l’architecture (Paris, 1992), taking off from Michel Foucault’s Les Mots et les choses (Paris, 1966).