

High and Mighty

Measure of Emptiness: Grain Elevators in the American Landscape by Frank Gohlke. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992. 112 pp., illus., \$59.95 hardcover, \$29.95 paper

Grain Elevators by Lisa Mahar-Keplinger. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993. 112 pp., illus., \$19.95 paper

Reviewed by Nonya Grenader

Mrs. Schuyler (Marianne Griswold) Van Rensselaer in her biography of H. H. Richardson records her puzzlement that “no architect so endowed as to be very strongly attracted by ecclesiastical work would have been likely to say what I once heard Richardson say: ‘The things I want most to design are a grain-elevator and the interior of a great river-steamboat.’” A hundred years later, it seems almost a matter of course that both of these books would introduce the grain elevator by comparing it to a cathedral. In *Measure of Emptiness*, Frank Gohlke remembers what a woman from Plainview, Texas, told him: “Out here churches don’t need to have tall steeples – we have the grain elevator.” In his foreword to Lisa Mahar-Keplinger’s *Grain Elevators*, Aldo Rossi observes, “The silos appear like cathedrals, and in fact they are the cathedrals of our time.”

Gohlke offers large-format photographs that connect the forms not only to their immediate surroundings, but also to the landscape beyond. He makes clear the relationship between the elevator and its geography and, acknowledging the influence of J. B. Jackson, affirms that “every element of a landscape participates in many levels of meaning.” His preferred view of the elevator is from a car or truck windshield:

It is not a static view, but one that begins just as the elevator becomes visible above the centerline, about five miles out of town, and continues until it disappears in the vibration in the rearview mirror. In the minutes that pass as the speck grows to colossal size and then shrinks to rejoin the horizon, many contradictory messages are created: we are powerful, we build for centuries; our monuments rival those of other heroic ages; we are insignificant, our hold on this landscape is tenuous, nature and time erode our greatest creations as if they were dust. What lingers in the memory, though, is



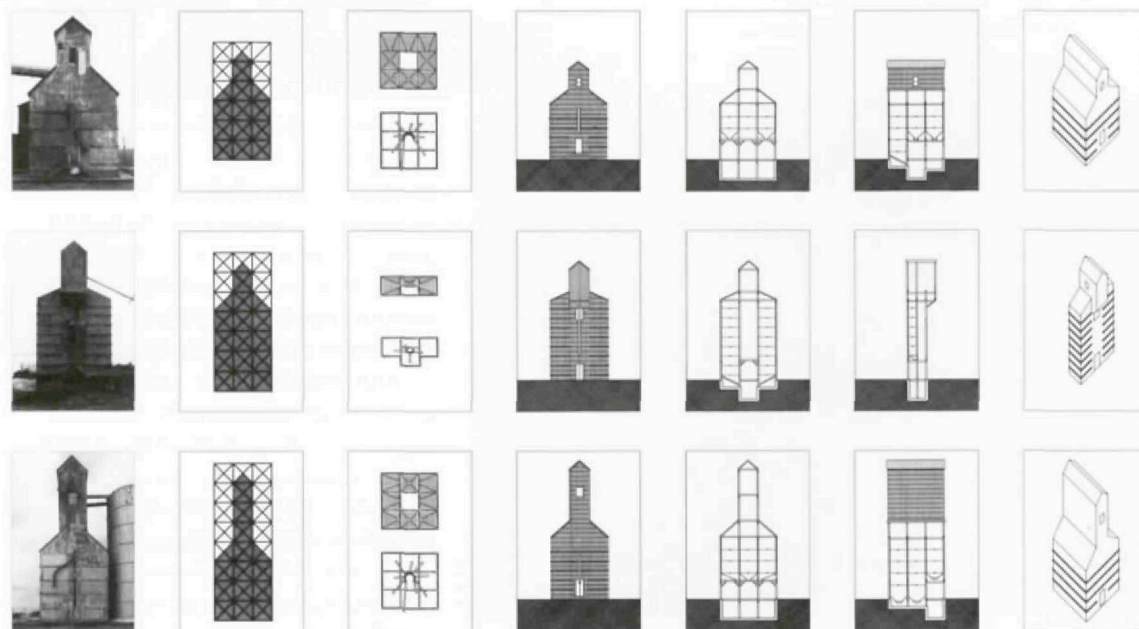
Frank Gohlke, grain elevator, Tulia, Texas, 1975.

to the variety and unexpected complexity of the type.

Both books are well-conceived additions to the scant literature on grain elevators as fixtures of the American landscape. Reyner Banham was the first historian to study these structures anew. His account of the outer and inner workings of the heroic complex of late-19th- and early-20th-century elevators that make up the Buffalo River District – published in 1986 as part of *A Concrete Atlantis: U.S. Industrial Building and European Modern Architecture* – is itself a landmark in the writing of anonymous history. Mahar-Keplinger’s worm’s-eye drawing of the Great Northern elevator in Buffalo even takes its cue from Banham’s marveling, elegiac description of that colossus:

The conical bin bottoms, lofting legs, oblique chutes, and legs of the chassis, seen together, seem like a gigantic surrealist architecture turned upside down or like the abandoned cathedral of some sect of iron men.

Nor are such ruins common only to Buffalo. Today a drive across Texas,



Lisa Mahar-Keplinger. Analysis of studded elevator construction.

the image of a solitary upright form in the middle distance of an endless plain.

Gohlke takes a wide view of the elevator and its engagement with the land. Focusing on the vast emptiness of the prairie, he sees the elevator as “the presence against which that emptiness can be measured.” A concluding essay by John C. Hudson, professor of geography at Northwestern University, places the elevator geographically and economically in American life.

Mahar-Keplinger begins by tracking the grain elevator as an American icon in the work of numerous architects, painters, and photographers, from Le Corbusier and Mendelsohn to Demuth and Sheeler to Wright Morris and Gohlke. She then turns her attention with typological precision to elevators from urban Brooklyn

and Minneapolis to rural Kansas and Nebraska. Small photographs provide initial readings of silhouette, material, and texture, arrayed alongside analytical drawings that expose various configurations and structural layouts in diagram, plan, section, and axonometric projection. She also investigates the role of the elevator – often the first structure, along with the railroad station, to be put in place – as a generator of town plans. Mahar-Keplinger notes the frailties of materials: the short life span of the wood elevator; the need to compensate for the relatively low tensile strength of the brick elevator with steel and, reciprocally, the need to wrap massive steel elevators, with their circular bins, in a brick enclosure as protection from extreme weather conditions. It is this juxtaposition of information, beautifully presented in photos and drawings, that provides a valuable index

where Gohlke did much of his photographing in the mid-1970s, reveals as much. Passing along the highway in Corsicana recently, with the town on one side and the decaying elevator on the other, it was hard not to be impressed and a little saddened by the elevator, which was once a destination point but lingers now as an imposing but forlorn edge, no longer part of the grid but standing deserted beside it. By considering the contexts as well as the forms, structures, and inner workings of these affecting upright granaries, Gohlke and Mahar-Keplinger help us see them in fuller measure. ■