

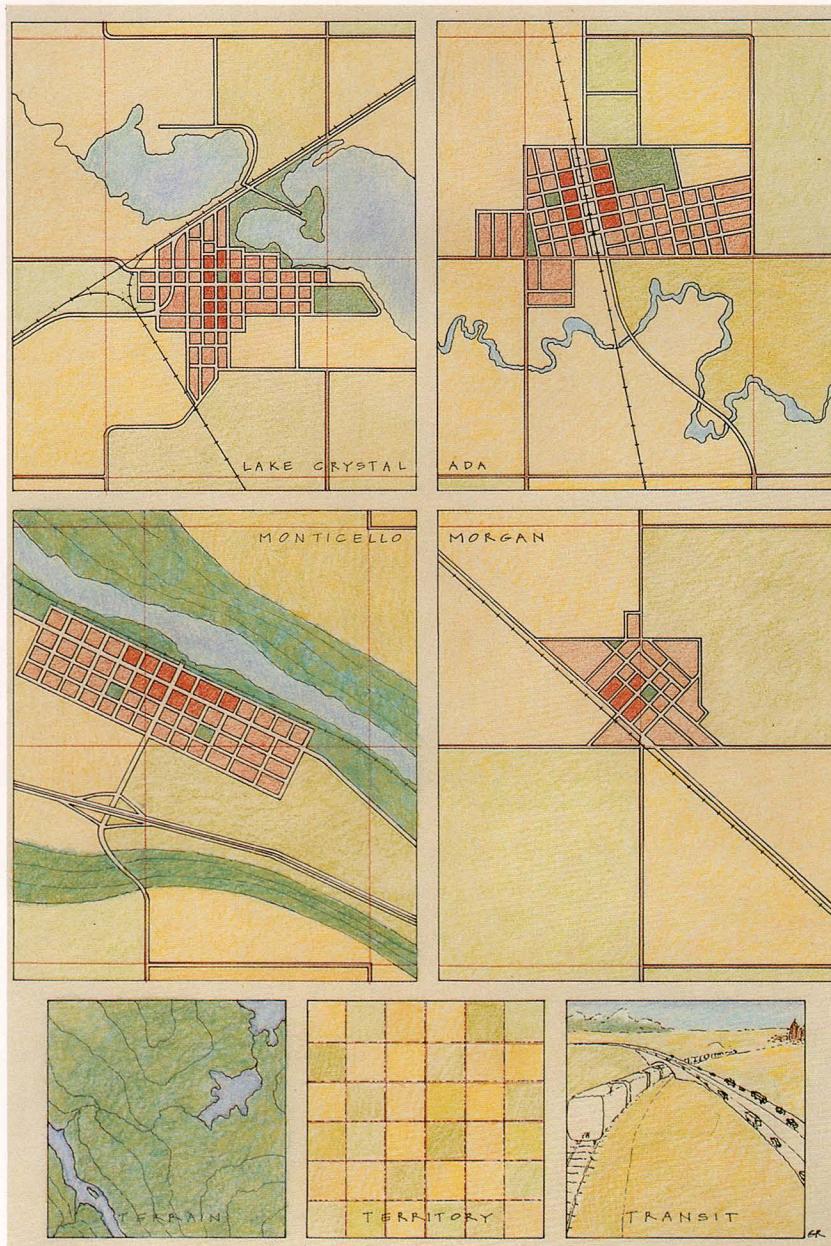
Prairie Urbanism

Garth Rockastle

It can be argued that there is oftentimes an intrinsic formal beauty latent in midwestern cities, especially the smaller ones. Why no great architects, at least to my knowledge, have pursued making this beauty more apparent or manifest is most unfortunate. Had painters Edward Hopper or Charles Sheeler, or authors Willa Cather or Mark Twain been architects (even paper architects), this point would surely be more difficult to make. There is no doubt that architectural speculation has largely been relegated to the individual building or garden, certainly not the city.

