Adirondack Architectural Heritage
NEWSLETTER
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Finding the Art in Architecture

Architecture is a visual art, and the buildings speak for themselves.

~ Julia Morgan

Finding the Art in Architecture

Like any art form, architecture embodies the human experience. It can convey safety, hope, spiritual connection, even grief. The buildings that we interact with every day are much more than roofs over our heads – they shape how we live our lives. Like many historic preservationists, we spend a lot of time talking about the environmental and financial practicality of preservation and the irreplaceable role that structures play in telling the history of our communities. Yet we don't want to forget about the intangible, emotional impact that comes from appreciating architecture as an art form.

Art is defined as "the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination." What is more artistic than shaping the spaces in which we live, work, and play? In addition to providing shelter for our daily activities, intentional design adds layers of meaning to our structures, transmitting cultural messages across time. Consider the classical features adorning many government buildings, which convey an adherence to democratic ideals, or the elaborate traditions in religious architecture that establish places of worship as hubs for community gathering and spiritual education. Structures like homes and businesses often display more personalized features that reflect the tastes and values of their owners. In short, buildings carry an unspoken language that informs our understanding of them and their purpose.

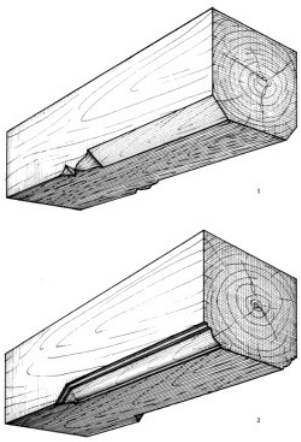
These design choices are not always strictly decorative, though. Many features that we celebrate in historic structures are both visually appealing and functional — for example, shutters, monitor roofs, and chamfered timbers (*see images at right*). Each of these features served a vitally practical role in historic Adirondack buildings, protecting windows, increasing light and ventilation, strengthening the structure, and reducing fire risks. We still see these elements in modern design, where they are not only prized for their functionality, but sometimes purely for their beauty. These enduring features illustrate that architecture can be both practical and beautiful.

We find the art in architecture all over our region, from thoughtfully planned Adirondack Great Camps that celebrate their surrounding landscape to vernacular schoolhouses and farmsteads, whose practical design holds a quiet beauty. The simple act of noticing and appreciating the craftsmanship in historic buildings we see every day adds value to our lives.

In a world that feels ever busier and noisier, taking a moment to notice your surroundings can reset your perspective. Pausing to appreciate the Adirondack

Though usually decorative on new structures, operable shutters were once common on many types of buildings (like this c. 1816 schoolhouse in Essex), where they protected the glass from weather and helped regulate heating and cooling.

Monitor roofs (seen along the peak of this barn in Jay) allow increased light and ventilation. Even with electric light and mechanical ventilation, they remain a popular design feature.



In addition to providing an attractive finish, chamfering timbers rather than leaving the edges sharp makes them easier to handle, better distributes stress across the wood, and slows the spread of fire. This feature was actually a requirement of mill insurers in the 19th century when fire was a large concern!

Shown here are details from 17th-century houses in Massachusetts. (From The Framed Houses of Massachusetts Bay, 1625-1725 *by Abbott Lowell Cummings.)*

Rustic Style that defines much of our region's architecture or the 19th-century downtown streetscapes that remain at the core of our communities can deepen our gratitude for our surroundings. We all have more to offer when we fill our proverbial cups. Just like exploring the Adirondacks' stunning vistas, taking time to find the art in our region's historic structures is a small act that can make a big difference in your day-to-day life.

Here at AARCH, we celebrate the multi-faceted role that architecture plays in our communities and individual lives. This includes not only the cultural and environmental significance of historic buildings in the Adirondack region, but their artistry as well. In this newsletter, we would like to take a moment to celebrate Adirondack architecture's intrinsic beauty and explore how the artistry, craft, and character of historic places encourage a deeper appreciation and exploration of our vibrant communities.

The Art of Craftsmanship

It is easy to see and feel the art in architecture, but we often overlook the artistry of the tools and techniques that were used to create the buildings around us. Taking a moment to examine this craftsmanship can invoke our senses and emotions, deepening our appreciation for our region's architectural heritage.

