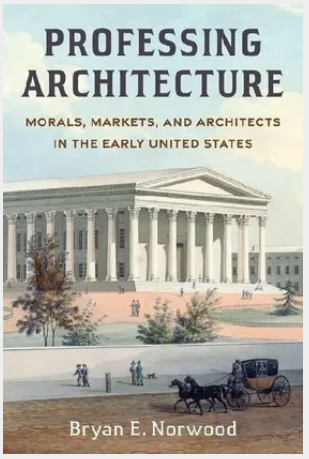
Norwood

Professing Architecture

Morals, Markets, and Architects in the Early United States



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In the early nineteenth-century United States, a number of architects began to see their profession as a higher calling. Even as architecture was increasingly subjected to the pressures of the market, these figures gave sermon-like public lectures that cast their work as a divinely informed task. They sought to elevate their profession beyond mere building or crass profit-seeking by portraying it as a force for moral and civic improvement. Bryan E. Norwood tells the story of how a small group of architects built a profession amid the powerful forces of capitalism and religious faith in the antebellum United States. He explores how architects in rapidly growing coastal cities from Boston to New Orleans portrayed their role in the burgeoning—and later fracturing—republic, tracing the tension between the religiously informed historical vision of architecture that they preached in popular lectures and the market-based contractual approach to design work that they actually practiced. Norwood recasts professionalization as a web of daily practices rife with incoherence: not a clear-cut institutional form but a potent mixture of ambitions, ambivalences, and complaints. Putting emotions and affects into conversation with the history of capitalism while considering the intersections of religion, race, and nationalism, Professing Architecture highlights the enduring contradictions between architecture’s lofty aspirations and its material realities.

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