

Temples of Democracy: The State Capitols of the U.S.A., by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and William Seale. New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976. pp. x, 333. Illustrations and index. \$29.95.

Like its subject matter, this book is a monumental achievement. It is an awesome assembly of facts, figures, and trivia woven into the story (or stories) of the building of our fifty state capitols. The result is something to be gazed upon—perhaps more appropriately by school children or Sunday browsers than by serious scholars.

This exhaustive survey discusses each state capitol—sometimes in several pages, sometimes in but a few sentences—and illustrates the discussion with at least one photograph or drawing of each capitol. The arrangement is roughly chronological, though an attempt is made to unify the whole by focusing on the rise of the architectural symbols of American democracy (the dome, rotunda, colonnaded portico, and balanced wings).

The prose is quite readable, with humorous anecdotes punctuating the technical architectural descriptions. But the narrative of the building of the capitols—from the announcement of the design contest through the bickering among state officials, architects, and builders to the laying of the cornerstone—becomes tiresome in its sameness.

The scope of the work permits the authors little time for reflecting on the symbols they discuss, though they are more successful at maintaining a broad perspective than one might expect. Their attempts at smoothing the transition from a discussion of one capitol to the next are commendable.

Each reader will no doubt gravitate to the discussion of his or her own state capitol. If the authors' discussions of the Iowa capitols are representative, they are a bit too free with the historical facts. In the section on the Old Capitol at Iowa City, for example, they portray John Rague as the noble architect whose inability to get along with the ruthless businessman Chauncey Swan causes the architect's early withdrawal from the project. In fact, Swan was the one who hired Rague, and it is more likely that his withdrawal was due to the restrictions imposed by the legislature than by any disagreement with Swan.

A careful look at our public buildings—our schools, churches, libraries, courthouses, and other public edifices—can tell us much about the American experience. Even though it suffers in this respect because it aims to be inclusive, Hitchcock and Seale's book is a welcome addition to the literature on American public architecture.

—Robert K. Bower
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