

Sun, Land, Wind: Building a Sustainable Terrace Town

Monona Terrace, Madison, WI

November 19, 2009

HOW TO 'READ' A BUILDING

You can learn a great deal about a building just by looking at it carefully and asking some critical questions. This is called 'reading' a building. Learning about a building requires more than knowing just its name, date, height, or architect.

To read a building, answer some or all of these questions and make simple sketches to document what you see. Sketching will help you learn how a building was designed, and it will also help you remember and understand the building in a much deeper way. Research can also be done to learn more about the buildings, but research cannot replace what you will learn by experiencing the building in person. Finally, share what you've learned with others.

OBSERVE AND SKETCH

Location

How would you describe the general character of the city where this building stands?

Is the street in front busy and noisy or is it a quiet street?

Site

Does the building sit close to the street or is it set back?

What is located on either side of this building?

Are any other structures attached to this building or does it stand by itself?

Does the building site have any trees, grass, or other landscaping?

Describe the topography of the site.

Climate

Does the building have features that you think are a result of this particular climate? (covered porches, atrium, south-facing windows, a courtyard, etc.)

Building materials

What different materials were used to construct this building?

Once you move in closer...what kind of textures do the materials have?

Shape

Is the shape distinctive from or similar to neighboring buildings?

How many stories tall is the building?

Openings

Is the main entrance to the building marked in a special way? How?

Is there a rhythm or pattern to the arrangement of the windows?

Color

What is the overall color of the building? Is there more than one color?

Is the color distinctive from or similar to surrounding buildings?

Purpose / function

What is the purpose of this building?

Who uses it now?

Has this function changed over time?