

Introduction

The appeal of a traditional Michigan farm landscape is universal. Farmhouses and barns, tall against expansive fields, assert a strong presence both graceful and evocative. By their form and their materials, the buildings convey integrity and an intimate connection with the land and its cultivation. The farm people who speak from these pages are passionately allegiant to their farming way of life, to buildings, fields, animals, and tranquility. Theirs is a deeply emotional sensibility, one as much of the heart as of the mind—and understandably so. Farmsteads communicate an easily recognizable authenticity, a palpable sense of sacred space, of history, of deeply rooted buildings. Designed and detailed with compelling simplicity and elegance, they evoke questions about the people who built them, their lives, values, and inspiration.

A traditional Michigan farmstead engenders a sense of nostalgia for a disappearing way of life. Diversified family farming is under duress, and the viability of many farm structures is compromised by its demise. These stories reveal how farm buildings and farm life complement and interrelate and illustrate how the culture of the Europeans who built them and the material resources of their environment molded these structures. Nostalgia for the past is not the impetus for this book. The connectivity of farm people to their farms and buildings is. Farmers have responded with creativity, innovation, and hard work as changes in the economy and technology have threatened their ability to live on their land. Their efforts and struggles underscore the depth of their desire for a farm life despite its physical hardships, uncertainties, risks, and low monetary rewards. As farm people speak of their barns, farmhouses, and farm life they valorize hard work, frugality, independence, self-reliance, resilience, and sustainability—values, attitudes, and capabilities that our society allows to disappear at its peril and our collective loss. That we have farmers who absolutely love the family farm life and desire the hard work and dedication it demands is a national asset important to cultivate and support.

U.S. Farming's Global Impact

The decades following World War II were a period of decolonization. The new countries formed in its wake were primarily agrarian, following traditional systems of cultivation. Their national plans for development embraced the “American” farm as a standard of excellence, recognizing its phenomenal productivity. Enabled as it was by an agricultural extension system and technological innovation, it represented a model of science-driven agriculture that promised a “green revolution” that would free the world from hunger. The consequences of this approach, the capitalization of agriculture and the consolidation of family farms into larger farms with corporate characteristics, only became apparent in subsequent years, tangibly changing the lives of the farm people who speak in this book. They demonstrate remarkable resilience in accommodating themselves to change and pragmatism in coping and making do, illustrating how hardy, motivated people have survived and fashioned a life here.

The twenty-first is the first “urban” century, one in which a majority of the global population will live in cities. But urbanization relies on agrarian productivity and surplus. As a majority of people leave their farm roots behind, we risk losing the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to address the natural world that family farming embodies: the frugal tenacity that enables survival under even the most inclement conditions. With the specter of global warming, water shortages, and desertification looming, there has arisen widespread concern for the environment. Following on the heels of global markets and trade there are concerns about loss of control over the source of our food and insecurity about its quality and safety. The greed of the global financial system and its fragility, with dire consequences for local economies, is manifest. In this climate of anxiety, revisiting through these stories a not so distant past, with its intimate relationship to resources and consumption, offers a valuable perspective on today and reveals that we have the skills and value base with which to forge alternative lives that can empower.

Sustainability and Self-Reliance

In an age of global interconnectedness the commodities of our daily lives—the clothes we wear, the apple juice we drink—are likely to be produced halfway around the world. They are shaped in forms that are familiar. So only occasionally do we contemplate their journey before they entered the intimate recesses of our homes and bodies. Our

vast unfamiliarity with the places where these objects were grown and made, and the people who made them, is accepted. The price is right. Only when we are discomforted, perhaps by a crisis of contamination or danger, do we think about the origins of goods that now fulfill our basic needs. The global supply chain is a fact of modern life in the twenty-first century. It is now all too familiar yet at times unexpectedly unsettling. The stories that follow illustrate how not so long ago many in the United States grew, or obtained from close at hand, the food they ate, the clothes they wore, the energy they used, and the buildings they inhabited to shelter them from the climate.