Take a look at any 18th-century Adirondack house and note the materials – whether it's made of wood, stone, or brick, the structure was likely built with local materials. Everything was shaped by the hands of skilled artisans, from the structural frame to the finishing details. Consider how these elements come together to determine how one experiences the building - the insulating warmth of plaster walls, the shadows cast by multi-paned windows, or the feeling of sliding your hand up a wooden banister. These features reflect the years of dedication that master craftsmen spent honing their skills. The ability to produce these beautiful elements using traditional techniques and tools is rapidly becoming a lost art.

Traditional hand tools and techniques provide a tangible connection to our past. Using hand tools allows artisans to better understand the material they're working with. When you look at and hold an old tool, you see and feel the patina of a lifetime of use. Many craftspeople describe using old tools as feeling like you're sliding your hand into a favorite, well-worn glove.

Antique hand tools can be works of art in and of themselves. Photo courtesy of Vintage Tool Shop Pty Ltd.

Through our hands-on preservation trades workshops, AARCH offers participants the chance to delve deeper into the techniques and knowledge that guide various historic trades and foster a greater appreciation for the craftsmanship embodied in old buildings. At the Adirondack Mennonite Heritage Farm, the host of our 2024 Restoring Wood Windows Workshop, traditional techniques and tools are still used to build and repair wooden window sash. During the workshop, Norm Mosier, the farm caretaker, showed us his collection of antique wood planes and let the group try their hands at using them. We experienced that a plane with a sharp knife has a zippy tone whereas a dull plane has a scratchy tone.

Norm's collection of antique hand planes are as beautiful to look at as they are comfortable to use. It is easy to see why one may prefer using hand tools over power tools after experiencing the sound, scent, and feel of a smooth, well-balanced plane gliding along wood – even to the novice user, it feels like a natural extension of your hand. While some may use antique tools and techniques to carry on the tradition or for their distinctive, hand-crafted results, these tools can also be quieter and safer than power tools. They are not only beautiful in form and function, they are tangible links to our past, offering a window into how our ancestors produced the intricate and solid buildings that we carefully steward today.

Norm Mosier of Adirondack Mennonite Heritage Farm sharing his love of traditional tools with a participant at our 2024 Restoring Wood Windows Workshop.

From simple vernacular structures built from materials found on-site to high-style architect-designed buildings, it is the skilled craftspeople who brought them to life. Throughout AARCH's work, we look for these stories. We don't always know who these builders and individuals were, but we can admire their skill in the structures they crafted. As you explore the art in architecture around you, we hope you will think about the craftspeople who gave those buildings life.

Bringing the Details into Focus

Architecture in its best form not only offers shelter, it provides a space to explore our personal beliefs and shared history. Old buildings can evoke a range of emotions, from wonder to loss. We hope that experiences with AARCH highlight places across the region that tug on this kind of emotional feedback. Art may be subjective, but we can all appreciate the artistry in old buildings – the way columns and eaves cast dynamic shadows or how window placement consistently lights a room from morning to night. These details create a distinct sense of place.

The goal of our popular architectural sketching workshop is to give attendees the tools and skills to translate the details of a building from the mind's eye to the page. However, the "ah-ha" moment for participants is when, after peering at a structure long enough, they begin to notice things they never saw before and imagine why an architect, designer, or builder made the choices that they did. Sketching a three-dimensional structure is a tall task, but adding a little bit of artistic license is encouraged in this workshop – this is not drafting, it's drawing what you see. The sketches that participants produce not only capture architectural details, they also carry the emotional interpretations of the artists, just like the work of the craftspeople who built them. This mindful approach allows people to slow down and fully admire a building and its story.

Of course, so many other AARCH outings showcase the art in architecture. One of our final tours of this past year brought us to the village of Potsdam to explore its vibrant downtown. Many of the village's historic buildings are famously marked red by the geological time coded in its extraordinary sandstone. Architects and masons of the past who selected, quarried, and chiseled this unique stone lent their artistic license to sensational structures dotting the community. Clarkson University's "Old Main" encapsulates this artistry and also anchors the stories of those who both learned and worked in its halls. Trinity Episcopal Church, an iconic community structure, carries the hallmarks of high-style Gothic Revival masterpieces found in Europe. Both buildings, alongside others featured on the tour, showcase a tangible and beautiful connection to past members of the community. Their very stones were worked in the hands of Potsdam's forebears.

