

# Common Buildings, Uncommon Interpretations

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In **Untangling Tangible and Intangible Heritage**, the importance of considering both the tangible and intangible aspects of heritage was discussed. Here is a case study of how this can be approached. The exceptional and the unique have historically been favoured in built heritage designation, preservation and documentation. This is natural. The rare and exemplary always command more attention by virtue of their difference, and it is important to preserve that which is exceptional. However, in Saskatchewan, and in the country as a whole, the common, everyday architecture which reveals much more about the past has been historically neglected.

This type of architecture, known as vernacular architecture, is not always grand or aesthetically pleasing. It does not always catch the eye from the road, nor was it designed by a noted architect. However, vernacular architecture is a record of everyday life in a particular place. Noted vernacular architecture expert Thomas Carter states: "Buildings and building landscapes encode in tangible form deeply held and often otherwise unstated cultural, social, and economic values." He continues: "In vernacular architecture studies we are looking for the connections between people and place, between people and *their* place..." These connections can be found in analysis of the country church, the country school, the homestead shack, the tipi, the farmhouse, the sweat lodge, the corner store, the barn. But to grasp the depth of meaning such buildings hold in our lives, it is essential to move beyond the tangible structures themselves to consider the intangible contained within them.

In terms of commonness, perhaps no building is more ubiquitous in the Saskatchewan landscape than the barn. It was once a feature of nearly every family farm in this province, and as such, it represents the realities of rural life and reflects the changing practices of agriculture. The barn is a timeline of agriculture in the province and can tell us much about life on the family farm. No two barns are the same. However, considered together, common themes and stories emerge. Studying barns can present to us both a micro view (the story of one particular barn on one specific family farm) and a macro view (a representative symbol of the history of agriculture and rural life in this province).

In the fall of 2013, I began my Master's thesis research on barns in two rural municipalities in southern Saskatchewan. I started my study by examining the structures themselves: their materials, methods of construction, design, and their current conditions. I surveyed all 1043 kilometres of my study region to document

every barn still standing (even if not for long). I talked to dozens of people about barns and I soon realized that the barn could tell me much more about life in rural Saskatchewan than I had first thought. The tangible aspects of the barn receded as the intangible cultural heritage embedded within them emerged.

What can be learned from the barn? If we begin to ask questions, it can tell us a great deal indeed. For instance, we can learn about gender norms and the division of labour, and the cultural attitudes these reflected. There is an old, colloquial saying that one can tell who is the “boss” of a particular farm by a cursory glance at its buildings. If the house is big and well maintained, the woman is the boss. If it is the barn that commands attention on the farmstead, the husband is the boss. What does this saying tell us about gender norms in twentieth-century Saskatchewan? What does it tell us about the gendered division of labour?

Studying the barn can tell us about the relationships between humans and animals, and in a broader sense, between humans and the natural environment. It can reveal how agricultural practices evolved over time, and how this affected farm families. It can tell us how communities were organized. It can tell us about everyday rhythms of movement – from house to barn to field and back again. It can tell us about the hopes of early pioneers. Rotten, falling down barns on abandoned homesteads can tell us about the reality of disappointed hopes and promises unfulfilled in the face of the uncertainties of dryland farming. A lovingly restored barn can tell us about the triumphs of certain farm families.

The barn can tell us about the settlement of this province and about people’s identities and their attachments to place. It can tell us about perseverance and it can tell us about failure. It can reveal affluence and it can demonstrate poverty. It can give us insight into a past way of life and it can tell us about our present. So too can it ask questions of the future. As barns recede further into the margins of farm life, we can ask: what is the future of the family farm in this province?

In studying a barn, or any aspect of vernacular architecture, it is essential to remember that the building is merely the beginning of the story. Beyond posts and beams is the intangible material which weaves it all together. A barn can be a symbol of nostalgia, it can be a working building, it can be a reminder of the precariousness of farming. Whatever its current guise or its eventual demise, a barn is a repository of story. It is up to us to discover the stories of the buildings we live in, work in, look at and talk about.

For more information on my research about barns, visit <http://www.thebarnhunter.blogspot.ca/>.

See also: <https://www.heritagecanada.org/en/about-us/vision>