

complexity as newer waves of immigration and shifting city demographics continued to increase residential diversity.

Wilson's book sheds light on a small but longstanding ethnic enclave that has received little attention from other scholars of Philadelphia. Her textured account of the neighborhood offers a well-rounded combination of ethnography, oral history, and history of the built environment. Though the chapters are decidedly weighted toward the past forty-five years, Wilson draws useful connections to area's development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The activists that Wilson profiles scored impressive, if small, victories in an era of tight budgets and market-oriented development. Overall, Wilson's story shows how Chinatown residents cannily negotiated development not only to preserve particular landmarks, but even to expand the residential character of Chinatown. At many moments, the neighborhood's future seemed uncertain, but the historic core weathered repeated threats to its existence and reinvented itself in the process.

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Ryan K. Smith. *Robert Morris's Folly: The Architectural and Financial Failures of an American Founder* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014). Pp. 360. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$40.00.

Robert Morris was a Founder. He signed the Declaration of Independence. He secured loans from international bankers and with them sustained the Continental army. Pennsylvanians celebrated his success in moving the federal capital from New York to Philadelphia while the Federal City could be built. He served Pennsylvania as representative to Congress. But our view of Founders, Ryan Smith suggests in *Robert Morris's Folly*, needs to be "rounded" (216 n. 12). This Founder's business dealings, friendships, and personality unfold as we meet him at the pinnacle of his mercantile wealth and political service, then follow him to an infamous failure that triggered a rash of bankruptcies in the young nation.

Smith also aims to "push material culture under the noses of even the most object-averse historians," and he interweaves the rise and demise of Morris's financial fortunes with those of the spectacular but unfinished mansion he engaged French engineer Peter L'Enfant to design and superintend.¹ *Folly* is

both a lucid explanation of the diverse business affairs that brought Morris to his financial knees, and a close examination of L'Enfant's unrestrained architectural endeavor. Both are explored within a rich context of national and international developments, among them the Jay Treaty, the French Revolution, and Indian relations.

L'Enfant began the mansion in 1793, but it was still incomplete when Morris landed in debtors' prison in 1798. Contemporaries disparaged the "palace" and would soon declare it a "folly." It became an offensive symbol of insatiable ambition, excess luxury, and aristocratic privilege incompatible with a republican nation. Its royal pretensions of scale, French style, and costly adornment captured the anxieties of a fragile nation. Morris's "folly" was twofold: financial failure rooted in ambition that propelled him into securities and land speculation on a monumental scale, and material grandiosity that fueled desire for a mansion to embody his economic and social status. But contemporaries and indeed later commentators understood the mansion to be Morris's ruin. The unfinished hulk was a tangible lesson in the dangers of extravagance and vanity, whereas Morris's speculative ventures were inscrutable. The architectural folly thus became Morris's "double."²

Smith captures the material texture of Morris's life in 1780s and 1790s Philadelphia by drawing amply on correspondence, household accounts, guests' diaries and letters, and portraits. Morris was an avuncular and generous host who oversaw a well-stocked wine cellar, assorted viands and delicacies, a French cook, porcelain settings, and silver tableware. In their stately residence, Robert and his wife Mary entertained lavishly and sustained fervent relationships with such worthies as George and Martha Washington, for whom they even vacated one of their houses. Robert and Mary enjoyed a loving marriage; Mary shared Robert's passion for acquiring the furnishings, social connections, coifs, and couture appropriate for their status, using consumption to rival other elite Philadelphians.

Morris speculated with few limits and even from his jail perch disclosed barely a smidgeon of self-knowledge about his part in his own—and many others'—failure. Morris did not consider his dealings to be excessive or greedy, and he framed his land speculations, among other pursuits, in terms of advancing the greater good of the nation. While descending more deeply into a financial hole, Morris nonetheless held that the next deal would reverse his fortunes. Those fortunes were soon entangled with the schemes of John Nicholson, a disgraced state comptroller. The two engaged in securities and land speculation, endorsed each other's notes, and formed and reformed

subsidiaries and holding companies to rebundle shares in land companies—increasingly vain attempts to sustain their affairs long enough for a lucrative ship to sail in, a ship Morris continued to believe in.

L'Enfant's ambitions also knew no limits. Temperamental and prone to conflict with employers when they questioned his vision, spending, or progress, L'Enfant would leave a trail of unfinished projects, in particular, the Federal City and the industrial site for the Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures on the Passaic River. Morris and L'Enfant nonetheless formed a warm friendship, and early in the planning and building of his mansion while Morris felt flush, he was "inclin[ed] to indulge [L'Enfant's] genius" (92). The architect set out to build Morris a Parisian villa; it was massive in its footprint (the building and grounds were to engross an entire urban square) with two wings flanking the central section, and in height, with two or three stories of cellars underground and another two tall stories capped with a mansard roof. Stone covered much of its exterior, and its glazed windows were strikingly large. It was a distinct contrast to Philadelphia's brick rowhouse and federal traditions, and even to the city's most ostentatious dwellings. L'Enfant employed the best local artisanal talent as well as recently arrived European ornamental stonemasons. At the height of construction, hundreds of men dug earth, set bricks, framed windows, and laid out gardens. By 1795 Morris was struggling to juggle sinking finances, and while his attempts to push L'Enfant toward economy and haste led to quarrels and frustrations, he continued to plow funds into the mansion with the hopes of redeeming his public façade.

Neither construction nor Morris's business ventures proved sustainable. Smith follows the building's dismantling and traces the afterlife of its parts. The denouement is replete with ironic twists. While Morris lingered in the debtors' apartment during a yellow fever epidemic, petty criminals and vagrants were taken out of the prison and sheltered in the Folly. Architect Benjamin Latrobe, though he considered the mansion a tasteless and ill-proportioned monstrosity, bought its marble bas-reliefs and installed them in his renovation of the Chestnut Street Theater. "[R]elics of royalty" (102) that had been shipped from Paris to furnish the mansion disappeared among bargain buyers. Investors carved up the property into streets with small lots, and using building materials from the mansion, mechanics erected brick rowhouses that were soon praised as improving the city. Morris—identifying with his double—complained that the erasure of his mansion "seem[ed] to be in the way of bidding me adieu" (174).

BOOK REVIEWS

Readers see little of the damage Morris's speculations caused (except to his wife), and it is difficult not to like the man portrayed in *Folly*; perhaps that is a product of a "rounded" approach. A sympathetic treatment, however, does not take away from Smith's success at combining historical and material culture approaches to produce a deeply researched, compelling, and finely crafted narrative.

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NOTES

1. Ryan K. Smith, "Building Stories: Narrative Prospects for Vernacular Architecture Studies," *Buildings and Landscapes* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 1–14, quotation at 6.
2. *Ibid.*, 9.