



The Architectural Imagination of Edith Wharton: Gender, Class, and Power in the Progressive Era

Annette Benert

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Edith Wharton has recently returned to prominence as a major American novelist. But few have taken her architectural work as seriously as she herself took it, or noticed its effects on her career. Two early architectural books and three travel works give sustained critical attention to the built environment. Early novels graphically portray the physical miseries of the poor and marginalized and their course in hierarchies of class and gender. By contrast, her letters consistently celebrate the tastes and manners of the elite. At its best, her fiction embodies this tension - the beauty and grace of elegant houses and public spaces, juxtaposed to their effects on those under their control. This book tracks Wharton's literary and architectural work in tandem, revealing their complex relationship. It also foregrounds the odd symmetry of her career, which began and ended in fierce attachment to traditional values, moved from delight in Italy to despair for France, and centered on the brilliantly crafted structures and spaces of the prewar novels. Annette Larson Benert is Associate Professor of English at DeSales University.

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