There is, of course, a compelling reason for this that stems from the broader context or reality of American culture. The disinterest or lack of value in urban beauty seems at times to be found at the very core of American life. After all, American cities are more about the efficient exchange of goods and services, the expeditious movement and parking of cars, outdoor advertising and perhaps most important, the pursuit of separating home from work as far as is reasonably possible with prevailing gas prices. This phenomena has led to the development of largely non-urbanism throughout this country.

The objective here is not, however, to dwell on these depressing facts or even to propose socio-political remedies, but rather to pursue through visual means, the intrinsic architectural qualities and potentials of small midwestern cities. This too, can not be accomplished in only a few pages of this Journal. These

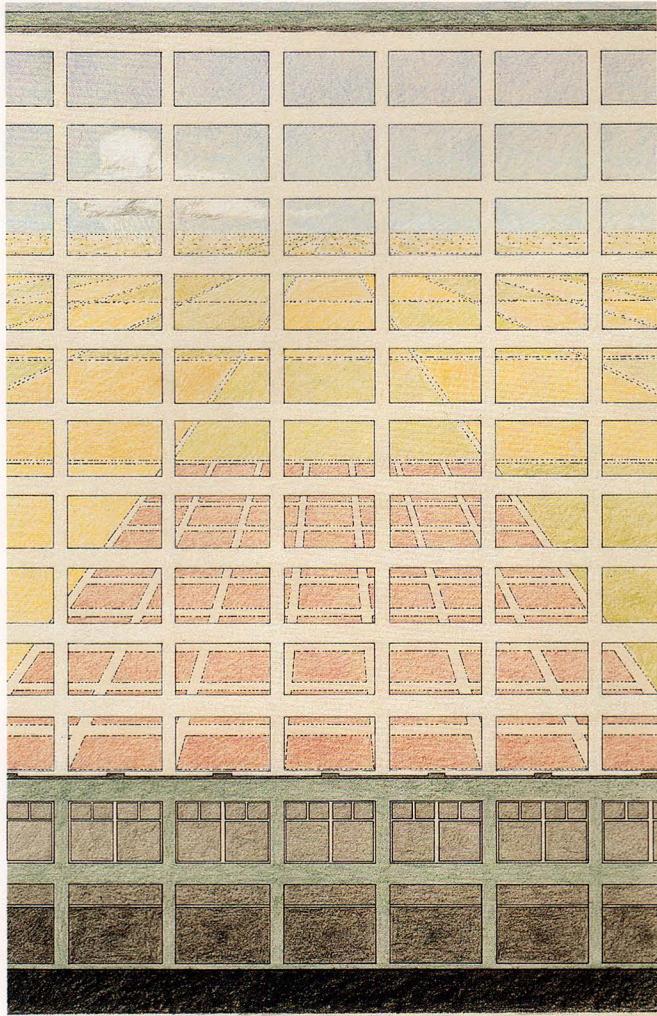


Urban Anatomy.

few drawings are only indicators of things to consider. My interest in this subject began through the lens of my camera, continued through my love of USGS maps and is now just beginning to emerge through drawing. It should probably be noted that this work is only a hobby of mine that has enjoyed the support of both the Graduate School at the University of Minnesota (Faculty Research Grant) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (Summer Institute Fellowship).

It should also be said that it is my belief that if there is any real regionally significant architectural work to be done in the midwest (that is work that is more than some passing style) it will need to be mindful of the underlying raw material of these and other inherited architectural traditions.

Two dominant formal ingredients leap to the fore when one takes a step back to look at the midwest: the everpresent (yet deformed) grid and the elevator or silo. They are both extraordinary expressions of power and significance. They are the most literal evidence of why we came and what we intended to do on the frontier. The subtleties apparent in the mediation of the macro or sectional grid to the natural terrain, to the territorial sub-division of smaller block units in towns and cities, and to the rail or road alignments are wonderful places to begin discovering the midwest's latent urban beauty. This is where I began, because I first came in by air with camera in hand.



