Scholars of everyday buildings are notorious for one of two missteps. Some spend so much energy on the minutia of a singular site that they fail to connect that site to prevailing historical narratives and in so doing miss the opportunity to challenge and reshape those narratives. Others spend so much time recording and establishing building typologies that they seem not to explore what those typologies tell us about the human experience. In his well-illustrated book on eighteenth-century outbuildings, Michael Olmert falls victim to neither tendency. Olmert—a specialist in English literature and winner of three Emmy Awards—rightly claims in his introduction that the book’s focus is “neither connoisseurship nor aesthetics” (1). In eight chapters, each dedicated to a different eighteenth-century outbuilding type, he provides a general introduction to the common architectural forms and features associated with each type and then animates them by exploring in rich detail the ways these buildings were stages and sometimes tools for the execution of particular tasks essential to everyday life in the eighteenth century. Drawing from rather obvious sources like period documents, archaeology, and the buildings themselves, but also from contemporary prints and early modern literature, Olmert identifies kitchens, laundries, smokehouses, dairies, privies, offices, dovecotes, and icehouses as sites of activity and work. In this book, early outbuildings are endlessly interesting.

Olmert opens with a chapter on kitchens. Seventeenth-century kitchens in England and in the larger houses in her Southern American colonies were often in cellars. Yet, by the opening decades of the next century, elite Southern colonials removed their kitchens to a rear work yard. Olmert uses this shift to frame the broader emergence of differentiated work buildings and reminds us that Dell Upton, Fraser Neiman, and others have connected this physical change with the rising dependence on the labor of enslaved Africans. “[S]ervitude and social separation . . . utterly transform the appearance and placement of kitchens in the Anglo-American South” (34). As a result, the emergence of the village of outbuildings often beside or behind a major eighteenth-century dwelling house is a largely Southern phenomenon. Olmert then turns his attention to laundries and here he offers an engaging social and material history of work. Period documents, but also paintings, print culture, and even lines from Shakespeare begin to populate these spaces with artifacts of work, processes, and people. Readers learn about the differences between cleaning linen and silk. Ash, lye, and tallow become soap. In the discussion of smokehouses, pigs are slaughtered, hams and other cuts are bled, then salted, then smoked. But the most engaging and entertaining chapter is that on the privy. The prevalence of two-, three-, even four-seaters near many great plantation houses reminds us that our own sense of privacy is culturally constructed. Early privies presumed simultaneous users, and they were not segregated by gender. Waste-removal arches on the rear of privies immediately bring to mind those called to the tasks of cleaning. The absence of deep privy pits in Williamsburg and other urban sites points to the common use of chamber pots; Hogarth prints and phosphate levels in archaeological soil sampling make clear that these were often emptied out the nearest window. From the cleanliness required in the dairy to the filth of the privy, Olmert’s chapters bring the realities of these spaces to life.

While the book is and will be an important source for information on these buildings, scholarly readers will quickly note that Olmert’s book is geared first to a popular audience. In a manner akin to Henry Glassie’s glossy Vernacular Architecture, the author provides no footnotes, offering instead a substantial “Notes and Further Readings” section at the end of each chapter. While these provide a welcome survey of useful sources, readers must dig to find specific citations for quotations and references in the text. In the manner of his award-winning documentaries on dinosaurs, Olmert also makes it clear that he depended heavily on the work of specialists in the field of early American architectural history. The voices of Carl Lounsbury, Willie Graham, and especially Ed Chappell—all architectural historians working for Colonial Williamsburg Foundation—are scattered throughout the notes and on occasion even in the text. Since his primary sources are also from that site, the book has a particular focus on Williamsburg. But it also means that the buildings are rarely situated in a broader American context. As an aside, readers will also wonder how Williamsburg and its environs curiously found its way into the mid-Atlantic rather than its traditional home in the South. Olmert’s attention to outbuildings in Virginia reinforces the fact that the complex proliferation of outbuildings is a story largely centered in the South.

There are some aspects of the book that are troubling. On multiple occasions, the early medieval monastic plan of St. Gall—almost a millennium earlier than colonial Williamsburg—is enlisted as a precursor to various service spaces in eighteenth-century America. The introduction includes evocative quotes of a woman reminiscing about outbuildings on a plantation . . . written in 1896. Furthermore, Olmert uses the voices of Williamsburg’s own costumed interpreters to speak to the experience of certain chores in the eighteenth century. To what extent can the voice of a modern interpreter be used instead of an admittedly absent voice from the past? Embracing the mythology of the unchanging vernacular, the author’s use of later nineteenth- and twentieth-century buildings as deriving from medieval forms pays scant attention to the realities of change over time. His free use of evocative source material—he is a fan of Shakespeare—means that loosely related quotes frequently interrupt the narrative. In some instances these are evidence to a point, but often not. And, while the photography is strong, specialists will bemoan the absence of floor plans. But probably most problematic are Olmert’s two appendices, dedicated to octagons and hexagons,
respectively. Reminding readers of the religious significance of these shapes in the Christian tradition—baptismal fonts are frequently octagonal and pulpits hexagonal—Olmert argues uncritically that "octagons were possibly satisfying, and may still be, because of some lingering atavistic association with the eternal number eight," and "even the most nominally secular of hexagons have some doctrinal heft"(256, 261). The octagonal privy by extension is a reminder of things sacred? Without a far richer contextual analysis and a more sophisticated historical argument, these assertions fall flat.

Reservations aside, Olmert’s book is an excellent companion to John Michael Vlach’s *Back of the Big House*. If Vlach’s work still stands as the definitive survey of the range and variation of nineteenth-century Southern outbuildings, Olmert’s works hard to engage social history by populating earlier outbuildings with artifacts, processes, and human experience. It is a delightful read and an essential introduction for any serious student of early Southern outbuildings.

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