In late September, an AARCH tour explored downtown Potsdam's treasured sandstone buildings, including Clarkson University's restored "Old Main." The richly detailed building beautifully exhibits how designers and builders applied their artistic flair to Potsdam's iconic red sandstone.

Building an appreciation for this artistry and the emotional resonance it evokes is at the heart of what we do at AARCH. Getting people through the door of a historic church, an old mill, an ornate camp, or a vernacular farmhouse is only ever a starting point. We may highlight the details and lay out the context, but the beauty of art is that it generates something different for everyone. Looking out over Upper Saranac Lake through the fantastical log screens of architect William Coulter or taking in the dynamic mix of proportion and asymmetry in Warrensburg's high-style homes – as art, these buildings may be studied, critiqued, or simply enjoyed. The best stories in our collective past often flow from architecture that was there to witness it. We hope that in interpreting the stories and buildings side by side, our programs encourage a greater appreciation for the art in architecture.

A new in-depth tour of Peru brought us to some defining downtown buildings, including the Heyworth-Mason Mill, now the centerpiece of a recreational park. Here, the 1836 mill is a work of superb masonry craftsmanship that also features a different kind of artwork. Today, scenes of prominent buildings, figures, and events in Peru's history (painted by local artist Greg Badger) adorn the mill's window openings. This lends a layered effect of architectural and painted artistry, a unique blend of art in architecture.

We'd love to hear from you! *Send us your stories of finding the art in architecture at info@aarch.org.*

Great Camp Santanoni

Like all Adirondack Great Camps, **Santanoni** was thoughtfully designed to showcase its stunning natural setting and shape visitors' experience of the site. AARCH is proud to help share the unique opportunity for everyone to explore an integral and historically exclusive piece of the region's heritage at this publicly-owned Great Camp. All are welcome to spend the afternoon on the Main Camp's expansive porches, taking in the scenery while sheltered from the elements.

The architecture of **Santanoni's Main Camp** also incorporates Robert Pruyn's admiration of Japanese architecture. Many features, from its layout resembling a Japanese phoenix, with its "wings" outstretched facing Newcomb Lake, to the *irimoya* (Japanese for "resting hill") roofs were inspired by Robert's time in Japan as a child.

Annual Preservation Awards

AARCH's Annual Preservation Awards highlight the extraordinary work of those who make historic preservation such an important part of the region's vitality. **Crystal Spring Farm**, one of our 2024 awardees *(shown here)*, reminds us of the beauty found in simple, vernacular structures. The 18th-century farmhouse and 19th-century outbuildings don't have many decorative frills, but their clean lines and balanced proportions illustrate the care and craftsmanship of both their initial builders and recent restoration.

Adirondack Rural Revitalization Program

AARCH's Adirondack Rural Revitalization Program (ARRP) funds rehabilitation projects in vital community structures that preserve their historic character. The cobblestone construction of Brant Lake's **Heintzelman Library** *(shown here)*, an ARRP grantee, reflects the artistry of the craftspeople who built it. The gable facade shows an additional level of creativity beyond the carefully laid cobblestones, with a decorative shingle pattern and vergeboard as well as pebbles laid out to form the library's name and date of construction as well as highlight the lintels.

All of these artistic choices work together to form a dynamic structure that reveals more details the longer you observe it.

Fire Towers

At AARCH, we work to preserve all parts of the Adirondacks' built heritage. This includes fire towers, which are a great example of utilitarian structures that have evolved into cultural symbols that we admire as much for their beauty as their intended practical purpose. Built to prevent the spread of devastating forest fires in the early 20th century, fire towers are now a destination for hikers who reach the summit of mountains like **Poke-O-Moonshine** *(shown here)*, tying us to the region's past while augmenting our enjoyment of the Adirondacks' natural splendor.

Preservation Services

AARCH's preservation services program helps historic property owners understand and preserve the architectural features that give their buildings character. We recently wrote the National Register of Historic Places nomination for the **St. Lawrence Government Complex** *(shown here)*, whose striking buildings reflect the community's aspirations. The campus is an outstanding example of Richardsonian Romanesque architecture, with hallmark features like round arches, intricately carved stone details, a massive tower, and varied rooflines. In addition, the buildings proudly showcase locally-sourced materials: Gouverneur marble, Potsdam sandstone, and Norwood blue limestone.

