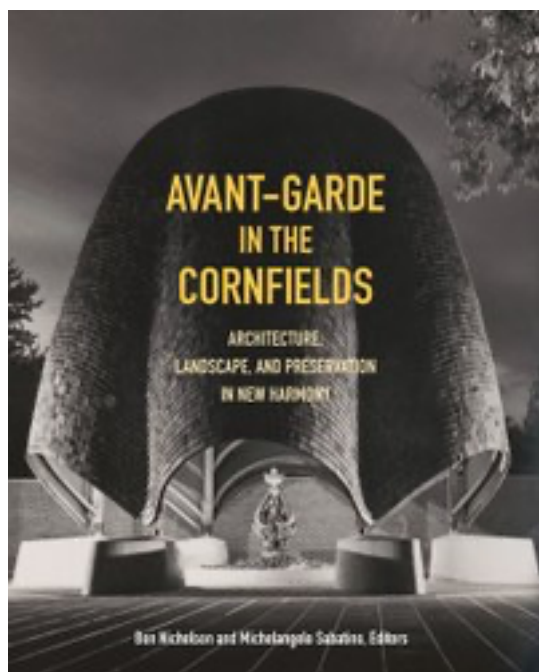


Avant-Garde in the Cornfields: Architecture, Landscape, and Preservation in New Harmony

edited by Ben Nicholson and Michelangelo Sabatino. University of Minnesota Press, October 2019. 392 p. ill. ISBN 9781517903145 (pbk.) \$40.00.

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The bulk of scholarship published on the agrarian, Indiana town of New Harmony focuses on the development of two utopian colonies, one a separatist, religious colony founded by the German George Rapp that existed between 1814 and 1824 and the second a socialist experiment led by Welshman Robert Owen that began in 1824 and lasted only three years. This second effort formed the basis of a more durable settlement composed of scientists and naturalists, some of whom were Owen's descendants, that remained after 1900. A great-great grandson of Owen's, oil executive Kenneth Dale Owen, grew up in New Harmony and brought his bride, Houstonian Jane Blaffer Owen, hereafter abbreviated "JBO," an heiress to the Texaco and Exxon fortunes, to New Harmony in 1941. Initially, JBO and her husband purchased and rehabilitated utopian-era properties in town, but, by the late 1950s, she

gradually began spending more time there and commissioning new buildings and landscape designs by noted New York designers to supplement the town's historic, architectural corpus.

JBO left a deep imprint on post-war New Harmony, consisting of many projects, some for-profit, and others that reflected her devout, ecumenical religious beliefs. The German theologian Paul Tillich exerted particularly strong influence on JBO, encouraging her emphasis on a spiritual foundation in a materialistic, technology-focused world. She commissioned three large projects, one completed, but two unrealized, all having symbolic importance referring to the life of Christ: Philip Johnson's Roofless Church, a remarkable, curvilinear, shingled structure designed to cover a sculpture of the Virgin Mary by Jacques Lipschitz, erected within a walled

temenos; St. Stephen's Episcopal Church by Johnson; and a third structure by Frederick Kiesler, the Grotto for Meditation, conceived to shelter a Holy Family sculptural grouping, to be set in a park named for Tillich.

This book's seven chapters focus on New Harmony's utopian history and JBO's ambitious, public-spirited patronage. Architectural historian Stephen Fox's excellent chapter delineates the connections among JBO, other wealthy Houston arts patrons and several prominent designers, most notably Johnson and his erstwhile friend, Kiesler. Essays by scholars Ben Nicholson and Cammie McAtee effectively examine sources and meanings of the grotto and Roofless Church, respectively, while another chapter by Nicholson analyzes Richard Meier's New Harmony Atheneum, a key work in the architect's career. A notable omission is a more detailed examination of Johnson's St. Stephen's project, one of JBO's key efforts. The book is carefully produced and edited, with abundant photographs and is well suited for college readers at all levels, particularly those in heritage preservation studies.