

“Barn Preservation Matters”

Description: If I were asked to consider the ‘great architecture’ in my community I might reply with the one-of-a-kind... uber-custom... architect-designed... building. You know what I’m talking about. But if I were to reflect on that I might also say that while those may be great buildings they are not necessarily the buildings that really define the community. They may be the rock stars but a community is made up of more ordinary buildings; buildings that together add up to be more than the sum of their parts. Likewise, the rural landscape has its ordinary buildings that make places, the farmhouses and the barns. And if the more ordinary urban buildings are not likely to be singled out as ‘great architecture’ how likely do you think a barn will be? But barns are great architecture and worthy of our attention and preservation. Americans have always been infatuated with agrarian retreats and the simple life (as if farming is simple). Most of our universities and capital cities were originally built in rural settings to shelter our politicians and young students from the trappings of urban life. Jefferson even referred to his design for the University of Virginia as an ‘academic village’. And Thoreau meditated on this at Walden Pond. Barns are the symbols of that simple life; surrounded by nature, living off the land, being self sufficient. Barns are also impressive; soaring spaces, warm with wood. And they exude a serious work ethic. One cannot stand in a barn and not be constantly reminded of the incredible amount of work that went into wrangling massive timbers and taming them with axes and saws. The hewing and the joinery are ever-present reminders of that effort. Historic barns are also the easiest way for us to see back in time. Most American barns that are a mere 150 years old or older will have been built with both tools and techniques recognizable by any ancient Roman. For over 5,000 years humans have hewn timbers with broad axes, flattened mortises and tenons with chisels, and stood up bents held together with wooden pegs. And while it has only been about one-hundred years since this was considered the ‘normal way’ to build a wooden building, most people today, including architects and builders, cannot speak cogently about barns or timber framing. Barns today however occupy an interesting place in our built world; they are icons in the landscape. As such it is easy for us to assume a familiarity, even an ownership. After all, they have been there for as long as you can remember and you expect them to be there long after you are gone. We think of barns not as in the landscape, but like rivers or mountains, they seem part of it...inseparable pieces of the countryside that surrounds our cities and towns ... distinct personalities that color the landscape. As a result, they are variously described as timeless, strong, and permanent... which sadly they are not. It has been estimated that there may be 600,000 barns in the United States that are greater than 50 years old; when I consider that one-hundred years ago there were over six million farms, that number seems frighteningly small. Barns are now being lost at a fast pace as there are seemingly few uses for them. As an architect who has a passion for saving these old structures I will talk about the history of barns in America and their fate today. I will talk about the beauty of the barn and how they can be preserved. I will talk about how they can also be adapted and used to make new and interesting architecture while respecting the past.

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Time required: 15 minutes to 1.5 hours

AV equipment required: Screen & projector, sound system for large rooms and/or groups

**Paid honorariums to Speakers are not expected from requesting group. Speakers, at their discretion, may donate their honorariums to AIA Michigan. Mileage reimbursement to Speaker are not expected from requesting group.*