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**Architectural Variability in the Southeast.** Edited by Cameron H. Lacquement. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007. 224 pages. \$59.75 cloth.

As indicated by its title, this edited volume of papers is a compilation from a 2005 symposium on Southeastern archaeology. It makes no pretenses other than to present findings in a standard cut-and-dry fare of excavated Native American sites and their probable usage. The chapters are replete with examples of excavations that show the variability of building types and construction techniques. The discussions may add a substantial footnote to the archaeological literature of sites and structures, but it woefully lacks any indigenous voice or interpretations.

However, it should come as no surprise that this compendium continues the mainstream tradition of excluding the living narrative. The Mississippian culture (AD 800–1500) had already been on the skids when Spanish explorer and conquistador Hernando de Soto entered the region in 1539. Although this was barely twenty years after the siege of Tenochtitlán (Mexico City) by Cortez, first-hand Iberian accounts had already indicated that enormous swaths of the Southeast cultures had been decimated by old-world disease and migration.

Due to that decline, there was little or no human or material wealth to be usurped. Incursions into the region were few and far between, and, gradually, the memory of its great Mississippi civilization dimmed. Oftentimes referred to as the “Mound Builder” societies—because of the monumental effigy or pyramid earthworks that their communities constructed—the lack of a direct historical link to indigenous memories would create a scientific mystery that became known as the “Myth of the Mound Builders.”

In 1894, the explanation that such earthworks had been constructed by Vikings, a lost tribe of Israel and the Greeks, to name a few, was debunked by Cyrus Thomas in a report published by the Bureau of American Ethnology. In the meantime, the myth became fodder for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pseudoscientists, and this led to the excavation and pillaging of the mounds in hopes of uncovering evidence confirming their hidden roots in Euro-Western civilization. It was precisely this not-to-be-taken-seriously context that has made the Mississippi civilization a stepchild to the other great indigenous civilizations of the Americas. Rarely, does it even get a footnote in the annals of significant events that shaped the Western hemisphere.

*Architectural Variability in the Southeast* blithely forgoes that necessary historical context and concentrates instead on what can be characterized as the domestic mundane. The central theme of the volume’s architectural diatribe is limited to gaining clarification about the variations in housing types as seen at sites throughout the Southeast. The archaeologists gain insights by reproducing vernacular construction techniques using similar hamlet styles from throughout the world.

As a result, many chapters are filled with findings of “empirical” efforts gained through the reconstruction of so-called primitive structures by using local harvested materials and vernacular construction techniques. The process is described as “experimental archaeology” but doesn’t seem that far removed

from what Ohiyesa (Charles A. Eastman) instigated with teepee making and the Boy Scouts. To give credit to the efforts of the archaeologists, though, it's a daunting task because in most instances only the hollow postholes and ashen structural members at the excavations remain.

Other chapters, however, do provide more historical and cultural grist as exemplified in a chapter on historic Creek household architecture. Although this discussion decidedly strays from the prehistoric era, it frames the context regarding incursions of white settlers and the US government on the Creek domicile as a discourse on sociocultural transformation and evolving form. In an odd way, this seems reminiscent of the sociocultural transformation waged by policy makers through the imposition of the 1960s Housing and Urban Development programs on Indian reservations.

One can easily argue that there is no historical counterpart to reconstructing similar social changes before precontact. Nonetheless, there is little or no indication that the living tribal descendants of this vibrant civilization were given even a courtesy call during any phase of their research efforts.

Case in point—another chapter on the architectural grammar of a late Mississippian house goes to great lengths to supplant a Euro-Western nomenclature on space and production of the indigenous house. The approach is heavily informed by Christopher Alexander's seminal treatise on spatial "pattern language," which employs a Lego-like approach to explaining form and function. Although the author postulates that the current nomenclature is woefully inadequate in capturing the nuisances of meaning and social ordering in Southeast architecture, there is not one indigenous word or descriptor used. Amazing.

Aside from the linguistic challenges that this may present, one wonders if it really might be the case that tribal languages are that "stone dead." The odds-on favorite is that they are not. Among the ancestral languages that are spoken today in the Southeast, one should wager that some, if not all, of that the architectural terminology and descriptions already do exist. With that language comes inherent meaning and the most suitable manner for characterizing those bygone and, yes, ongoing traditions.

In summary, the overall body of this work can be characterized as something that only a mother can love. In this case, the "mother" is a select body of archaeologists who appear to be living in their own minds. They could benefit by breaking their collegial bubble and conducting cross-disciplinary work with the living and breathing ancestors of the Mississippian civilization. Doubtless to say, both communities would benefit enormously, and, from the dialogue, a definitive Mississippian architecture book that, finally, does justice to the topic might emerge.

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