

Fifty State Capitols: The Architecture of Representative Government

A review by Linda L Burton, Capital Cities USA, July 2011

Jim Stemberidge loves state capitols. You will love them too, once you read his new book about the 50 of them. This isn't a heavy-duty, hardbound coffee-table book that's hard to fit on your lap. It isn't filled with endless facts and figures that you simply don't want to wade through. Nor is it one of those slapped together 101's, where inspiration unfortunately gives way to glib.

Like Little Bear's porridge, this book is Just Right. You will enjoy reading it, and you will be satisfied with the logistics and consistency of it. I've always wanted a collection of capitol photographs. This book offers that – left hand page, alphabetical order by state – a full-page color exterior shot. You can flip through the book and easily find the one you want, or, just enjoy them one after the other. These are not glam shots, touched up to a too-pretty perfection. Stemberidge puts you there; you get a sense of place, as though you were standing on the sidewalk beside him.

You cannot look at Stemberidge's photos without instantly getting a feel for what that capitol represents, the history behind it, the thinking of the citizens of that particular state, at that particular time. Some of the buildings are magnificent showpieces, elegantly columned, domed, and gilded in gold. Some are slender, modern, high-rises of efficiency. Some are skewed far from the norm, designed to represent their connection to the culture, or the land.

The right hand pages of Stemberidge's book tell the rest of the story. Who designed these buildings? When were they built? What are they made of? How much did they cost? Is artwork displayed inside? Murals? Statuary? Photos set within the text give you a glimpse of the interiors; gaze upward into breathtaking curved rotundas, marvel at sweeping staircases, study the intricate detail of a hand-carved wooden door. There is color, warmth, and feeling throughout.

Stemberidge tells about the heroics and the scandal too; the bullet holes in the wall, the mural overhead that's hidden now, the one spindle on the staircase that was installed upside down. Do you know about Petunia #1? Where can you see a fossil swirl embedded in the floor? What is the Quadriga? Where can you find the Goddess of Liberty? What is scagliola, and where was it used?

Stemberidge traveled all over the United States to find these things. Accompanied by Ruthless, his big black dog, he took thousands of photos, interviewed hundreds of people, jotted endless notes; and then meticulously fashioned everything together with prose that flows, to share with readers everywhere.

I recommend this book for every library, school, and household. It is a good read, but not only that, it is an important read. Stemberidge shows us, as the title says, the architecture of *representative* government. State capitols are symbols of democracy. Being knowledgeable about them not only improves your wizardry with parlor games, it raises your confidence in the processes of government, despite the ups and downs of daily headlines. As Stemberidge stacks present against past in *Fifty State Capitols*, we see the foundation is secure. # # #

FIFTY STATE CAPITOLS: THE ARCHITECTURE OF REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT

Kit Salter

Here are five things I learned reading *Fifty State Capitols*: 1) The Palace of Governors on the Plaza of Santa Fe (New Mexico) and part of the state capitol grounds is the oldest public building in the United States, built in 1610; 2) The grand stairway in the Missouri State capitol is 30 feet wide and extends 65 feet from one side to the other and is among the widest stairways in the world; 3) The initial state capital of New Hampshire was named Penacook, then Rumford, then Concord (and it had been moved from Portsmouth after consideration of Salisbury and Hopkinton); 4) The capital of Nebraska was removed from Omaha to be the newly settled and named Lincoln—and this new city was to house the state capitol, the penitentiary, and the university as well; and 5) The capitol in Des Moines, Iowa has, above its central rotunda, twelve gilded bronze statues representing History, Science, Law, Fame, Literature, Industry, Peace, Commerce, Agriculture, Victory, Truth, and Progress—and at the end of 15 years of construction a final accounting of the entire capitol the audit showed \$3.77 unaccounted for (that is three dollars and 77 cents!)

These are among the many facets of history, architecture, politics, geography and local place identity that serve as the building blocks of Dr. Jim Stemberidge's *Fifty State Capitols: The Architecture of Representative Government* (2011). The book is designed around 50 two-page spreads, each on a state capitol illustrating the capitol building, some of the interior, shots of the grounds and the settings and several hundred words of prose. Not just are dates of founding and building included, but asides about the forces of politics and commerce in their efforts to secure a favored local for the site for the new (and—hopefully—final) capital as well as capitol.

In addition to the author's attention to art and painting and significant personnel involved in the creation of these dominant structures, the book is rich in additional historical tidbits. This gives the reader a better sense of the critical process of selecting a capital city, designing a capitol structure, and the securing of often necessary associated state functions (university, penitentiary) to help give the new capital and capitol permanency.

What author Stemberidge has done—for he is a geographer—is take focus on a traditional day trip of American families. In such nostalgia, the parent or grandparent calls out "Hey, kids, get in the car. I want to show you the state capitol and if things go well, we may end up at an ice cream shop." The author has made this into a three-year field assignment and through his travel, research, prose, and photography given two strong meanings to the phrase: Geography is concerned with state capitals. He has very deftly added the second spelling—capitol.

The book also is richly photographed. All of the work is done by Stemberidge and it is clear than he gave considerable thought to time of day and even season in his traveling and photography. The shots on pages 83, 76, 56, 82, and 100 are worth the price of admission just in themselves. The book also enhances its value by concluding with 11 pages of comparisons between capitols and the presentation of an illustrated glossary.

This is a book that is beautiful enough to be a classic Coffee Table Book, but the content, spirit, and highly varied inclusions of place-specific features makes it a great read as well. This book ought to be in all schools, all offices of American politicians, and in public libraries in every state that has a state capitol!

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