

*Victorian Architecture of Iowa*, by William Plymat, Jr. Des Moines: Elephant's Eye Inc., P.O. Box 396, 1976. Paperback, \$10.95.

"Victorian Homes and Store Fronts of Iowa," might be a more appropriate title for William Plymat, Jr.'s book, *Victorian Architecture of Iowa*. The title promises to reveal examples of railroad stations, firehouses, churches, school buildings and courthouses, as well as the best of Iowa private residences, but fails to live up to such expectations. The book comprises 137 black and white photographs of store fronts and homes, with only a token church window and one courthouse dome. Nearly two thirds of the photo essay consists of private Iowa residences. It covers the period between the mid-1800s and 1900, when Iowa progressed from wilderness, to frontier, to settled communities.

Plymat's photographs attest to his love of antique architecture. He has arbitrarily searched 481 Iowa towns over a four-month period, shooting seventy-five rolls of film (and supposedly wearing out parts of his already worn-out Dodge van), in order that we, the viewers, might enjoy some of the beauty found in Iowa's architecture.

*The Victorian Architecture of Iowa* is filled with artistic expressions of quite unusual flair. The cover features Terrace Hill, Des Moines' finest Victorian jewel, proudly displayed in bold dark and light shadows. Chiaroscuro is Plymat's chief style, since he uses no color. Due to the obvious lack of color and often texture, the book is distinctly factual, crisp and sometimes even cold. The photos, and the way they are presented, offer hardly a hint of the romantic nostalgia or quaintness commonly revealed in these stalwart structures. Instead of a sense of height, width or breadth, these magnificent structures appear flattened and trimmed into abstractions of squares, rectangles and triangles.

Admittedly, Plymat has chosen only visually appealing architecture rather than that which is historically significant. Still, one wonders why three homes—Iowa's first territorial

Governor Robert Lucas' home in Iowa City; the General Grenville M. Dodge home in Council Bluffs; and the William Larabee home, Montauk, in Clermont—have been omitted from the survey.

The most informative portion of the book is the forword. Its frankness and easily understood explanations and observations illuminate and complement the text and photographs. However, the chapter headings are ambiguous and/or not appropriate to the content—"Wigwams and Palaces"; "Shanties and Chateaux"; "Cottages and Cathedrals" and "Main Streets and Town Squares" suggest a wider range than actually exists.

A book similar in size, shape, and content written by Edmund V. Gillon Jr. and Clay Lancaster, titled *Victorian Houses—A Treasury of Lesser-Known Examples*, makes an interesting comparison with Plymat's. *Victorian Houses* contains full-page photographs of Victorian homes accompanied by brief explanations. Although Plymat's book is unsurpassed in visual delight, the photos often have very little, if any, explanations. Because they have been cropped extensively, it is impossible to know their location. The most unfortunate difference between the two books, however, is price. Plymat's is nearly thrice the latter.

It is a commonly held notion that Victorian architecture exhibits a multitude of sins. Such decorative features as window pediments, brackets, cupolas, cornice pieces and false front facades have been indelibly imprinted on the Gilded Age, when architecture expressed a sense of opulence and self-indulgence. It is fortunate, however, that some of Iowa's architectural heritage has been preserved for posterity.

Plymat has accomplished what he set out to do. As he stated, "It was decided at the outset to ignore the histories of individual buildings and to concentrate on collecting good photographs. The stories these buildings tell . . . is visual, and this is the message offered here."

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