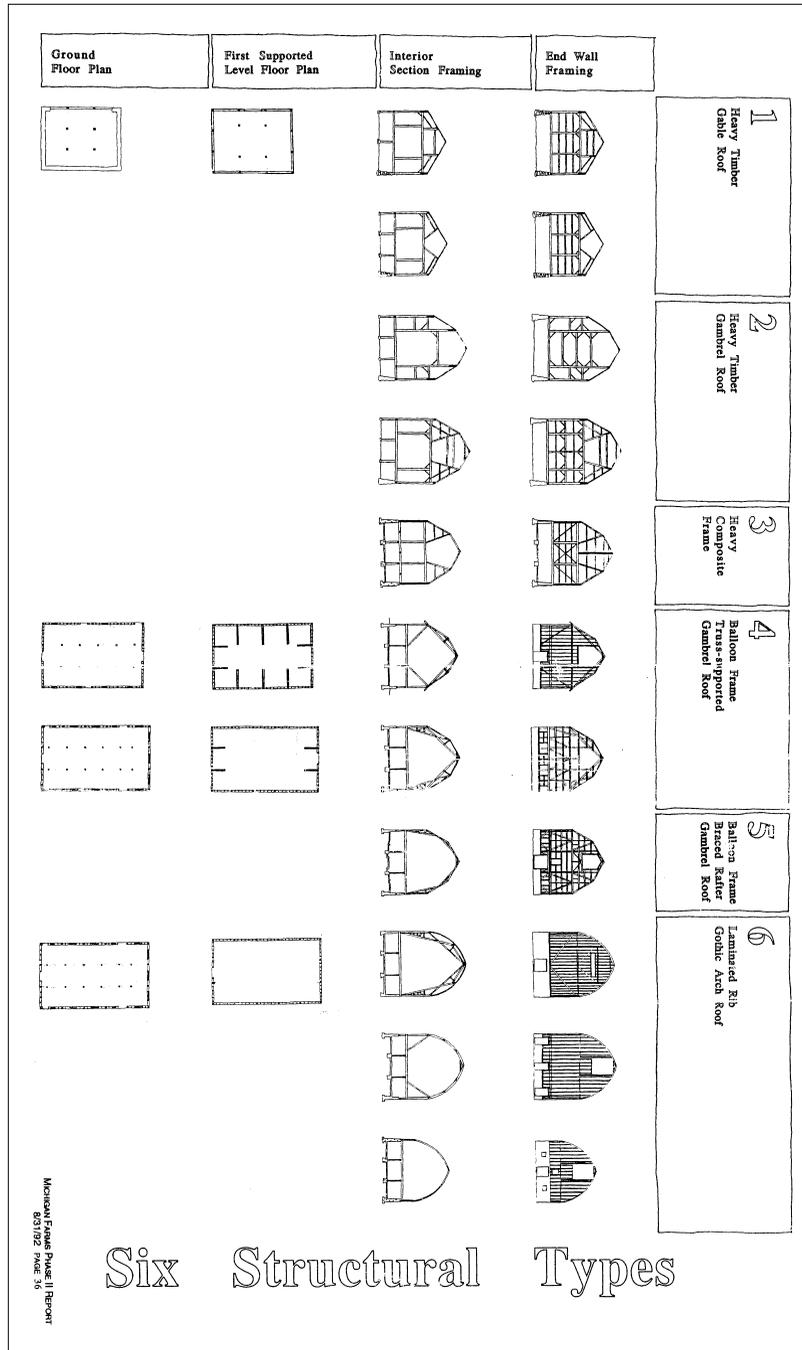
With urbanization, people's involvement in producing the food that sustains them has become increasingly distant and the lure of the family farm, with its connectivity to land and animals, has assumed poignancy. And, perhaps because it is a very different reality from that of the buildings, infrastructure, and services with which the urbanite lives, the image of the family farm—with its great barns, farmhouses with front porches mutely bespeaking community, and an ethos of integrity and honesty—evokes a romantic nostalgia. But nostalgia does not preserve silos and corncribs, barns and farmhouses. Our research reveals that traditional farm structures are maintained and cared for only if they contribute centrally to a farm enterprise.¹ Such is the pragmatic nature of farming.