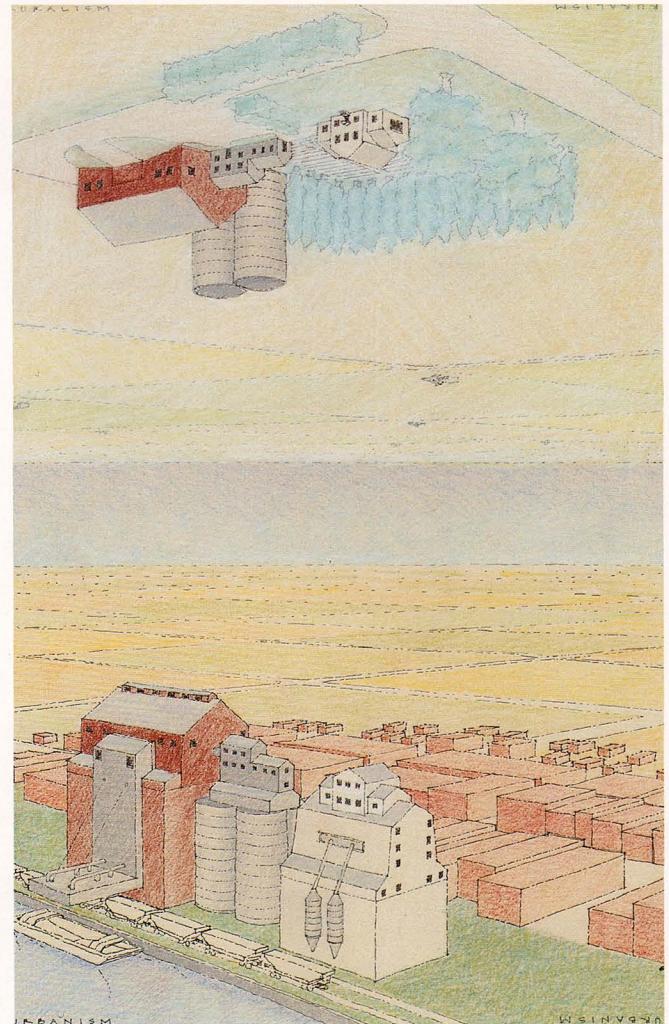
Sullivan's Frame — Jefferson's Grid.

I. Urban Anatomy

The anatomy of the cultivated midwestern landscape generally has an extraordinarily simple, intrinsic quality. The few ruptures, wrinkles, and twists found in its relentless gridded structure are delights to behold. The struggle between the three primary ingredients (the territorial grid, the natural terrain and the force lines of transit systems), appear like a series of laboratory experiments using the same three chemicals at each specific location but using varying amounts of each producing alternative effects. The four Minnesota towns shown here are illustrative of the diversity of effect and similarity of means throughout the midwest.

II. Sullivan's Frame — Jefferson's Grid

I have photographed several of Chicago's famed "frame" buildings over the years and have always been struck by how normal they always appear. One always has to look carefully for the subtle nuances of elaboration or deformation to know distinction. While frame expressive buildings are found throughout the world now, there still is a comparative abundance throughout the midwest. These phenomenon seem, however, entirely natural here given the predominance of the grid on the ground's surface. I only wish that there was as often and as skillful a network of deformations of the elevated frame as there is of the lateral grid. By the way, has anyone else



Urbanism — Ruralism.

noticed that the expressed frame of Sullivan's Carson, Pirie & Scott Department Store is virtually identical in proportion to the north/south residential blocks of Chicago?

III. Icons — Commodities

The iconographic components of the classic midwestern farm often seem to be "elevated" to extraordinary heights in most midwestern cities. I believe this observation is more than esoteric foolery or wishful thinking. There is power and meaning in the traditional rural components of the farmstead. The proud house, the commodious barn, the upright silo, the tree windbreak and the entourage of carefully maintained landscape features all exhibit a cultivated

presence. The borrowing of several of these architectural elements in the making of urban elevator forms seem to help make the elevators appear familiar, even trustworthy. Farmers give up tons of produce, the basis of their sustenance, to be stored in these creatures for later sale. It seems inappropriate to imagine them as threatening or suspicious in appearance. As early symbols on the midwestern landscape these domesticated tower tops give an air of pride and humility that seems appropriate. The extraordinary productivity of the fertile land appears well tamed by these familiar icons and is celebrated as the commodious shafts rise above the landscape.