Advocacy

AARCH supports grassroots preservation efforts to save buildings that embody our region's rich heritage. This includes a coalition to save **Thomas Memorial AME Zion Church** in Watertown *(shown here)*, led by Shameika Ingram of *Preservation in Color*, through fiscal sponsorship and technical assistance. Congregants built this church in 1909, crafting the structural concrete blocks by hand. A center of Watertown's African American community until its closure in 2012, Thomas Memorial embodies the craftsmanship of its founders, from its hand-formed concrete blocks to its colorful stained glass windows.

Would you like to get more involved with AARCH?

AARCH announces an open call for applications to serve on our **Board of Directors**. We particularly welcome the nominations (including self-nominations) of candidates who will diversify our board by geographic region, abilities, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual identity, age, discipline, and expertise. All nominations will be reviewed by AARCH's Governance Committee for interview consideration.

If you would like to learn more, please contact Erin Tobin with a brief bio and statement of interest at erin@aarch.org or 518-834-9328 ext. 1.

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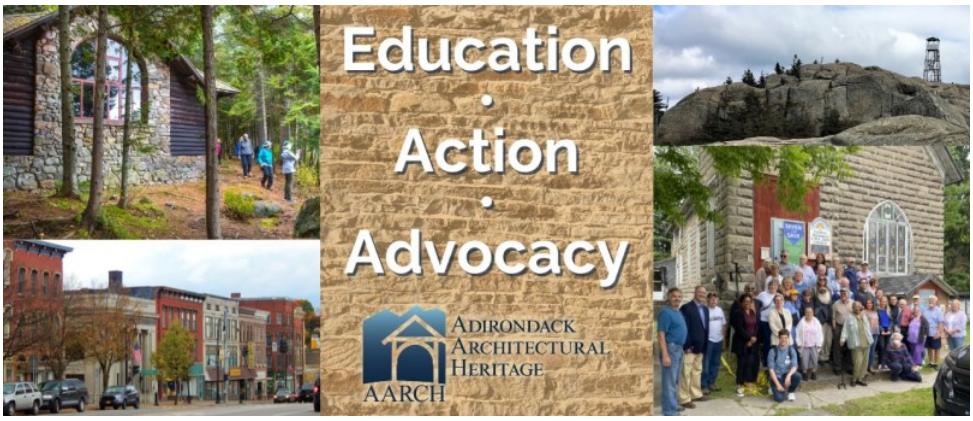
A World of AARCH exists online, join us there.

PRESERVING THE ARCHITECTURE AND COMMUNITIES OF THE ADIRONDACKS THROUGH EDUCATION, ACTION, AND ADVOCACY



YOUR GIFT SUSTAINS ADIRONDACK COMMUNITIES

AARCH relies on the support of individuals, organizations, businesses, and communities throughout the Adirondacks to further its work through education, action, and advocacy.

Even the smallest gift goes a long way! Visit **aarch.org/one-time-donation** or scan this code to donate to AARCH securely online.

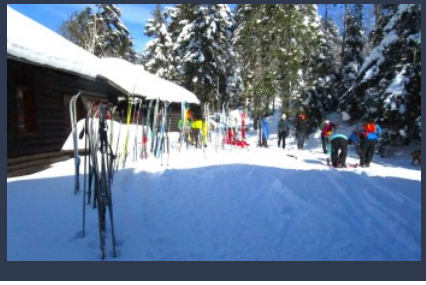
NEW YORK STATE OF OPPORTUNITY. Council on the Arts

AARCH's work is supported, in part, by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature.

2025 SANTANONI WINTER WEEKENDS

January 18-20
February 15-17
March 15-16

Ski or snowshoe into Camp Santanoni during our annual Winter Weekends for special interpretive tours at the Main Camp. Then meet us by the woodstove at the Artist's Studio for free coffee, tea, or hot chocolate. *Learn more at* ***www.greatcampsantanoni.com/special-events***



Cover: Thousand Island Park boathouses.