Landscapes of the Mind and Heart

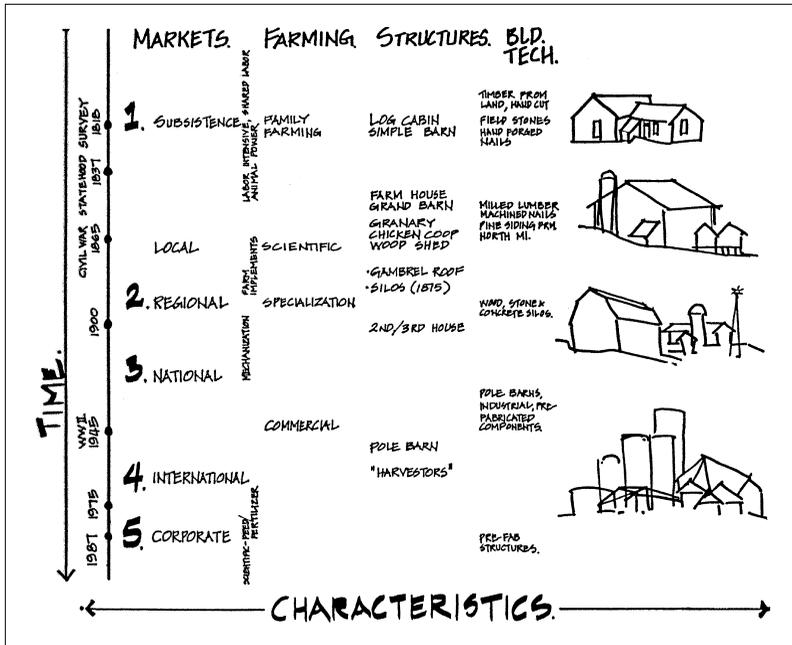
This work started as a technical study of barns in Michigan in which aspects of barn architecture, landscape, and farm production were juxtaposed to make transparent their interconnections and reveal the role of agricultural extension, land grant colleges, and government policies and programs in shaping farmsteads.² That the compelling design of Michigan farmsteads reflected local natural resources, the regional economy, national policies, and regulations was documented.³ These determined the materials with which farm buildings were constructed and influenced their size, design, and structure, as well as the crops that were cultivated. The interrelationships were strong. Innovations in transport transformed the size of markets that could be reached and changed the competitive advantage of products, the utility of barns and other farm buildings, and crop patterns and landscapes. Our studies addressed the farm landscape “of the mind,” of rational judgment and cool economic calculation.

But just as compelling is the fact that our investigation—fact-finding, data collection, and technical documentation—was radi-

The form of barn roofs evolved with the availability of milled lumber, changes in farm production, and stimulation by agricultural experimentation stations and extension services. (Drawing by Eric Allen MacDonald and Hemalata C. Dandekar.)



cally expanded by the farm people we interviewed. Their words, wrapped around the facts we asked for, conveyed their memories of relationships, values, and past ways of communicating, supporting, and receiving support. They spoke about the glue that bound farm people to each other and their communities. Their anecdotes volunteered descriptions of the ways in which mothers and grandmothers



Farmstead form was influenced by production processes, building technology, and the regional economy, as well as regulation and policy.

cooked and preserved food in the farmhouse and sustained the family and hired hands. They remembered farm women who ventured into the fields and tilled the land when the need arose. They revealed how the great barns and farmhouses were not only an intrinsic part of the physical landscape but also reflected the social, cultural, and ethnic landscapes and histories of the people who constructed them. In short, they communicated landscapes of the heart, of sentiment and memory, not just those of the mind, economy, and practicality.

The people in this book spoke with clarity to convey intimate knowledge of family farm life in Michigan and the farmhouses and barns that enabled it. Many were proud owners of Centennial Farms, farms that had been in their families for more than a hundred years. Some were palpably sensitive to the draw of the evocative buildings that “owned” their farm landscape. Intuition, dumb luck, and at times author persistence made the connections with the individuals who populate these pages. We looked for traditional, classic farm buildings and sought out those who knew about them. They self-selected with their eloquence. This is not a comprehensive typology of Michigan’s farm buildings, rural communities, and family farmers or the ethics and values they embrace. These are stories of evocative farm buildings and the articulate people who know about them.

Our interest in iconic farm buildings in Michigan led to a realization of how our understanding of farm buildings is enriched by tying their evolution to farm life, culture, economy, and community. As farm people talk about their lives they reveal what gives them meaning and sustenance and the values they hold dear. The specifics of locale powerfully shape production, so the stories are geographically clustered in urbanized Southeast Michigan; mid-Michigan; and the rural, isolated reaches of Michigan's Upper Peninsula (UP). Each group includes articulate individuals who communicate their perceptions, feelings, values, and opinions. They address themes of technology choice, the role of women, relationships to food, family, community, and material consumption. Indirectly they delineate provocative traits of personality and character. Farm people speak in their own voices, precisely, and thus reveal aspects of their inner worlds. The buildings and landscapes they occupy make tangible why farm people cherish their particular way of life. It is an intimate glimpse that offers insight for our future.